



Three Things that Last Forever

International Leadership
Institute

PDF #2
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Introduction: the Petersons face the result of “religion”

Once again we take up the story of Knut and Gudrun

Knut and Gudrun’s ministry to the Czechs begins in Prague, the capital of Czech Republic which once ruled as a “faith capital of Europe.” Prague was able to develop its importance as a major city from the fourteenth century on because of its enviable Christian institutions and culture, and the many fervent Christians living in it. In our last book, *Three Things You Can’t Do in Prague*, we have explored what might work in Christian ministry in the contemporary Czech Republic. Our two fictional characters, Knut and Gudrun Peterson, Norwegian/Czech Americans living in Florida, came to Prague to start a movement among young adults in several targeted cities in Czech Republic in order to mobilize Czechs for following Christ.

In this, the second volume of our Prague trilogy, we return to this theme and imagine another way for the Petersons to fulfill their destiny. We will attempt to describe what is really happening in Prague and other places in Czech Republic, based on our recent extended visits there, and will try to envision how Prague could once again lead the West in returning to Christianity within Europe. It is against this background that we will explain how the Petersons grappled with the “three things that last forever” in their ministry.

The Results of “Religion”

It has been said that that the highest type of wickedness is that which uses up the wealth, happiness and virtue of the community to satisfy your own needs, with no regard for others. When the Petersons first arrived in Prague in late October 2007 in *Three Things You Can’t Do in Prague* (the first book of this trilogy) it did not take them a long time to notice that an established and most common social practice of people around them was to pursue one’s happiness by focusing on one’s own needs, while using up the resources and wealth the society provides without much concern for others. Luckily, they were prepared for such practices, having seen them before in the U.S. as exemplified by the so-called “Tea Party activists.”

While they saw that many people around them had comfortably settled into the world, following their own desires and ignoring those around them who needed help, both Knut and Gudrun were also able to recognize that people around them wanted to be loved and appreciated. The Petersons knew that Jesus Christ can change people’s thinking, revolutionize their lives, and ultimately help them to lead lives with purpose and meaning, with a focus on the needs of others.

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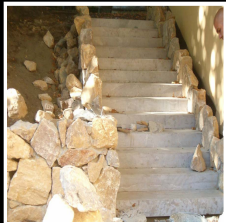
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Introduction—continued

Fortunately the Petersons had many friends in the Czech Republic, and with their help they were able to realize that the answer for their work among people in the Czech Republic would not come from “religion”—for religion often has a negative impact on the whole of society, and people are right to think they are better off without it.

From their discussions with friends in Prague and elsewhere in the Czech Republic, Knut and Gudrun better understood why so many people there prefer to be agnostics, pagans, New Age believers or atheists, rather than practicing some old worn-out form of religion (Christian or any other). It was apparent to them that when men and women get their hands on religion (and they don’t need to be just “radical Islamists”), one of the things they sooner or later do is to turn their religion into an instrument for controlling others, either putting or keeping them “in their place.”

Religion’s Past Crimes in the Czech Republic

The history of such religious manipulation and coercion of people living on the territory of today’s Czech Republic is long, tedious and frightening. Therefore it did not come to Knut and Gudrun as a great surprise that people who have mostly known religion on such terms experience release or escape from it as freedom, regardless how short-sighted such “freedom” might turn out to be. Historically, it would seem that the Church in Europe has at times put itself into a position wherein it may be truthfully described as an evil institution.

In fact, many Czechs believe that there is perhaps no better disguise than the cloak of religious piety and zeal for doing evil, and that men never do evil so cheerfully as when they do it from religious convictions, which gives an average Czech a deep distrust of the institutional church and of all authoritative, top-down structures.

The Petersons, then, were determined to avoid an appearance of building hierarchical church structures, instead focusing on helping those in need by reflecting Jesus Christ through their actions and attitude. Their prayer was that, by so doing, they might attract the curiosity of others, who then might be willing to hear about Jesus. The emphasis on others was the starting point for everything the Petersons came to do in the Czech Republic; in all their endeavors they focused on putting their God-given skills, talents, experience and qualifications at the service of those whom they came to serve.

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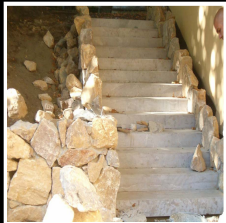
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My Utmost for His Highest

In daily life, serving others meant to pray first about what God wants them to do this day and then to do their “utmost for His highest” to fulfill His guidance, as they were led by the Holy Spirit. Knut and Gudrun wanted to use their lives to make a difference for Jesus. They were not focusing on participating in religious activities; they knew they were led by the Holy Spirit and were not alone. Knut and Gudrun often reminded to each other their favorite passages from, the Word of God, The Bible, including passages from the Reverend Eugene H. Peterson’s *The Message*, such as:

Lady Wisdom will be your close friend and brother knowledge your pleasant companion. Good Sense will scout ahead for danger. Insight will keep you from making wrong turns, or following the bad directions of those who are lost themselves and can't tell a trail from a tumbleweed.

(Proverbs 2:10-12)

The Petersons belonged to that special flock of people who know Christ as their personal Savior and are led by Him. These people can hear and heed the counsel of the Holy Spirit; they can also magnify the words of the Spirit and can appropriately judge the advice and counsel of man. Subsequently such followers of Jesus can recognize that the purpose of their lives is much greater than simply their own preferences and fulfillment. Knut and Gudrun were convinced that greatest service one person can render to another is to bring him or her to know Jesus. They knew what their mission was and followed what Jesus Christ told them, and so they went to Prague, trusting that God would lead them, guide them and help them in all their tasks.

You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (Matthew 28: 19-20)



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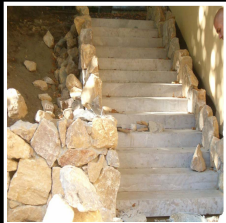
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Chapter One: willing to stay but planning to go

The first few months of 2007 were a time of testing for Knut and Gudrun Peterson, a middle-aged couple living in Florida. This kind of testing was not new to them; as Christians, they were accustomed to the challenges of following God's guidance, which can be dramatic and clear (as when Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac, meant to be a submitting to God's guidance, was transformed into an act of obedience when a ram appeared to be the substitute sacrifice, or when Job encountered God in a whirlwind). Such guidance could also be as difficult to discern as a still small voice that can't be heard without the ears of faith and trust.

Testing in itself is rarely pleasant; in every test is the possibility of failure and dire consequences. Fortunately, the Lord's testing is always done in His presence. The test is a source of anxiety; the Lord's presence is a source of grace. After a while, most mature Christians come to count on the sweetness of the Lord's presence as a "side benefit" of testing—and truly mature Christians learn to love their tests and count them as blessings, as the author of Hebrews said, knowing that the Lord is ready to help who need Him most. As *The Message* puts it:

Now that we know what we have—Jesus, this great High Priest with ready access to God—let's not let it slip through our fingers. We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help. (Hebrews 4:14)

One of the tests that Knut and Gudrun faced was to obtain a long-term residence permit for Gudrun, who did not hold dual citizenship (Czech/American); Knut had managed to obtain this citizenship during one of his extended stays in Prague through an obscure legal loophole. The Petersons had to spend considerable time and resources to deal with the inflexible bureaucracy that's so well-entrenched in the Czech Republic; the communist regime and the Hapsburg monarchy had in common their love for rules, regulations and paperwork, and that tradition seems to live on in the Czech Republic.

The Petersons also faced a more pleasant test in deciding on where to live. They knew that being in Prague, the capital city, would be the best choice. To rent or to buy a flat? They decided to rent until they settled on a neighborhood that they could become part of and enjoy as their new home. Vinohrady (the former "King's vineyard") in Prague 2 was one option; crossing the Vltava to Prague 6 (Dejvice and the rest) behind the castle (Hradcany) was another. Even Prague 5, Smichov and the environs, was a possibility, or Prague 7 near Letna, with its huge public park (Letenské sady) and nearness to the city center.

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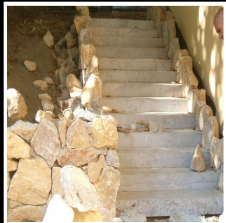
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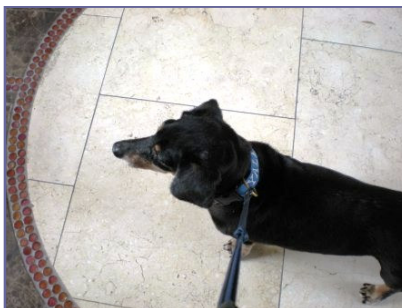
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Waiting for God

So in a way, these early months of the year were “same old, same old” times of uncertainty and false clues. When Knut and Gudrun were well-rested and in good health, they could remember their past tests and luxuriate in the amplified presence of the Lord; however, life being not so simple, they were neither well-rested nor in good health during this time.

In fact, between Knut’s knee and shoulder inflammations and Gudrun’s sciatica, the Petersons were less healthy than their elderly dachshund Comenius, a survivor of paralysis due to slipped disc. Comenius went through a grueling surgery and long recovery period to restore his spinal functions, so he could walk again; now he had rotten teeth, to boot. In his single-minded way, Comenius was an inspiration to the Petersons. When he was in pain, he snapped at everyone and was quite the grouch. But when he was feeling good (as he was in early 2007, after a professional tooth-cleaning that relieved the infection in his mouth) he was as playful as a puppy.

Watching Comenius trot at full speed, his rear end at a crooked angle, his spine like a question mark, his useless right rear leg being dragged by his massively powerful shoulders, Knut and Gudrun couldn’t help but laugh. They forgot their own pains as they enjoyed Comenius’ frolicking almost as much as he did. Comenius demanded frequent walks, and, thanks to Comenius’ high level of energy, vitality and eager spirit, Knut was able to keep in reasonably good physical shape by walking with Comenius and keeping up with the dog’s high spirits.



The Nature of the Test

Back in 2006, when they wrote *Three Things You Can’t Do in Prague*, the Petersons felt they had the future firmly in their hands. They had been working with people from Central and East Europe, especially from the Czech Republic, for 16 years in their business, the International Leadership Institute. The Institute delivered leadership development programs in the United States, for business leaders (executive education and training programs through the *Business Leadership Forum: USA*) and for young people (American English language immersion programs in the US) from the newly-opened countries of the former Soviet bloc.



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The programs had been successful in providing opportunities for participants to develop their leadership and language skills, helping them in their careers and their educational pursuits. BLF program participants generated over \$1 billion in international business activities in the years 1992—1997, with the help of the new business insights and confidence they gained through interacting with their professional peers in the BLF programs. Over 800 Central and East Europeans had taken part in Institute programs, and the Petersons considered this phase of their business, from 1990—1997, to be the most interesting and productive years of their professional lives.

The Petersons knew that there was something missing in the experience of their program participants, an empty space that educational programs could not fill. Forty years of communism, among other things, had sapped the vitality and power of the Christian church in Central and East Europe. The Petersons could see that their Czech participants, in particular, had a void in their lives that could not be filled by education, business success or even a satisfying family life. So in 1997, Knut and Gudrun began to adjust the mission of the International Leadership Institute to take into account the spiritual needs of the people living in the former countries of the soviet bloc. The Petersons attempted to tactfully introduce their participants to Christians and the beliefs of Christianity, with widely varying results.

Knut and Gudrun remembered well the 1992 International Leadership Institute language students from the former East Germany, whom they took to a lecture by a distinguished senior professor at the conservative Christian college where Knut was on the faculty. The professor began a mild, rather academic discussion of Christian values; the students became almost instantly enraged and offended by his words, jumping to their feet to argue with the startled professor, to everyone's great surprise.

Knut also recalled the time he took a group of young adult Czech Travel-and Learn language students to Christ the Redeemer church in Ponte Vedra, Florida, the Petersons' home church. The event was a free dinner and short video by the Reverend Nicky Gumbel, a British evangelist who "starred" in the Alpha taped series of talks on basic Christianity. This presentation was entitled, "Christianity: Boring, Untrue and Irrelevant?" As Nicky presented the basic truths of Christianity with mild British humor, two of the Czechs walked out of the church, highly insulted by such seemingly "simple" ideas. Knut hurried out after them to calm them down, only to be told that they needed to get out to have a cigarette, because their minds had become cloudy.



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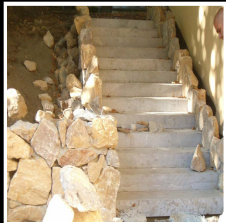
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From many experiences like the ones mentioned above, Gudrun and Knut came to understand through prayer that their next task in life was to minister to the Czechs, in their own country, about the love of Christ. And they needed to see if they could help to create around them a real Christian culture of peace, joy and friendliness as they interacted with those whom the Lord sent their way.

A Decade of Preparation

Sometimes the ways of God are mysterious, as the Bible makes clear. And sometimes His ways are just plain “slow.” The Petersons were finding that the “slowness of God” was rather trying to their patience—no doubt, their lack of patience itself was exactly why He was so slow! As can be seen from numerous Bible stories (the Jacob-Leah-Rachel story comes to mind), often a person is far from ready to be used by God when God informs that person that he or she has been given a particular task. Jacob wanted to marry Rachel, but the Lord did not clear the path for a quick and happy ending. Jacob worked for seven years to “earn” Rachel’s hand—only to be told by Rachel’s father that Rachel could not marry before her older sister, Leah. He offered Leah to Jacob, who accepted her as his wife and then worked seven more years to gain Rachel as his second wife.

Or there was Moses, who was chosen by God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. It took forty years of wandering for them to make a relatively short trip to the Promised Land (a journey of a week or so, on foot). In this case, the grumblings and bad attitude of the Israelites seemed to be the cause of the delay—but in Jacob’s case, he was working hard and doing everything right, but still had to wait.

Whether due to their own stubbornness and inability to hear God, or simply to God’s mysterious ways, by 2007 the Petersons had been preparing and waiting for four years to discern God’s plan for their Czech ministry. They never lost faith that they should go—they were more than willing to go—but they had to learn to wait in order to fully grasp what God has appointed them to do, and get ready for it. Throughout all this time of waiting, praying, thinking and preparing, the Petersons displayed considerable spiritual tenacity by not just hanging on and doing “nothing,” but by working deliberately on the certainty that God would not be mocked or worsted in His plans.



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Clearly, the Petersons perceived that the greatest fear of a human being is not necessarily that he or she will be damned, but that Jesus Christ will be “worsted” (as Oswald Chambers puts it)—that all Jesus stands for (love, forgiveness, kindness toward other men, grace, mercy, compassion, truth, justice, peace, hope, patience and so on) will not win in the end. The Petersons demonstrated a kind of endurance which is combined with the absolute certainty that what they have been told by God is going to transpire. There is nothing noble, desirable or Christ-like that the human mind has ever hoped for or dreamed of under God’s guidance that will not be fulfilled. And the Petersons also knew that what God has begun, He will bring to a successful conclusion. They took much strength from Oswald Chambers’ book, *My Utmost for His Highest* during this time (see bibliography for information on this publication).

Gudrun and Knut were not discouraged. In fact, they were strangely certain that they were heading somewhere special. They realized, as saying goes, “Man proposes but God disposes.” Increasingly they were able to understand and to take to their heart an admonition of Gudrun’s brother Jahn who read their first book, and gave them warm congratulation and encouragement while not failing to warn them mildly, that “God will surely use you but He will not necessarily confine Himself to ways you now imagine.” The Petersons realized that “reality,” as it sometimes happens, does not line up with their imperfect (although, as they believed, inspired) vision.



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