

Editorial: ‘If We Knew Then,’ random elements and faith

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Every so often, I play the “If We Knew Then ...” Game.

Without fail, the other player is a fellow Baby Boomer. We’re middle-aged. Too far along to make monumental career changes. Still years from retirement.

“If we knew then what we know now, what would you become?” one of us asks. Then we re-live our lives as if we had made one huge, different choice.



Editor Marv KnoxIt’s not quite the George Bailey/*It’s a Wonderful Life* option—what life would be like for our families and friends if we’d never lived. It’s less radical but more personal—what our own lives would be like if we had chosen different careers.

Most times, I say I would have become a pediatrician. In my day (re)dream, my life is idyllic. That’s because I, in fact, did not become a pediatrician. Panicky new parents never have called in the middle of the night. And I’m not trying to figure out how to manage a medical practice in the midst of healthcare reform.

Blessings

So, I settle back into my own real life. God blessed me with a splendid family, terrific friends, vibrant health and an interesting career. Every day, I give thanks.

But practically every life is shaped by at least one random element. It's the event or development that knocks plans off course. It's unpredictable, perhaps unavoidable. It may not change everything, but it re-forms and re-shapes huge swaths of that life.

My random element is my career. And I'm good with that. If I had to choose radical alteration of my family, friends, health or career, I'd pick career. Every time.

Maybe your career is your random element. Or maybe not. But chances are, you've experienced a random element, too. And if you ponder it, you can correlate your random element to mine or to my life. We're probably not that different.

My 'random element'

Ironically, my random element didn't surface at the obvious time. Early in my career, I covered the Southern Baptist Holy War. A friend predicted I would be "damaged goods," because most Baptists didn't want to know the truth about the conflict rocking their convention.

Instead, I eventually landed my dream job: Back in my home state, Texas, editing the newspaper I'd read since I was a boy, the *Baptist Standard*.

Be careful what you pray for.

Fourteen-plus years ago, when I sat down at my predecessors' desk, few observers envisioned the near-death of the newspaper industry. Fewer still predicted the escalating pace of post-denominationalism, the malaise of the Baptist movement and large-scale congregational apathy toward

conventions. Even visionaries didn't have a clue about the amazing-yet-bewildering advances in computers, communication, the Internet and social networking.

Shortly after I became editor here, the Baptist General Convention of Texas split, victimized by the Holy War. *The Standard's* circulation—a victim of a perfect storm of the Holy War, broader declines in the newspaper industry, and cyclical economic downturns—continued a slide that began in 1980.

Many days, I cried out to God as I drove to work. I pleaded with God to reverse our circulation trends and restore advertising. Acknowledging my limitations as a leader perhaps had exacerbated our challenges, I told God I'd happily change jobs if that would mean restoration for the *Standard*. God never seemed to resolve those prayers.

Opportunities

Instead, God strengthened love for the *Standard* within a core of Texas Baptists. God fortified the faith and courage of Baptist Standard Publishing's board of directors. God propelled the passion and commitment of our staff. God directed vision, technology and opportunity our way.

So, this year, we converted the *Baptist Standard* to digital delivery exclusively; updated our website, baptiststandard.com; launched *CommonCall*, a magazine of inspiration and ideas; and completed construction of FaithVillage.com, a resources website and social network for young church leaders, adults and teenagers.

All these changes don't guarantee success, of course. But the digital *Standard* and *CommonCall* provide us with our best opportunities in 30 years to extend our reach. And FaithVillage.com presents the possibility of helping hundreds of thousands of church leaders, young adults and teenagers deepen their relationship with Jesus, expand their faith friendships, and strengthen their ministry skills for the cause of Christ.

I hope and pray those developments come about. More imminently, I hope my experience with life's random element resonates with yours and brings you hope.

Do I wish my life and career had tracked the way 19-year-old Marv planned it? You bet. But I've been blessed by my own random element and, more particularly, the lessons it has taught. Here are five things I've learned through struggle with my random element:

- **Life is hard.** As Christian singing artist Ginny Owens proclaims, God never said life would be easy; he only said we'd never go through it alone.
- **Change is constant.** That's the obvious truth of our era.
- **Desperation is liberating.** You can try as hard as you are able, over and over, and your labor doesn't produce results. Then you give yourself permission to try something new.
- **You can't control much of anything,** which also is liberating.
- **God is reliable.** "Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good" (Romans 8:26-28, *The Message*).