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Why I Try to Believe: An Experiment in Faith, Life and Stubborn Hope

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BOOK AND FILM REVIEWS

Tell The World

Director: Kyle Portbury
Writers: Aaron Hartzler (screenplay)
Genres: Biography | Drama | History
Release Date: 1 August 2016 (Australia)
Filming Locations: Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Production Companies

A Frame Productions (in association with)
Adventist Media Network (produced by)
Tell the World

Source: IMDb. (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2624344/>)

Daniel Reynaud

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***Tell the World* is an ambitious film that represents a step forward for an Adventist production, breaking out from the traditional 'talking heads' documentary. It is a difficult film to label, because it looks like a movie, through imagined reconstructions of characters and conversations, but acts like a documentary, because its primary role seems to be to convey information. In effect, it is really a moviemetary, a dramatized history of the origins and foundation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It represents progress in an Adventist understanding of how visual media works best: as a communicator of attitudes, emotions and values rather than of information.**

Tell the World begins with the origins of the Millerite movement in the 1830s, with William Miller as the central character, switching about halfway through to Ellen White, as the Millerites gradually organize into the Seventh-day Adventist Church with distinctive doctrines and emphases, such as the Sabbath, the health message and education. The film attempts to explain the key theological and religious ideas that drove the church's pioneers, while at the same time fleshing out the founders of Adventism so that they come across as real people.

The cinematic step forward is in dramatizing

the facts, with the intention of making denominational history more appealing and memorable. And it has done this well. The high production values result in a film that looks thoroughly professional, with quality sets, locations and costumes. The professional actors are almost uniformly good, creating believable characters and credible emotions. The cinematography is excellent and the directing assured. One shot in particular stood out for me: Ellen White standing on a snow-covered ridge, in mourning after the death of her eldest son Henry. Its exquisite framing and tone speaks more eloquently of sorrow than does copious screen weeping. Though to be fair, Tommi-Amber Pirie, who plays Ellen White, handles her role with aplomb, as convincing with her vision scenes as with the emotionally-charged scenes of the loss of two of her boys.

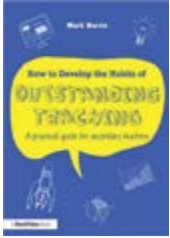
The film is heavy with history, with the screen writer struggling to cram in the many theological issues of the era, especially the now-obscure ones of the Millerite period, while ensuring that the film doesn't become bogged down with theological exposition at the expense of the narrative. The result is an unhappy compromise where there is both too much exposition for the story to sustain, and too little exposition to really understand the issues.

This compromised outcome gets to the heart of what is weak in the film: it is simply attempting too much. It seeks to explain the bulk of Adventist nineteenth-century history in the context of watchable drama and engaging characters. The result is a film that doesn't quite pull off any of those goals. In fact, the medium of film is ill-suited to explaining complex ideas such as the Sanctuary doctrine; it is more effective in offering modern viewers an approachable and human Ellen White, along with other pioneers, which to its credit it partially accomplishes. To see the interactions, disagreements and arguments of the principal personalities, as well as the nice touches of the critics of Adventism in the tavern, was one of the most persuasive features of the film.

Rightly handled, *Tell the World* is an ideal classroom tool for the teacher of denominational history, rather than a stand-alone cinematic text. Its imposing length and density of historical detail



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suggests that it is best presented not at a single screening, but episodically, with time to discuss and unpack the story further with the assistance of additional textual information. The name-dropping that occurs through the film of significant historical personages offers the potential for classes to research the characters more fully, as well as explore the theological issues mentioned but not detailed, such as ‘The Midnight Cry,’ and the ‘Shut Door.’ The film’s interpretations of Adventist history will also offer opportunities to examine cause and effect, and the role that individuals have played in shaping Adventist thought and practice. Many of the key Adventist ideas, such as the inspiration of Ellen White and the question of the Sabbath, have an apologetics case presented in the film. These too could be explored as arguments for distinctive Adventist doctrine.

While it is flawed in its attempt to communicate an excess of Adventist apologetics and history, the church is to be congratulated for its increasingly assured and effective use of visual media. Gradually we are learning that film is not very good at conveying hard information—but all is not lost. Historical movies capture audiences who ordinarily won’t read a book, and often act as catalysts for viewers to do their own research. Perhaps the next move advance is to produce a mini-series, allowing characters to be fully developed, and acting as inspiration for audiences to seek out the historical detail which is best presented in print rather than on screen.

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Editor’s Notes:

1. A trailer of the film can be downloaded from www.telltheworldfilm.org/
2. *The Tell the World* DVD can be purchased from Adventist Book Centres (ABC) for \$5:00.

How to Develop the Habits of Outstanding Teaching

Mark Harris (2016). New York, NY: Routledge. 178pp.
ISBN: 978-1-1-138-95047-4

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Many of us who are in the latter part of our careers will remember our first car that often came with a workshop manual full of instructions and repair protocols. That was in the days when cars were simple enough for the average person to tinker with. A little later in our histories we saw the introduction onto bookshop shelves of the ‘. . . for Dummies’ series of ‘how to’ manuals such as *Personal Finance for Dummies*.

How to Develop the Habits of Outstanding Teaching by Mark Harris sounded to me like another textbook on teaching theories. When I had a quick look through it however, my attention was immediately gained because I saw that it was full of tables and templates, lists and thought bubbles. On closer inspection I found that this book is more like a manual for high level teaching skills, than an academic book. Harris from experience is able to pack a whole lot of tricks, routines, templates, self-assessments, lesson plans, flowcharts, summary tables and much more into a mere 150 pages.

The methods of great teaching are employed in written form in this book. Most teachers would find themselves captivated and excited as they find practical tips they can’t wait to employ in their classrooms.

Many of this era’s important issues and buzz words are incorporated into the chapters and expanded on in a most practical fashion. Topics such as self-reflection, differentiation, teaching literacy, developing outcomes and success criteria, great questioning, lesson planning, classroom management and developing resiliency in students are all considered along with practical tips to excel as a teacher in these areas.

This book can easily be read from cover

to cover as the teacher retrieves ideas, but it can equally be used as that ‘workshop manual’ to bring an average teacher into the realms of greatness. I believe that the ‘reader’ will quickly become a ‘user’ if they have a desire to lift their teaching performance. Whether the ‘user’ is a new graduate, or an experienced teacher choosing not to become stale, this book needs to be in their ‘toolbox’.

Why I Try to Believe: An Experiment in Faith, Life and Stubborn Hope

Nathan Brown (2015), Warburton, Vic: Signs. 102pp.

Becky De Oliveira

Author, and Editor of Christian lifestyle magazine LIFE.info

It’s an interesting word—try. What does it mean to try? Does it mean to throw the full weight of your passion and effort behind an endeavour, like one might do in trying to win a gold medal at the Olympics? Or does it connote a half-hearted attempt, such as when a person politely refuses an invitation? “Sounds great! I’ll try and see if I can make it.”

Most of us claim to be trying to do things all the time. We try to get to work on time. We try to be good spouses, loving parents, helpful members of our communities. When faced with failure, we often offer self-defenses that rely heavily on the supposition that we have, all evidence to the contrary, tried. Believe me, I tried. I tried everything I could think of. We spout popular motivation quotes that encourage trying as a form of dauntless perseverance: *If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.* We urge trying as a way of getting out of a rut, sampling new experiences—no commitment necessary. Just try the sushi. Why not try wearing a different jacket? Try a new sport?

The concept of trying is either a nod to an extreme and extended effort to something—usually impossible—or an absolute exercise in non-commitment. Sampling. Showing positive intentions without actually having to do anything. Master Yoda of Star Wars fame has, of course, the best line containing the word *try* ever uttered by a

puppet or computer generated image: “Do or do not. There is no try.”

You can see where a certain personality might react badly to Brown’s title—as he acknowledges early in the book when recounting the negative reaction he received from a group wanting “more certainty, perhaps fewer questions, in relation to their faith” (p. 11). Why do you have to *try* to believe? Do or do not. If you acknowledge that your belief comes down to a matter of trying, are you in fact saying one of the following: one, belief is probably impossible anyway; two, you have no intention of believing, but want to seem like you might; or three, believing is a novelty for you, something you’re going to kick around until you get tired of it.

Trying is a lacklustre concept when it comes to actions that are a mere matter of *doing*. If you’re trying to get out of bed on time and failing consistently, well, you aren’t trying very hard. But you can’t compel yourself in matters of the heart and belief is one of those intangibles. Like love. You can certainly behave in ways that are ‘loving’, but you absolutely cannot manufacture the feeling of love. Most of us probably worry about this more than we should.

The cry of the man in the Gospel of Mark, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (9:24) is one to which we can all relate. Sometimes a commitment to *trying* is the best we can muster—in our relationships, our work, our faith. Circumstances cause the ground to shift beneath our feet. Most of us will hit spiritual lows, or experience setbacks and tragedies that make us wonder what life is all about—and if our faith in God is pure foolishness. What we choose to do at that point—and Brown makes it very clear faith is an active choice—marks a clear fork in the road.

The quiet continuation of a lifelong inward struggle doesn’t tend to make the headlines. Human beings tend to be far more interested in dramatic deviations from the norm. No one pays you much attention when you stick with your job, remain married or continue to be a committed and involved member of a religious faith. But at a certain point—probably many points—each of us faces a basic choice: Do we invest in what we’ve invested in before, or do we dump it all in search of something better?

Brown’s good friend, former Hollywood



Reflections, Impressions & Experiences

Seventh-day Adventist Church pastor Ryan Bell, made headlines when he declared 2014 his “year without God,” and generated a great deal of discussion from those sympathetic and those hostile to his experiment. While *Why I Try to Believe* was partly prompted by Brown’s struggle to make sense of Bell’s experiment, it never appears to be trying to demonstrate that Bell—or any atheist—is wrong. Brown writes, “I am not setting out to critique or criticise my friend” (p. 5)—and, in fact, Bell read and responded to the manuscript at several points in its creation. Brown’s primary goal is to create what he calls a “personal apologetic” (p. 5) that “will be counted among the positive results of his [Bell’s] public investigation of the nature of believe and non-belief” (p. 5).

This is what the book does extremely well: In offering his own struggles—the inevitable losses that characterise mid-life (Brown is now 42)—including the suicide of a good friend, along with the ubiquitous search for meaning and a faith that is intellectually satisfying, Brown invites his readers to ponder their own reasons for trying to believe.

The example of John Woods, a member of the Victorian state parliament in the 1880s, offers a glimpse into how Brown sees himself, and of the kind of character he hopes to help his readers tease out of their own experiences. Woods mounted an argument in favour of using local stone for Parliament House and, having lost the argument, managed to get a block of sandstone erected as a symbol of his opposition. It stands in Melbourne today—and is Brown’s favourite spot to take visitors. He notes while some have “dismissed Woods’ monument as an act of petulance,” he sees it “as something more positive, an act of stubborn hope” (p. 23).

Hope forms the ideological core of this book. It’s no feel-good sloppy sentiment, either. There is clearly a serious and thoughtful person behind these pages—not one given to easy answers or platitudes. Hope is useless as a form of daydreaming or escapism, but it takes on real power as it “changes things and changes us” (p. 25) and can be “a reason in itself to try to believe” (p. 26). Part of this hope springs from a conviction that the answers do not lie within oneself. Brown ultimately concludes that he can’t make it on his own, that he can’t find enough within himself or learn quickly enough from his own mistakes. An

important part of making the choice to “try to believe” is the acknowledgement of needing a higher power—it “is about something, Someone and a story beyond me” (p. 105).

This stands in contrast to what Bell concluded after trying his year without God—which led to a decision for atheism. He writes, “Without dependency on a cosmic saviour who is coming to rescue us, we are free to recognise that we are the ones we’re waiting for. If we don’t make the world a fair and habitable place, no one else is going to do it for us. Life does not need a divine source in order to be meaningful. Anyone who has seen a breathtaking sunset or fallen in love with another human being knows that we make meaning from the experiences of our lives; we construct it the way we construct any social narrative” (“Why You Don’t Need God,” CNN, January 9, 2015).

Brown would likely agree with a majority of the ideas contained in this paragraph. A strong believer in social justice and in action as a crucial component of Christian faith, he seems likely to resonate with the idea that we can’t simply wait around for a “superman”-type character to make right all that is wrong. And of course we make meaning of our own experiences—that seems to be Brown’s point. For him, “belief is worth trying” (p. 6). He frames his own life within this context and considers “what is important and good, as well as choosing how to respond to the experiences life presents to each of us, such as love and grief, pain and wanting to make a difference, growing up and growing older” (p. 6).

Why I Try to Believe is an excellent book for a small group to read and discuss together. The reflection questions at the end provide a ready-made and valuable framework around which to structure conversation, helping people figure out how their own experiences have built or shaken their faith. For all of us, this is an experiment that is ongoing for as long as our lives last. Acknowledging that there are no easy answers, but that commitment to God through faith is worthwhile anyway, Brown challenges us in a quiet and deeply respectful way to “walk on” in faith. He makes it seem like a noble approach. The last line of the book reads, “As for me, I’m still trying to believe” (p. 115). **TEACH**