GOD'S WORLD TO WIN

The Story of Operation World



Patrick Johnstone

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The Early Years

In writing *God's World to Win: The Story of Operation World*, my desire is to reveal what God has done in the nations and peoples of the world in recent years, as well as the contributions of many involved in producing successive editions of *Operation World*. This narrative also includes details of my own personal journey. I often see my life and the journey the Lord has led me on, which culminated in the production of *Operation World*, as a large, multi-layered onion. Some layers are genetic, others are part of my human heritage, and still others are distortions and lies I believed about myself that had to be exposed and dealt with in the light of God and his word.

In the seventeenth century, my forefathers migrated from the Scottish borderlands to Ireland. Later, in 1899, my grandfather and uncle relocated to England, where they worked as medical practitioners in Gloucestershire. In 1917, my grandmother tragically lost her life when an attending doctor unwittingly allowed her to bleed to death during a miscarriage. My grandfather never recovered from that devastating loss, and in the process, he became addicted to morphine. My father, Maxwell (better known as Peter), was just eleven at the time, but despite the ensuing tragic home situation, he graduated and continued the family tradition in medicine by becoming an anesthetist at St. Thomas' Hospital, opposite London's Houses of Parliament.

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My dad loved his job and his circle of friends, but when his father asked him to return home in 1936 to help with the country practice, he gave up his happy social life and attractive salary in London. One other reason my grandfather requested his help was that he had been placed on a list of registered addicts and needed my father's assistance in the practice and to administer his morphine dose. The loyalty my dad displayed became a model for my life and shaped my character.

My wonderful mother, Trudy, grew up in the town of Sliedrecht in the Netherlands. Her childhood was also dominated by a major family tragedy: the break-up of her parents' marriage. Neither Trudy nor her brother fully recovered from that trauma, which created a passionate desire in my mother's heart to preserve the integrity and closeness of her family.

My parents first met at a ski resort in Sweden, where my father was part of a group of holidaying English doctors. They married in 1937, but my mother experienced immediate culture shock when, at the tender age of twenty, she took over the management of a large English household with five servants, two acres of gardens, and an attic filled with half a century's worth of items stored by the extended family. Then just a year after my birth, all connections with her family and homeland were cut with the German invasion and occupation of the Netherlands.

I was born a year later, just before the outbreak of the Second World War, having inflicted my dear mother with toxemia. She was warned not to have more children but proceeded to have five more—all of whom were delivered safely.

The war years were difficult for my parents, and my father's health deteriorated. To cope with the stress, he became a heavy smoker, fell into depression, and developed ulcers that required surgery to remove most of his stomach.

My siblings and I spent much of the war cooped up because our large home served not only as our residence, but also as a doctors' office for three practitioners. I developed a passion for mischievous behavior, such as when I opened the valve of the upstairs radiator to create a puddle on the floor to paddle in,

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which dripped down to the dining room table below. Although we often fought among ourselves, my brother, sisters, and I became close companions. We banded together to protect each other against perceived external threats, and our friendship has continued throughout our lives, despite being scattered around the globe as we forged different career paths. Notwithstanding the intensity of our competition and frequent arguments on the court, I gained a lifelong passion for playing tennis.

My carefree boyhood ended abruptly at the age of nine when I was sent to a boarding school. Later, I was sent to Malvern College, where C. S. Lewis had also attended for a time, although he hated it so much that his parents were persuaded to remove him early. I struggled with the harsh discipline and rigidity of the school. I was a late developer, with my voice finally breaking when I was sixteen. Until then, I stood just over five feet tall and could not compete equally with my peers. My sports were gymnastics, tennis, and shooting—none of which garnered respect from my classmates, and I was frequently bullied by frllow students. All this cultivated within me a deep sense of inadequacy and failure. My five years at Malvern were the unhappiest of my life. I didn't dare tell my parents of my struggles, however, as they had sacrificed much to enable their children to benefit from a private education.

I also struggled academically, though I managed to complete enough schoolwork to graduate. Around half a century later, I discovered that I suffer from something called Auditory Processing Disorder (APD), which is similar to dyslexia. It often irritated my teachers and others that I was unable to follow instructions. A key characteristic of APD is that the initial part of a person's spoken message gets jumbled between my ears and brain. Over the course of my life, my most common phrase has been, "What did you say?" My struggles are exacerbated when I cannot see a person's face, as I need to lip-read to help determine the meaning of what is being said. This explains my lifelong dread of using a phone, which some mission leaders may have found strange!

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Over the years, I developed mechanisms to cope better with this developmental issue, but only recently did I realize that I was different from other people. In retrospect, I now understand how APD contributed to my early social struggles and marginalization. I wish I had known about my condition as a schoolboy, but like the many branches on the autism spectrum, nothing was known of such things at the time. My ability to learn only developed when I completely reformed my study methods. I began to write notes and categorize them with different color headings. I barely scraped through to pass one subject of three at the end of my secondary education while at Malvern, but later at university, my new study technique meant I had no problem with learning, and I even gained an honors degree in chemistry.

I left Malvern College in July 1957 with no clear idea of what I should do with my life. Before my exam results arrived in the mail, our family went on a holiday to one of our favorite beaches—Tintagel on the north Cornish coast. Tintagel is the site of an early medieval castle—purported to have once been the home of the legendary King Arthur—and overlooks a small cove. At the time, my father was still recuperating from major surgery, as the earlier operation to remove most of his stomach had not gone well. I made my way out into the cove, but not being a very good swimmer, I soon headed back to the shore. My father passed me as he swam out to the entrance of the cove wearing his snorkel. It was great to see my dad enjoying himself, but I remember feeling profoundly concerned about how much stamina he had so soon after his surgery.

When I reached the beach, I went to retrieve my towel, and as I looked down at my father's towel and watch, an inexplicable dread came over me—will I ever see him again? I dismissed the thought, but just a few minutes later, there was a cry that a swimmer was in trouble. In the distance, I could see my father floating lifelessly at the entrance to the cove. Two kind men retrieved his body. The glass of his snorkel was broken, so we surmised that he had grown tired, and a wave had smashed his face into a rock, causing him to drown.

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This tragedy was life-changing for my entire family. Our parents had poured so much into our education that there was not much remaining of my father's wealth, and we were living in my mother's father-in-law's home. My mother was suddenly a 40-year-old widow with six children and in need of a new home. As the eldest son, I realized that I might have to become my family's chief breadwinner. My grief-stricken grandfather died a few months later, at which point the house and property were divided among my father's surviving siblings.

I struggled to come to grips with my father's passing and the instability it caused, but in the years that followed, I came to appreciate the time I had spent with him. He taught me how to play chess in the evenings, and we would often spend hours looking at an atlas and making discoveries together. These precious interactions with my dad gave me a great love for maps, which greatly impacted my later life and ministry. I treasure those memories.

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