

the GATHERING

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The Gathering exists to foster a learning community that serves individuals, families, and foundations in expanding their vision and effectiveness in giving to Christian ministries.

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Living a better story

If anyone knows how to write a good story it's Donald Miller. His *New York Times* bestseller, *Blue Like Jazz*, has sold over a million copies. But when Miller was recruited to help write a screenplay of his own life, and subsequently asked to fictionalize it to make it a "better story," he was struck with another thought: "What changes could I make to my actual life to make it better – to give it a greater sense of meaning?" That's when The Mentoring Project was born. Miller founded the organization to respond to America's crisis of fatherlessness. As a result, he's not only discovered more meaning for his own life, but he's helping to rewrite the life stories of hundreds of fatherless boys. Here's what he had to say in a recent Gathering interview. [See page 2.](#)

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A promise

MY FIRST REACTION to the “Giving Pledge” by Warren Buffett and Bill and Melinda Gates was mixed. On the one hand, I was encouraged to see so many who had spent their lives accumulating wealth, power and influence making pledges to give the majority of their assets to philanthropy in their lifetime.

I DON'T KNOW if it was a reaction to the wild media response or the sheer flamboyance of the venture that gave me qualms. Probably, there is just something in me that distrusts those blowing loud trumpets about giving.



Fred Smith

God gives a man riches, property, and wealth so that he lacks nothing that his heart desires, yet God does not enable him to enjoy the fruit of his labor – instead, someone else enjoys it!

– ECCLESIASTES 6:2

to philanthropy as a final place to search for satisfaction. As well, many of the letters were filled with echoes of Warren Buffett’s conclusion that “fate’s distribution of long straws is wildly capricious” and their advantage, ultimately, was a mixture of luck and winning the “ovarian lottery.”

THAT’S NOT OUR BEST HOPE as believers, is it? It is not what we desire to say at the end of our lives, is it? We don’t come to giving as a last resort to find meaning or to fix the imbalance of the ovarian lottery.

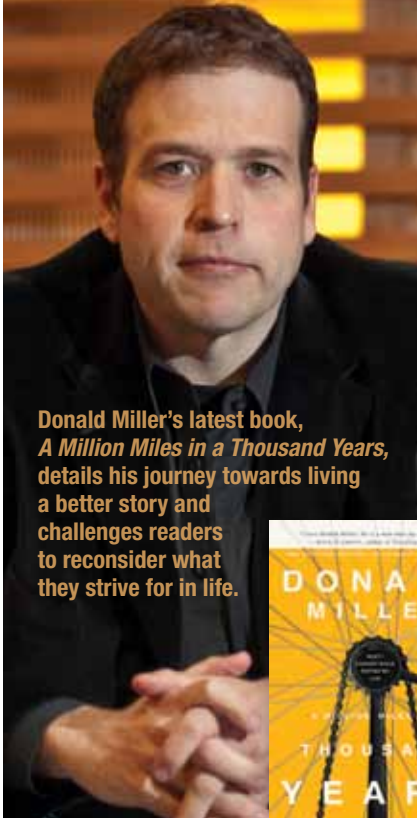
INSTEAD, we come to giving out of gratitude for a God who has loved us intentionally and from all eternity. We come out of joy in response to a promise.

Blessings, Fred

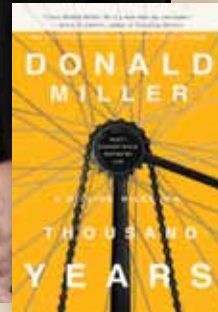
FRED SMITH, THE GATHERING PRESIDENT

I DECIDED TO READ the letters of those who pledged and not make judgments based on my own sensitivities. There are extraordinary stories of commitment, sacrifice, service and honest intentions to do good in those letters. Many of them are inspiring, and we would be well-served to follow the same exercise ourselves. For a number, it was the first time they had seriously reflected on their giving. For others, they had been planning for years to make this step and had simply joined to encourage others to do the same. For some, the motivation was closer to achieving immortality than philanthropy but for many others it was a serious and commendable desire to “give back” to a world that had rewarded them richly.

THE MORE I READ, I felt a growing sadness around their common discovery that there were only so many cars, houses and pleasures money could buy. Many had come



Donald Miller’s latest book, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*, details his journey towards living a better story and challenges readers to reconsider what they strive for in life.



Continued from the cover

TG: How has the idea of writing a better story affected your work with The Mentoring Project?

DM: There are several things you have to consider if you want a really meaningful story. One is, you have to have an extremely clearly defined ambition. Our vision for The Mentoring Project started with “wanting to enter into the story of the fatherless generation,” which was fine, but vague. We kept refining it to make it more concrete and went from “We want to provide 10,000 mentors to fatherless boys” to “We want to be a leading influence in shutting down 15 percent of America’s prisons.” The more we defined our ambition, the clearer the story became that we were trying to tell.

TG: In a good story, the protagonist is always faced with some type of conflict. What conflicts have you had to overcome as you attempt to live a better story?

DM: Well, whenever you try to do anything beautiful in the world, you encounter serious resistance. At The Mentoring Project, we were

paying bills month to month, wondering if we were going to have to lay people off. Thankfully, because God is good, we’ve never not been able to pay a bill. Also, when you get into families that are broken, where there’s been abuse, drug addiction and fathers who are incarcerated – that’s the kind of conflict that if you don’t turn away from it, but choose to face it with a really bright light, will lead you to a story worth celebrating. We see that literally everyday.

TG: Tell us more about the kind of influence The Mentoring Project is currently having.

DM: We have nine churches in the Portland area that are currently running our program. We have 600 churches across the country that would like to start our program. So we hope to move from the nine to the 600 in the coming year. We created a program that works, that’s changing the lives of kids, and now we’d like to franchise it nationally. We’re building video curriculum to do that. Also, the city of Portland has asked us to provide 500 more mentors for the city. We’ve been very clear with them that we’re a Christian organization and that we have no problem introducing kids to their real Father through a relationship with Christ, and the city still keeps asking us for the 500 mentors.

TG: Starting The Mentoring Project has given great meaning to your life. What else is giving it meaning?

DM: Recently, we were planning a seminar here in Portland and on paper we were seeing that it was going to make a sizeable amount of money. We just sat down and said, “Let’s give it away! (He laughs) Let’s give away all the money from this seminar to somebody who needs it to fund their story.” ...It’s amazing how much more impassioned you are about your work when it’s not for you – when it’s for somebody else. That’s one of the ways of increasing a sense of fulfillment in life.

TG: What advice do you have for the person who wants to live a better story?

DM: Define very clearly what you want in life and run that goal through these filters: Is it good for the world? Is it going to be sacrificial? Is it my heart’s desire? Am I wired to do this? The second thing would be to seriously analyze and anticipate the conflict that you will encounter in making that happen. It shouldn’t be a surprise to us when we encounter resistance in our attempts to do something good. In fact, encountering conflict is something God actually wants for our lives.

Hear more from Donald Miller when he speaks at The Gathering’s 2010 Annual Conference. To learn more about The Mentoring Project, visit their website at thementoringproject.org.

Navigating your way to a stronger family



Mike and Kim Petersen (with children Lauren and Stefan) on the bow of the 65-foot catamaran they rebuilt and sailed together.

WE ALL WANT strong, healthy family relationships. But what lengths are we willing to go to in order to cultivate them? Most of us immediately gravitate to the old standbys of protecting the family dinner hour or committing to family game night once a week. But for one Gathering family, the measures became much more extreme. Mike and Kim Petersen, together with their children Lauren and Stefan, decided to strengthen their family by building a boat together and sailing it across the Atlantic Ocean!

The Petersen's sailing adventure sprouted from a "bucket list" Mike and Kim had created as college sweethearts. Fifteen years after it was written down, Kim rediscovered the list when she was cleaning out her basement.

"We were at a stage of our lives when our kids were approaching the teenage years and we had kind of lost touch with each other," states Kim. "This idea of living on a boat and crossing an ocean had been our dream... and we thought it would be a neat opportunity to do along with our kids as opposed to waiting until we retired."

"Early on in our marriage we lost a daughter to SIDS, and when that happened, it really killed a lot of dreams we had and replaced them with fear," explains Mike. "When Kim found this bucket list, we had a desire to confront those fears and embrace some of the dreams we had."

With strong motivation to both conquer fear and reclaim their family, The Petersens located and purchased the shell of a 65-foot power catamaran from a farmer in New Zealand. The lessons in family teamwork soon began as all four of them spent eight months finishing the boat and preparing it to sail.

Once they hit the water, quality family time was abundant, but living space and privacy weren't. "In the tight quarters of the boat and with the stressful things that are happening, you're not able to hide who you really are," comments Mike.

Yet, there were also benefits to that setting. As Kim mentions, "The great thing about being exposed in the safe environment of your family is that there's love and acceptance. And it does prompt change... There's something very powerful for kids to be able to watch their parents fail and have weaknesses and see how they handle them."



Kim Petersen's book, *Charting the Unknown*, tells the story of her family's voyage across the Atlantic, as well as her personal journey related to fear.

When asked how he felt about exposing his family to the risks inherent with their adventure, Mike explains, "There are really two kinds of risk. There are direct risks and missed opportunity risks. For all the direct risks (like severe weather or pirates) we had a plan B and a plan C to overcome them. So we didn't see those as a big problem. What we focused on was the missed opportunity risk. We asked ourselves, 'If we don't do this, what are we risking? What are we risking if we stay in our house and our kids go off with all their friends?'"

In the end, the missed opportunity risk was worth it. Even the youngest member of the Petersen crew, Stefan (who was 12 at the time), raves about how his family profited from their experience. "It was amazing. Just like when steel is hardened into a stronger substance, our relationships went through the same thing. We really had to depend on each other and connected in ways that I don't think a lot of other families do."

While the Petersens benefited immensely from the time aboard their boat, they realize that not every family can do what they did. Their advice for strengthening family bonds without such an adventure? Simplify.

"In our culture we have this idea that being good parents means signing your kids up for as many activities as you can," comments Kim. "I think we have good intentions behind that, but I learned that there's a real value in simplicity. It's definitely possible to experience closeness as a family, it just may mean cutting a few things out."

Just make sure it's not dinner together or family game night! Learn more about the Petersen's adventure at www.chrysalisvoyage.com or read Kim's book, *Charting the Unknown* (available at amazon.com).



Experts on family to speak at 2010 Gathering Conference

For more insight on cultivating strong families, be sure to attend a session offered by Dr. Tim Kimmel and his wife, Darcy, or Dr. James Dobson and his son, Ryan, at The Gathering's 2010 Annual Conference in San Diego. The Kimmels will speak on "Grace-Based Parenting," while the Dobsons will address "Help for Families in Peril and a Culture in Chaos."

When helping hurts

A Gathering interview with Brian Fikkert

F YOU'RE HEADED to The Gathering's Annual Conference in San Diego this fall, you won't want to miss the opportunity to hear from Brian Fikkert, co-author of the book *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor... and Yourself*. This recent Gathering interview will give you a sneak peak at what he and co-author Steve Corbett will be addressing.

TG: Why did you and Steve Corbett write *When Helping Hurts*?

BF: We are very passionate about the fact that we are living in very unique times. We've got the richest people ever to walk the face of the earth coexisting with the poorest people on the planet. We have an enormous Biblical mandate that if we're going to love and follow Jesus, we have to be about helping the poor. So the first motivation is just out of love for Christ. Secondly, we've seen in the past several decades the evangelical church in North America reawakened to the Biblical mandate to serve the poor. We're excited about that, but ... as the church re-engages, we want to make

sure it is aware of the best practices that are out there.

TG: Can you give an example of how our attempts to help the poor can actually do harm?

BF: The way that the West has approached poverty alleviation is as though poverty is fundamentally about a lack of material things. Most short-term missions come out of a framework of "we have stuff, they don't have stuff." We think that if we go and build three houses for people we will have addressed their poverty. But people around the world who are affected by poverty are experiencing high degrees of shame. When we approach the poor by focusing on a material transaction (giving them shots, houses, clothing) what we inadvertently communicate is: "I'm okay, you're not okay. You need me to save you." That actually exacerbates their sense of shame and inadequacy and the sense that they "can't do it" and need us to save them.

TG: Why do you think it's so important for individuals to take a hard look at their motives for wanting to help the poor?

BF: We're called to glorify God above all else. So, if we're doing things that are coming out of motivation to bring glory or honor to ourselves, we're not fulfilling our calling to glorify God. In a more practical sense, if I am engaging in poverty alleviation with a sense of trying to make myself feel good, ... that will put me in the position of doing something *to* the poor. With this motivation, I will tend to treat them like widgets. Donors are particularly susceptible to this because they want to see their gifts leveraged for the kingdom. When we're in that mode, we treat the poor as objects instead of human beings who are created in the image of God, who have something to say about their own destiny, their lives, and what their families and communities should look like.

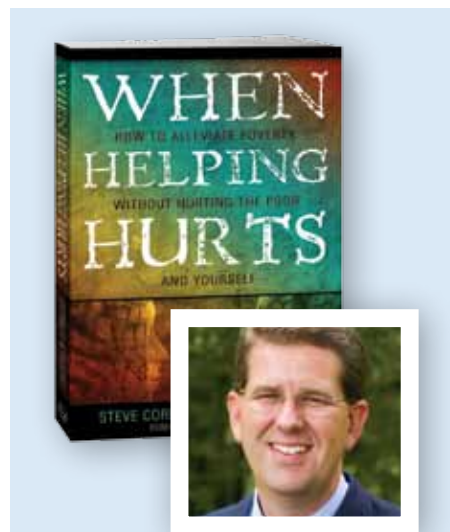
The West's attempt to paint a brighter future for the poor by focusing on material transactions may actually be doing more harm than good.

TG: How does the American "need for speed" undermine true poverty alleviation?

BF: As we work with the poor, if we think that transformation is going to happen quickly, then the way we design, implement, and evaluate the intervention is going to be fundamentally wrong. Poverty alleviation is about the reconciliation of relationships. It takes time to build and transform relationships and a lot of that looks like just hanging around. It's a lot of non-programmed, non-measurable kinds of things that don't give us the nice indicators we want within a three-year grant cycle.

TG: What's your bottom line piece of advice for people who want to do something to help the poor?

BF: Repentance. I think that most North Americans need to repent of two things, and I'm at the front of the line here. One is, a modern worldview in which we think the world is a material, mechanical machine that we can control and dominate through our own logic, rationality and accumulation of capital. I think that particular problem, the material versus the relational, is devastating poverty alleviation efforts around the world. The second thing we need to repent of is our God complex. It's the sense that we're okay and they're not okay and that God has uniquely called us to be the messiah to the world. That framework shackles the poor. It tells them they are inadequate and inferior and that they can't do it. It's the most devastating message we could possibly send to the poor.



Dr. Brian Fikkert is a Professor of Economics and the founder and Executive Director of the Chalmers Center for Economic Development at Covenant College. He earned a Ph.D. in economics from Yale University, has been a consultant to the World Bank and is the author of numerous articles in both academic and popular journals.