

Hometown News: Newsprint Jesus (part 2)

by Matt Lubich

Radio Waves to Heaven

Faith runs like a deep river through small towns and their souls, with all the individual dark eddies of sin and pools of salvation. About the best religion story I've ever heard doesn't even have to do with a church. It didn't take place in a pew, or come from a sanctuary. There is no stained glass involved. It happened in a farm field.

Don owns the local radio station and farms a small amount of land north of Johnstown. The story goes that years ago he was out working his land when a voice came to him. He needed to go into town, the voice said. He needed to go to the home of a local couple and talk to them about their marriage.

Now, living in a small town, Don knew of the couple, but little about their lives. Yet, something told him to stop work and drive into town.

As he was pulling up, the man was just leaving the house. His marriage was troubled. He and his wife had just had a terrible fight and he had stormed out the door, shouting that he never intended to return. As he was coming down the walk, Don was coming up.

"God sent me to come talk to you about your marriage," the story goes that Don said. The man, dumbfounded, sure this was a sign of some sort of divine intervention, calmed down and went inside with Don to talk with his wife.

Don's radio station has even gone through a salvation of sorts. When he started it in the mid-1990s in a news talk format, the burgeoning "Patriot Radio" genre was just getting its budding shoots of a start. The station wasn't and hasn't ever really been "local." Broadcasting by satellite, it reached and still reaches listeners scattered across the country. Several of his on-air hosts quickly fell into line with the Posse Comitatus, individual landowner rights, distrustful of government, conspiracy theory crowd.

Then, the Oklahoma City bombing happened, and suddenly folks weren't so willing to be accepting of divergent political viewpoints. The station, broadcasting from this small town in northern Colorado, became one of the examples of the "dangerous movement" that the state and national media began pointing to and at. Editors from the Denver dailies would send reporters to Johnstown, where they'd find Don's radio station on one block, and my hippie weekly newspaper down the street, and they'd call me for an interview.

Don was a good friend, I would tell them. He was always one of the first people buying a copy of my paper at the local hardware store when it came out on Thursday mornings, I'd say, and yes, I listened to the station on occasion. While I probably disagreed with 90 percent of what I heard, I'd tell the reporters, I still thought he was doing important work getting that perspective out to the listening public.

And then, on a cold November night in 1997, the beautiful two-story brick building at the main intersection in Johnstown, that Don owned and ran the station out of, caught fire. It burned through the night and to the ground. The story naturally caught the national media's attention, even meriting a report and photo in the *New York Times*. Rumors about what had caused the blaze swirled like ashes on the wind. The official determination, eventually, was that a man and wife who were on-air hosts, and who were living in the back of

the station, had left a hot plate on and then gone out for the evening. To this day, however, some still doubt that.

But the fire was a cleansing of sorts for the station. Shortly after relocating to the old bank building across the street from the paper, and getting back on the air, Don began to shed himself of several of the more strident personalities he broadcast. Today, the station still proudly remains part of the patriot movement (“Truth, News, Health,” it boldly claims on the sign on their door), but has mainstreamed itself, if that's possible. And Don, always devout, has continued broadcasting even more religious-toned offerings, including a daily program hosted by him. I love to listen to his show. Not so much for what Don is saying, but the soft rhythmic way in which he discusses this part of the Scripture, or that part of his faith. His voice soothes me, and I usually end up learning something as well.

“Unless God builds the house, those who labor build it in vain”

Psalm 127

If Don's story was one of faith carrying someone through his trials, the story of Randy Slafter is another. It was faith that brought him and his family to Johnstown 15 years ago. The wings of faith protected him from the dark angels of grief and tragedy in times so black that memory cannot even see them now. And it is with faith that he is now stepping into the next stage of his life.

A smiling modern-day Job, Slafter said he first realized his calling when, as a college student at the University of Colorado in Boulder, he preached for the first time in a small church and something resonated within his heart. He decided to go to Multnomah Bible College in Portland, Oregon, to study for the ministry. It was there one day he saw Sandie Reger, a beautiful co-ed from Southern

California, with an inner light and spirit that shone like sunlight off her blond hair.

The two eventually began to date. Nine months later, they were engaged. On May 19, 1979, they were wed.

The young couple and their three kids moved to Johnstown when Randy was called to the new young church there. As he set about helping it to grow, growth of another kind came into the couple's lives. Johnstown and Milliken, long steady in population, were swept up in the development "Californication" of the northern Colorado Front Range. Sandie had sold real estate part-time in the small town in Nebraska where they had come from, and began steadily to build a real estate business here.

Eventually, facing burnout as a pastor, Randy chose to step down from the pulpit and joined his wife in the real estate office. Together they became "The Slafter Team." For a period of time, they were *the* real estate agents in Johnstown and Milliken. But if business success had followed the Slafters to Johnstown, more malignant forces did as well. Shortly after coming to the communities, Sandie, then 39, was diagnosed with breast cancer. Following treatment, however, it appeared as if the disease has been stopped. For the next 10 years, she regularly got a clean bill of health at her six-month check-ups. The kids continued to grow, the business flourished, and life was good.

Then, seven months after her last check-up, Sandie went to the doctor. "The cancer had come back with a rampage," Randy said.

Taking over more and more of the responsibility of running the business, Randy tried to keep things going while Sandie battled the cancer. One of their sons came to work with him. Randy said the last year of Sandie's life was the biggest ever for the business, but always, Sandie's illness hung over everything.

May 4, 2004, although the couple had done everything they could, including seeking alternative treatment in Mexico, Sandie died. Summer turned to fall, then to winter, as Randy tried to get the business back on track -- now without Sandie by his side. But the real estate market had been flooded with other agencies and agents attracted by the growth. Things just weren't the same. Bit by bit, Randy saw the business beginning to slip as he continued to grieve. We kept running his weekly ads, but payments became fewer and farther between. We tried to let the amount due ride, and even discussed a couple times just writing it off, but as a small business ourselves, we couldn't figure out how we could absorb the loss of revenue. Finally, the business went under. Randy, to his credit and our gratitude, came into the office and settled his bill in full -- on the way to file for bankruptcy, I believe.

Then, in April of 2006, we heard that Randy had been badly hurt in a motorcycle crash the night before. He said he doesn't remember deciding to go for a ride. The garage door at his house was left open, something he never did. His dog, which he always put in before he left, he said, was still outside.

"There was still food warm on the stove, so I must have intended to be right back," he said.

The Weld County Sheriff's deputy clocked him at nearly 120 miles an hour just a few miles south of the Wyoming border. He was traveling so fast that the deputy didn't even get a chance to initiate a pursuit. Within minutes, the Colorado State Patrol received a report of a crash. Randy had gone off the highway at a curve in the road.

Randy said he doesn't remember anything. The whole thing is still a complete blank. "I don't think I wanted to die," he said softly recently, sitting at a local coffee shop, his blue eyes looking off into

space and trying to picture that black time. "But I know I didn't want to live." What he also knows, Slafter quickly adds, is the hand of God was on his shoulder that day. He suffered a closed head injury that he still feels the effects from, and a badly broken thumb that still gives him trouble, but his recovery has been nearly complete.

Late last month, Randy Slafter left Johnstown to go to Sierra Leone, Africa, where he will work with World In Need International, teaching other pastors. Given what he has gone through in the past 15 years since coming to Johnstown, and given what he is now embarking upon, the conversation quickly comes back to the nature of faith.

"Faith is nothing until it has been experienced," he said. "Sometimes, when you don't think God is speaking, that's when you have to listen."

I wasn't listening for God, but rather for footsteps, as I stood behind the screen of a large tree in the Johnstown Cemetery, trying to finish off a joint before the funeral procession appeared out on the highway. Part of the service had been the pastor reading the article I had written that week about Eloy's death. Following it, I bolted from the packed church and walked to the cemetery alone, needing to clear my mind and fill my lungs.

Eloy Mares was the owner of a tire and auto shop in Milliken. He had died suddenly of a heart attack. One of 10 brothers and sisters, he had grown up poor. In 1988, when he opened his tire shop, things weren't much better. He and his son, David, started in a shed along the main street not even as big as the average residential garage. In the winter, they used to have to build a fire in the morning just to thaw out the air wrench.

About that same time, Eloy was also elected to the town board. He served proudly in that position, maybe not always the most politically savvy or well-spoken member of the board, but certainly one of the most earnest. As his business grew, and he became more well-known in the community, he became the champion and voice for segments of the population that might not otherwise have had one. When Hispanic families moved to town, some coming newly from Mexico, the word was always the same: "Go to Eloy, he'll help you out," and he always did.

Whenever I was in Milliken, I'd stop and smoke a cigarette with him out in front of the service bays of his shop. Maybe go across the street to Rosa's Café and have a cup of coffee. There was always something to talk about, as Eloy, oftentimes impatiently, chided me about lack of coverage of this issue, or coverage of another.

The church had been filled for Eloy's funeral, and now, the long line of cars appeared on the highway, turning off and slowly making their way toward the cemetery. I began walking toward the gravesite. As the family walked toward the chairs set up under the tent, I made brief eye contact with one of Eloy's brothers, whom I had met the other day for the first time when I was interviewing the family for the story. A blood red carnation was pinned to his black t-shirt. I doubt he even saw me, staring through the haze of his grief.

As the crowd assembled around the grave, one of Eloy's *vato* nephews, a huge hulking guy with a shaved head, stepped forward and began to sing "Amazing Grace." I remembered when one of my reporters had written in a story about cemetery expansion that they make sure all the headstones face east, so the cold granite symbols of death are warmed each morning by the rising sun. I remembered the time I called Eloy in a panic because I had to go to the airport the next morning to fly to California with my mom for several days, and the weatherman was saying there would be snow on the ground when I returned. The tires on my LandCruiser were balder than my

dad, and I was worried about having to drive the hour back from the airport on race-slick rubber on icy roads. Eloy not only got the tires on for me that afternoon, but drove to Denver on his lunch hour to get them.

*When we've been here ten thousand years...
bright shining as the sun.
We've no less days to sing God's praise...
then when we've first begun.*

They say the hardest day isn't the funeral. The worst is the day after, when the sun comes up, and life now goes on without the person. I thought of eternity. Of the rays of sunlight each morning from now on that would hit the chiseled shadows of Eloy's gravestone. And I wondered whether he was gone, or had simply gone on. I wondered if it mattered. Either way, he wasn't here.

That night I was sitting on the bed, brooding about and mourning Eloy, when my oldest daughter, Riley, came home from a youth Bible study class and immediately went to her room. Like her mother, emotional by normal nature, if she was quiet that meant she was truly troubled by something.

Neither Lesli nor I had said much when Riley announced she was attending the classes. They were held at one of the more conservative and fundamentalist of the churches in town, but it was also the church of her neighbor and best friend. The pair had literally grown up together, but now, as adolescence was budding, they were starting to drift apart. Riley saw going to the class as a way she could share her friend's life and maybe reconnect. She wasn't coming home parroting any of the intolerant rhetoric we had sometimes heard coming from the church -- and she still proudly used phrases like "In Goth We Trust" -- so neither of us was really worried.

Around bedtime, I went downstairs and found her already in bed. I asked if everything was OK. She muttered things were fine. I knew that with her, as with her mother, the true emotion lay just below the skin and needed only be picked at slightly.

“How was Bible class tonight?” I asked.

“It kind of sucked,” she said. “The people running it made me mad.”

“What happened?”

“They were talking about Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses,” she said. “They were basically saying they were wrong to believe the way they do. My friend Zach is a Mormon. Cousin Colin is a Mormon. And Aunt Shar and Uncle Dick and Kristi are Jehovah's Witnesses.

“And,” Riley said, looking at me, “if I believe what they're telling me, you're going to Hell.”

I winced.

“Riley, God and I don't have any problems,” I told her. “The only way I'd be going to Hell is if I believed what they believe and didn't follow it. But I don't, so it doesn't matter.

“What I do know is this,” I told her, trying to get her to settle in, and pulling the covers up. “I do know that the hand of God worked on the hearts of the people we bought the newspaper from. And for that, I owe Him, Her, or It a debt of gratitude. We've been given a really cool chance to do something for these communities. To be their voice. And part of that dialogue is religion. And part of any dialogue is that not everyone is going to agree.”

"Do you ever pray?" she asked.

"Every morning and usually before I go to bed."

"What do you pray for?"

"That you guys are safe," I said. "That I'm thankful for another day. That I want to be a positive force in the universe, and that I'm seeking strength to be that."

"Who do you talk to?"

"God, I guess, Riley."

"So you believe in God?"

"Sure. Just not in religion. I believe there's something out there ... a spirit ...or something ... a higher power. Your mother says we listen to it, we learn, and then we choose with our hearts."

I turned off Riley's light. Kissed her on the head and walked out, closing the door.

"And it struck me kind of funny, kind of funny sir indeed," I muttered to myself, singing the old Bruce Springsteen song, "how at the end of every hard working day people find some reason to believe."

Matt Lubich and his wife, Lesli Bangert, have owned The Johnstown Breeze since 1997. He has worked there since 1991. The paper has provided weekly news to the communities of Johnstown and Milliken (Colorado) since 1904. In 2002, and again in 2005, the paper was voted the "Best Small Weekly Newspaper in the State" by the Colorado Press Association. Lubich and his wife live in Johnstown with their two daughters, Riley and Harper Lee.

To check out the paper, go to www.johnstownbreeze.com

