

# PLAIN TRUTH®

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

## The Overlooked and Ignored

By Greg Albrecht



**F**iorello LaGuardia was the mayor of New York City during dark, dismal and difficult times—he served for an unprecedented three terms from 1934 until 1945, during the Great Depression continuing through World War 2.

LaGuardia was respected and loved for mingling with the people he served, experiencing firsthand how they lived and the challenges they faced. One legendary story (which cannot be documented to be absolutely historically accurate) recalls Mayor LaGuardia showing up at night court one cold night in January 1935. An obscure law allowed the Mayor to sit as judge, so LaGuardia exercised that right, dismissed the night court judge and took the bench himself.

An old woman, dressed in raggedy and tattered clothing, was brought before the court, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She

told Mayor LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had left her, her daughter was sick and she, the old woman, had two grandchildren who were starving.

After hearing the woman say she had stolen the bread to feed her starving grandchildren, the shopkeeper, from whom the woman had stolen the loaf of bread, still refused to drop the charges. He said, "This woman needs to obey the law—she needs to learn her lesson."

LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said, "I've got to punish you. That's the law—ten dollars or ten days in jail." As he pronounced the sentence the mayor, in a Christ-like gesture of self-sacrificial love, was reaching into his pocket.

He took out ten dollars saying, "Here is the ten-dollar fine which I now remit: in addition, I am going to pass my hat around this

courtroom. I am fining everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a city where a person has to steal bread so her grandchildren can eat. Bailiff—collect the fines and give the total to the defendant."

According to the story, \$47.50 (equivalent to something like \$850 in buying power today) was turned over to a bewildered but enormously relieved senior citizen who had stolen a loaf

of bread to feed her starving grandchildren.

The store owner who took the woman to court contributed 50 cents, 70 others who had committed misdemeanors and traffic violations did the same, and they were joined by a number of New York City policemen who chipped in the rest—and then they all gave the mayor a standing ovation.

*I was hungry and you fed me,  
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,  
I was homeless and you gave me a room,  
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,  
I was sick and you stopped to visit,  
I was sick and you came to me.*

*Then those 'sheep' are going to say,  
'Master, what are you talking about?  
When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink?  
And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?'*

*Then the King will say, 'I'm telling*

*Continued on page 3*

inside

Question the Question p2

God is Love p5

To Seek and to Save that  
Which is Lost p6

The Prodigals p7

Quotes & Connections p8



## Question the Question

Someone recently asked me to help them find the true church. You've probably heard the wise proverb, "If you ask the wrong question, you'll probably wind up with the wrong answer." If you allow someone to set the agenda and ask all the questions, the answers you give will take you exactly where the person asking the questions wants you to go.

So, my initial response to the person who wanted to know where they could find the true church was to **question the question**—then I posed a question of my own!

My answer went something like this: "I assume you are looking for one 'true' legally-incorporated entity, one body of dogmas and doctrines, one physical address, one building or piece of real estate or one denomination which is 'true' and all other forms of Christianity are, by definition, 'false.' That's what you mean, I assume, by a 'true' church. Let me ask you a question: Who told you there is, or ever has been, such a thing as one true physically identifiable, legally-incorporated entity known as a church? Where did you get that idea?"

The world is filled with deceitful questions that can lead to answers that lead to erroneous and painful consequences. The cautionary and safe practice of **questioning the question** is not just necessary when discussing theology and religion—it is a firmly entrenched practice within science, as scientists ask themselves whether they are asking the right question or whether a wrong-headed question is leading

them down the garden path.

Scholars and researchers in all disciplines **question the question**. For lawyers, forensic investigators, police, parents, consumers, voters—**questioning the question** is necessary, isn't it?

In many cases, when someone is asking you questions, they resent you asking questions right back, because they don't want you to get off topic—that is, **they don't want**

**Where is the true church? If you mean, is there one and only one authentic geographically located spiritual destination—one and only one organized group with one and only one set of true dogmas and doctrines, you are on a fool's errand!**

**you off their topic**. They want to lead you down *their* primrose path, but when you take the initiative to ask questions of them you will put a serious dent in how far down that path they can take you.

Telemarketers are a perfect illustration. Telemarketers are schooled in the art of asking leading questions. The technique works. They want you to answer their questions and jump on board their train of thought because that will lead you to the destination they have in mind, which invariably will mean they will make money from the answers you give to their carefully planned questions.

Theological hucksters and con-artists sell esoteric truth they claim few people know about—the *one true church* is their appeal. They dangle the seductive fruit of knowing and benefitting from

something not available or known to others—so that you'll believe you are special and unique. If you fall for their sales pitch you may wind up bamboozled, hoodwinked and swindled.

In John 8:32, Jesus said, in reference to the relationship he invites us to embrace, "You will know the truth—[that is, "you will know me"] and **THE TRUTH** [the ultimate, eternal and forever truth who is one and the same as Jesus] will set you free."

The Truth, who is Jesus, will set us free. And what, pray tell, will lies do for us?

**QUESTION THE QUESTION:** question the assumptions and presuppositions behind the question. If the true church concerns Truth personified,

Jesus, the head of a universal church that has no boundaries or walls, then the answer is obvious.

**QUESTION THE QUESTION:** The question is neither WHERE the true church is physically located nor WHAT specifically are its physical characteristics.

**The question is this: WHO is the true church?**

*Jesus is the way and the truth and the life* (John 14:6) and he will lead you and me to freedom—freedom, as Paul advises in Galatians 5:1, that will never again allow us to be burdened with a yoke of spiritual slavery. □

—Greg Albrecht

Join us for the complete message of "Question the Question" at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of September 6, 2020.



Continued from page 1

*you the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.*”—Matthew 25:35-40, The Message Bible, my emphasis

### **Thieves and Shepherds**

Shepherds were the first audience to whom God chose to announce the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:8-15). When Jesus was born, shepherds were people of extremely low social standing—they were among the lowest of the low. They were *overlooked and ignored*. Shepherds were often in that profession because they had no other options—we can safely assume most of them weren't doing what they were doing because they just loved cute little adorable sheep.

Their testimony, by virtue of the kind of work they performed, was not admissible in court—they were thought of as untrustworthy—assumed to be unworthy in virtually every way. There was some truth to that stereotype. Many shepherds were petty thieves—itinerant, moving with their flocks and thus were regarded, by polite society, as crooks, swindlers and thieves.

The fact that a group of blue-collar working shepherds, who were barely making ends meet, were the first to receive the breaking news about the birth of Jesus offers a huge insight into the nature of the kingdom of God. From the very beginning Jesus revealed the love of God to everyone, without excluding the *overlooked and ignored*.

**Just as lowly shepherds received front row seats to the miraculous, angelic, heavenly choral performance (Luke 2:13-14) the lost, the least and the last—the overlooked and the ignored—the alienated and left behind—the poor and the impoverished—were continually attended to by Jesus.**

As Christ-followers, we say loudly and clearly: any and all who sell

out the poor, who step on the impoverished, who use the less advantaged to their own advantage and who take from the poor to augment their own wealth completely miss the entire message of the gospel. By wittingly or unwittingly *overlooking and ignoring*, they trample on the heart of God.

### **The Economy of Grace**

Jesus did not believe the poor were more worthy of his time than the rich—all were equal and just as worthy of his time. Still, probably because of the vast numbers of the poor in his day, in contrast to the “well off,” we find many examples of Jesus' care for those in need.

Some would say that Christians should not besmirch the gospel by talking about economic issues—some would say that the spiritual things of life should never be corrupted by talk of money or riches or poverty.

But Jesus begs to differ—16 of the 38 parables Jesus gave were all about money and possessions. Approximately one-tenth of all the verses in the Gospels deal with the subject of money. The Bible at large gives us more than 500 individual verses about prayer, and just less than 500 on the topic of faith—but more than 2,000 verses that discuss money and possessions.

The gospel of the kingdom of God is about an entirely different way of getting and giving. The economy of the kingdom of God is grace—on the other hand *the history of humanity is a long history of various economic theories having to do with either one getting at the very least what one earns or one receiving far more than one deserves.*

The economy of grace says that what we do in our lives—in terms of what we accumulate, possess or gain—is of little interest to God.

What God is most interested in is our debt—**God's grace says that God cooks the books of all indebtedness.** He wipes away any

*There's nothing political at all when speaking of the message of Jesus and the economy of grace and how it reaches out and offers hope to the disenfranchised, the oppressed and the alienated.*



and all debt. God does not judge anyone of being worthy or unworthy of grace—grace is given to all, without discrimination. God does not *overlook or ignore* anyone!

Our Western world is awash with the definition of success as excess. Those who amass incredible wealth are seen to be visionaries, servants, pioneers and leaders of our world. Perhaps some rich individuals are visionaries, servants, pioneers and leaders, but in his economy of grace all are seen to be equal before God.

By the values and perspectives of success and excess, Jesus was an absolute failure. He never owned a house. He never received an advanced degree. He wasn't wealthy in worldly goods, but instead, as we read in 2 Corinthians 8:9—*though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

In God's economy of grace, no one is more righteous or moral because they have more belongings, property and worldly wealth. God does not show favoritism to those whose check books have more money in them than those who are less prosperous, or those who have no checkbooks at all.

There's nothing political at all when speaking of the message of

Jesus and the economy of grace and how it reaches out and offers hope to the disenfranchised, the oppressed and the alienated.

### **Equality in the Kingdom of Grace**

God loves each of us just the same. That's part of what it means to live in an economy of grace.

In Luke 12:20, at the conclusion of what is called the parable of the rich fool whose only concerns were providing for himself, Jesus says, *"God said to him, You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"*

In Mark 8:36 Jesus asks, *"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?"*

Recent news reports have detailed the enormous efforts undertaken by the uber-rich to prepare for an apocalyptic doomsday. Articles speak of the super-rich acquiring "apocalypse insurance" in the forms of private jets and farms with air strips in New Zealand—which is thought to be the ultimate place of security and safety to which the rich and privileged might escape.

They are equipping underground shelters and bunkers with expensive air filtration systems in case of lingering radioactivity after a nuclear bomb. They are buying guns and freeze-dried foods, all to give them a sense of security and protection from a future disaster.

But when Jesus came to this polluted and sin infested world he did not arrive in a safe and secure place deemed to enable him to survive. He arrived as a vulnerable baby in occupied territory—born to working-class parents.

He befriended the lost, the least and the left behind—people who lived in desperate times and places—the poor, the sick and the diseased—hated tax collectors and despised prostitutes.

During these times when we are rightly concerned about "social distancing" and being "safe at home" we are amazed to read how Jesus made himself vulnerable.

Today we might think of his behavior as reckless, for Jesus touched lepers and washed the feet of his disciples without protecting his hands by wearing gloves.

It goes without saying that Jesus did not place a high priority on his own security and safety—physical survival was obviously not his ultimate goal.

### **Overlooked and Ignored—Those Living in Desperation**

Who are the people today to whom the angels might appear, as they did to the despised shepherds who were regarded as deplorable, untrustworthy and unreliable—who are the people today to whom the angels might appear, assuring

*"What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?"*

them that the Savior has come, bringing great joy?

**Aliens and refugees**—people who have been forced from their countries and from their families and from their cultures, through war, famine, or disease. Many are undocumented, with no legal standing and thus they are forced to live in the shadows.

**The sick, malnourished and diseased**—the ministry of Jesus makes it obvious that Jesus is our healer, our beloved Physician—who heals us most of all spiritually, even while standing, sitting and being with us in our physical battles and trials.

**The very young**—it is no coincidence that God, when he came to be one of us, and to experience all that we experience, started life just as we do—helpless and vulnerable. Jesus, the Son of God, God in the flesh, was targeted immediately for extermination when Herod heard that a new born king had arrived in Bethlehem, and out of his rage and insecurity decided to slaughter the innocent.

**The very old**—the way in which the aged and infirm are ignored, shunted aside, and mistreated in so many nations today is a crime against all humanity.

Jesus came and he still comes for **the poor, homeless, victims of war, accidents and crime and the slaves and sexually trafficked.**

### **Don't Forget Those Overlooked, Ignored and Oppressed by Religion**

*We must also always remember the religiously oppressed—those oppressed in the name of God.*

Before Jesus and his disciples visited the temple and observed a widow who gave an incredible offering, in terms of her abilities and means to give, Jesus warned his disciples about religious authorities who, as he said in Mark 12:40, *"devour widow's houses."*

He was speaking of highly respected, well-thought-of and pious men who may have appointed themselves as executors to the estates of widows who had just lost their husbands.

Were these religious authorities appropriating for themselves as much of the widow's assets as possible? I am not sure about these particular religious authorities—but I am absolutely certain that Christless religion has impoverished, both physically and certainly spiritually, hundreds of millions of people. These are predators who have fleeced the flock of God's pasture rather than serving and feeding it!

*Lord Jesus,*

*Live in us in such a way that you focus our attention and turn our hearts on those in great need. In this fragile world so vulnerable and susceptible to epidemics and pandemics, may we remember the oppressed and the abused—the impoverished and the diseased—the homeless, orphans and all those who feel alone in this world. May you in your gracious way make all who are overlooked and ignored know that you are with them, now and forevermore. □*





GOD  
is

By Jim Fowler

**T**he Apostle John twice writes, “God is Love” (1 John 4:8,16). *God is pure and absolute Love.* The Greek word for God’s love is *agape*, as contrasted with other Greek words for love: *eros*, from which we get “erotic love;” *phileo* from which we get Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love; and *storge*, the natural familial love of father, mother and child.

God’s Love is unselfish and unconditional. God seeks the highest good of the other without any thought of reciprocation. God’s love is always outgoing, for He has no needs that require the affection of anyone other than himself. He is complete in Himself.

God is Love, and what God is only God is. It is not that God has a quantity of the affection of love that he desires to offer and dispense to others. God IS Love, and he is desirous of expressing his divine character of Love in and through human behavior. “The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Romans 5:5). Love is the first feature of the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22).

We are unable to produce *agape* Love by human effort, for it is God’s character alone, and only he can express his character of love when he is present and indwelling us. “God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16).

Because God’s Love always seeks the highest good of the other, God created mankind and sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to redeem fallen mankind in order to draw human beings into participation in the perfect loving community of his Trinity.

**The Son of God, JESUS, is the revelation of God’s Love, the life-giving Spirit who brings God’s essential Loving character to reside in receptive hearts.**

### **Unconditional Love**

Natural human life is linear and conditional—if we don’t eat, sleep, or drink water the natural consequence will be death.

Unconditional love, however, is outside of the linear and conditional cause and effects of natural existence. Unconditional love goes against the grain of every natural thought and feeling of our humanity. It is not natural.

**It will be impossible to love unconditionally:**

- if you are resentful and still demanding an apology before reconciliation can occur.
- if you feel you have been wronged by another person and have failed to forgive them.
- if you feel like your actions or motives have been misunderstood, and you have not “ironed out” those feelings in conversation with the other person.
- if you still want to state or defend your position from a previous hurt, and haven’t laid it aside.
- if you are wallowing in the “poor me; I am wounded” victim mentality, and don’t want to climb out of that hole.
- if you are demanding that someone change their behavior before you feel

comfortable extending love to them.

**Unconditional love is reaching out to seek the highest good of another with:**

- no strings attached.
- no expectation that it will be easy or even lead to reconciliation.
- no expectation that the other person will admit their fault, or apologize, or even acknowledge what happened.
- no expectation of reciprocal extension of concern.
- no expectation that they will change their ways, even if they have committed a horrific crime against you.

Unconditional love is a choice—but it is more than a choice to act in a defined manner. Unconditional love is a choice to be the derived expressive agency of the divine, *agape Love of God in JESUS Christ*, regardless of circumstances or disappointments.

“The love of God has been poured out within in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us...” (Romans 5:5). □

*Jim Fowler is the author of several theological works, including his classic, The Issue Is Jesus.*



*"to seek and to save  
that which is lost."*

*By Brad Jersak*

*The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which is lost (Luke 19:10).*

**T**here it is. The gospel of grace distilled perfectly through Jesus' own words. That statement encapsulates the reason for Christ's Incarnation, his earthly ministry and his final Passion, in which he pursues humanity even into death. Even *hades* could not separate us from the relentless love of the "hound of heaven."

Christ describes his "seeking and saving" mission in the three great parables of Luke 15: the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son. In each of the parables, the obvious punchline is how heaven rejoices when what was lost has been found. This was our Lord's corrective to the Pharisees and rabbis who were indignant that "*this man welcomes sinners and eats with them*" (verse 2). Through the father's speech to the older brother, Jesus was urging his naysayers to celebrate with him the return of "lost causes" to the kingdom table.

### **Why Didn't the Father Seek His Son?**

But one thing has niggled at me for years. The shepherd leaves his flock to seek the lost sheep "until he finds it." And the woman sweeps the house repeatedly for the coin "until she finds it."

Then why didn't Christ depict the father leaving home to scour the roads and fields, tirelessly searching

for his son "until he found him"? Why does he wait at home for his return? Where is the seeking and finding in that parable?

We could answer that question in several ways. First, as in real life, the father must grant his son the dignity of bottoming out, coming to his senses and choosing to return home freely. That's important.

We could add that the father didn't simply wait at the threshold but ran to the son "*while he was still a long way off*" (verse 20). That's also true. And in any case, we should accept Jesus' own commentary, that "*...this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found*" (verse 32).

Still, it's not quite the same. Unlike the first two parables, when it comes to the prodigal son, we don't have a corresponding sense of the father's compulsion to leave the house to go out and seek his lost son.

### **(Because He Did)**

Except we do. And this is the ingenious twist in which Christ takes the third parable up a notch and turns the tables on his opponents, as he so often does. The father *does* leave the house to seek and save the lost. When? In verse 28, "*The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.*"

Yes, the younger son had truly been lost but now he had come home. But if *what is lost is identified by*

*the seeking*—the sheep, the coin and the son—who does the father *go out to seek and save* in the third parable?

Who is more lost than the older brother? And with this twist, Christ indicts his self-righteous despisers, leaving them with the open question: will you too be found? Like *both* sons, they had reduced themselves to spiritual slavery (verses 15, 29) but now, Christ welcomes them to full inclusion at his table.

We also know how religious fundamentalists have historically been as exclusive as the Pharisees. But it is remarkable to me how today's most popular proponents of inclusion can likewise so quickly appoint themselves as the new gatekeepers. How brazenly they lock the doors to the Father's house once they have found their way to the table. I sometimes wonder if, like the older brother, they ever truly entered the house.

But there's the beam in my own eye, right? I wonder, whose inclusion have I failed to celebrate? Where have I turned from the fullness of Christ's generous welcome? Who have I neglected to compel to the banquet? The older brother, perhaps? And how does my reluctance signal my own lostness? Gulp. *Lord, in your mercy, find this lost son.* □

Brad Jersak explores this theme further in his book, *A More Christlike Way* (CWR press, 2019).





## The Prodigals

*Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).*

I'm the mother of a prodigal son, no relation to that single dad in Palestine who had two boys, Malachi and Bob. Bob, baby of the family, twists Dad's arm, slips on a backpack of cash, goes to a *faraway country*, blows the money and ends up on a pig farm. Malachi stays put, building up a herd of heifers and fatted calves. Bob returns with remorse and a big appetite. Dad kills a fatted calf, Malachi kills Bob and goes off to live in the land of Nod. Well, not exactly, but it could have turned out that way.

Carlton was a prodigal just out of high school. Refusing to live by house rules, he ran away, slept in his car and worked at Little Caesar's on the far side of town. Attending a social gathering three days later, a woman asked me about him.

Before I could finish a sentence, I started bawling so hard I had to excuse myself to the restroom. The next night I drove to Little Caesars, stepped in the side door and asked him to come home. He returned—no running to meet him, no celebration, no fatted calf. Some parables just don't work for mothers.

Within a year he had moved out to live with friends. Close by, albeit in a *faraway country*. I needed to get hold of him one afternoon. No answer. Finally, hours later after interrogating friends, I learned he was in the ICU.

Rushing to the hospital and down the hall, I told the woman at the counter I was looking for my son Carlton, choking tears as I asked how he was. She glared at me. I'll never forget her look of disgust. Her only words, "He was drunk." I found him lying on his back, strapped to the bed, tears running down both sides of his head, strapped down because he had tried to run away. I told him I loved him. He would be okay.

On another occasion, his girlfriend called the police, reporting that he was drinking and had been shoving and threatening her.

(Fortunately, she wasn't injured.) Police arrived and took him to jail. I learned of it from her the next morning. I was in my seminary office when she called. I had a class to teach in ten minutes.

We always started with prayer. I asked if there were any prayer requests. Hardly had I gotten the words out when the tears started falling. There I was, the teacher, weeping in front of twenty students. I pulled myself together enough to briefly tell them my son was in jail.

Students prayed for me that morning—for Carlton as well. The class would never be the same.

Two years ago, a sober Carlton walked his beautiful daughter down a garden pathway to be married to a fine young gentleman. A crisis

**I'm crowned with tender mercies—joyful times together with a prodigal son and a prodigal grand-dog.**

in his life had motivated him to give up drinking and smoking cold-turkey. He regularly goes to his nearby AA.

Prior to that he had rescued a prodigal dog. She had run away and was in the middle of a five-lane heavily trafficked street in Grand Rapids. After getting her in his car and bringing her home, he searched online five days before finding the owner—five days of such tight bonding that he was choked up as he left to take her back.

When he arrived, she wouldn't get out of his car. The woman was furious. "*That dog,*" she muttered. "*That dog* keeps digging holes under the fence and running away."

Yes, she was a *bad doggie!* So bad, the woman ended up giving her to Carlton—since named Tank and since spoiled with love and tender mercies. And I'm crowned with tender mercies—joyful times together with a prodigal son and prodigal grand-dog. □

—Ruth Tucker



## Quotes & Connections



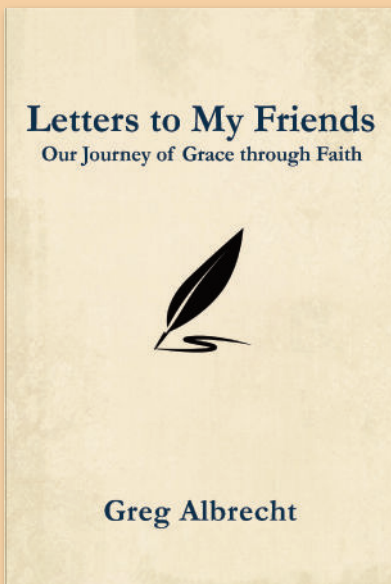
"To be really at home is to be really at peace, and there can be no real peace for any of us until there is some measure of real peace for all of us. When we close our eyes to the deep needs of other people, whether they live on the streets or under our own roof—and when we close our eyes to our own deep need to reach out to them—we can never be fully at home anywhere." —Frederick Buechner

"A proud man is always looking down on things and people, and, of course, as long as you're looking down, you can't see something that's above you."—C.S. Lewis

"I was taught when I was young that if people would only love one another, all would be well with the world. This seemed simple and very nice; but I found when I tried to put it in practice not only that other people were seldom lovable, but that I was not very lovable myself."—George Bernard Shaw

"Sin is not a crime that can be acquitted. It is a sickness that requires our being made well again... God does not need a sacrifice to forgive us or love us. Rather, we need the sacrifice God provides to be made clean inside... It is love that led Jesus to the cross. Love is the focus, not death." —Derek Flood, *Healing the Gospel*

## Coming Soon from CWRpress!



Remember when you saved special letters and tied them, like treasures, with a ribbon in a big bundle?

Is letter writing a lost art? After all, when emailing or texting one doesn't need to bother with spelling and grammar.

Since the last years of the 20th century, Greg Albrecht has been sending a monthly "snail mail" letter to thousands of mail boxes (and more recently posting them electronically as well). He has reviewed hundreds of the inspirational and uplifting letters he composed over the past few decades and selected and organized some of them, calling the collection *Letters to My Friends*.

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