

I squeezed myself into the overcrowded bus. With one hand holding a briefcase, and the other hanging on to the railing, I was not exactly enjoying the ride that summer afternoon in Calcutta. The driver speedily swung the bus around a sharp corner. I spun with the bus and made a 360-degree turn. In that singular moment, I met that face so familiar, so distant... and not so sure.

Was that my childhood friend, Jaya? I had not seen him for 31 years now, ever since we parted ways after high school—he to a local college, I to a distant Adven-

The Pastor and the Pickpocket

by
John M.
Fowler

tist center. I was about to call him by name when I suddenly remembered my wife's sage advice: "You have a terrible time with names; don't call people by name unless you are sure."

I'd better make sure, I thought, and in the process my mind had flashbacks of its own. Jaya and I had grown up in a mining town in south India. We went to the same school, lived in the same neighborhood, ate almost the same food, played marbles and soccer and kites, and got into the same mischief. Now and then Jaya took tangents of his own.

Once six of us boys planned a cookout. We wanted to make halva, a delicious Indian sweet. We sorted out responsibility for bringing the ingredients. Jaya was to bring peanuts—we couldn't

afford cashews, almonds, or pecans. At cookout time, Jaya came not with peanuts, but with cashews and raisins. We knew that Jaya's mother couldn't have given him those, and so we insisted on an answer. Well, on his way to our rendezvous he had to pass by the Cresswells, an exclusive store for the British. There he saw a lady come out with a basket of groceries, place it outside her car, and go back to the store again. Jaya looked, and behold, right on top of the basket were what he needed for a cookout. We, the righteous and all under 12, held court and decided to make the halva without the ingredients from Cresswells. That did not bother Jaya. He ate all the nuts and the raisins in front of us, and when the sweet was ready, he wanted to have a share of that too. That was Jaya—easy going, ready always to enjoy life, helpful when he could be, and hardly bothered about anything.

On another occasion, we were returning after a long day of school (we had to walk three miles each way) and an after-school soccer game. "I'm hungry," I remember saying. Within moments, we heard Jaya's screams. We rushed to find him with a bloody face. He had heard me say "hungry," and had decided to help out. He had entered a bungalow, climbed a guava tree, and stuffed in his pocket as many guavas as he could, and was coming with the smile of mission accomplished, when the guard saw the intruder and gave a good chase. Jaya jumped over the fence, the guavas fell out of his pocket, and he landed on barbed wire and cut his face. We rushed him to the hospital, and he got 16 stitches on his right cheek. There was no plastic surgery in those days, and the scar remained forever.

That's it. Scars. Now I knew how to make sure. I turned around in the bus, focused my eyes on his right cheek, and presto, there he was: Jaya.

"Hi, Jaya!" I shouted in excitement of seeing a friend after 31 years. No answer. "Aren't you Jaya?" I almost screamed.

"Hmm. Who are you?"

"Don't you recognize me? I am John Fowler!"

"Hmm." He stood cold as a statue. No sign of joy in seeing a childhood friend. No smile. Nothing. I tried starting a conversation. Talked about my family, and

asked if he had one. Talked about my being a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, and wondered what he was. No luck in opening his mouth. Had he gone dumb, I wondered?

The bus was signaling a halt. I decided I would take Jaya for lunch. We would get off at the next stop in the downtown area. But Jaya was hurrying to leave the bus. I held his hand and invited him to stay on till the next stop to have lunch with me. He shook his head and rushed to the exit. But before he got off the bus, he swirled around, came back to me, thrust in my hand something, saying, "I'm sorry," and he was off. I looked into my hand, and found—to my amazement—my wallet. Sometime between the moment I entered the bus and the 360-degree turn I made, Jaya had picked my pocket.

I did not sleep for days. I kept wondering. As boys we both were the same in many ways—in what we had, in what we did not have, in the opportunities that came our way, in the sufferings that mocked our growing days. We shared the same environment, the same teachers, and the same challenges. And yet what makes one a pastor and the other a pickpocket? Perhaps I can think of three reasons, not altogether satisfying, but sufficient to add some meaning to my disturbing world.

Home. I had a strong Christian home. My father had only a fourth-grade education, my mother not even that, but together they had the wisdom to make God central in their home. Worship, prayer, family togetherness, and strong moral values were part of our priceless heritage. During the war years, there was not much at home—not much of clothes, food, or toys—but we had plenty of love, caring, sharing, and living for each other. A secure home leads to a purposeful life.

A life philosophy. Does a child need a life philosophy? I don't think I knew it then, but now I know that even as a boy I had influences molding a philosophy of life. I remember one day coming out of my English class, all enthusiastic about memorizing something that sounded great. All week I was repeating that quote from Shakespeare: "Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." During my Sunday school class, the discussion turned to what we did during the week. For my part, I repeated

the quote. My old Sunday school teacher told me what my English teacher never explained. Life is not a tale. Nor does it have anything to do with idiots, fury, or nothingness. Life, I learned, is meaningful—and the meaning is found in God—His image, His purpose, His caring, and His cross.

A life commitment. At 15 Jaya and I had parted ways, not just because it was time to begin thinking about college. A Man called Jesus confronted us with the truth that He is coming again. The second coming of Jesus was an astounding message to come to our town. Many ignored, some mocked, a few believed. When I accepted Jesus as Saviour and became a Seventh-day Adventist, my life began to have a clear purpose and destiny.

Later, as I attended Spicer Memorial College to become a minister, my entire life-style changed. I could no longer be the same. Preparation for the great day, so soon to come, became almost a passion.

Thirty-eight years later, I ponder: But for the grace of God—the amazing grace of God—where would I be? □

John M. Fowler (Ed.D., Andrews University) is associate editor of Ministry and the author of many articles. Previously he served as college professor, editor, and educational administrator in his homeland, India.

Quotable

We are not sent to preach sociology, but salvation; not the economy, but evangelism; not reform, but redemption; not culture, but conversion; not progress, but pardon; not a new social order, but a new birth. [Our greatest need is] not a new organization, but a new creation; not democracy, but evangelism; not a civilization, but a Christ. We are ambassadors, not diplomats.

—Hugh Thomson Kerr

The best argument for Christianity is Christians: their joy, their certainty, their completeness. But the strongest argument against Christianity is also Christians. When they are sombre and joyless, when they are self-righteous and smug in complacent consecration, when they are narrow and repressive, then Christianity dies a thousand deaths.

—Sheldon Vanauken

God has given the power of choice to each person, and it is theirs to use. We cannot change our hearts. We cannot by ourselves give our love to God, but we can choose to serve Him. We can give Him the powers of our minds. He will help us choose the right way. Then our whole being will be guided by the Spirit of Christ. We will love God, and our thoughts will be like His.

—Ellen G. White