

“Honest to God and to her readers, Tania Bright dives head first into the most heartfelt issues of hope and human identity. Never scared to share the things that need to be said, nor those that go unsaid, she cuts to the chase and teaches us to reflect with ‘kindsight’. Too often faith becomes the boxing glove we use to beat ourselves up. For those who feel battered, defeated, overwhelmed and diminished this book offers a much needed hand up.”

– Dr Russell Rook

“If anyone was going to write this book it was going to be my great mate Tania. I’ve seen her refreshing honesty in action talking to a thousand men who gave her a standing ovation. I also know her when she’s off the stage and she’s exactly the same person. This book will warm your heart, help you to be kinder to yourself and to keep ‘looking up’ in hope and faith. Nice one, Tania. Your honesty and humility are compelling and personally challenging.”

– Revd Carl Beech

“I love this book! A little bit manifesto, a lot of honesty – it’s bold and beautiful about how to embrace life in all its rawness and fullness. Tania will help you re-think how to love yourself, and others, with the radical kindness Jesus demonstrates. Inspirational and completely unforgettable – I couldn’t put it down.”

– Rachel Gardner, founder of The Romance Academy

“Honesty is not for wimps, and neither is this book! Tania is a courageous and transparent warrior of hope-filled truth who takes us past polite conversation into the kind of honest discussion about tough issues that most of us long to have, but few of us actually experience. Every chapter reads like a coffee-fuelled chat with a fantastic friend – one moment raucous and a bit embarrassing, the next moment personal and poignant; but always compassionate and almost therapeutic in nature. This book is an incredibly practical and relevant resource that will greatly assist us all as we

relate and minister to others, but also, I have no doubt that you, like me, will personally reflect on its content for some time. The benefit of 'kindsight' is, in every area of life, a powerful weapon for finding freedom. Pour yourself that coffee and get stuck in."

– Cathy Madavan, Speaker, member of the Spring Harvest Planning Group and author of *Digging for Diamonds*

"Within the church, there are a number of topics that are often avoided, and a tendency not to admit that we are humans living imperfect lives and struggling with difficult times. No one could accuse Tania of this in this book, which mixes humour, insights, gentle challenges and a sense of support and encouragement as we learn from Tania's journey, and other voices that she has drawn upon! No one should finish reading this book feeling chastised, but rather have learned to practise 'kindsight': an ability to learn to be kind to ourselves (and others) in our past, present and future. Tania is an engaging public speaker, and this translates well into this book. Anyone who can get the word 'codswallop' naturally into a book, and recommends that 'it is better to eat a Mars Bar with good friends, than to eat broccoli alone' gets my vote!"

– Bex Lewis

"Tania is absolutely one of a kind, a breath of fresh air for the church today. She is one of those amazing people that after leaving her presence, you feel like you have spent time with Jesus. She lights up any room she walks in, not because of her charisma, but because of her deeply found confidence and trust in God that has come from an intimate walk with Him. Within these pages you will find her secret to the confident, abundant, Spirit-filled life that she so graciously carries everywhere she goes. Full of grace and truth, this book will take you to the heart of God and be ever so real about it along the journey. Thanks for being vulnerable and real, Tania... we desperately need it!"

– Rob Peabody

“This book is a generous gift. Tania has opened up her life and her heart to us in order to help us meet her God. I was hooked from the first page as Tania lets us into the sorrows and joys of her life story so far, showing us that even after some very dark times she has discovered the relentless grace of God. If you look back on your life and think ‘if only...’ Tania’s concept of ‘kindsight’ will help you to see your past through the lens of the grace of God. She offers us a great gift. Make sure you don’t miss out.”

**– Dr Krish Kandiah, President of London School of Theology and
Founder of Home for Good**

“Wow, a book that tells it as it is. If you hunger for reality and honesty, if you value relationships, you will love this book. Hindsight is the ability to reflect on an event or situation after it has happened whereas kindsight is the action and ability to stop, reflect and learn to be kind to yourself and to those involved. The world needs to not only know this word more but use it, as we are failing to tap into the most beautiful gift God has given us – love for each other and ourselves. When I first met Tania, we had chemistry, connection and instant commitment; observing and walking with her through some of the ups and downs has been a deep privilege. I highly recommend this book of wisdom and kindsight, but it does carry a health warning: your heart and life could be changed because of it.”

**– Vicky Taylor, founder of Free Range Chicks and Dignity,
Leadership Consultant, Trainer and Coach**

“Tania holds the heavy extremes of great strength and great vulnerability without fumbling over or dropping either. Her honesty and hard-won wisdom are life- and joy-giving. Long may she bless us by sharing them!”

– Abby Guinness, Event Director, Spring Harvest

“Tania writes as she speaks, and her strong and deliberate addressing of taboo subjects so personally will set the reader free of

their religious spirit and/or their own personal struggles in these areas. Tania has such freedom in her own heart and it flows, nay, floods out of the book. It's time such a book was written by someone with the respect and value she has in the Christian world. Leave it to Tania to not just break through the barriers, but blow'm sky high.

"Her coining of the word 'kindsight' is nothing short of beautiful and the determination with which she practises what she preaches is a testimony to the power of the God she serves. Her love for people, friends, total strangers, and her two beautiful boys gives courage to those of us who look on as she journeys through life. If I could describe this book as just one thing, it would be HONEST. It is radically, freely, empoweringly, encouragingly, over the top honest and no reader can sit with it without being changed for the good, without wanting to know God more courageously and more deeply. This is a woman who knows the heart of God in a most beautiful way. I'm going to buy a dozen copies and give them away... captives can turn into mighty warriors; Tania is living proof."

– Bev Murrill, Director, Christian Growth International

"Well done for picking up this volume! This is an intensely practical, down-to-earth, life-researched book, which has been forged in some of the deepest and darkest experiences of life; Tania has been through them all and her dogged faith in the Lord Jesus to not only bring her through, but also to make something profoundly precious out of them, is the basis of the wisdom you will unearth as you read these chapters. I have had the privilege of seeing how Tania has tackled some of the things life has thrown at her and I have grown in profound admiration for her; she is a shining star and proof that what she writes about works. As you read this book you too will learn how to be kind to yourself as you work with the Holy Spirit to bring healing, wholeness and strength to your life."

– Anne Coles, New Wine

DON'T BEAT YOURSELF UP

Learning the wisdom of Kindsight

Tania Bright

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Acknowledgments

People have often asked me if I would pen something of the journey I've been on over the years. The task has always felt too gargantuan and my writing skills too clumsy, so I have never actioned it. Until Tony Collins laid the gauntlet down in front of me. He had belief in me and assumed I could write a book. That in itself was enough. And so I too believed in me and wrote a book. Thank you, Tony. I'd put the babies to bed, tidy the house, take a deep breath, and write late into the night: night after night, the words flowing until the story was told.

There've been cheerleaders on the way who have given me strength, made me laugh, and pushed me on; many of them are found in the pages ahead. They are part of my story. To my best friends Heidi and Ed, for their unswerving loyalty, fun and friendship. To my "special buddies"... to Russ, to Stella and Rob, to Katy and Phil, to Narn, to Joy, to Prince and Laura, to Victoria, to Katka, to Dr Laura, to Anna and Azariah, to the Dales' – life is richer with you all in it. I am blessed and grateful.

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And lastly, for my sons Mack and Charlie. Thank you, boys. You are joy-bringers. Funny, brave, and resilient. Every minute with you is a privilege. You have been the greatest gift I have ever received. I love you both. My prayer is that you don't cringe if ever you read this book: "Mum, why did you have to tell people that! You're so embarrassing!" Sons, I will do all I can to ensure you are kind to yourselves, that you live freely, and that you show yourselves and others compassion throughout your lives.

Foreword

It's a comment that my pal Adrian Plass has frequently made, usually accompanied by his wry but warm smile: "There's always a problem when truth is allowed to creep into Christianity." Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? I can hear people huffing and puffing and making "disgusted of Woking" horsey noises, exhaling air through their indignantly flared nostrils at 500 psi.

I hear them protesting: "What are you blethering on about? Jesus is the truth, and so we are a people of the truth, aren't we?"

Yes. That is the theory. But the reality is often quite different. Christians, in common with the vast majority of the human race, frequently lie, hedge, exaggerate, pretend, and dance around the truth. This can happen when a question concerning how large a rear end looks in a pair of skinny jeans is proposed, prompting a lie in order to keep the peace. And in the church, there's often more hedging than is usually found at a garden centre when "difficult" subjects like self-image, pornography, masturbation, and guilt are mentioned. Much coughing can be heard from the cloisters. Although we *have* moved on a little. When I was a keen evangelical adolescent locked attentively to the annual talk about sex in the youth group, explanations were so vague that one needed a map reference, a gift of interpretation and a copy of *Grays Anatomy* (the medical textbook, not the eternal television series), to figure out what was being shared.

I have occasionally struggled to be a truth-teller myself. An American Christian publisher recently told me that I was “too honest for the church”. Spot the error, there, people...

Hence my delight that Tania has written this compelling, warm, practical, and utterly inspirational book. She begins by bluntly sharing some of her own fractures and fragilities, which is one reason I like her, and this book, a lot. No ivory towered exhortations here; rather another broken but under construction soul sharing some poignantly relevant advice with her fellow travellers.

Tania has a beautiful smile, which, helpfully, she uses a lot. But this is not the superficial grin of an enthusiastic airhead who wants to palm us off with platitudes, but is the facial architecture of one who has been around the proverbial block, has plenty of cuts and bruises to show for it, and now, in plain, unfussy language, wants to help the rest of us out. Here, you won't be bossed around, rudely shoved with a stack of *musts* and *shoulds*. But you will find a winsome invitation to live healthily, but not clinically.

So I won't say, “enjoy the book”, because I *know* you will. OK, if you're of a nervous disposition, proceed with care. But I know that as a result of your walking through the pages that follow, you'll laugh, cry, be relieved, become resolved, and most important of all, be a more authentic follower of Jesus as you do.

Thanks, Tania.

Thanks a lot. Really.

Jeff Lucas

Introduction

Mine was a complex journey into adulthood.

Aged ten, I started puberty. By eleven, our family life was under pressure and cracks were beginning to show in my relationship with my parents. When I was twelve, I had the physical form of an eighteen-year-old. Aged thirteen I was sexually active, smoking, and drinking. By sixteen, I had left home and was working in pubs and sharing a single bed with my older boyfriend, a drayman with a brewery. By the time I was seventeen, I had been groomed by a local couple to become a stripper. (Thankfully, I never did execute my debut performance in a working men's club in the North East of England. The act before me was too good and I sharply left the venue!) I already had a few low budget glamour photo shoots under my belt by the time I was eighteen, and when I was nineteen a male "friend" was offering to pimp me out for £300 per session without a condom. It was an offer I declined. But that was a shocking and defining moment in which I realized how dark my life was becoming.

I was in a mess.

But the tides did turn: by the time I was twenty I was working as an administrator for a FTSE 100 company. I was still vulnerable, but was managing to hold down what now felt like a "career" and I was meeting a different breed of people. Articulate people. Ambitious people. People with aspiration.

And it rubbed off.

A year later and I was on a fast-track management training scheme; by twenty-five I was travelling the world as a global buyer, negotiating international contracts and managing supply chain logistics. A not dissimilar story to the 1988 film *Working Girl*, where a young Staten Island-raised working-class lass conquers all and ends up in the mergers and acquisitions department of a Wall Street investment bank.

It was an adventure indeed!

I could drink with the boys, play hard, yet still wake up early and nail a deal. As one colleague-turned-dear-friend said, “You’re a sight to behold in the boardroom and even more so when dancing on it!” – referring to the penchant I had in those days to combine business with fun!

Oh my. I can laugh now.

Not long after that, I became a Christian. And with gusto, I listened to God and everything was turned on its head. I sold up and flew to Sydney, Australia, where I found an excellent church and Bible college. Here I spent nearly three years studying, learning, and listening to God. Since then I’ve been a church pastor; worked for urban-mission organizations; co-founded a community home caring for homeless teenagers; worked for large Christian charities; and now serve on a variety of boards whose concerns span the delivery of healthcare, education, and the abolition of child sexual exploitation. I’m also the group director for a wonderful organization that runs a chain of schools and well-being projects. But the *pièce de résistance*, the thing I’m most exhilarated by, has been adopting two courageous little boys. I not

only feel vocationally fulfilled, but also maternally and spiritually fulfilled through my work and motherhood. Deeply satisfying.

Ah, you think, feeling mildly relieved for me. Life's all sorted then!

I cough, embarrassed.

I don't want to burst the "bubble of comfort" on this happy, grace-filled, life-turned-around story. But burst I must. Because since coming to faith fourteen years ago, the journey has been a paradox of passion and pain in equal measure. I haven't had the "Ta-da! Look, see – everything's OK now" experience, which so often accompanies my type of story in Christian magazine articles or platform testimonies.

That said, life deals us all a unique hand. We each have a different story and a different experience. And none of us, whether Christian or not, are exempt from both trials and joys. And trials I am all too familiar with. Matthew 5:45 sums this up: "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

I've learned that no amount of faith will stop bad things happening to good people. Nor good things happening to bad people! Nor good people making mistakes, and bad people making wise choices and vice versa!

While the mess-ups, which are actually of my own doing, aren't as frequent now as they were in my teens and twenties, I'm still well able to turn a situation from serenity into chaos surprisingly quickly. And disappointments, heartache, failures, and challenges have been regular visitors to the table. Not a popular, victorious, evangelical admission!

In fact, since coming to faith I've encountered multiple heart-breaking bereavements; made poor financial choices; lost confidence through redundancy; suffered a significant relationship breakdown; failed at ministry endeavours; struggled with people's unmet expectations in me and vice versa; had a near breakdown; have aspirations as yet not even close to seeing lived out; deeply grieved through two miscarriages; and all too regularly, clock up significant social faux pas. I am not the right girl to ask for a testimony at a prosperity conference plugging a "just believe it and it's yours, in the name of Jesus-ah" agenda!

Nowadays my most common dilemma, amid a raging drama or two, is feeling frustrated that I haven't dealt with something as well as I might. Or at least being left with that feeling of "I'm sure there's something I could have done differently there."

Do you ever find yourself asking that? I intuitively know how I'd like something to turn out – I plan the gracious response to something or someone who's totally irked me, I make a personal pact to withhold a sharp word, or respond with grace... and sometimes I end up failing. And I'm left with a feeling of "not good enough" and disappointment in myself because I feel I should have either the skills, the insight, or the emotional intelligence to have oriented it well.

So, as you see, I stand before you metaphorically naked, with the intent of offering up my struggles, my mess-ups, and my less-refined moments. But hopefully not self-indulgently. Nor sensationally. Rather, for the purpose of learning – for the both of us. Now, in middle age, I'm finally learning to eyeball

the “tough-stuff”, mess-ups and “not done wells”. I hear a cheer rising! I’m embracing the failures, fears, flops, and fiascos. I see them differently now. No longer do I see them as cringe-worthy black marks, nor as a personal immaturity that I’ll eventually grow out of. And most importantly I don’t now mark myself down as unredeemable nor beyond the love or grace of God. Quite the opposite.

I now see those failures, fears, flops, and fiascos as an opportunity. To be kind to myself, then to breathe... and then even more remarkably, to learn. American scholar Brené Brown, discussing kindness, asserts, “Talk to yourself like you would to someone you love.”¹ I tried it. I’m changed because of it. The kindness that I now afford myself has liberated me to learn from difficult situations, rather than beat myself up because of them. And kindness toward myself has also allowed me the privilege of seeing quite how magnificent aspects of me really are. And as exciting, to see quite how magnificent aspects of others really are! It affects everything.

So I now live my life through what I like to call “kindsight”, rather than mere hindsight. It’s not just theory: it informs how I interpret and accept the past, negotiate and enjoy the present, and remain optimistic for the future.

Might I assume that you’re in possession of this book because you need a little encouragement? Perhaps you need to know there’s light at the end of the tunnel and that all might

1 “Brené Brown on the 3 Things You Can Do to Stop a Shame Spiral”, as told to Oprah Winfrey, *Oprah’s Lifeclass*, Oprah Winfrey Network (<http://www.oprah.com/oprahs-lifeclass/Brene-Brown-on-the-3-Things-You-Can-Do-to-Stop-a-Shame-Spiral-Video>).

turn out OK. Perhaps life hasn't dealt you a good hand but you're determined to see the positives nevertheless. Perhaps a mistake is costing you dearly and you feel sick to the stomach now dealing with the consequences. Perhaps you can't quite believe a situation can be redeemed, and you need some volts of faith to kick-start a new way of thinking. The principle of kindness can aid this: it encourages us to live honestly and openly, not eradicating huge swathes of the past or present; nor daily reliving the scenario with zero constructive outcome – but embracing, accepting, and learning instead.

We might not be able to change what's happened, but we can change our continued response to it. And God wants to be in on every part of this journey, not just the parts of life we feel OK about, or are proud enough of. God wants to breathe goodness and kindness and love into every area of our life – particularly the areas we're the most frightened or ashamed of.

What you'll find on these pages are insights from my own story and those of others, gathered through the tough stuff of life: insights seen through kindness. They're not always pretty, nor neatly packaged, but they're earthy and real.

The challenge I place before us is to dare to master kindness. It's a game changer.

So, if life's been tough; it's not gone great; if you've messed up; if you don't feel as though you've dealt with something well – don't beat yourself up... instead, breathe, then ask: "What did I learn?" And apply a large slab of kindness.

On Missing the Point of Church

You may have understandably made the assumption from the early part of the introduction that I grew up in a tumultuous family situation worthy of a *Jeremy Kyle* or *Jerry Springer* episode, given my then apparent predilection to general dysfunction and sexual exploration from a very young age. I've often noted how people who only know the headlines of my life try to analyse why my early years were so erratic. I've been asked countless times whether I was abused, which, while a sound diagnostic question, wasn't the case.

Another question, albeit asked only once was, "Were you copying your mother's behaviour? Was she promiscuous?", which, if you had known my lovely mum, is a hilarious notion, given her endearing prudish tendencies and penchant for woollen knee-length socks accompanied by Scholl clogs – not to mention her being faithful to a thirty-year marriage.

I may never know quite why things "ran off the rails" for me. It certainly wasn't due to a chaotic childhood or to abusive parents.

In fact, my childhood – certainly up to about eleven years old – was as good as one could hope for. Remarkably surprising given that I sported a severe 1960s bowl-haircut into the early eighties, wore harsh National Health glasses from age seven,

and had a dicky hip that required crutches for six months! Not a winning combination, but I survived!

I recall blackberry-picking, narrow boat holidays, copious bike rides with my older sister, acrobatics in the back garden on an old mattress, and no real traumas at primary school, bar a boy called Alex pulling his trousers down and showing me his private parts. For someone looking from the outside in, we were a fairly typical British family. Mum, Dad, older sister, and me. My parents were from working-class stock, both with no small amount of challenging family history. Dad had secured himself an apprenticeship and worked very hard studying for an HND in mechanical engineering. This had led on to a fulfilling, but nonetheless stressful, career for him in design engineering. A non-fatal heart attack aged forty-five on the M40 motorway into work one day attested to this. Mum was a product of her time, a highly personable lady but with little career aspiration or self-confidence. She adored amateur dramatics, singing, and being a housewife, and she was very good indeed at these things. When my sister and I were very young my parents became Christians – the born-again, Spirit-filled, Bible-believing, evangelical variety. Church was central and Jesus was referred to as “Jesus my personal Lord and Saviour”, in case there was any confusion as to who He was. And so, that’s what I grew up in, was surrounded by, and assumed its identity by osmosis. Life as a child largely revolved around two things: Dad’s work (plus the associated pressure, stress, absence, intrigue, income, and inevitable house moves around the country), and Christianity.

I was of a happy disposition as a child. Still am. Yet I also had the capacity to react quickly and respond emotionally rather than objectively. Still do. “Highly expressive” was often the diplomatic title afforded me by teachers and parents. Still is! It was dependent on how sincerely and respectfully someone engaged with me that determined whether my self-expression toward them was warm and effervescent or withdrawn and difficult. As a teenager, if you’d have brushed me against an egotistical authoritarian whose own voice was the only one they’d listen to, filled with dour opinion, unexplained instructions and legalistic assumption – oh man, I’d have to quickly get out of their way lest my mouth and attitude take over, often landing myself in hot water! I’d like to believe my responses now are a little more refined!

As I’ve been told by more than one source, I was not an easy to child to raise (lest you be concerned for my emotional well-being, I’m smiling, mischievously, as I’m writing). “Highly expressive” was also accompanied by “intense and intentional”. If I felt it, I felt it 100 per cent. Add to that the early onset of puberty and large doses of raging hormones... well, things were not always pretty!

As you probably gather by now I wasn’t fitting well into the “good Christian girl” box. And in the day when sayings such as “little girls should be seen and not heard”, or “be a good little girl” were still mildly acceptable, I picked up the suggestion that I therefore wasn’t “pleasing”. I remember registering that quiet, obedient children were superior in some sense. And by default, I was inferior.

At twelve years of age, I can clearly remember an internal shift happening. Even though not a lot had changed externally. Chicken à la Rosemary (my mum, Rosemary's, name for a chicken casserole, exotic only by virtue of adding garlic!) was still being served every Monday night, gymnastics was still on Wednesdays, we were allowed a ten-penny bag of sweets on a Friday night after fish and chips, and *Juliet Bravo* was still my favourite TV programme. But, outside of this normality I was beginning to see some things differently and I was becoming unsettled with what I saw.

I began to see my parents' Christian faith for what felt like the first time. I guess this isn't altogether unusual: as children grow up they begin to question things they've always just accepted. But for me, sadly, faith shifted in my mind from being a normal "everyone does it" kinda thing, to an abnormal "I wish we didn't do it" kinda thing. Not only did I suddenly recognize that we actually went to church when others didn't, but I began to notice aspects that became oddities to me. I noticed behaviour at church, for example, that wasn't present at any other point in the week at home. Sunday's "Praise the Lord!" greeting, songs sung in a certain way, phrases used all seemed, in my naivety, to be altogether different from how we lived and expressed ourselves for the rest of the week. I wanted to see a Sunday face that was the same as the Monday to Saturday face. I'm sure this is also true for many Christian households across the country as well.

Then I noticed that certain ways of speaking and expressing things were different dependent on where we were. Religious

language was used within church circles, but not at the shops or school. This didn't escape my attention.

The fracture lines of faith were forming for me.

I was facing a serious disconnect. The incredible Bible stories – so faithfully told to me – of burning bushes, parting of waves, men being swallowed whole by whales, lions being tamed in pits, local women becoming queens – certainly whetted my appetite and inspired me to want to trust in this God. But I had no obvious place to associate or connect these stories within my daily, average, really-quite-boring existence.

Hearing in youth groups about miracles, good overcoming evil in a swashbuckling kinda way and demons being cast out, and then reading about drug addicts being healed of their addictions in books by people like Jackie Pullinger and Nicky Cruz all seemed so exciting at the time. Yet, like many teenagers (and tweenagers), it just didn't relate to the rest of my life between the bookends of each of my monotonous-breakfast-school-homework-tea-sleep days. Dad still worked away during the week, Mum still baked wholemeal rock cakes, my sister still liked floral print, and I was still wearing glasses.

The radical revolutionary I had grown up learning about – Jesus – didn't seem quite so radical or revolutionary in everyday life, where scenes from the pages of the Good News Bible weren't played out. Certainly not in the town where I lived, anyway.

To add to my growing teenage faith-conundrums, over the years I'd seen "predicaments" in our church community unfolding in front of me that didn't always look good. I can

clearly recall a church elder who left his young family for his vivacious secretary. A mum of four smoked so many cigarettes due to her nerves that her lips and fingers were yellow. A local reverend of a posh Anglican church was rumoured to not believe in Jesus. One of the choir would add a two-second warble on the end of every hymn or chorus stanza so that her voice would dominate, just like her opinions. Parents would protectively gather around their children when a certain single hairy member of the congregation came too close. The Christian music teacher was so very angry, all the time. Another church member wore sunglasses even on rainy days to cover bruises. One individual was diagnosed with “religious mania”, where she stayed in a permanent state of manifesting encounters with the Holy Spirit, even when in the supermarket, walking around physically lurching and loudly groaning. And added to this, church was really, really boring.

In the eyes of a disenfranchised young person, all this stuff becomes odd and frightening – and if not frightening then mildly humorous. And if church isn’t addressing or balancing these issues of life with great biblical teaching and a radical manifesto of what it is to live in God’s Kingdom on earth, as in heaven – then what’s left is not likely going to cut it for the average young person.

Like many teenagers, I developed a not altogether unsurprising reticence towards our family’s involvement in church life. Maybe, like me, this happened to you? Or to your children? It can be an incredibly unsettling thing, for both children and parents. Some kids are perhaps scared that they’ll

lose the love of a parent for challenging the family status quo, or some will simply use it as a way to pull away from perceived parental control and assert their growing opinion. Some, as in my case, just didn't "get it". Parents then react, scared perhaps that their precious children may walk away from faith, and of course them, and what they represent. And the reaction, in turn, pushes the child further away. Painful stuff. It is such a common story. If you're relating to this, please know you're not alone.

My reticence was due to the fact that being a Christian didn't *seem* to make a jot of difference. In my childlike mind, it didn't actually make stuff OK, nor even come across as appealing. Also, and worryingly, somehow I'd picked up the message that to be a Christian meant that nothing should go wrong, God will protect you, and if He doesn't, either you're sinning or you're not saved. What terrible theology. I cringe by just typing it!

Recently Adrian Plass, the great faith-inspired comic genius, wrote a letter:

Sorry. [This is m]ore of a rant than a letter. Perhaps it's because these issues have become particularly important to me recently. In the course of this month I've lost most of the use of my right hand because of a stroke, together with something akin to neuralgia, also connected with the stroke, which causes a continual, throbbing headache. It's a long haul, and the future is uncertain, but medication and hard work are already beginning

*to show results. The thing I want to make clear, though, is however sh[**]ty things get, they will never be a measure of God's love for me or those who are close to me. Terrible things happen to Christians. They die in car crashes. They become paralysed. Businesses fail. Dreams plummet. Nightmares become reality. Our leader was crucified. If we can't beef up our puny little theology by embracing and incorporating these inescapable facts we might as well give up our ridiculous faith and join the Ember Day Bryanites. They do coffee and biscuits. They'll do.*

Not for me. I'm in for the long haul, stroke or no stroke.

Yours, written with my left hand

Adrian.²

Very sad as I was about hearing he'd suffered a stroke, I loved reading this letter because it's real and so very honest about the tough stuff of life. Honest and yet still absolutely faith-filled. In my forties, I now know that God exists alongside the pain, and until a new heaven and new earth, it would seem, bad things aren't going to be eradicated. But Jesus is here with us, every step of the way. In the midst of the suffering. Now that's better theology.

Back in my childhood I needed something that was so much more real. I needed to know about a God who is there

2 Published on his website, June 2014 (<http://www.adrianplass.com/june2014.htm>).

through all the realities of life: the ups, downs, adventures, and humdrum bits. And I needed to know how to deal with the downright difficult bits.

What was absent for me as a child growing up in the church was an honesty to help me understand what was happening. As an adult, and with hindsight, I now understand that faith itself isn't complicated, but the way humanity represents it and lives it makes it complicated! Because we are complicated. Life is complicated. We live in a fallen, less-than-perfect world, so it follows that church isn't going to escape the complication – because we *are* the church!

My friend Andy Frost eloquently captured the great teenage disconnect I felt when he emailed me years ago, saying, “We teach good, sound, Christian values like respect, integrity and good moral conduct. But we have often forgotten to teach our kids other great Christian values like risk, generosity and courage. We have presented a nice Jesus rather than a radical Jesus.” This fully resonated with me. As a teenager, I wanted something to sink my teeth into and have an adventure with – what young person doesn't?

When faith becomes about a Sunday outing, niceties, rules, regulations, moral codes, pretence, and an “in-language”, the integrity of the whole thing implodes for many young people, as it did for me. Of course, the challenge is that we adults have to live the fully courageous, HD, surround-sound version of faith in order to showcase it. To our youngsters! Because we have to ask ourselves, what are they seeing in us? Boredom, apathy, back-biting? Or fresh ways of doing things, embracing

edgy mission accompanied by prayerful sacrifice? However imperfectly!

Some kids survive church. Others don't just survive, they thrive – given a loving, supportive church, a great group of friends in the youth group, and youth leaders who inspire them. It's all about their individual experience in the wider picture. But for others, even under the best circumstances, church and the notion of God just don't cut it. My sister, for example, flourished. Whereas, in the exactly the same conditions as her, I just didn't survive. Same family, two sisters, two different reactions.

If you're a parent reading this, and one of your children hasn't survived church or has turned away from faith, please don't blame yourself. Please don't read Proverbs 22:6, contending that Scripture validates the claim that if we had taught our sons and daughters the right values, they would not have departed from the faith – and crumble at the accusation. Please don't! Kindsight is needed in huge measure here. Many factors, many people, many Christians, over many years, will have impacted your child. Not just you. Your child also has a right to make personal choices that cannot be dictated by even the most well-intentioned parent. If your teens aren't the toe-the-line type, whatever you do or say may not work to keep them at church. In fact, the opposite might work better. The very act of gently respecting their choice, however hard, instead modelling a supportive Christian life (possibly with some risk and adventure mixed in!), trusting God and praying like the clappers – and you never know, their faith may be ignited in later life. As it did with me.

Thankfully, since my teenage years, an excellent book has been written, which I highly recommend for anyone reading this chapter and needing support. It's Rob Parsons' terrific *Getting Your Kids through Church without them Ending up Hating God*.³ Every Christian family needs a copy. Every church needs a copy. I wish I'd written it – it was begging to be penned!

So, in my youth, spiritual confusion, poor theology, and church experiences that were unappetizing took their toll. What also entered into the arena was a crippling lack of identity. In certain churchy circles I pretended I belonged to Jesus, to the church, and its sub-culture. And yet, in school and elsewhere, I was another person, seemingly happier, but with different values, beliefs, and opinions. There is no explanation for this other than I wanted to please my parents and to “belong”, yet I also wanted to “belong” in the non-church space – at school, at clubs, with friends and their families – so I acted in a completely different way. Deep fragmentation began to happen.

By my early teens, I was leading two different emotional lives. This was very destructive because it hampered my ability to manage the child-to-youth and youth-to-adult transition. And when a young person has little sense of identity, all manner of behaviours can exhibit themselves. Quite literally, I didn't know who I was, what my values were, what to trust, or how to feel or safely process emotions.

The list of struggles was growing. There were more and more family arguments. I had a deepening anxiety that there was something fundamentally wrong with me and my attitude

3 Monarch Books, 2011.

was worsening. School was at least fun due to the friendships I had, and it was a welcome respite from home. Smoking had become an addiction, not just a school bus hobby. The “little girls should be seen and not heard” ditty internally mocked me; shame abounded, condemnation was rife. I suffered guilt and shame at giving my new boyfriend oral sex all too readily; infatuation and lust became the norm; I started drinking alcohol. In summary: for me it was a tough, tough gig being a teenager with a foot in the church and a foot and an arm outside of it.

Now of course I'm not saying this is the experience of all teenagers who feel a disconnection between church and other aspects of their lives. But they may share some of the confusion and disillusion, and they may have a journey experimenting with who they are and what they believe. Thankfully, for most, that doesn't mean they will necessarily strike out in the same ways as I did.

But in my extreme confusion, I was becoming more and more unable to reconcile faith with life and life with faith. I was confused by what I saw, confused by what I was doing, confused by how faith didn't seem to make an impact, and confused about everyone's seeming avoidance of talking about difficult issues that were right in front of them. I was coming to all sorts of poor theological and personal assumptions that, sadly, had no safe space to be tested and re-engineered. Not at home, nor at church, and not at youth group nor in school.

A simple, if not painful reality, was that there were too few adults modelling a fun-filled, aspirational, inspirational, healthy

Christian identity yet who were honest about life and all its challenges and who were prepared to have a continual, messy, truthful interchange with me about how faith and life worked. Which for an expressive, extrovert live wire such as myself, was vital. And it was vitally missing.

In the spirit of hindsight, I've learned that for Christians to live a life where faith is out-worked transparently and openly with no hidden corners, acknowledging life's challenges and disappointments, as well as its joys, is priceless. If we pretend suffering doesn't exist or, indeed, if we live permanently in suffering, how can we model a life that is seen as trusting a real and living God? I want to be real and model the truth that, if we let Him, He will live with us through every moment of joy as well as any suffering as we travel through our difficulties until more settled times are reached.

Similarly, when we Christians fail and occasionally blow it, as undoubtedly we will, it's best not to cover it up. Own it. Walk people through our struggle in an appropriate way. We can learn from it ourselves and, by being transparent, we can allow others to learn too. That's how to showcase to other people an authentic faith that can survive failure in life and still yet rise to take on another day. Young people particularly need to see this. Young people can spot a cover-up from a million miles away and their interpretation is "fake". They'd much rather know the truth of a difficult situation and how you've negotiated it in a Christian way, than for adults to gloss over tricky situations. Being real is also all about admitting that the truth is you don't know all the answers. Sometimes, we need to model patience while waiting

for God to reveal His plan in the journey of our lives. It's much better to help others orient their faith by never shying away from any subject, however uncomfortable we may find it.

“Do as I say, not do as I do” is a death-knell statement to young people. Instead of bending their ears with dogma, give them room to work out their theology, however much it clashes with our own. Listen and learn together. This is the Kingdom way.

Actions speak louder than words... what do young people see when they look at their parents? Faith or self-reliance? Forgiveness or anger? Anger-induced discipline or benevolence? Generosity or selfishness? Are parents living the radical lives they desire their children to be living? To live a Christ-centred contagious life and to model a whole-life faith is how the next generation will be inspired. Our teenagers need to see us living with purpose and with passion for a great cause. In other words, being people who embody a radical, risky, and real relationship with Jesus.

For me, it took fifteen further years for God to begin to sort out the “faith-mess” I'd got into, and another fourteen years on from that I'm still working on it!

I have learned so much from my experiences. I don't beat myself up any more, I just put the learning into practice. I make it matter. It's why I hugely enjoy working with young Christians, mentoring and guiding them into a whole-life experience of their faith.

Imagine if we all helped just one young person and stuck by them, no matter what; if we were utterly unconditional in our commitment to them. Being there for them, taking them

out for a hot chocolate, allowing them to ask any questions, talk about any subject, confess any silly goings-on (or indeed serious goings-on!) without making them feel as though they've blown it for life, nor condemning them, but instead actively coaching them through different choices for next time a tricky scenario is thrown up.

I wonder if we would have a church still full of our young, who feel confident to experiment with life still, knowing we're there to provide a safety net for them. And ultimately with them knowing how much they are loved by a huge and passionate God who would love nothing more than for them to step into their calling and potential now. I don't want them to miss the point about church like I did. Church can be, and is, a glorious thing.