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## Try Things You Can't Do

### *Stretch Yourself*

Writing a book scares me to death. The thought of starting with an empty computer screen and filling it with 220 pages of original, God-inspiring material is terrifying. But then I read Henry Cloud's words in his book *Integrity*: "In order to grow you must attempt things you are unable to do."<sup>1</sup> I looked up from the page and thought, "What is it that I would like to do but can't do or have never tried to do?"

One of those things for me is writing a book. For years I've dreamed of it, but then, who am I to write a book? I'm not smart enough, creative enough, or talented enough, and I convinced myself that I had nothing to offer. But then I read Cloud's words:

People who grow jump in over their head. They try things that they cannot do, then stretch to become able to do what they are attempting. In fact, for growth to occur the attempt has to be about something that you are not able to do. It has to be a try.... When people get married for the first time, for example, it's something they've never before attempted. By definition they don't know how to make it work. But, the having to make it work pushes them to grow.

It's the same with dating for the first time, going to college, writing a paper, becoming a parent, teaching a class, or running a business. At some point all these things have to be a "try," because we've never attempted them before. And when we try something we can't do, we go through a process of stretching, failing, recalibrating, trying again, learning from mistakes, and growing stronger. Cloud says, "People who grow place themselves in situations that demand more of them than they are able to deliver."<sup>3</sup> Great words. I wish I'd written those words; people who write books write words like that. So I want to ask, "What is it in your life that you want to do but have convinced yourself you can't?"

Writing a book would have to be a "try" for me. So with a lot of uncertainty and insecurity, I loaded up my Ford Explorer with my books, laptop, notepads, two plastic bins full of stories, clippings, and messages; I packed my cooler with food and tossed in my bicycle, hip boots, and fishing gear. I was going up to a beautiful beach house near Bayfield, Wisconsin, on Lake Superior that some friends were letting me use. It

was June, but a cold rain was blowing off the lake, and when I stopped to get gas south of Duluth, I almost froze to death; it was forty-one degrees. I have a hard time leaving my family and home whenever I go off by myself for a few days, but it's good whenever I do it because God always speaks to me by his Spirit and reveals things to me that I never notice when I'm in my daily work routine. But I get lonely, and the gloomy, cold day up north wasn't helping. I continued on toward Bayfield, and after driving eight miles past it, I finally located the place where I'd be staying I'd never been there before, I was two hundred miles away from home, and I was relieved to find the key under the mat. But when I opened the front door, I saw that the entire first floor was flooded with two inches of sewage water. I was so stunned that it took me a few seconds to realize that this was real-and a major problem. I dropped my bags on the porch and tried to call the owners on my cell phone, but there was no service in this remote little town. So I rolled up my pant legs and sloshed my way through the hallway and into the living room looking for where the water was coming from. I found the bathroom and saw that the toilet was running. It had been running for three days and had filled their three-thousand-gallon septic tank. The system was completely backed up, and the stuff was now coming up through the drains in the showers and from who knows where else.

So I sloshed my way back through the living room and into the kitchen looking for the phone; no phone in the kitchen. My shoes were completely soaked, and I didn't want to keep making waves through the living room, splashing water onto the leather-backed sofas, but I had to find a phone. No phone in the living room. I walked up their beautifully finished cedar staircase with water squishing out of my shoes, but the cord-less phone upstairs didn't work. I frantically went back down-stairs and finally found the main phone sitting behind a couch; it was under water, so that phone didn't work. Now what? I drove back into town, pulled up to a small-engine repair shop, and said, "I've got a minor emergency here. Could I please use your phone?" I got in touch with my friends and explained the situation. They made a call and then called me back to tell me that the septic service would be there in an hour.

Two hours later Septic Jim showed up wearing knee-high rubber boots, black rubber gloves, a mustache, and long, wet hair tucked under a hooded sweatshirt. His lack of any sort of smile or greeting let me know he wasn't thrilled about being there. And I've heard foul language before. but Septic Jim cussed like a Lake Superior sailor. Turns out he had sliced his hand open earlier in the day while working on a car and hadn't been to the doctor yet to get it stitched up, so the last thing he wanted to do was suck sewage. But he emptied the septic tank, and then we dragged about fifty feet of hose up to the house and into the kitchen. Septic Jim said to me, "Pill hold the bleepin' hose while you take the bleepin' squeegee and push the bleepin' water my way." I didn't have the heart to tell him I was a pastor-I figured he'd had enough bad

news for one day. Septic Jim and I spent the next five hours sucking up sewage, moving furniture, and pulling out rugs. That was my first day of writing a book.

It's always a little creepy for me the first night when I'm staying all alone in somebody else's place, and with the cold rain and wet feet, I couldn't help wondering if God was trying to tell me something. What are the odds that I'd be given the keys to a beautiful home in which to work, only to find it flooded with sewage water? That's not a good sign by anyone's measure. But maybe God was giving me a gift and hitting me over the head with a fresh example of how true the subject matter of this book really is. I also remembered what Erwin McManus said about being in the center of God's will. He said, "Being in the center of God's will is not the safest place to be, it's often the most dangerous place to be." I would add that it's also sometimes the smelliest place to be.

## **More Water**

When I think of someone who tried things he couldn't do and who put himself in situations that demanded more of him than he was able to deliver, I think of Joshua. Joshua lived during a time in Jewish history when the Israelites were trying to establish themselves as a new nation in the land of Canaan. Moses had led the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt, and after forty years of wandering through the desert, Moses brought them right up to the border of their new land. But Moses was 120 years old, and his days on earth were coming to an end. So God told Moses to hand over the reigns of leadership to Joshua, and Joshua was commissioned by God and Moses to lead the people into their new land, fulfilling God's eternal promise. The Bible says, "Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the Spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the LORD had commanded" (Deut. 34:9). Then God gave Joshua his full blessing when he said to him:

Now... get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. Your territory will extend from the desert and from Lebanon to the great river, the Euphrates-all the Hittite country-and to the Great Sea on the west. No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you or forsake you.

(Josh. 1:2-5)

What a send-off. God says he's going to give Joshua every place where he sets his foot, that no one will be able to stand against him, and that God will always be with him. Those are words of blessing and protection. You would think that when God makes a promise like that, he would make it easy for Joshua with no problems,

setbacks, or resistance. The Israelites had just come through forty years of traveling like homeless people in the Sinai Desert; they could assume that it was time to reap the rewards that God promised them many years ago.

But instead, the first thing they encounter is water, lots of it, not from a backed-up septic tank but from a swollen Jordan River that's at flood stage. This was a real danger, a real threat to the Israelites, who were made up of six hundred thousand men, women, and children of all ages, with all their possessions, goods, and livestock. The Jordan River separated the people from the Promised Land, and it represented a real problem for Israel. It's what stood between them and the life God had promised.

The Jordan actually starts up in Mount Hermon and flows down to the Sea of Galilee and then keeps flowing to the Dead Sea. Mount Hermon has an elevation of nine thousand feet, but the Dead Sea is thirteen hundred feet below sea level, so the river descends rapidly, making it difficult to cross, especially at flood stage. Joshua 3:15 says, "The Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest." Rivers at flood stage are very dangerous, with life-threatening undercurrents and speed. Originally the Jordan ran through a gorge called the Zor; the gorge was 150 feet wide and had steep banks that were twenty to thirty feet high. So when the Jordan was at flood stage, the entire gorge became filled with fast-moving water, and because the banks went straight up and down, if you went into the water, you went into the water and were likely swept away by the current, never to be seen again.

That's important, because in Joshua 3:6 it says that Joshua turned to the priests and said, "Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on ahead of the people."

Imagine for a moment that you were one of the priests who was carrying the ark of the covenant, which was like carrying a millstone around your neck, and Joshua says to you, "I want you to be the first one to step into the Jordan River." If the river doesn't miraculously part or dry up, you're a goner. If I was the lead guy, I'd be tempted to fake a hamstring injury and sit this one out.

Joshua is asking the priests to do something they cannot do; he's asking them to do something that's impossible, that's beyond human reason or ability. Have you ever sensed God leading you to try something that's impossible? Thankfully, these into-the-river moments don't happen every day; most days are fairly routine and regular, nothing spectacular. But if you are following God by faith, every once in a while he will lead you to a river, to a moment, to a crossroad where he will call you to take a step and try something you can't do. And if you follow him, you will discover three huge payoffs.

### ***First Payoff: You Experience God's Power***

When you try things you can't do, you get a chance to see what God can do; you get to see God's miraculous power take over. God said to Joshua, "I want you to take the first step." Taking the first step into something you can't do is always the hardest step, and it requires complete trust in the power and goodness of God.

But think about it: stepping into something you can't do is the only time you need God's power.

If you never step into something you can't do, God's power isn't needed; and where God's power isn't needed, God's power doesn't show up. So I would ask you, "What river might you need to step into in order to see and experience God's power?" What is it that you can't do? What is it that you would like to do but you're afraid to try? If it's something God has put in your heart and it's gnawing and tugging at you and won't go away, that might be God's Spirit urging you to take the first step.

God can't take that step for you; you have to do what only you can do so that God can do what only he can do.

"But what if I can't do it, what if I fail, what if I look like a fool, what if God doesn't pull me through?" I have to fight through the "what ifs" every time I'm attempting to try something I can't do, even when I'm convinced that God is urging and calling me to do it.

Some people rarely experience God's power because they seldom attempt to accomplish something that would require his power. "God, give me lots of money first, then I'll be generous." Where's the miracle in that? There's no faith in that. "God, make my friend apologize to me first, then I'll forgive her." Or "God, make me a gifted, eloquent teacher, then I'll try to lead a class." Where's the need for God in that?

Now I do believe that people need to play to their strengths and step into areas in which they are gifted, but I also believe that there are times in your life when God will ask you to cross a Jordan River that is beyond your ability or area of expertise. God might prompt you to go back to school, stay home to raise your kids, extend forgiveness to someone who offended you, end a hurtful relationship, start a business, confront a family member, or give generously toward God's purposes, and everything in you might be telling you that you can't do it. And you're right. You can't. But if God is prompting and leading you, and if God has led you to a place where you will absolutely fail unless he shows up, will you trust him enough to take the first step so that he can show you his miraculous power? Paul, author of several books in the New

Testament, said, "I will rejoice in my weaknesses, because when I am weak, then I am strong" (see 2 Cor. 12:9-10). When I'm at my weakest point, that's when I'm at my strongest point, because that's when I have to rely on God's power to do something amazing. Joshua said to the priests, "Take up the ark of the covenant and cross over ahead of the people." And I love the very next sentence: "So they took it up and went ahead of them" (Josh. 3:6). Flat out obedience. No arguing, no questioning. "So they took it up and went ahead of them."

At some point you just have to go.

If you ever want to experience God's power, you have to take a step and let the chips fall.

Some people spend their entire life standing on the banks of the Jordan waiting for a miracle to happen. Can I be lov-ingly direct? *Miracles never happen while you're standing safely on the river's edge; miracles happen only when you step into the unknown and impossible.* And this is true of all great people of faith and accomplishment. When God called Abraham, the Bible says, "Abraham .. went, even though he did not know where he was going" (Heb. 11:8). When Jesus called Peter, it says, "So Peter went over the side of the boat" (Matt. 14:29 NLT). When Jesus called the first disciples, it says, "At once they left their nets and followed him" (Matt. 4:20).

Joshua told the priests to step into the Jordan with the ark and lead the way. "So they took it up and went ahead of them." At some point you have to stop thinking and start stepping, because nothing amazing ever happens while you're standing safely on the shore.

Every spring the walleyes and saugers (which are like wall-eyes) pile up below the dams and power plants on the Mis-sissippi River near Red Wing, Minnesota. And if you hit it right, you can just hammer the saugers. So about sixteen years ago, I took my son, David, who was only six at the time, and we joined Mark Kalb, who's a pastor friend in Red Wing. We fished hard all morning up and down the river but didn't catch a thing. Not a bite, nibble, nothing.

By early afternoon Dave had had it. He said things like, "Dad, I'm bored; there aren't any fish in the river; when can we go home?" And because I was with my friend and didn't want to cut short his day of fishing, I was looking for anything to keep David occupied. We'd already burned through our lunch and snacks. Suddenly, four big mallard ducks set their wings and landed about twenty feet from our boat. They were wild ducks, but it was obvious they were used to get-ting handouts from fishermen, because they floated in close to our boat. I thought, "This is a godsend."

So I said to Dave, "Toss 'em some chips." Sure enough, they swam right up to the boat, grabbed a chip, and fluttered away. That kept Dave occupied for, oh, about a minute. Soon he was moaning and groaning about going home again. Mark and I were standing on the front of his bass boat talking about life, so just as a brush-off I said, "Dave, why don't you see if you can grab one?" knowing that it's impossible for anyone to grab a wild duck, much less a six-year-old kid.

But his eyes lit up. "Really, Dad?"

"Sure, Dave, knock yourself out."

So with a whole new purpose, he rolled up his sleeves and started throwing out more chips. You've heard of oil slicks-this was a "chip slick." Mark and I weren't paying much attention to him. We were standing on the front of the boat, and all the while Dave was hanging over the back, and all we could see was his rear end. Then all of a sudden we heard David yell, "Dad, I got one!" Mark and I looked up just in time to see David fall into the boat with his hands clutched around the neck of a huge mallard duck. Its wings were whacking and flapping and slapping him in the face right and left. Dave was taking a beating from this bird that was almost as big as he was because he had his little grubby hands clutched around its neck.

He was lying on his back on the bottom of the boat with this bird just beating the heck out of him. Finally, he yelled, "Dad, what should I do?"

I yelled back, "Dave, let him go!" So he released his grip, and that huge bird flew off, wondering what had just happened. David stood to his feet, all wet and shook up, and Mark and I doubled over in laughter.

Finally, after the commotion settled down, I said, "Dave, how did you ever do that?"

He said, "Well, when I tossed in a chip, it would sink down a little bit, and the ducks would put their head under water to grab it, and I thought, 'That's a good time,' so I went," and he made a fast downward motion with his hand and said, "I grabbed one, like that."

I said, "That's brilliant!" I proudly turned to Mark and said, "That's my boy!" That's the day we went fishing and caught a duck, and it was the most amazing, most memorable fishing trip I've ever had. But what I love about that story is David's childlike faith. The son hears his father say, "Why don't you try to catch a duck." And it's completely impossible; it's something that nobody can do, especially a six-year-old little boy. But because he trusts his dad, he rolls up his sleeves and gives it a whirl, because nothing

ever happens if you don't try.

When you try things you can't do, you get a chance to see what God can do. Joshua 3:15-17 says, "The Jordan is at flood stage all during harvest. Yet as soon as the priests who carried the ark reached the Jordan and their feet touched the water's edge, the water from upstream stopped flowing. It piled up in a heap... [and] was completely cut off.... The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan,... until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground." The first payoff when you try things you can't do: you get a chance to see what God can do.

### ***Second Payoff: You Expand Your Capacity to Tackle Greater Challenges***

When you attempt things you can't do, you grow new muscles to take on bigger challenges. In Joshua 3:10, Joshua said to the Israelites, "This is how you will know that the living God is among you, and that he will certainly drive out before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites." Joshua is saying that crossing the Jordan is the least of their problems. There are at least seven enemy nations waiting to go to war against them as soon as they cross the river. But Joshua says that this first step into the Jordan will expand their capacity to face greater challenges. When the Israelites see how God provides a way through the river by holding back the water, then they will know "that the living God is among them," and they will be emboldened to take on greater challenges.

Ten years ago we voted to add a two-million-dollar children's wing to our original campus, and I remember feeling overwhelmed and insecure about what seemed to me an insurmountable amount of money. It was three times our annual budget, but we were growing rapidly and were in dire need of children's space. I remember walking around the newly poured footings and watching the walls go up and wondering how we were ever going to pay for it.

Two years later we voted to build a new four-million-dollar worship center, and again I thought we were stepping way beyond our financial capabilities. But we had managed to pay off the children's wing, and so I thought, "Well, God provided for that; maybe God will provide for this." Before the worship center was finished, everybody knew it was too small. As soon as it opened, we filled it four times every weekend, and we could see that God was blessing our steps into the river.

Then three years later we voted to buy one hundred acres and build a new campus for twenty-seven million dollars—an insane, impossible challenge. But we sensed that God was prompting us, leading us, and compelling us to go. There were some voices telling



us to cap our growth, plant smaller daughter churches, and stand safely by the river's edge. These voices were urging us to do what was doable, but rarely had God asked us to do what was doable. He always asked us to do what was not doable so that we would get a chance to see God's power. This would be a step into the unknown that would certainly fail if God didn't show up and provide a way

And we would never have had the courage to take that impossible step had God not expanded our capacity by taking us through smaller rivers first. We've been in our new build-ing for three years, and we have grown from two thousand people ten years ago to four thousand, six thousand, eight thousand, thirteen thousand people. We added a third cam-pus, and then a fourth, and now are planning a fifth. And none of it would have happened had we not taken that first step into the Jordan River with our children's wing. Joshua told the Israelites that when the priests take that first step and they see how God will part the river, then they will know that God is with them, and it will embolden them to take on greater challenges that lie ahead.

Gary Haugen is the president of International Justice Mission. He's a Harvard-educated lawyer who started out working for the US Department of Justice as the senior trial attorney. Gary could be living a safe, cushy life somewhere, but he's chosen to use his experience and skills to go into the dirtiest, darkest corners of the globe and work with often corrupt legal systems to free children who are bought and sold in the sex trade. He's rescued little boys and girls as young as eight years old who've been forced into a lifestyle of system-ized rape for profit, who endure ongoing sexual assault in the back rooms of brothels. Gary met with our leadership team for a couple hours a few months ago and said:

What we do is dangerous, and it scares me. I've had co-workers shot and murdered for trying to close down these sex rings. I want to be brave, but I also want to be safe; I want to be brave and safe. But that's not possible. I can't be brave and safe; it has to be one or the other. And I think God calls us entirely not to be safe. Who's going to intervene for those who don't have a voice, who don't have protection, who get preyed upon simply because they can't defend themselves?

Choosing this line of work is not safe! But I have found that when I am safe, I don't pray as much or rely on God as much. How many of us have taken on challenges that we can't imagine doing without prayer? Get involved in some-thing that is not safe, and your devotional life will catch fire. Most people do devotions because they think they have to, not because they're at the end of their rope, in trouble and out on a limb. But if you start attempting things that are not safe, you will find yourself praying because you'll collapse in fear if you don't; you'll find yourself praying because you're in trouble if God doesn't show up. You'll find yourself read-ing the Bible not out of duty but because if you don't have God's wisdom it could cost people their lives; you read God's Word because you have to know what God says in order to get out alive. God has called us to be brave, and that

means we must increasingly live lives that are not safe.

When was the last time you and I chose to step into some-thing that was not safe? When was the last time we had to pray and had to read God's Word because we'd collapse in fear if we didn't? Most of us live lives that are entirely too safe, standing on the banks of the river wondering why God doesn't do something amazing. In order to see and experi-ence God's power, you have to give yourself to something that is not safe, and if you do, you will become a bigger, bolder person.

One of the reasons I like to tackle tough challenges is because it stretches my capacity. I'm a buck-fifty drippin' wet. I'm not a big person, but I subject my skinny, little body to the rigors and extremes of the Hog Hole trip every year because they expand my capacity to face other challenges. The demands of that trip force me to stay physically and men-tally fit; they push me to my absolute limits. Many times we stagger to the fin ish line, sometimes in a downpour with bloodied knuckles and burning muscles, and we drop our packs and canoes in the sand and just hug each other in exhaustion and elation. It's a beautiful feeling, because it makes me feel like a bolder person. It's a test of character and strength that I can't get by sitting at a desk or playing golf, because it requires more of me than I have; it keeps me edgy and unsafe, and it increases my capacity to try things I can't do. Then when I'm faced with challenges like raising several million dollars, or giv ing a scary amount of money to a worthy cause, or asking forgiveness, or going to counseling, or dealing with deacons, they seem less formidable because I've conditioned myself to face much tougher challenges.

Joshua was saying that if they succeeded at crossing the Jordan, they would gain the courage and capacity to fight the enemy. When you try things you can't do, when you're onsafe, when you require more of yourself than you have, you ghe God a chance to show up and do something amazing. And it increases your capacity and courage to tackle even greater challenges.

### ***Third Payoff: It Inspires Others to Try Things They Can't Do***

When you try bold things, others will be inspired to do the same. The Israelites had crossed the Jordan River, and they were standing on the new land God had promised them. Joshua 4:18 says, "No sooner had they set their feet on the dry ground than the waters of the Jordan returned to... flood stage as before." But before that miracle occurred, Joshua instructed twelve men from the twelve tribes of Israel to take twelve large stones from the middle of the Jordan, where the priests had stood, and they built a memorial representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Joshua 4:6-7 says, "[This memorial] will serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of

the covenant of the LORD. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever." Joshua 4 concludes with these words: "The LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. . He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God" (vv. 23-24).

"All the peoples of the earth" is still involved in our lives, is still powerful, is still able and reference to you and willing to help us do things we can't do ourselves. Joshua instructed the twelve men to erect a memorial so that their children would always remember that God is capable of doing miracles and so that they'd be inspired to follow God into unknown and impossible adventures. They erected a memorial so that all the peoples of the earth (you and me) would know that God is powerful and so that we'd be inspired to try things we can't do so that we'd get a chance to see what God can do.

I love to be inspired, and I need to be inspired, because I lose my courage so quickly. And I quickly forget the miracles that God has performed all through my life. I forget. Dozens of times I've made my lunch and left it sitting in plain sight on the counter as I've walked out the door. A couple years ago I signed and dated my Alaska fishing license July 28, 1999; it was 2009. I forget entire decades-they should never let me lead a church or write sermons. So I need other people to regularly inspire me and remind me of all the amazing ways God has led me and wants to continue to use me.

One Sunday afternoon in June 2008, I watched the final championship tennis match at Wimbledon between Spaniard Rafael Nadal and Swiss Roger Federer. It was the longest final match in Wimbledon's 133-year history: four hours and forty-eight minutes-more than seven hours with rain delays. The youngster, Nadal, pulled ahead two sets to none and was serving for the match in the third set when a rain delay interrupted play. When the players returned, Federer, who had won sixty-five straight matches on grass, dug deep and held off Nadal and won the third and fourth sets. The fifth and final set went to four/four, five/five, six/six, and was finally won by Nadal, eight/six, just before the match was called due to darkness. They were like two prizefighters who took blow after blow and wouldn't fall.

I was watching the final half hour while exercising on an elliptical machine at the health club-I had eight minutes to go on a thirty-minute workout, and my whole body hurt. My muscles were burning, I felt faint, my shirt was soaked, and I wanted to step down and quit. But I was watching this amazing match, and I was so inspired by their relentless will to win that there was no way I could quit. I told myself, "Suck it up, Merritt. Don't be such a pansy. Grind it out and finish it off. These two champions battled for four hours and forty-eight minutes; the least you can do is finish your

thirty-minute workout." When I see other people trying things they can't do, it inspires me to try things I can't do.

I was inspired one night twelve years ago, and it was completely unexpected. My daughter spent thousands of hours practicing six days a week for ten years in the sport of gymnastics, which meant that I spent countless hours drifting aimlessly down school hallways between Megan's four events looking at photographs, trophies, and high school memorabilia. She'd do a thirty-second bar routine, and then it was a forty-five-minute wait until her five-second vault; she'd do her five-second vault, and then it was a forty-five-minute wait until her twenty-second beam routine. This happened at every four-hour-long meet. Gymnastics is inspiring for a total of one minute and thirty-five seconds.

But I have a memory that will always inspire me to try things I can't do, and it happened unexpectedly. Our daughter was selected to attend an awards banquet at the Regal Hotel in Minneapolis to honor a dozen gymnasts from the state of Minnesota for their achievements. The University of Minnesota women's gymnastic team was there, along with their coaches. And John Roethlisberger, who is a two-time Olympian and the most decorated athlete in the history of the University of Minnesota, was also there. One by one these twelve kids were called to the front by this world-renowned athlete, and as they came forward to receive their award,

John would announce two or three of their achievements. Then he'd conclude with that gymnast's most outstanding achievement: "first in state," or "went to regionals," or "went to nationals, " and everybody would applaud.

But as we sat there, I noticed a young girl sitting with her family about three tables in front of us. It was obvious that she was mentally and physically challenged. She would wave at odd times, clap and speak out at odd times, and I figured she was there to watch a sister or brother receive an award.

But when John announced the final gymnast, he mentioned that this particular gymnast had made the special gymnastic team at her school. He mentioned a few other minor achievements, and then he paused. And before he called her to the platform to receive her award and stand with all the other gymnasts, John Roethlisberger, this great Olympian, looked down at Julie and said, "And Julie's most outstanding achievement was learning how to walk independently." With great effort she stood to her feet. Her smile was brighter than the chandeliers above her. Her dad stood to assist her, he walked with her a few steps, and then he let her go. And with a shuffle and a limp, Julie walked proudly all by herself to receive her award from John, and everyone in the room stood to their feet in spontaneous applause.

It inspired me; it continues to inspire me. As I watched her, I wondered what kind of impossible rivers Julie had to cross to get to this proud moment in her life. She would never do a backflip off the beam, she would never represent her team at state, but she could walk independently, and it was her most outstanding achievement.

I have faced many challenges in life, but I have never had to relearn how to walk independently. I take walking for granted, and running, working, writing, creating, and leading. When I see people like Julie step into impossible rivers like learning how to walk independently with limited resources, I wonder what I should be capable of doing with my unlimited resources. Whenever I see brave souls overcome impossible barriers, I am inspired to try even greater things that I can't do. In Luke 12:48, Jesus said, "To whom much is given, much is required" (author paraphrase). That's me. And that's most of you.

## **Three Cautions**

### ***Make Sure God Is Leading You***

Deuteronomy 34:9 says, "Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the Spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him." Joshua was filled with the Spirit of wisdom, which means that Joshua was getting an ongoing supply of discernment that came directly from God's Holy Spirit. All through Old Testament history, God would select a leader like Moses or Joshua and would supply them with an on-going stream of wisdom and direction so that they could instruct and lead the people. The Bible, God's Word, hadn't yet been written, and Jesus hadn't yet come, so the primary way God revealed truth and wisdom to people was by his Holy Spirit.

Sometimes God's Spirit would reveal things through dreams, visions, or an angelic being. One time God used the voice of a donkey to reveal his truth, another time a burning bush. But God usually revealed his truth and purposes in the way he did it with Joshua: by filling Joshua with wisdom that came from the Holy Spirit. It wasn't something Joshua could explain, predict, or manufacture, but when it happened, Joshua couldn't keep it bottled inside. The leading from God's Spirit was so strong that he knew it was from God. But just to confirm it, God told Joshua, "Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses. Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant [to] go and stand in the river" (Josh. 3:7-8). God let Joshua and all the people know that God's Spirit was leading Joshua by miraculously stopping the river. They'd seen God hold back waters once before, forty years prior when Moses led the Israelites across the Red Sea, and now they would see it again. Whenever I feel prompted to try something I can't do, I try to make sure it is God who is leading me and not just human desire. I look for

four signals. First, do I sense an inner prompting or an inner tug on my heart from God's Spirit? Every time I've been led by God, it began with an unmistakable prompting that wouldn't go away. Second, does it line up with Scripture? I know, for example, that if I feel compelled to do something that's immoral, would harm my family, or would weaken the church, it can't be God's leading, because those things are in conflict with Scripture. Third, do other wise and godly people agree with it, and have I sought their counsel? If everyone whom I trust disagrees, that's a red flag. Fourth, do the circumstances make sense: Is the opportunity there, is the timing right, does it seem like the circumstances are pointing in that direction?

Make sure God is leading you.

### ***Be Realistic***

Be as prepared as you can be before you try something you can't do. Consider your background, experience, skills, and training, because there's a difference between realistic steps of faith and foolish steps of faith. God will ask us to do things we can't do, but it's not blind faith or stupid faith. I am 99 percent sure that God is not calling any of you to Nome, Alaska, to start a business in ceramic figurines. That's not realistic; that's foolishness. There's a difference between realistic risk and foolish risk. Gary Haugen of the International Justice Mission doesn't go into dangerous hot spots haphazardly; he builds alliances, marshals his resources, considers the timing, and brings more than twenty years of expertise. And then he tries things he can't do.

### ***Expect Problems***

You'd think that when you obey God's leading, everything would go smoothly, but it seldom does. As soon as the Israelites cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land, they are met with war, and they have to take out the cities of Jericho and Ai. Problems.

They conquered Jericho, but Joshua's men disobeyed his orders and kept some of the plunder for themselves instead of putting it all into the corporate treasury. So Scripture says, "The LORD's anger burned against Israel" (Josh. 7:1). Consequently, when they went up against the city of Ai, God removed his protection, and they got beaten badly. More problems.

God was giving them this land, but Joshua had to launch dozens of military campaigns against the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites, and Philistines. It seemed that Israel's bold step of faith ended up causing nothing but problems.

Do you ever feel like your life is one big problem?

We all know what it's like to have problems. You sense

God leading you to try something you can't do, and you take a bold step into the unknown. At first it's thrilling, but then there's a series of conflicts, heartbreaks, and obstacles, and it's easy to fall facedown and lose heart. You are led into a new position at work only to be undermined and criticized. You are led to go back to school only to run into stressful classes. You are led to start giving generously only to have your car break down. You are led to write a book only to have an editor cut, criticize, and make you redo your work. And because of the threat of conflict and failure, some people play it safe; consequently, their life never changes. Anyone who attempts to try things they can't do will encounter problems.

Those problems aren't there to stop you but to embolden you. They're there to show you that God is there, his power is real, and it is available to those who will take the step. Problems are opportunities for God's power. No problems, no power.

People who never cross the Jordan might avoid some conflict and hardship, but they never see new land, they seldom grow, and they rarely experience the thrill of following God into the unknown and watching him do impossible things.

I wonder how many unfulfilled dreams there are in people who are still standing at the river's edge, how many unresolved conflicts, unexplored adventures, untaught courses, unused talents. Henry Cloud talks about people who live their lives in a "dull state of sameness." He writes, "You could peer into their lives year after year and see that there's no difference in the way they relate to their spouse, kids, coworkers and careers just following the conveyer belt of sameness."<sup>5</sup>

If you want to see God do amazing things in your life, and if you want to expand your capacity to face greater challenges, then you eventually have to step into the river and try things you can't do.

You might fail, you might become afraid, you might have to go through some battles, but you might achieve something that was far beyond your dreams or abilities. That's when life gets exciting.

At one time I was unable to do many of the things I can do now, like write a message, give a speech, fix a washing machine, create a lesson plan, teach a class, manage a staff, filet a fish, be a husband, raise two kids, lead a church. Every one of those things required that I try things I couldn't do. So step into the river, get your feet wet, try something you can't do, and maybe God will do a miracle and show you what he can do.

How will you ever know unless you try?