

My Path in Life

When I was 16 years old, the MRA play by Alan Thornhill, *The Forgotten Factor*, came to our town in Wales. I went to see it on the first night. On the second night, I was back in the theatre, helping to sell books in the foyer. I was captivated by the play and also by the people travelling with it. Little did I realise that twenty years later I would collaborate with Alan Thornhill on writing four plays.

Fast forward four years to 1955. As a junior officer in the British army stationed in north Germany, I went to see Peter Howard's musical, *The Vanishing Island*, in the Ruhr town of Essen. My company commander had recently bought a new Jaguar car and was keen to try it out on the autobahn. I persuaded him to take me and two other junior officers to Essen for the weekend. Towards the end of the show one of the characters sang about his vision of "fulfilling the hunger and hope of mankind". Something very deep stirred in my gut and I said to myself: "Yes, that is what I want to do with my life". You can call that the idealism of a young man, but it has stayed with me ever since.

After military service I went to Oxford University to study modern history for three years. While there I teamed up with a few fellow students who also had some experience of Moral Re-Armament. We did some interesting things. For instance, we persuaded the manager of a cinema in the centre of the city to put on the MRA all-African film, *Freedom*, for a week, commercially. We boldly assured him that he would get good audiences and would not lose any money on it. To achieve this, we wrote personal letters to all ten thousand students at the university and delivered them in bundles to their colleges. It worked, and he got the best houses he had had for some time.

I was still a member of the Territorial Army, the reserve. I had opted to join a parachute regiment and during the first Easter vacation I was due to go with the regiment to the Netherlands to do my jumps and qualify as a paratrooper. (I had already completed the gruelling ground course). However, I also received an invitation to go to Caux in Switzerland, the MRA conference centre, to act in a play. This was a very difficult decision to make. I longed to qualify as a parachutist but in my heart I felt I should go to Caux instead. It meant leaving the regiment and joining a less active part of the Reserve.

While acting in the play a very remarkable thing happened. As I walked into the Green Room where we used to meet to prepare our minds for the performance with quiet time and prayer, I noticed a lovely dark-haired girl sitting across the room. Not knowing who she was or even what country she came from, something inside me said: "That's the girl I'm going to marry". And seven years later marry we did. Dell was a gifted graphic artist and illustrator and we produced two remarkable sons, one a wildlife painter and the other a photographer and film-maker.

When the time came to leave Oxford, I didn't know what I was going to do next. I'd not applied for further studies nor had I applied for any jobs. Each time an opportunity came up I asked God about it and each time I seemed to get the answer: "No, this is not for you". It was only in the final few weeks that it became clear to me that I was not meant to have a job in the ordinary sense – salary, status, promotion, pension – but that I should give my whole time as an unpaid volunteer with MRA. It was a colossal gamble as I came from a poor family and had no private income or resources. I called it a "gamble on God" and all I can say is that, despite some difficult times, God has never let me down. In later years, while writing *Poor Man, Rich Man*, about St Francis of Assisi, I was very challenged by Francis's embracing poverty. When I went to God about it, I got the clear message: "If you follow me, I will set your standard of living and you don't have to worry about it".

I had always been keen on writing and to begin with I fancied myself as a budding journalist. I wrote press releases and edited the MRA Information Service. But God had other ideas. It won't have escaped your notice that in the previous paragraphs theatre and film played a big part in my spiritual journey. But at that time, I did not get the connection. So, when I received an invitation to stop what I was doing and move instead to the Westminster Theatre to train as an Assistant Stage Manager and to understudy the smallest part in the first play MRA put on commercially there, I didn't want to do it at all.

For one thing, I am not very technical or practical and so the idea of stage management frightened me. I also thought the job was not worthy of me – an army officer and an Oxford graduate. I knew enough about theatre to know that an ASM was the lowest form of life who worked the tape recorder and made the tea. In other words, my pride got in the way. It took me two weeks to wrestle with the question – was this just someone's bright idea or was it a real call from God? Thankfully, I came to the conclusion that it was the latter.

At first, I hated it. I'd bring with me to the theatre huge biographies of famous journalists and editors and read them prominently whenever I had a spare moment. But after a while I began to realise what a fool I was. I was being given the chance to work with professional actors, top directors and designers – an experience any budding writer would give his back teeth to have. I worked in stage management for eight years and in that time learnt a lot about the art of theatre. When I began to write plays, to produce and to direct in later years, I had the basic knowledge to do so.

The theme of gambling on God cropped up several times as the years went by. On one occasion I was writing a new play and had just finished Act I when an urgent message came, asking me to go to India to co-direct a new musical revue called *Song of Asia*. It was very inconvenient, but again I asked God about it and felt very clearly it was right to leave the play and go to India. I was away for two months. The remarkable thing was that when I returned home, I sat at my desk, wrote Act II at the top of the page and continued writing the play as if I had never been away. It turned out to be one of the best plays I've written and even got some good reviews from the usually hostile critics.

When I was 55 years old, I went through a very painful time at the Westminster Theatre where I was now Producing Artistic Director and Chairman of the company that ran the theatre. After a disastrously short run of our most expensive production to date, we were forced to cease production and to close the theatre. I had to make 25 people redundant. When the last of our staff had worked out their notice and left, I was finally able to get away to a friend's holiday cottage on the island of Anglesey of the coast of North Wales for a rest. It was November and very foggy. As I walked along the cliff top in the mist I said to God: "I'm also in a fog. I don't know what I'm going to do next". And I felt God say to me: "That's alright. I'm in the fog with you". It was very reassuring and meant that in those worst of times I didn't lose my faith.

Partly as a result of all the stress of that year, I developed heart disease. After the first lot of treatment Dell and I again went away for a rest, this time to the coast of South Wales. It was warm September weather and as I sat on the beach in the sunshine, I just felt utterly exhausted and that all the strength had been drained from me. My friend, Nigel Goodwin, had had the vision of a Christian Arts Centre in London and asked my help. I just wanted to retire and not get involved in what I knew would be a massive task. But words from the poet, Robert Frost kept going through my head. He imagines the old post horse at the end of a tiring day just wanting to rest and not go on any longer. Says the horse, "But I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep." I decided to work on the project and formed a committee representing several artistic disciplines and different Christian denominations. We worked together for five years and although we didn't succeed in the end our time was not wasted due to the bonds of friendship and cooperation that we forged. The problem was money. We had been promised a huge grant of several millions of pounds from the National Lottery Arts Fund, if we could find 20% of the total. But the Christian business people we approached did not respond, although it was well within their means to do so. They just didn't see the importance of the arts in the same way we did.

There was still some unfinished business arising from the closure of the Westminster Theatre. I felt a residual bitterness towards some colleagues because of the way I felt I'd been treated. One day I went on a retreat in a beautiful house in the heart of the countryside. The retreat leader was very "laid back". He hardly said anything. But he gave each one of us a picture of a mountain beside a lake. He suggested that in our imagination we should climb that mountain. With very few words he took us to the top. Suddenly he said: "You look behind you and see someone standing there. It's Jesus. What do you say to him? Don't stop and think, just say the first thing that comes into your head." My immediate words: "I need to be healed". And I felt Jesus reply: "But do you *want* to be healed?"

In the afternoon, the leader suggested we take a walk in the grounds. As I walked, I pondered that question, “Do you *want* to be healed?” I knew what it meant. Was I willing to let go of my resentment against those people? Those hurts seemed like scars that I carried around with me. They were very useful because when things got difficult, I could show my scars and say: “Look where I have been hurt”. Was I willing to give up those scars – for ever? I made a mental list of those involved. There were some I felt I had already forgiven. There were others I labelled “on-going”. Was I now willing to forgive them also and let Jesus heal those scars? After an inner struggle I prayed and said to Jesus: “Yes, I want to be healed”. And Jesus said to me: “Then you are healed”.

Two years after the closure of the Westminster Theatre, Dell’s father died and she inherited a small terraced cottage in a charming village in Kent, “The Garden of England”. The timing was perfect as we needed to leave the MRA-owned house where we have been living with another family. So, we decided to move. Seven years later, our next-door neighbour, who had become widowed, decided to sell her cottage and move away from the village. By using all our savings and with the help of a number of generous gifts from charitable trusts and individuals, we were able to buy her cottage and join the two together, making more space to welcome guests. In 2000, the village held an Arts Festival to celebrate the new millennium. Many of us opened our homes to host artistic events. Our home was the setting for poetry readings. After one of these events, one of the village grandees who owned a lovely house with a large garden on the river bank, telephoned to say: “Next summer we should stage Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in our garden – and you should direct it.” I replied: “You don’t know what you’re asking!. But if I can find twenty men and women in the village who’ll rehearse every week for six months, then I’ll take it on; otherwise it’s impossible.”

We found the actors from among the ordinary men and women of the village. Most of them had never acted before. Almost all of them thought they could never manage Shakespeare’s verse. But they could, and they did. We gave four performances in beautiful weather and it was such a success that we were encouraged to plan a second Shakespeare play two years later, and another two years after that. I then handed over to someone else who also directed three plays over six years. In the meantime, one of the cast said: “It’s good having these plays in the open air in the summer, but we need something for the village in the winter months. What about doing some modern plays – and some of your own plays?” I devised a programme we called Drawing Room Drama, with very few rehearsals and with scripts in hand, but with costumes, props and lighting and sound effects and, crucially, performed in each other’s houses. We started with my play, *Skeletons*, performed in our own cottage. There followed a dozen or more other plays and more and more people offered to host them in their homes. We played for three or four evenings and before between 25 and 50 people at a time, depending on the size of the sitting room. Again, I’ve been able to leave this to be carried on by others.

One reason for handing over responsibility for the plays was that not only was I getting older with less energy, but Dell was entering the final stages of her 16-year battle with ovarian cancer and cerebellar ataxia and I needed to devote more and more time and energy to her care. Her periods of remission were becoming shorter until finally her Consultant said her treatment was causing her more suffering than the disease and recommended palliative care only. Two months later she entered a hospice and died on 3rd July 2009. We had been married for 44 years.

I was overwhelmed by the care of people in the village – I had so many invitations that I hardly had to cook a meal at home for several weeks. I was in a kind of limbo and experienced a strange mixture of grief and relief. And despite so many good friends around me, I was also very lonely. Again, God provided in a most amazing way. Nicky Grainger had been a friend of ours for many years. She and Dell would walk their dogs or inspect each other’s gardens. Her husband, an architect, had also died of cancer 12 years previously – in the same hospice. We were drawn together by many common interests in theatre, art, music, film and our Christian faith, spending more and more time together, becoming more and more fond of each other. We eventually decided to marry. She had already sold her marital home and moved into a converted hop barn in the middle of the village. I sold my terraced cottage and joined her there. We are very happy.

Hugh Williams, March 2014