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Published on *Initiatives of Change International website* (<http://www.iofc.org>)

Steps in Faith

01/08/2002



Hugh Nowell has made a vocation of rising to the unexpected, as Paul Williams and Mary Lean discovered.

When Hugh Nowell left Oxford with a chemistry degree in 1949, acting and publishing were the last things on his mind. He planned to spend a gap year in Switzerland, and then take up a career in industry.

He already had an inkling, however, that things might not turn out quite the way he expected. 'I was standing in the corridor of a train, thinking with anticipation of the summer ahead. The sun was setting in a blaze of glory and the fields and hedgerows were alive with colour. I had the distinct feeling that I would be leaving this pleasant land for a long period.' It would be five years before he returned to Britain.

Industry was a natural choice for Nowell, whose father directed a tannery in Runcorn, England. During World War II, Nowell senior had pioneered a democratic approach to management that was revolutionary in its time. 'He was open with the trade unions about issues affecting the plant,' says Nowell, 'and he set up a works council. That sort of thing simply didn't exist in those days. As a result of this, the atmosphere in the plant changed. He used to write about it to me at school and university.'

These letters stemmed from a new relationship that Hugh built with his father when he was 13. He had taken a decision to live his life as God wanted him to. As a first step, he looked at things that had gone wrong which he was ashamed of and decided to talk to his father about them. There was only one problem: 'My father was not the sort of person one spoke to: he was a very busy businessman.'

When Nowell eventually plucked up the courage to approach his father, their conversation had a 'dramatic effect'. 'I felt free in a way I had never experienced before. From then on I was quite clear that God could be a personal force for me.'

Both his father's experiences at the tannery and Hugh Nowell's sense of rebirth were inspired by contact with MRA (now Initiatives of Change). So it was natural that when Nowell took a year off before pursuing his career, he decided to spend it working with MRA in mainland Europe, then rebuilding after the devastation of World War II.

On his way to MRA's international conference centre in Caux in Switzerland, Nowell went on a biking holiday in the West of France with some friends from college. 'We were on bikes of a very vintage variety, this being the post-war period when modern replacements were unavailable.' By the time their exam results came through they had made their way to Paris, where they saw all the shows and spent the last of their money on a bottle of champagne to celebrate their success on the Champs Elysées.

One of his friends took his bike back to Britain, and Nowell set out with no money to hitchhike to Switzerland. Lifts were hard to find - perhaps because of his travelling gear, a bush shirt, shorts and a battered felt hat into which he had stuck a union jack.

As evening drew in, he was 'feeling a bit down'. 'Then a Citroen bulging with children and baggage drew up. The driver turned out to have fought with the Resistance.' The family even offered him a bed for the night.

After the summer conference in Caux, Nowell spent the autumn in the north of France, working to build bridges between management and labour under the auspices of the Jeune Patrons, an association of young textile managers. In the New Year he moved on to the Ruhr, whose heavy industry had become a battleground of the class war. 'Our qualifications were that we had given all that we knew of ourselves to God for the purpose of remaking the world. We felt we were just as dedicated as the revolutionaries of the left whom we met there.'

He was still in the Ruhr when a strange request reached him from Caux. He was asked to return immediately to take part in a play, one of the media used by MRA to spread its message of personal change leading to social and economic change. An early embarrassing appearance on the stage had convinced him that this was not for him. 'I ignored the request. However, following more agitated calls from the director, I packed my bags and went.'

He remembers a terrible night when he lay awake contemplating a life on the stage. 'The director complained I was not putting my heart into it. He was dead right. However my inner workings told me I had better get on with it.'

Meanwhile his year was drawing to an end. As Oxford chemistry graduates were much in demand, he could have found a job in any of the large petrochemical companies in the UK. His father had also offered him a job at his tannery. But the feeling began to grow on him that he should stay where he was. 'God appeared to want me to do what I was doing.'

He went on playing the part for the next 11 years, when required, while doing 'fieldwork' for MRA in Europe, North America and Asia.

'This was the start to an unpredictable life which often seemed to involve doing things which I felt I had neither the gifts nor the desire to do,' says Nowell.

He felt equally unqualified to enter publishing, when the opportunity arose in 1963, although he had an innate interest in business. 'At the end of my third year in Oxford, I was looking for training in management skills. But no management courses existed in Oxford in 1948 - and I couldn't find a psychology course either!' Thwarted, he had done a fourth year of chemistry.

Nowell was instrumental in starting Grosvenor Books, the publishing arm of MRA. They published a broad range of titles from *Cooking around the world* (which combined recipes with anecdotes) to children's books set in different cultures and *The Muslim Mind*, which opened western minds to an understanding of Islam. For 25 years he represented Grosvenor Books at the International Book Fair in Frankfurt. He says that one of his most exciting undertakings was launching a publishing operation in Moscow, before the end of the Cold War.

He retired from Grosvenor Books in 1988, only to find himself led in another unexpected direction. In 1990 he was one of a small group at an MRA conference who heard a senior British publisher, Bill Porter, talk about his concern about values in the media. 'He said that the media needed to find a new sense of responsibility for its impact on society. This echoed the convictions underlying the publishing we had been doing, and I offered to help.' Porter founded the International Communications Forum

(ICF), and Nowell became its Joint Secretary. He describes Porter as a 'pied piper of Hamlin', to whose cause hundreds of media professionals all over the world have rallied.

Nowell quotes the response of Carol Goar, editorial page editor on the Toronto Star, as typical of many who have taken part: 'My involvement with the Forum has helped give me the courage to live by the values that brought me into this business in the first place.' He also quotes Roger Parkinson, President of the World Association of Newspapers, as saying that the ICF has 'put the issue of media responsibility on the world's agenda'.

'There are two types of people,' says Nowell, as he looks back on his life. 'There's the sort who have visions and ambitions and go for them, and the sort who take things as they come and act when they are clear it's the right track. I belong to the second type. If asked how do you know what course to take, I answer, "It grows on you!" And then you have to take a step in faith. A life of faith is an adventurous life.'

FAC Volume 15 Number 4 ^[1]

Keywords: Turning Point ^[2]

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