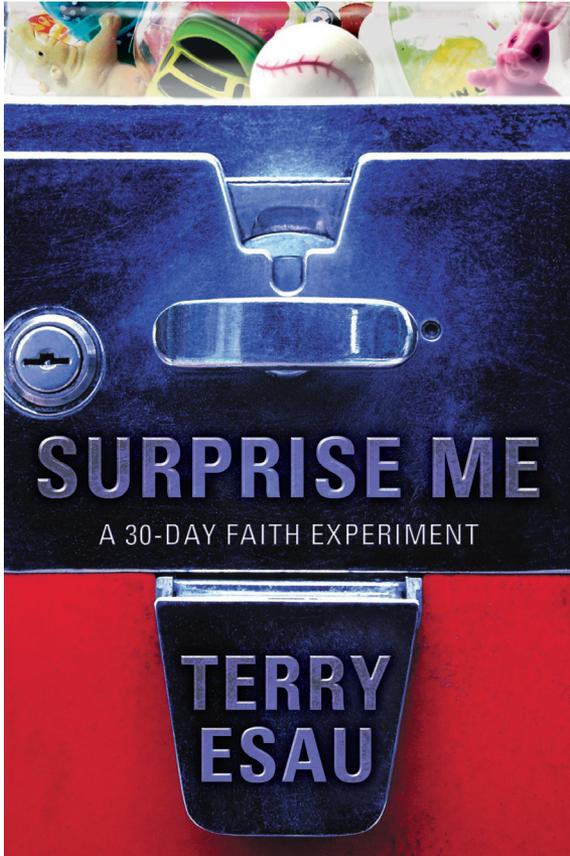


Surprise Me

TERRY ESAU



NAVPRESS 

© 2005 by Terry Esau
All rights reserved. Permission is granted to download and print one copy to use with a study group.

REALITY SPIRITUALITY

And on the eighth day God said, “Surprise!”

I was watching some reality TV the other day. Weird stuff. I get the impression they want me to think that I’m eavesdropping on an adventure—that it’s spontaneous, unscripted, raw, real, alive. Well, Gilbert and Carol didn’t raise the brightest boy, but even I’m not that gullible.

Still, it got me thinking. What would a Reality TV show look like if it was about our faith? You know, Reality Spirituality. I suppose there would be several forms of competition.

Maybe the show would open with *The Parking Prayer Competition*. Contestants would be deposited in large SUVs, probably white Hummers plastered with sponsorship logos, about a mile from the mall. Then they’d be given thirty seconds to pray and ask God for a really good parking place. Whoever got a spot closest to the entrance would be declared the winner.

Or maybe they’d have a *Restaurant Prayer Competition*. Contestants would get extra points for longest prayer and loudest volume and could earn bonus points if they got the entire clientele, including the waitstaff, to bow their heads.

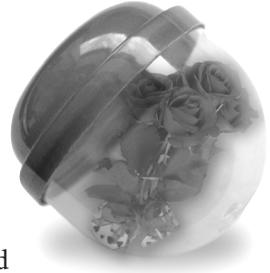
I have a few other ideas as well, but it only gets worse from here. Let’s just say I hope that show never makes it to TV. If you have to go on TV to prove how spiritual you are, haven’t you just disproven it? Our faith is not a competition.

Yet, there’s something intriguing about an aspect of this — the reality

part. Wouldn't it be cool if our faith were a little more raw, a little more real, more spontaneous, unscripted, more like an adventure?

So I got this idea, not for a TV show but an experiment. A faith experiment.

Thirty Days — A three-word prayer — A trail of surprises



What if:

Every day, for thirty days, I pray and ask God to surprise me? “Surprise Me, God.” Nothing more, nothing less. Three words. Not asking for something in particular. Not giving him my list. Not presenting my agenda. Just inviting him to barge into my life in any old way he pleases — to crash into the busyness of my schedule and mess with it.

Then, what if:

Every day I record my thoughts and activities? All the twists and turns that give shape to the month. I'll look for when, where, and how God steps into my world in a practical, everyman sort of way, and then I'll transfer it all onto my hard drive. I suspect this won't be a collection of “highlight” stories (TV tales of only the positively answered prayers that seem out of context and too good to be believed), but rather a measure of “reality spirituality.” I suspect it will include stories of seemingly unanswered prayers as well. Maybe the surprise will be that on many days no sugarcoated coincidences aligned at all — the day headed south and just kept going. Maybe the surprise will be in how I handle that, or don't handle it. Maybe the surprises will be more internal than external. Maybe the sea will part, the rod will bud, and the sky will rain biscuits. Maybe not.

I have no idea what those “maybes” will look like—except that I expect they won’t be what I expect. Today there is no story. But come Monday, the experiment begins. Thirty days from now I’ll be done. The book of stories will have been written, assisted by the Surprise-Meister. All the “aha” moments will be in the bag; the good, the bad, and probably the odd as well.

I’m hoping it will be a tapestry that blends my physical, emotional, and spiritual worlds. I’m hoping it will feel real and honest. I’m hoping it *won’t* feel like one of those happily-ever-after, dimple-grinned Christian tomes that smack of well-intentioned inauthenticity. I’m hoping it will look like thirty days in the life of a regular guy who embarked on a terribly irregular experiment.

I’m not exactly sure why I’m doing this, except that I feel the need to stir the pot of my personal suburban faith. Maybe this is a plea for an adrenalin shot-to-the-heart for the sake of my spiritual resuscitation. I want to see and hear strong beeps on my spiritual heart-rate-monitor. I want to live large.

I’m a little nervous. I like control, always have. This is yielding the paintbrush. It’s saying, “Okay, I’ll be your canvas for a month. Paint away. Any color. Any subject. Trowel, paint gun, or brush. Have at me!”

Well—here goes.

“Surprise Me, God!”

DAY ONE: FLEECE

Well, this is it. This first day of the “experiment.” It feels kind of weird, like I’ve started a game and I don’t know the rules. I don’t know how to play. I’m not even sure of the goal. It’s like I’m on a scavenger hunt, but nobody gave me the list.

I’ve got to tell you, part of me feels an odd sort of pressure to come up with the goods. You know, extraordinary stories of miraculous events — the kind they make miniseries about or air on PAX TV. What if nothing like that happens? What if this ends up being the dullest month of my life? Who’s going to want to read that? Will that make God look bad? Will it make *me* look bad? Is this whole idea stupid? Maybe this whole idea is just the unfortunate result of eating bad chicken.

I wish my ideas came with a logbook that clearly identified their source. “This one’s from God, this one — not so much.” It would make things so much easier. It does make me wonder . . . is God anti-easy? I suppose he just wants me to use my brain. And I guess if he robbed me of that option I’d be whining all the more.

Sorry. This is supposed to be a record of my days and the events that happen in those days. Not my disjointed mental meanderings. Maybe this experiment will be more about the processing and understanding of life than the actual chronological documentation of it. Hmm.

Enough conundruming.

Woke up at 4 a.m. I wouldn’t call that a surprise, at least not a pleasant one. Trust me, I didn’t set the alarm for four bells. I think it was the anticipation of this day. The subconscious wheels were cruising when

they should have been snoozing. I hate that.

Got up, showered. Walked Bailey, our English Springer Spaniel. She didn't seem to notice anything special in the day. Just did her business in a very rote sort of way.

When I got back home, I did a little reading and had some toast while Katie Couric yammered on in the background. The starting line for the experiment was staring at me. Maybe I should stretch a bit more before I step up to the line. I was . . . um . . . *surprised* to find myself a bit hesitant to actually say those words, "Surprise Me, God." Once I say them for the first time, the game is on. The game without rules.

As I was eating I started thinking about the story of Gideon in the Bible. Remember how he was testing God's direction by putting a fleece out at night? He said, "Okay, if this is what you want me to do, tomorrow morning let the fleece be dry and the ground around it be wet." It was. And then, another test. "Okay, that was pretty good, God. Now, let the fleece be wet and the ground be dry. Then I'll know this is you, Mr. Anti-Easy, directing me."

Jump ahead a few thousand years. It's the inaugural Surprise Me day. Maybe I should have put out a fleece to make sure this was a Really Good Idea. Or am *I* the fleece? I don't think I'm testing God to see if this or that direction is true and from him, like Gideon. But I may be testing myself to see if I can hold water, holy water. I wonder if this whole thing is more about my ability, or my willingness to soak up the rain he causes to fall on me. Maybe it's about throwing away my umbrella, getting rid of the protections and distractions that keep me from seeing what God wants to dump into my life.

Can I hold the surprises he rains on me?

I walked out our back door onto the deck. I looked up at our bedroom windows to see if Mary was still sleeping. *Zzzzzz*. Then I did something a bit odd — at least it felt odd. I lay down on the deck, flopped my arms

out wide, and looked up at the clouds. Bailey threw me a “what’s-he-up-to-now” glance.

I took a deep breath, then said, “God, here’s your fleece. Soak me.” I followed my request with those three words he’d better get used to:

“Surprise Me, God.”

I lay there for a few seconds. The wind blew, the birds chirped. There was no Terry-as-target bolt of lightning. Nor did I suddenly receive the supernatural ability to see into the future or cure acne or rattle off the names of the riders in the 1938 Tour de France in alphabetical order.

Life was copacetic.

I got up and dusted myself off, making sure that my back was cleared of leaves, twigs, and other deck crud. How would I explain the outdoor-living collage on my back to my wife? What would I say? “Uh, little dust storm kicked up out there, blew a bunch of debris onto my, uh, back. Weirdest thing.” She already looks at me sideways. I don’t want her to reconsider institutionalizing me.

It felt good to be underway.

Interesting thing about this experiment—it’s not taking place in a vacuum. I’m not taking time off to do it. I haven’t set aside thirty days to laboratory-ize it. Life as I know it will continue, and this project will weave itself in and around and through it. That is intentional. I want this to be a slice of the normal life I lead, not a scripted event that doesn’t relate to my everyday existence. Surprise Me is about inviting God into my life *as is*.

My life *as is* continued at a meeting with our church staff to present this Surprise Me idea. I had mentioned it to our pastor the week earlier over coffee. His ears perked up like Bailey’s as I was telling him how it worked, and he asked me to come and present it to the staff. I did. It went well. They decided to use it as the fall kick-off campaign at our church.



Four Sundays, five Wednesdays. We'll get the whole church engaged in this experiment. On the first Sunday we're going to introduce the idea and hand everyone a thirty-day journal. Then, on Wednesdays during our whole-church gathering, we'll recap the past week's Surprises and break into the already existing small groups for everyone to tell their stories. I think this is going to be a good thing. Think of the community—the bonding that will take place as people tell their stories of God working in their lives. How can this not be fun?

After I returned home, I had a conference call with a radio station in Florida. I'm composing a new package of image music for their station. Did I mention that I'm in the music business? I mostly write and produce music for TV commercials, but I also score documentary films, TV show themes, TV news packages, radio commercials, and radio station campaigns. I used to own a full-blown recording studio until a year ago. It was a pretty cool space, occupying a 100-year-old bank building of rough brick, huge windows, high ceilings—and had an atmosphere that rocked. I gave it a name: The Coast. This was my creative home for the past seventeen years. Some days I miss it.

When I sold The Coast I decided to turn the space above our garages into a much smaller home studio. If it hadn't turned out so cool, I think I'd miss The Coast even more, but my new digs feel so right—like my new creative home.

So I'm sitting in my new space, calling this radio station in Florida. I had e-mailed seven or eight music files to them, and this was the “We like it/We hate it” conference call. I don't worry about these meetings like I did in the early days. Long ago I realized that I can't predict someone's musical tastes or preferences. They skew toward the randomly illogical. And when you get a group of people on the phone and try to come to a consensus, well, does the phrase “when hell freezes over” mean anything to you?

Evidently it was a cooler day than normal in hell — they liked, and agreed to, almost all of it. Gotta like those subterranean cold fronts. They wanted a few changes, but nothing with meteorological significance.

After the phone call I had to cruise to a lunch meeting. I met with Mark, a guy who leads worship at his church. He just wanted to talk about life, dreams, vision, and stuff like that. He's one of those people who will do something really new, really groundbreaking one day. I encourage people like that to do it, just flat out do it. "Incrementalism is innovation's worst enemy." I don't know who said that, but I love this phrase and think it's packed with a lot of truth. We're always trying to ease our way into change — *same* our way into something different. We try to do it in such a way that nobody feels uncomfortable. Long ago I decided that in my music business, if everybody feels good and safe with the music, then it must be weak, impotent, passionless. And it probably won't achieve its purpose. I call this the S & T factor. If there's not at least one person who Squirms and Twitches when they hear it, then toss it out, it's dead.

I encouraged Mark to innovate even if there were some S & T-ers in the crowd. Don't you think we need to start swinging art a bit more like a sword? I encouraged Mark to pull his ideas from the scabbard and slice away at some stale air. Hope he doesn't get in trouble. Or he may come looking for me with a more-than-metaphorical sword.

Mark told me at lunch about a mutual friend of ours, Bruce, who quit his job and is looking to start an experience-based café — a place where art would be used to gently poke and prod people to think and talk about life, love, faith, and God. Now that's a sword-worthy idea. It's always pleasantly surprising to hear about people like that. I wish they were the norm instead of the extremely remote exception.

In my first book I wrote a story about a café . . . sort of. It was actually about a bar called The Church. God was the sole proprietor of the joint, not to mention the bartender. (Yes, it was all metaphorical.) The people

who showed up at The Church were as diverse and as uniquely strange as are the people who show up in church every Sunday. And the drink selections represented the variety of choices those people make. God had his own “special concoction” that he offered everybody, but few took it.

Happy hour would be a lot happier if we’d all just wise up and drink his drink. Anyhow, it’s an interesting premise.

Read the story and then come to Minneapolis and check out Bruce’s new café. Who says we don’t have modern-day samurais?



Home from lunch, which always lasts longer than lunches have a right to, I started putting together the proposal for this Surprise Me idea (it’s not yet a book). My intent was to finish preparing the proposal and send it to several publishers. At this point in the experiment, I have to admit I’m not even sure this thing would work as a book. But the idea keeps stalking me.

I didn’t finish the proposal. And you don’t want to send a half-cooked idea to a publisher. Book Ideas Tartare don’t make it out of the concept kitchen. I’ll finish it up tomorrow and FedEx it.

As I’m writing all of this I’m thinking, none of this is surprising. I’m just writing a boring travelogue on the unexciting life of some guy you’ve only just met (well, except those of you who are relatives and friends and have been kind enough to buy this book even though I probably should have given you one for free).

But this is just Day One. Wing it with me for a few days and things may get interesting. Or not. I guess we’ll be surprised together.

Mary, my beautiful wife and chief surprise dispenser of the last quarter century, was working today, so it was just me and two of our three daughters, Taylor and Lauren, for dinner. I make some mean chili, killer breakfasts, and Surprise Me-Smoothies, but other than that I’m

a cooking illiterate. So rather than subjecting my loving daughters to a blended meal of green beans, Rotelle, hazelnut yogurt, mushrooms, and three shakes of Bacos (I love a little crunch in my smoothies), we decided to go to Retro, a just-opened coffee shop café. Taylor invited her buddy Alex to join us and we were off.

Taylor is our fifteen-year-old, almost sixteen — though she seems almost twenty. She's all that and a bag of chips. Her friend Alex is all that and a bag of B-B-Q chips. The two of them together produce some serious crunch. Lauren is our middle daughter, twenty, a sophomore at Baylor University in Texas, home for the summer working as a server at Italiani's Restaurant. How would I describe her? Maybe a chili pepper in a bowl of Malt-o-Meal. It's not that she's all spicy in a puddle of blah, she just does her own thing, has her own opinions, and walks them down the road with a subtle confidence. I've also seen her be the dollop of Malt-o-Meal in a steaming bowl of jalapenos.

Sitting, eating, and talking with my girls, including Alex, is on my "top three things I love in life" list. We talked at length with one of the owners as we were ordering. There are railroad tracks just twenty feet from the restaurant. Heidi, the owner, told us that sometimes the engineers will call in their order ahead of time, then stop the train by the drive-through window to pick up some bean before choo-chooing off into the distance. Who's ever heard of a drive-through window for Burlington Northerns? That right there has got to make you love this place.

As we were leaving, Tay took a job application from Heidi. She's thinking about becoming a bean-brew-schlepper, part-time. I can hear her now, "That's three dark roasts, a mocha frappacino, and a latte with skim-no whip for the guy in the caboose. That'll be \$13.26. Please chug up to the window."

I dropped the girls off at home and then ran by the high school to catch the second half of a soccer game. I know a bunch of the guys on

this college-age men's team, so it's fun to watch. Besides, when soccer is played the way it's supposed to be played, it is, without a doubt, the beautiful game. It's amazing to watch, the anticipation, the unity, the effort, the vision.

I couldn't help but think, "If we as human beings could learn to work together like this, the world would certainly be a better place." When a player dribbling the ball downfield is pressured by the defense, his teammate behind him yells, "support," and the guy dribbling drops the ball back to him. They maintain control. On a good soccer team, the player with the ball never tries to do more than he could or should. And his teammates are always looking out for him — recognizing trouble and letting him know about it. They trust each other. And sometimes — often, even — they move the ball forward by temporarily going backward. Soccer is all about the greater good, not the individual performance.

Wouldn't it be cool if churches were more like soccer teams?

Well, that's day one. As I walked Bailey I thought back over the day. It was what it was. No big surprises. No page-turning thrills. Not many scientific journals are page-turners, either. Just the same, I'm hoping that this doesn't read too scientifically. I guess it's not really up to me. Or is it? This is supposed to be a journal of the God-moments in my life, but if I'm a dull-eyed dimwit I won't see them. And maybe that's the first surprise after all — a God-reminder that I need to keep my eyes open and not let life become a forgettable blur.

It's late. Thanks for reading day one. And God, thanks for letting me play fleece-man today. Do you mind if I do it again tomorrow? I felt a few droplets that I think were from you.

Send more.

DAY TWO: THE RIDE

If life is a giant Hide-and-Seek-athon, wouldn't you assume that God is the hider and we are the seekers? That always seemed like a safe assumption to me. I'm not so sure anymore. What if we're the hiders, and God is poking around shrubs, sniffing under rocks and behind garbage cans looking for anyone who wants to be found. It does track with that whole shepherd and lost sheep thing he talked about.

I think I may have seen him sniffing around my yard today.

The day started rather inconsequentially, as most of my days do. *Woke up, got outta bed, dragged a comb across my head . . .* I had a bunch of stuff to do today, not the least of which was to FedEx the proposal for this very book idea to several publishers. I had to write cover letters, make copies (I love Kinkos, and Kinkos loves me), stuff, address, paper-clip, lick, rip, tear, and send e-mails. E-mails that hyped the coming proposal and said,

Hey, you got a shocker coming in your P.O. box tomorrow, Mr. Publisher dude. Don't miss it. It's the surprise you've been looking for!

I was trying to convey my passion, but sometimes passion and pitch are like identical twins. *I can't tell them apart — and I birthed them.*

So that process had me twitching. Then I had to take Lauren (our middle daughter, you met her yesterday) to work because one of our cars came up limping. I may not have mentioned the car thing as a valid

surprise because I fully expect it to come up lame every day. It's a Land Rover Discovery . . . of the older variety. Predisposed to decompose. And resuscitating those dinosaurs is a piggy bank buster.

I dropped her off at the restaurant where she works, then headed to a brainstorming meeting for a community-wide multi-church gathering event. No real surprises at the meeting except this one idea we came up with that I thought was pretty cool: Have the pastor from one church stand and say what he loves about the pastor from another church — what he's learned from him, why he believes in what they're doing at the other church, and so on. You know, bragging about the “competitor.” We thought that would be a great way to set an example for the people. A “we're-all-on-the-same-team” sort of talk.

We all came away feeling like we made progress . . . and we got a good, *free*, Italian lunch. *Mmmmm*, farfalle with artichokes and shrimp followed by cantucci di prato. *Bellissima*. Then I picked up Lauren from work. The poor kid had slaved away for three straight hours and was wearing alfredo sauce on her shirt.

Back home I finished with the e-mails and packages and shuttled the latter to the FedEx box, where they magically disappeared only to materialize the next day in the hands of terribly excited publishers.

By this time it was 4:39 p.m. I considered starting another project, but opted for my favorite distraction instead — a bike ride. Bicycle, that is. The self-powered variety. The kind that makes you sweat. I think we were made to sweat, cuz for some reason sweating makes me happy.

I can't even tell you how much I love riding my bicycle. I fell in love with this a few years back — after I tore the ACL in my knee playing basketball, and after I tore my Achilles tendon playing basketball, and after I tore my calf muscle playing soccer. (I'm about as reliable as my Rover. Predisposed to decompose.) Essentially I had nothing left, athletically speaking, except bike riding. At first I was depressed about that, but then

I discovered bicycle *racing*. Presto = Buono. Speed = Good.

Now I'm one of those weekend warriors who wears "wind-cheater" spandex (much to the dismay and embarrassment of my daughters), rides a bike that costs more than my car, and is passionate about . . . okay, obsessed and addicted to the whole thing.

This weekend is the State Championship Criterium race, so I've been training like a Lance Armstrong-wannabe. We had a party to go to at 7 p.m., but it was only 4:39. That left plenty of time to thoroughly trash myself—to see if I can get my heart rate up to 180 without infarcting my cardio. I hopped on my "two-wheeled carbon-fibered aerodynamic second mortgage" and went out to kick some asphalt.

Less than a mile from my house I pull up behind a guy who wasn't moving very fast. Guess he's not training for the State Crit race. I figured to just blow by him, maybe say hi, but that's it. As I got to his back wheel, I thought about the "Surprise Me, God" prayer I prayed this morning. "Oh geez (that's how we Minnesotans curse), do I have to talk to him? Okay, but just long enough to find out if he's a 'player' in this Surprise Me game. I'll give him fifteen feet. If he doesn't say something 'surprising,' I'm gone."

We made small talk for ten feet. At fourteen feet I found out he'd just returned from climbing Mt. McKinley in Alaska. Interesting. "Okay, I'll give him fifteen feet more." I told him I've seen all the great mountain-climbing disaster movies—avalanches, blizzards, you know. He didn't say much. In fact he changed the subject.

He asked me a bunch of questions about who I am, what I do—standard fare for two guys. I talked about my music studio and my recent decision to sell it and try other things.

"What other things?" he asked.

"Well, I wrote a book."

"About what?"

“Well, about God and who he is and who we are and how we fit together, at least how we try to.” I told him it’s a bunch of short stories, metaphorical pictures of this God. I couldn’t really tell if he was interested or not.

So then he asked, “What are you working on now?”

I told him I’m two days into a spiritual experiment. “Every day I pray, ‘Surprise Me, God.’ Then I wait to see what happens and write it down. I think it’s going to be pretty interesting.”

There was a long pause, and then he looked over at me and said, “You want to be surprised?” I thought, okay, another mile won’t kill my conditioning. Besides, he had me curious.

“My buddy was killed on McKinley.” He took a breath. “He got caught in a rock slide. Didn’t make it. I’m having a hard time knowing what to do with this.” There were pauses between thoughts. He seemed to be struggling to find the words. “I took the day off work today to do some thinking.”

He went on to tell me about the climb—which had become a nearly three-week expedition because of bad weather. On the ascent, a blizzard sent him and his buddy into their tent for four days and nights, periodically digging out to keep from getting buried. He told me of their conversations in that tent, conversations about their families, life, the future. They spent ninety-six hours getting to know each other in a setting that forced the hand of authentic knowing.

“We made it to the summit; things were going well. Then, on the way down, the incident happened.”

Another pause.

“Wanna hear something really weird?” he asked.

“Sure.”

“We all had roles on the climb,” he told me. “Mine was to be the first guy out on the ropes on descents, traverses, and ascents. I had done that

every time. In fact I had been on that first rope at least fifty times so far on the climb.” Pause. “There was only one time when I didn’t go first . . . *that* time. The one time when it turned out to be a matter of life and death, my buddy went first.”

We both pedaled for a while.

“Why? Why didn’t I go first that time? Why am I still here? Why am I still alive?”

He took more heavy breaths, heavier than our efforts required.

He went on, processing his questions and thoughts in real time, “I don’t really go to church much anymore. When I did, I was Lutheran. Well, I suppose I still am, I’m just not very religious.”

I wondered where he was going with this. Then he said, “You want to be surprised again?” I didn’t think he was looking for a verbal response. He continued.

“This is weird, but when my friend died — right after he died — I prayed for him and his family, and as I opened my eyes I saw the brightest white light I’ve ever seen in my life. It came right out of my friend and went straight up into the sky.” We both put in ten pedal strokes. “You realize, don’t you,” he said, “that Lutherans don’t see white lights when people die.” I smiled. “Maybe Pentecostals do, but not Lutherans,” he said.

Then he continued, “There’s something going on here. This is going to change everything. Who is this God and what does he have for me?”

We had a great talk over the next few miles about his overwhelming sense that he has a purpose in life — that he’s still here for a reason. I could hear a resolve in his voice, a commitment to searching for answers to his “why” questions.

This guy, Mike, has a great journey ahead of him. We’re getting



together for lunch next week to talk some more. I can't wait.

We rode together for fifteen miles today. I thought it was going to be fifteen feet. I thought I was training for a bicycle race. God seemed to have me training for a race of much greater significance. I'm so glad I didn't blow past him. What would I have missed? What would Mike have missed? This story doesn't have an ending yet, but it almost never had a beginning. It was a split second away from never happening at all. These thoughts humble me.

He stopped at our house on the way back, and I gave him a copy of *Blue Collar God/White Collar God* (my first book) and asked him to read the Hip-Pocket God story. I got his number; he took mine. He left.

My head was buzzing so I decided to keep riding—get my interval workout in. Five miles into it I ran into another guy riding an old Bianchi bike, vintage. Never met him before. He told me he's trying to find the things that give him meaning in life. Who are these guys and where are they coming from today? He said he got some meaning from riding (I buy that) and gardening (that's a stretch). Then he turned and was gone. But I got his name and I'm going to Google him. Maybe we'll run into each other later this month. Wouldn't surprise me.

A block later I ran into Miles and Jennifer, a brother and sister out jogging. That's a surprise right there. Did you ever jog with your sister when you were in high school? Not me. I know their dad pretty well. We ride together. And for the past three years I led a small group for high schoolers. Miles attended on and off, so we know each other pretty well. He's also a musical prodigy, so we have that connection. (The musical part, not the prodigy part.)

We talked for a minute, then he said, "Let's get together before I go back to school. You know, talk about life, the future, you know." Cool. I hadn't known he wanted to talk to me about "life, the future, and you know." I need to call him to set that up.

DAY TWO: THE RIDE

I'm starting to realize that everything goes somewhere. Makes me wonder how many "somewheres" I've missed. They can be so subtle. I really want to miss fewer of them. I'm finding that they're so dang interesting. So fun.

So surprising.

DAY THREE: FLOATING

“I went to the theatre with the author of a successful play. He insisted on explaining everything. Told me what to watch, the details of direction, the errors of the property man, the foibles of the star. He anticipated all my surprises and ruined the evening.”

“Never again!”

“And mark you, the greatest Author of all made no such mistake!”

Christopher Morley said that. Obviously the whole Surprise Me thing isn't original to me. Duh.

I was surprised when my niece, Vonda, e-mailed that quote to me. Surprised because she lives a thousand miles away, and I haven't spoken to her in a year. It turns out her mother (that would be my sister) told her about my little experiment and she decided to “half-heartedly take it on for herself.” (Her words, not mine.) When she read that quote she thought I might be interested. Duh, again.

She fed me other things too. A quote from Ravi Zacharias, “Prayerlessness is the scavenger of wonder.” I like that. And I know it's true because I've been there. And another quote from Ravi, “My deduction is that a praying Christian is carried by wonder; a prayerless person carries the wonder and will soon get exhausted by carrying the infinite.”

That got me thinking. And thinking often sends me into metaphorical

land—the theater of rumination. Follow me there for a moment.

Imagine that we are hot-air balloons, and prayer is the hot air. What if the sky is where all the surprises hang out? Our prayers fill and give shape to our balloons, the containers of our souls, sending us straight into the clouds of surprise and wonder. We bump into them. They flow and drift by and through us. We can feel them, touch them. From our vantage point these surprises are our reality. It's exhilarating.

But when the prayers stop, we lose lift, we lose shape, we lose perspective, we lose the thrill of flying, we lose proximity to the sky-full of surprises because the gravity of prayerlessness has pulled us down. We can still see the surprises, but they're so far above us that they're barely discernible. They look suspiciously like circumstances. And we may even question if we actually saw them. Our balloons, our *lives* sag and lose shape.

When we stop praying, our lives get deflated.

I saw a hot-air balloon last night. It was shaped and painted like Mickey Mouse, ears and all. Walt Disney—now there was a guy who believed in wonder and surprise. He must have been a perpetual kid at heart. Kids seem to float more naturally. Maybe they're lighter spiritually, not carrying so much heavy baggage. They *believe* instinctively while we *question* dutifully.

If we truly believed like children, would we gravitate toward a more serious passion for prayer? Or if we formed a more passionate pattern of prayer, would we more willingly believe? (That chicken and egg thing always messed me up.)

Jesus loved kids and they loved him. He told us to be like them. Maybe that's part of what this experiment is about. Becoming more kid-like. Believing *just because*. I know some of you are a little uncomfortable with that last statement. It makes me 'squirm and twitch' a little too. But do you ever think that we adults, and I use that term loosely, test and question the living daylights out of everything to the point that we

never allow ourselves to believe anything? Which is worse, misbelieving occasionally, or believing nothing at all?

Okay, roll credits on my metaphor and rumination. Time to head back out into reality. (Don't let the afternoon sun blind you as you exit the theater.)

I spent the biggest part of today helping my oldest daughter, Brianna, move into her first post-college apartment.

I was surprised by a couple of things. First, how Spartan it was. It ain't the Ritz. I'm not even sure if it's a HoJos. But Bri couldn't have been more excited. She talked a lot about decorating—*this will go here and that will go there*. “Pretty nice, don't you think, Dad?”

“Mmmm. Oh, yeah, it, uh . . . sure is . . . pretty nice.”

Our house was never showcased on Robin Leach's *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, or MTV's *Cribs*, but it's probably a few steps above Bri's current interpretation of “pretty nice.” At least I think so. But Bri's eyes were twinkling as she gave me the 13.2-second tour of the tenement. There was a joy in her voice, in her stride, everything. There was float in her balloon. She was viewing her new digs contextually, not comparatively. She was happy about what it was, not disappointed about what it wasn't. I guess twinkle is in the eye of the beholder, and the weight of a particular surprise is relative to that twinkle.

The second surprise at the apartment was “The Unbearable Being of Lights-on.” Bri seemed to be going for the “less is more” approach to lighting a room. She didn't want to leave any lights on, not even when we walked from one room to another. Taylor and I tested her, flipping lights on every chance we had. She followed us around and casually flipped them off. I finally called her on it.

“What's the deal with the lights?”

“Well, I don't have to pay for heating, but I do have to pay for electricity. So . . .”

Now, a little background info is appropriate here. This girl has never shown any serious tree-hugging or ozone-protecting tendencies. Until today, electricity was a limitless commodity that needed to be used in order to feel loved. Lights were left on to keep the rooms from getting lonely in Bri's absence. But the lights in her apartment seem to have different needs. They're surprisingly happier when turned off. And don't even mention air conditioning — it's on the endangered species list. All of a sudden, rationing is "in."

My youngest daughter, Taylor, came along to help with the move. She held the doors. She's fifteen, and she floats a *lot*. The ride home was fun because she was soaring. She had brought a little stash of CDs she'd burned (some of them legally) and was introducing me to some of the "newest bands that I needed to know about." She's got great taste in music. (Interpretation: we like a lot of the same stuff.)

When Tay was about six or seven I was doing the Christmas campaign for Target. I hired Amy Grant to sing the lead, and our little Taylor did a duet with Amy. Tay was so excited about this duet that her balloon must have been at about thirty-thousand feet. I had to give her oxygen. She still has the lyric sheet on her wall, signed by Amy.

Riding with her in the car and watching her feel the music — practically *become* the music — well, it was so cool. I'm not sure I'd call it a surprise, but there was joy and wonder in the moment.

The rest of the day was difficult for me. I struggled with one of the Miami/Latin sounding music spots I had to do for the Spirit FM package. I guess I just wasn't in the mood to merengue.

Now it's almost 1 a.m. This experiment is going to be difficult. If I can't find time until ten or eleven at night to start writing, I'm going to be one tired puppy in twenty-seven days. I am enjoying it though. I can see how this journaling thing could get addictive. It certainly helps to think through the details of the day — it gives perspective.

Maybe journaling is a form of prayer. When I write I can almost feel God whispering thoughts to me. And as I hunt and peck my thoughts back to him I think we're communicating in a keyboard-and-monitor-and-hard-drive-meets-high-flying-hot-air-balloon sort of way. I hope so, because I don't want my wonder to be scavenged. I don't want to miss the surprises because I'm flying too low to the ground.

It's been a long day and I'm starting to fade. Pretty soon, no amount of loft will keep me from doing a face-plant into my iMac.

See you tomorrow.



DAY FOUR: COW PIES

Today's first stop on the Surprise Me Express was an e-mail. The first publisher responded. That's fast! Same day. They said they loved the idea. They also said they don't want to taint the experiment so they suggested I finish the thirty-day deal and then talk.

Actually that was the second surprise. (Who can keep track?) The first came while reading Charlie Peacock's book *New Way to Be Human*. In his first chapter he quotes 1 Corinthians 2:9, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." I'd been looking for a verse that captures the essence of Surprise Me and there it was staring at me from another book. "No eye, no ear, and no mind" — I love that. Never seen, never heard, and never imagined. In other words, God is going to shock our socks off.

You would think people who believe this would be perpetually giddy, living as if it's Christmas Eve every day and God's just come back from shopping for us. What's under the tree today? Can't wait to see. Can't wait to wake up and open the gifts and *live*. Sadly, it seems that many Christians aren't smitten with this. I have to admit that I'm not there either much of the time.

Charlie wrote, "When I started hanging out with Christians, they seemed to be largely a people of dry, almost mathematical certainty." Ouch. I say we end that right here and now. *God, I want to unwrap all of the gifts you have for me today. Don't let me leave any of them under the tree.*

I just hung up the phone after talking to a member of my extended family. I woke up thinking about her today, so in an effort to not miss

something, I called her. I'm glad I did. She's going through one of the hardest times of her life right now. I can't go into the details, but it's enough to say that when someone pops into your head, you need to call or e-mail them right away. It's spiritual "mojo." And when we act on that mojo, we get a gift — the dew that God dumps on us. The surprises.

Mary, my better two-thirds, is working again today so I'm off to lunch with my little Tator Tot (that would be Taylor — and she's gonna love that I just revealed this little nickname to the world). It will be just the two of us for lunch. And then I have a really important appointment for a haircut. Hope there aren't any surprises with the scissors.

Tay and I went to eat at a sidewalk café called Chez Foley. French. Tasty. Two of her friends work there and they spent a lot of time at our table. One of them just returned from France where she stood on the Champs Élysées and watched Lance Armstrong ride by to take his sixth consecutive Tour de France title. I'm jealous. If any of you out there are looking to really surprise me (*wink, wink*), an all expense-paid vacation to the Tour would take my breath away . . . but I won't hold it.

As I'm getting my hair cut (not at Chez Foley . . . I've moved on from there — stay with me people.) I notice that the snip-snip of the scissors is sounding very close, like *inside* my ear. I look up only to realize that it is coming from inside my ear. Nina is trimming ear hair. *My* ear hair. I'm not supposed to have ear hair till I'm old. Surprise?

Back home I pounded away at more music for this radio station. No big surprises there, although sometimes I'm still surprised how fun my job is. It's not easy, but it beats being on the Port-a-Potty pickup patrol. (Sorry. Don't mean to diss the Biff boys.)

I still love making music, but the ad biz has lost a bit of its fizz for me. I remember the day the carbonated world of TV commercials popped its last bubble. An ad agency called and asked me to write a jingle for a product called Inhibitor Bolus.

“Say what?” I had no clue what that was. (Be honest . . . did you? No? Well keep reading and I’ll make you smarter than you wanna be. Trust me, you don’t want to know this.)

They explained.

“Well, it’s this big, honkin’ pill that a farmer forces a cow to swallow. The pill meanders through the cows insides and when she, uh, deposits her pie in the pasture, well um, that freshly baked pie is laced with a chemical that inhibits the reproduction of flies.”

Long pause.

I said, “Let me see if I have this straight. You want me to write a jingle for a product that kills flies in cow pies?”

“That’s pretty much it.”

It was at that very moment that I had one of the only epiphanies I’ve had in my life. I was raised in a predominantly German community and Germans don’t have epiphanies, unless they’ve had too much stout with their kraut. Anyhow, the image that came to me was a vision of my future grandchildren standing in a cemetery looking at my tombstone. Interestingly, I could read my tombstone too, even though I was theoretically under it. It simply said,

“Here lies Terry Esau. He helped kill house flies in cow pies.”

I got a deathly shiver. The cow pies were giving me goose bumps.

I hadn’t really thought too much about my legacy before. I had a good career. Good money, good times, and I had promoted a lot of products that improved people’s lives. It’s good, I told myself.

As I hung up the phone I started thinking through the last decade of my music making. There was that Kitty Litter spot — good for cats and people. A few dozen herbicide and pesticide spots — good for crops, made farmers jobs easier, maybe not so good for the environment. Target — everybody loves Target. Well maybe not Wal-Mart, but they’ll get over it. Golden Grahams — *Mmm*.

I went through a list of products and companies I had helped promote. From McDonald's to Shoneys, Harleys to Hondas, pickles to Pepsi . . . to the Mall of America. I noticed something when I looked over this list. Almost everything on the list “improved” people's lives, but nothing had the power to “change” them.

Not one single thing.

That started to bother me. A lot.

I know that focusing on this God I believe in can do me more good than cruising to the Mall of America on a Harley with a Pepsi in one hand and a pickle in the other. I know that “change” beats “improved.” I'm beginning to understand that these stories I'm telling have a strange sort of power embedded in them I can't explain. I never once said that about one of my jingles.

I tell you this to say that “epiphanies” can mess with your head. In a good way. Mine prompted me to look for something different, something more to invest my life in, something life-changing. This Surprise Me deal is a stepchild of that epiphany, or at least a distant cousin. So, indirectly,

Surprise Me was incubated in a nice, warm cow pie. A *fly-less* cow pie, mind you.

There's a lot more to my pre-Surprise Me journey I'd love to tell you, but maybe I'll save that for another day — one that's surprise-less. Will I have any of those?

I had a great ride this afternoon with three of my regular riding buddies. I love riding with these guys. Tom had a surprise going up a hill. His cable snapped so he was stuck with one gear for the rest of the ride. We all decided to put our bikes in the same gear and share Tom's pain. Well, until some young dude passed us. Then Gary, Bob, and I dropped a few gears faster than you can say “teenage testosterone still lives in middle-aged men” and we proceeded to hunt him down like an injured rabbit. Don't feel too bad for Tom. We



did wait for him in the next town. Okay, okay . . . we were just trying to catch our breath.

I love speed. Let me restate that: I LOVE SPEED!

I registered no surprise at how much I love riding with my friends. I'm not sure I could buy therapy that restores me like riding does. And speaking of good therapy, tonight we went to a party with some old friends. Friends we haven't seen for a while. We grilled and ate outside and laughed so loud I thought the neighbors might call the cops.

Mary and I have been realizing something more and more lately. We are rich in friends. *Filthy stinking* rich. We know so many people who mean the world to us, and, by the way they treat us, I can tell they feel the same way too. There was no "dry, mathematical certainty" about this group tonight. I wonder if God was surprised? I hope he was listening in and thinking, "Now that's what I like to see—hugs, belly-laughs, authenticity, and a love of life."

Tomorrow should be fun. I'm meeting with one of my favorite nineteen-year-olds. This guy processes life like a Veg-o-matic, slicing and dicing away. He's got an insatiable curiosity that keeps him digging. He doesn't know exactly what he believes right now but is learning to enjoy this season of questioning. Questioning isn't a bad thing at all, when it comes to matters of faith. T. S. Eliot said, "Doubt and uncertainty are merely a variety of belief."

Sleep on that one. I think I will, too . . . right away . . . it's a quarter to one in the morning.