

Beginning A New Life

July was an eventful month. I've related my first real date with Margaret. In the next post, I'm going to ask Margaret to tell her own story of what brought her to L'Abri and to faith in Jesus Christ.

In July I also enjoyed an amazing day off. I was asked to be a groomsman for the wedding of Roy and Jane, students at L'Abri. Jane's dad had provided them with a rental car for the week leading up to the wedding. Roy, some other friends and I piled into the car and drove to St. Nicholas. From there, we took train to the village of Zermatt, where no motor vehicles are allowed. We rode a cable car up from Zermatt to the highest station at the foot of the Matterhorn. We guys all took our shirts off and played in the snow on a hot summer day! Returning to Zermatt, we found the townsfolk in beautiful traditional costumes assembling for a parade.

One of the friends with us from L'Abri was a talented photographer, Sylvester Jacobs. Sylvester, an African American who grew up in Oklahoma in the Jim Crow era. He wrote a book, *Born Black*, which is a candid account of his experiences. After a stint in the US Army, he emigrated to England, where he honed his photography skills. Syl had also become a committed Christian. Two years later, Syl would produce a book of photographs of the L'Abri community—*Portrait of a Shelter*. It was a delight to watch Syl dancing through the folk festival taking roll after roll of pictures. He later gave me a print of one of his photos as a memento of that time together. I have treasured it over the years. It is reproduced here with his permission.



This is my amateur photo showing that day in color:



Roy and Jane's wedding was a spectacular event. You can find photos of the wedding in *Portrait of a Shelter*. It was held in a beautiful candle-lit chapel (parts of which date to the 12th century) in St. Sulpice on the shores of Lake Geneva. Dr. Schaeffer conducted the ceremony. His wedding sermon presented the similarity of the marriage relationship to the relationship of Christ and the Church. Following the ceremony we all piled onto one of the marvelous lake steamboats and spent several hours eating, drinking, and talking while cruising on Lake Geneva.

By far the most significant event for me in July was entrusting myself to Jesus Christ. I did not record the exact date, but the events of the day are etched in my mind. I was becoming increasingly convinced of the Truth as proclaimed in the Bible. I had arrived at L'Abri three months earlier, certain that a synthesis between Christianity and Eastern religions was possible. My study of the Bible had convinced me that those who sought to reconcile the teachings of Jesus and Buddha (as I had) relied on a few seeming similarities based on a vast oversimplification of each system of belief.

I had come to realize that a fair reading of both the Christian and Buddhist texts revealed irreconcilable differences regarding absolutely foundational issues. Such as? Here is a short list: the nature of reality, the existence or non-existence of God, the core problem of human existence and the solution to that problem, the goal of human life (why are we here?), the reality and nature of an afterlife, and the understanding of the person and mission of Jesus Christ. Not trivial matters! In particular, the exclusive claim of Jesus Christ to be the only path to the Father (which first set me on the road to L'Abri) had become impossible for me to reinterpret or ignore.

I was seeing daily evidence of the power of the Gospel (literally the Good News about Jesus Christ) in individuals and in the life of the L'Abri community. I remember praying at the start of that day in July, "Lord, if you are real, please show me today." What did I expect to happen? A message in the clouds? A message in a bottle? I really didn't know. What actually happened to convince me of God's reality? Well, in a sense, *nothing* out of the ordinary! Through the course of the day, several people stopped to greet me and ask me how I was processing what I was learning. Their genuine interest and concern made a powerful impact on me!

Based on study, asking what may have seemed to patient workers like endless questions, deep conversations one-on-one and around dinner tables, it hit me: God really didn't owe me further proof than what I had found in His Word and the community of His people. My "back was up against the wall" and any excuses I could think of to continue hesitating giving my life to Christ seemed flimsy. By "coincidence," I had an appointment with Birdie later the same day. I knocked at the door of her chalet, and she invited me in. She looked at me and said, "You're ready, aren't you?" She reviewed my understanding of my sin and guilt before a holy God and the work that Jesus Christ had accomplished by His life, death, and resurrection. She then led me in a simple prayer of repentance and faith. It was then that Birdie did something that was so wise. She asked me if I had brought any items of religious significance with me from India and Nepal.

I did, in fact, have a fairly valuable hand-painted Tibetan thangka depicting the Buddhist wheel of life. When I bought it, I was told that it had hung in a Tibetan temple. It depicted the Buddhist view of the universe and path to enlightenment. It was the Buddhist equivalent to a evangelistic tract! Birdie asked me to go and get it. When I returned, she had a fire going in her fireplace. She said, "You know what to do." I gladly consigned the thangka to the flames and immediately had a deep sense of freedom and relief. Birdie's deep spiritual wisdom was revealed in her encouraging me to burn that thangka. The Book of Acts records how the new Christians in Ephesus burned their valuable books of magic (Acts 18:18,19) to proclaim they were finished with the old way and committed to the new.

Burning the thangka was a powerful act indicating that I was forever renouncing my quest to become my own god and instead submitting my life to the one true and living God. I had come

to the end of one quest and taken the first step on a much different and greater quest as a child of God. Rather than trying to save myself, I admitted on my knees that only the Living God could save me. I would no longer live trying desperately to earn His favor. Instead, this prodigal son ran into the Father's arms and, by His grace and mercy, pledged to live my new life in gratitude for His undeserved favor, love, and forgiveness.

Life Changing Relationships

One aspect of community life at L'Abri was (and continues to be) a robust reliance on prayer. Early in the life of L'Abri, the Schaeffers became convinced that they should rely totally on God to meet the needs of the community. In particular, they would not publicize the financial needs of the ministry but would pray to God, asking Him to supply their needs. I heard story after story of how God had worked, often at the last moment, to meet their needs. One day of the week was set aside as a day of prayer. The workers would sign up for hour time slots. They would go to a room set aside for prayer, where there would be a list of community concerns. I later learned that a regular part of that Monday prayer time was prayer for those students who had not yet come to saving faith. I'm sure that my name appeared regularly on that list.

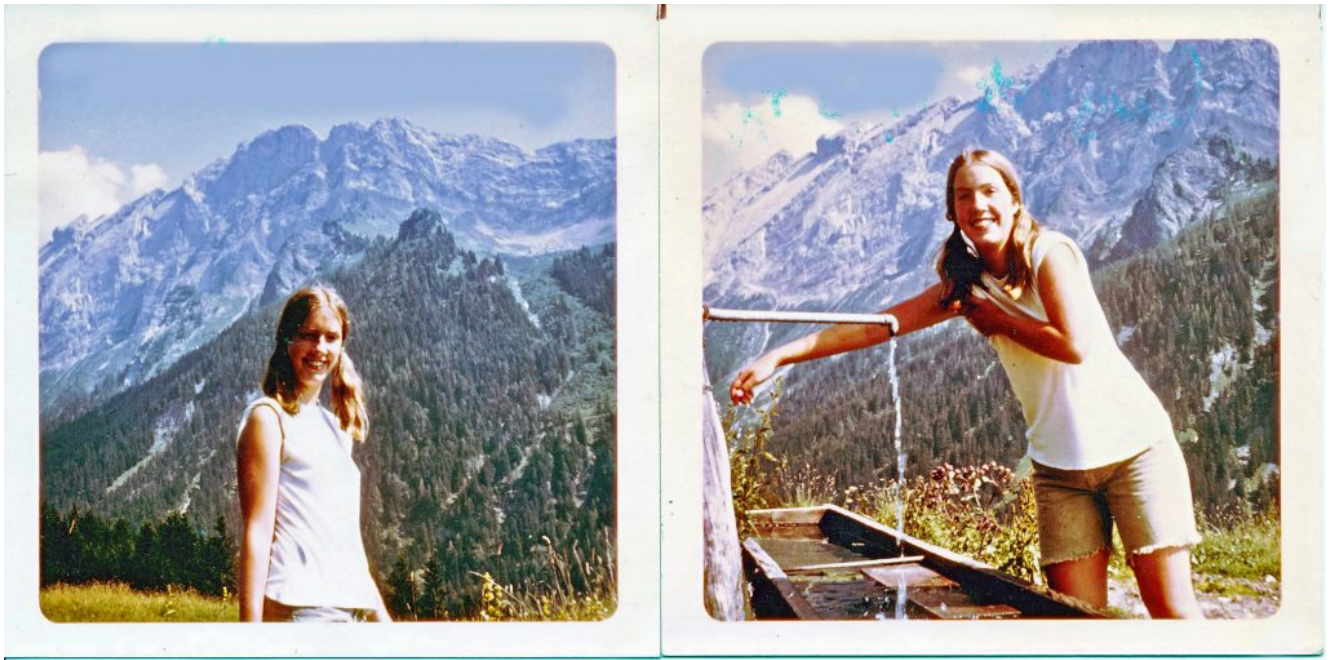


One of the answers to those earnest prayers for my soul came in the person of Sheila Bird, affectionately called Birdie by the L'Abri community. Unlike most of the workers at L'Abri, whose ministries were more visible, Birdie carried on a ministry that was largely unnoticed. Today, it's almost impossible to find any reference to her online. A New Zealander, Birdie was the only trained counselor among the workers, a skilled practitioner of Biblical counseling. It was never clear whether I chose to spend time with Birdie or whether she chose me.

Meeting with Birdie in her cozy chalet, La Niche, was like stepping into an peaceful oasis. She was a very perceptive lady. Even though she could be direct, she was always kind. She helped me sort through my family of origin and how it shaped the adult that I had become. Our discussions always came around to discussing how I was processing the Christian faith. She employed the Bible skillfully to address my concerns. She also took the discussion in a surprising direction, asking me to consider that I might have opened myself to unseen demonic powers through my immersion in Eastern religious practices. More later about dear Birdie.

I've mentioned Margaret's first sight of me as I arrived at L'Abri, fresh from India. She was leaving for a month's traveling in Europe with a friend. Our first encounter after she returned from her travels was on the path from Les Mèlèze to Les Sapins, the chalet where I was living with other students. I will let her tell the story.

"So, let me tell! After a very long train trip from GB to Switzerland, I was back at L'Abri as a worker/student. Delighted to find out that I would again be living at Les Sapins with Debbie and Udo, I was headed there when I heard a voice behind me, 'Would you like me to carry your backpack?' I turned to see a guy grinning at me. Didn't recognize him. Rather ungraciously, I replied, 'No, thanks! I've just carried it all over Europe so I can probably make it to Les Sapins!' Found out later that 'the guy' was Paul with a month's growth of hair/beard and much needed weight. Someone had obviously had a heart to heart with him about his sartorial choices. The green suit had been exchanged for just regular ratty hippie clothes. An improvement!"



From that inauspicious beginning, Margaret and I were spending much of our free time together by July. I wrote about Margaret to my parents. "Have made a really close friend in the person of a girl called Margaret McKenzie. We can communicate quite well, and we do a lot of things together." We coordinated our weekly day off. On one of those days off, I invited Margaret on our first real date, at a fancy restaurant in the Rhone Valley—Le Saint-Christophe. Neither of us had what you would call an extensive wardrobe, so we each spent the first part of the day borrowing suitable clothing.

Someone gave us a ride down to the valley. We had a great evening! Leaving the restaurant a little before 10 p.m., we took the train from Bex to Ollon, where we planned to catch the postal bus back up the mountain to L'Abri. Unfortunately, the last bus left at 10. Since I had "shot my wad" for dinner, even between us we didn't have taxi money. What would we do? Start walking and try to catch a ride! It was dark, beginning to rain, and Margaret was in uncomfortable borrowed shoes.

Fortunately we didn't have to wait for too long. A friendly

fellow in an Austin Mini Cooper stopped for us. The road from the valley up to L'Abri is marked by numbers of hairpin turns. Our driver was actually practicing for an uphill grand prix race. We must have set a time record from Ollon to L'Abri! You might think that having to hitchhike up the mountain could have ruined our classy date. Nope! That ride was so amazing that it just seemed like the perfect ending to our first date!