

# A Small Tribute

By Jamie Buckingham

I can take you to the exact place, and re-enact the exact scene where, 19 years ago this month, the lights flickered back on in my life.

Twenty of us, from all over the nation, arrived that Sunday afternoon at the huge stone mansion called Wainwright House, located above New York City on Long Island Sound. We were guests of *Guideposts* magazine and had come to attend a week-long writer's workshop.

Norman Vincent Peale, the publisher, and Catherine Marshall, wife of *Guideposts* editor Leonard LeSourd, had planned the workshop. They had asked writers—and writers-to-be—to submit a manuscript. It would be judged and 20 would be selected to attend an all-expense-paid week studying under the magazine's editors.

When I spotted the notice in the magazine it was like Moses seeing the burning bush. Two years before I would have passed it by. But during the last 24 months I had been fired from two churches as pastor. The first time was in South Carolina. I had escaped, just one step in front of the T&F Committee (tar and feathers gang), to start over in Florida in another church. I had lasted 15 months and was fired again.

The second firing was vicious. Deeply wounded, I had since huddled alone in our rented house with my equally wounded wife and five small children. In shame, I realized my ministerial life was finished. Like Moses, I was doomed to wander in the wilderness.

But what does a man do when all he can do, all he wants to do, is denied him? What does he do when deep within there remains a call to tell people about God—but now he is declared disqualified?

I did the only thing there was to do: I walked through whatever door opened. In this case I submitted a manuscript to *Guideposts*. If no one would listen to my sermons, maybe they would read my stories.

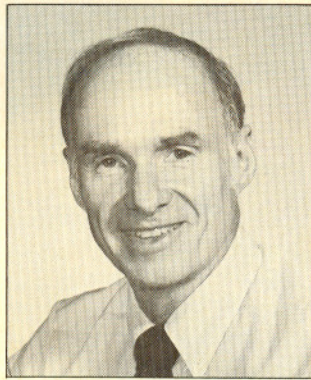
In late September 1967 I received a telegram from LeSourd. (I still have it, framed, on the wall of my writing studio.) Out of many entrants I, along with 19 others, had been chosen.

So I arrived that Sunday afternoon at Wainwright House to see a burning bush. But I had no hope. My bushes had burned before—and were always consumed.

That night, after dinner, we gathered in the huge walnut-paneled great room of the old stone mansion. A fire was crackling in the fireplace. Outside the autumn leaves brushed against the leaded-glass windows. We sat in easy chairs around the room. Twenty of us. All strangers.

The editors were introduced: John and Elizabeth Sherrill, who had written books I had never read; Catherine Marshall and her husband, Leonard LeSourd. Arthur Gordon, who later replaced LeSourd as editor, was there. So was Van Varner, who succeeded him. But dominating the room was Peale.

I was impressed, but struggling with my feelings. For years



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I had warned others about his writings. I thought of all the times I had stood in my pulpits (before I was fired) and made fun of his positive thinking. Now here I was—his guest.

Jovial, relaxed, he started by saying, "Since I'm paying the bill, I should find out who you are."

We started around the room, introducing ourselves. Everyone present was a professional: Jim Hefley, who had written more books than a man could ever read; Dick Schneider, later to become senior editor at the magazine; Irene Harrell, a top devotional writer. All the others were magazine editors, book authors and newspaper writers.

I had never written anything but sermons.

As they listed their credits I panicked. What could I say? Surely not the truth. It was almost my turn. I whispered to my neighbor, "You go next. I've got to use the bathroom."

I slipped out of the room, too embarrassed to introduce myself as the failure I was.

I waited behind a velvet curtain near the door until Peale was talking again. Only then did I slip back to my chair. I had never felt as lonely. I wanted to go home, but home was even lonelier.

"No one is here by accident," Peale was saying. "You have each been chosen."

Then, and to this day I believe he looked straight at me, he said, "Not only did our editors choose you. God has chosen you. He has called you to something greater than you've ever dreamed. Tonight is the beginning of something bigger than any of us can imagine."

He said more, but that was all I needed. The lights had flickered back on in my life.

A man can live without faith and love. But no man can survive without hope. That night Norman Vincent Peale gave me hope. My bush was burning.

The next afternoon John Sherrill pulled me aside. A New Jersey publisher, he said, was looking for someone who could write a book. He recommended me. I walked through that door, too, simply because it opened. That was the first of 37 books—and the bush burns brightly, still not consumed.

It was Michelangelo who said of sculpture that "the finished form exists within the uncut stone; the sculptor need only release it." That night, 19 years ago, Norman Vincent Peale picked up mallet and chisel. Looking across the room at a flawed stone, he struck a gentle blow of hope.

Now, I hear, the old sculptor is once again under attack by men such as I used to be. This time he's accused of being part of a worldwide conspiracy to seduce Christianity. I need not defend him. God, and history, will do that. I just wanted to write this small tribute and say, "For looking beyond the flawed surface to the finished form within, thank you." ■