

Gundar Falls

By David Chandler



[This piece was originally given as a chapel talk at Webb School after a student suffered a traumatic eye injury. Writing it and delivering it was, for me, a reflection on the meaning of prayer. We are told to pray. Does prayer affect sincerely desired human outcomes? Is prayer about desired outcomes, or is it about changing the state of the supplicant?]

Mark's eye injury on the freshman retreat was traumatic for everyone involved. "Life as usual" came to a screeching halt and we were all confronted by the reality that life is played for keeps. On the trip down the mountain to the hospital Mark said, "It's funny how you can get tired of people saying, 'Don't worry, everything is going to be alright.'" Mark was realistic enough to know that he might very well never regain his vision in his injured eye. He was braced for the worst. What he had a harder time coping with was the possibility that his eye might be saved. That possibility meant uncertainty, and uncertainty is hard to take. Yet hope, with all the uncertainty it

holds, is an important ingredient in recovery. I encouraged Mark to hold onto some hope of recovery; that although nothing was assured, he should not write it off.

I would like to share with you something that occurred in 1975 while I was teaching in India at Kodaikanal School. Kodai is an international school that was founded in the early 1900's to educate missionaries' kids. It is situated in the mountains of South India with dramatic views of the plains 6000 feet below. One of the big things at Kodai is hiking. During a certain season you could earn hiking points. The idea was to see how many hiking points you could accumulate in 13 weekends. I hiked about 250 miles in that time and quite a few students doubled or tripled my score. On one weekend several students started out at midnight, hiked down to the plains and back before breakfast, and then spent the rest of the day hiking up Mt. Perumal and back. Needless to say, we had some very experienced hikers.

Near the end of our stay at Kodai, four students went for a relatively leisurely hike out to Gundar falls. They were Hashim Fatehally, son of our art teacher, Ulmar Grafe, son of a German Lutheran theologian, Rollie Wiebe, an American and second generation "Kodai Kid", and Harold Menzi, son of a Swiss biologist. They were four of our most avid hikers. Gundar Valley is a beautiful secluded valley in the back country behind Kodaikanal. The stream that runs through the valley comes to a sheer cliff where it drops about 400 feet, at the first level, and then drops off a couple more times to the plains. There is no way to get to the base of the falls either from above or below without climbing ropes. A couple of days prior to the hike there had been a storm, so the stream was higher than usual. The rocks crossing the stream near the top of the falls were slippery and swimming there was hazardous. There was another storm predicted for that day, but it did not come.

When the four boys arrived at the falls Harold and Rollie decided to take a side trip leaving Hashim and Ulmar to go skinny dipping in the stream. When they returned they found no sign of the other two boys except their clothes by the stream. Rollie then looked over the edge of the falls and saw Hashim's body flat on a rock 400 feet below. He had an immediate sense of revulsion and started running back to the school. He was so choked up he couldn't speak until he got all the way back.

There was no hope for Hashim surviving the fall. The question was where was Ulmar? One search party left immediately and another waited to gather together climbing ropes and other equipment. I was running a bad fever at the time, so I

stayed at the school. Both groups returned to the school late that night empty handed. They had arrived after dark and could not see to attempt the risky climb down the ropes. At first there was some hope that Ulmar had not gone over the falls, but after the return of the search parties that hope had been virtually eliminated. The rescue teams planned to return in the morning to recover Hashim's body with the expectation of finding Ulmar's body either on the same ledge or further down the falls.

The students at the school, meanwhile, were not told what was known except that Ulmar and Hashim had not returned. They generally felt we were making too much of a fuss over it because they knew these two were thoroughly competent at taking care of themselves. Being stranded overnight was not a real concern to them.

The next morning was Sunday. It was a season of the year when quite a few of the missionary parents were visiting Kodai on their vacations to get out of the heat of the plains. The morning service was restructured to consist of nothing but prayer and scripture readings with a large number of visiting missionaries participating. Since Hashim and his family were Moslems, the scripture readings were confined to the Old Testament, which is accepted by both faiths. When the service started I couldn't believe my ears. The scripture readings went like this:

...thou has delivered my soul from death, yea, my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of life. (Ps. 56:13)

...for thou hast delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling;... (Ps. 116:8)

...Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your habitation, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For he will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your feet against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot. Because he cleaves to me in love I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him, and show him my salvation. (Ps. 91:9-16)

And so it went, on and on. With one boy known dead and the other presumed dead they proceeded to find practically every passage in the Old Testament that promised

protection and deliverance in general and deliverance from falling and rocks in particular! They kept asking in their prayers for the safe return of both boys.

I was appalled. I could see praying for something that was possible. But to lay one's faith on the line for the impossible, to parade glib promises of God's protection and deliverance before the congregation and the families when one of the boys was already known to be dead, and to ask others to lay their faith on the line under those circumstances seemed calloused and foolhardy in the extreme. How would these same missionaries pick up the pieces of the shattered faith that was sure to follow? The service was as traumatic for me as any of the other events of the day. Anju Fatehally, Hashim's mother, was beside herself with grief. If Ulmar were rescued was that supposed to prove Ulmar's faith was superior to Hashim's? It was going to take a long time for me to sort out my feelings and my beliefs. I wanted to put all my faith in the power of God, to bring the dead back to life if need be, but there was no way I could really let myself believe it would happen. Not all stories have happy endings.

As we walked out of the church everyone was standing around talking quietly. My mind was racing. How could those people parade promises of protection in these circumstances? And yet, there they were in the Bible. What could those promises mean if they were to be hidden away. At that moment one of the school vans raced into the driveway with Nora Mitchel leaning out the window waving her arms shouting, "They're both alive!" I was in shock. Anju Fatehally, who had gone back to her apartment moments before, fainted when she heard the news. Not only were both boys alive, they both walked out without broken bones and no injuries worse than sprained ankles and exposure to the cold.

What apparently happened was both boys decided to try to climb down the waterfall. They made it down about half way to the ledge when a rock broke loose and they fell about 170 feet. They were sure they would be killed at that point. They hit several times on the way down, which slowed their fall somewhat, and they landed in a pool of water one foot deep filled with rocks. Both students missed all the rocks in the pool. That pool would not have been there had the recent storm not swelled the stream. If the currently predicted storm had come, however, they would not have stopped at that ledge. They would probably have been swept on down to the next level. Hashim climbed out on a rock where he could be seen to try to attract attention. When Rollie looked over the edge Hashim waved, but by that time Rollie had already pulled back and started running to the school. Hashim and Ulmar had faced the prospect of certain death moments before. Now they faced sitting there in

the cold for the next 24 hours with no more than one pair of underwear between them as their only protection from the elements.

What is the role of faith and prayer in the face of "certain knowledge" that the prayer cannot be answered? How can we bring ourselves to ask for that which we "know" will be denied? The scripture says "Ye have not because ye ask not." On the other hand what do we do with faith that has been put on the line to no avail? Not all prayers are answered with miracles. But what good is a faith that cannot be put on the line? The scriptures repeatedly command us to ask. In asking we risk disappointment. We go beyond ourselves. We suspend rational judgement and put our reliance in a God whose very existence we may sometimes even doubt.

Mark has a chance of recovery for his injured eye, but it is far from certain. If he regains his sight few will consider it a miracle, although most would call him lucky and some would describe it as a "miracle" of modern science. I'm not big on miracles. Still, are you willing to ask God directly for something you are aching for inside; that Mark's sight be restored? Asking is such a little thing. Yet the risk involved in asking can make it awfully difficult to ask without hedging. I would like to take this risk with you now. If you are willing, please pray along with me.

Prayer: Father, you have healed the blind and you have the power to heal Mark. You have said, "Ask and it shall be given." I ask now that Mark's injury be healed and his sight restored. Help our unbelief. Amen.

Postscript: Mark lost the sight in his injured eye.