

An experiment in biblical living

By the book

by A. J. Jacobs

ON JULY 7, 2005, A. J. Jacobs packed away any of his clothes that were made of mixed fibers (Lev. 19:19) as a first step in a year of living the Bible—literally. Jacobs, who is an editor at large for Esquire, grew up in a secular Jewish household and as an adult has called himself agnostic. Yet at some point he became, as he says, impressed with the power of religion as “an enduring force” and determined to explore his own religious background. He was also fascinated by an uncle, a “spiritual omnivore” who withdrew \$300 from the bank, tied the bills to his sleeves and wandered the streets looking for widows who needed cash (Deut. 14:25).

In an effort to jump-start his own spiritual quest, Jacobs decided to follow his uncle's example. He decided to “find the original intent of the biblical rule or teaching, and follow that to the letter. If the passage is unquestionably figurative, . . . I won't obey it literally. But if there's any doubt whatsoever—and most often there is—I will err on the side of being literal.”

A righteous man hateth lying . . .
—Proverbs 13:5 (KJV)

Day 37. Man, do I lie a lot. I knew I lied, but when I started to keep track, the quantity was alarming. I try to catalog my daily violations.

A sample from today:

- I lied to my wife, Julie, about how much Internet access at Starbucks costs. I told her \$8 instead of \$10, so she'd be 20 percent less annoyed.
- I gave a fake e-mail address to a religious magazine called *Sofjourners* because I didn't want to be swamped by junk e-mail.
- I told a friend who writes children's books that my son loved her book about cookies, even though we've never even cracked open said book about cookies.

I don't tell huge lies. My lies aren't of the “I don't re-

member that meeting, Senator” variety, or even the “I spent time in jail with my friend Leonard” variety. They're little lies. White lies. Half-truths. Sugarcoating.

I'm such an experienced liar, I once edited an article for *Esquire* on the art of the “noncommittal compliment.” When your friend makes a movie that is just dreadful, what do you say? I gave a bunch of options, like “You've done it again!” or “I loved the credits!”

I've always thought that this sort of truth hedging was necessary in human relations. Without little lies, chaos would erupt. Marriages would crumble, workers would be fired, egos would be shattered. I've seen *Liar Liar* with Jim Carrey. I know how it works.

But if you take the Bible strictly, it says to avoid lying on all occasions. It says this several times. So at the very least, I should cut back on lying. I decide to do this in stages. My first mission is to

stop telling lies to my two-year-old son, then move on from there. I lie to Jasper all the time, especially at meals. One classic is this: “Just one more bite,” I'll say. He'll take a bite. Then I'll say “OK, just one more bite.” And so on.

Mind you, he's equally deceitful. He's allowed to watch TV only when eating, so he'll try to stretch the dinner out for hours. He'll put a string bean halfway into his mouth and just dangle it there like a Marlboro Light.

I'll say “Eat, Jasper.”

And then he'll gum it for a bit before stopping and getting back to the business of watching *Dora* explore.

My question is: Does the parent-child relationship have to be one of dishonesty? Perhaps there's something to transparent parenting.

I start it this morning. Jasper wants a bagel for breakfast. So I ask Julie where she put the bagels.

“We're out,” she says. “Just give him an English muffin and tell him that it's a bagel.”

Julie says she did it yesterday, and he didn't know the difference.

So I give him a whole wheat Thomas's English muffin.



LITERAL ADHERENCE: “Thanks to the beard, my alter ego is looking more and more religious.”

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"Bagel?" he asks, pointing to the English muffin.

"Actually, it's not a bagel. It's an English muffin."

He looks confused.

"It's still very good. But it's not a bagel."

As it registers that he isn't getting a bagel, his expression turns from confusion to anger to rage. He looks like someone has just circumcised him again.

"Bagell! Bagell!"

"We don't have bagels. We'll get bagels tomorrow."

Within about a minute, this has escalated into a full-blown tantrum. I'm still amazed that kids can live out clichés quite as precisely as they do. When throwing tantrums, Jasper will get down on his stomach and pound the floor with his fists and feet like he's a character in a *Peanuts* cartoon.

"What's going on here?" asks Julie. As you might have guessed, I had to tell the truth.

There are probably long-term advantages to being completely honest with your kid. (He'll know he can't have his way all the time, for one thing. He'll trust you, for another.) But there are severe short-term disadvantages.

They shall be stoned with stones, their blood shall be upon them.

—Leviticus 20:27

Day 62. It's time to tackle an item on my list of Most Perplexing Laws: capital punishment. The Hebrew scriptures prescribe a tremendous amount of capital punishment. Think Saudi Arabia, multiply by Texas, then triple that. It wasn't just for murder. You could also be executed for adultery, blasphemy, breaking the Sabbath, perjury, incest, bestiality and witchcraft, among other offenses. A rebellious son could be sentenced to death. As could a son who is a persistent drunkard and glutton.

The most commonly mentioned punishment method in the Hebrew Bible is stoning. So I figure, at the very least, I should try to stone. But how? I figured my loophole would be this: the Bible doesn't specify the size of the stones. So . . . pebbles.

A few days ago, I gathered a handful of small white pebbles from Central Park, which I stuffed in my back pants pocket. Now all I needed were some victims. I decided to start with Sabbath breakers. That's easy enough to find in this workaholic city. I noticed that a potbellied guy at the Avis down our block had worked on both Saturday and Sunday. So no matter what, he's a Sabbath breaker.

Here's the thing, though: even with pebbles, it is surprisingly hard to stone people.

My plan had been to walk nonchalantly past the Sabbath violator and chuck the pebbles at the small of his back. But after a couple of failed passes, I realized it was a bad idea. A chucked pebble, no matter how small, does not go unnoticed.

My revised plan: I would pretend to be clumsy and drop the pebble on his shoe. So I did.

And in this way I stoned. But it was probably the most polite stoning in history—I said, "I'm sorry," and then leaned down to pick up the pebble. And he leaned down at the same time, and we almost butted heads, and then he apologized, then I apologized again. Highly unsatisfying.

Today I get another chance. I am resting in a small public park on the upper West Side, the kind where you see retirees eating tuna sandwiches on benches.

"Hey, you're dressed queer."

I look over. The speaker is an elderly man, mid-70s, I'd guess. He is tall and thin and is wearing one of those caps that cabbies wore in movies from the '40s.

"You're dressed queer," he snarls. "Why you dressed so queer?"

I have on my usual tassels, and for good measure have worn some sandals and am carrying a knotty maple walking stick I'd bought on the Internet for \$25.

"I'm trying to live by the rules of the Bible. The Ten Commandments, stoning adulterers . . ."

"You're stoning adulterers?"

"Yeah, I'm stoning adulterers."

"I'm an adulterer."

"You're currently an adulterer?"

"Yeah. Tonight, tomorrow, yesterday, two weeks from now. You gonna stone me?"

"If I could, yes, that'd be great."

"I'll punch you in the face. I'll send you to the cemetery."

He is serious. This isn't a cutesy grumpy old man. This is an angry old man. This is a man with seven decades of hostility behind him.

I fish out my pebbles from my back pocket.

"I wouldn't stone you with big stones," I say. "Just these little guys."

I open my palm to show him the pebbles. He lunges at me, grabbing one out of my hand, then flinging it at my face. It whizzes by my cheek.

I am stunned for a second. I hadn't expected this grizzled old man to make the first move. But now there is nothing stopping me from retaliating. An eye for an eye.

I take one of the remaining pebbles and whip it at his chest. It bounces off.

"I'll punch you right in the kisser," he says.

"Well, you really shouldn't commit adultery," I say.

We stare at each other. My pulse has doubled.

Yes, he is a septuagenarian. Yes, he had just threatened me using corny *Honeymooners* dialogue. But you could tell: This man has a strong dark side.

Our glaring contest lasts ten seconds, then he walks away, brushing by me as he leaves.

When I was a kid, I saw an episode of *All in the Family*

A. J. Jacobs is the author of *The Know-It-All*. This article is excerpted from *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*, published this month by Simon & Schuster. © Copyright 2007 A. J. Jacobs.

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in which Meathead—Rob Reiner's wussy peacenik character—socked some guy in the jaw. Meathead was very upset about this. But he wasn't upset that he committed violence; he was upset because it felt so good to commit violence.

I can relate. Even though mine was a stoning lite, barely fulfilling the letter of the law, I can't deny: It felt good to chuck a rock at this nasty old man. It felt primal. It felt like I was getting vengeance on him. This guy wasn't just an adulterer, he was a bully. I wanted him to feel the pain he'd inflicted on others, even if that pain was a tap on the chest.

Like Meathead, I also knew that this was a morally stunted

way to feel. Stoning is about as indefensible as you can get. It comes back to the old question: How can the Bible be so wise in some places and so barbaric in others? And why should we put any faith in a book that includes such brutality?

And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land He has given you.

—Deuteronomy 8:10

Day 64. A spiritual update: I'm still agnostic, but I do have some progress to report on the prayer front. I no longer dread prayer. And sometimes I'm even liking it. I've gone so far as to take the training wheels off and am testing out some of my own prayers instead of just repeating passages from the Bible.

I called Elton Richards, a retired Lutheran pastor in Des Moines, Iowa, who is one of several advisers for my project. Elton broke down prayer for me into four types. It's a handy mnemonic: ACTS. A for adoration (praising God). C for confession (telling God your sins). T for thanksgiving (being grateful to God for what you have). S for supplication (asking God to help you).

Right now, the one that's working for me best is T, thanksgiving. Adoration feels awkward to me. Confession feels forced. As for supplication, I'm doing it, but I feel greedy asking God to help my career. Should I really be cluttering his in-box by asking for better placement of *The Know-It-All* at airport bookstores?

But thanksgiving, that I'm getting into. In Deuteronomy, the Bible says that we should thank the Lord when we've eaten our fill—grace after meals, it's called. Christians moved grace to the beginning of the meal, preappetizer. To be safe, I'm praying both before and after.

Today, before tasting my lunch of hummus and pita bread, I stand up from my seat at the kitchen table, close my eyes, and say in a hushed tone:

"I'd like to thank God for the land that he provided so that this food might be grown."

Technically, that's enough. That fulfills the Bible's commandment. But while in thanksgiving mode, I decide to spread the gratitude around:

"I'd like to thank the farmer who grew the chick-peas for this hum-

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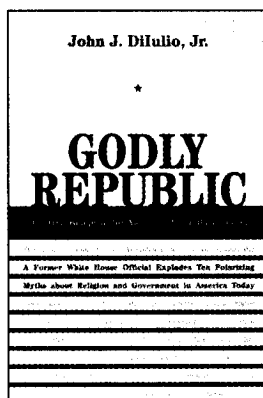
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mus. And the workers who picked the chick-peas. And the truckers who drove them to the store. And the old Italian lady who sold the hummus to me at Zingone's deli and told me 'Lots of love.' Thank you."

Now that I type it, it sounds like an overly earnest Oscar speech for best supporting Middle Eastern spread. But saying it feels good.

Here's the thing: I'm still having trouble conceptualizing an infinite being, so I'm working on the questionable theory that a large quantity is at least closer to infinity. Hence the overabundance of thank-yous. Sometimes I'll get on a roll, thanking people for a couple of minutes straight—the people who designed the packaging and the guys who loaded the cartons onto the conveyor belt. My wife, Julie, has usually started in on her food by this point.

The prayers are helpful. They remind me that the food didn't spontaneously generate in my fridge. They make me feel more connected, more grateful, more grounded, more aware of my place in this complicated hummus cycle. They remind me to taste the hummus instead of shoveling it into my maw like it's a nutrition pill. And they remind me that I'm lucky to have food at all. Basically, they help me get outside of my self-obsessed cranium.

Keep your tongue from evil . . .
—Psalms 34:13

Day 70. A lot of my friends expect me to speak like a walking King James Bible. They want me—or at least my alter ego Jacob—to spout words like *thou* and *woe unto and whosoever shall*. I get a lot of e-mails that start "Give ear, O Jacobs." And phone calls that begin, "Verily, I ask thee, would you like to meet us for pizza?"

I try to play along as best I can ("Yea, I shall rejoice in a feast of pizza"). But it's not high on my list of priorities. Such language is more a reflection of 17th-century England than of ancient Israel.

No, speaking biblically requires a far more radical change than raising my diction a few notches. It requires a total switch in the content of my conversation: no lying, no complaining, no gossipping.

They're all hard, but let me just focus on the gossip for a bit, because that's turning out to be a killer. The Bible has at least 20 passages condemning gossip. In English editions, translators use words such as *slander* or *talebearing* or *unwholesome talk* or *evil tongue*.

This means I can't join in when my

co-workers discuss a certain boozy actress who scribbled obscenities on a bathroom mirror, or the rumor that a news anchor is about to ditch his wife for a younger woman. That's a feat in itself, but I expected living biblically would require that.

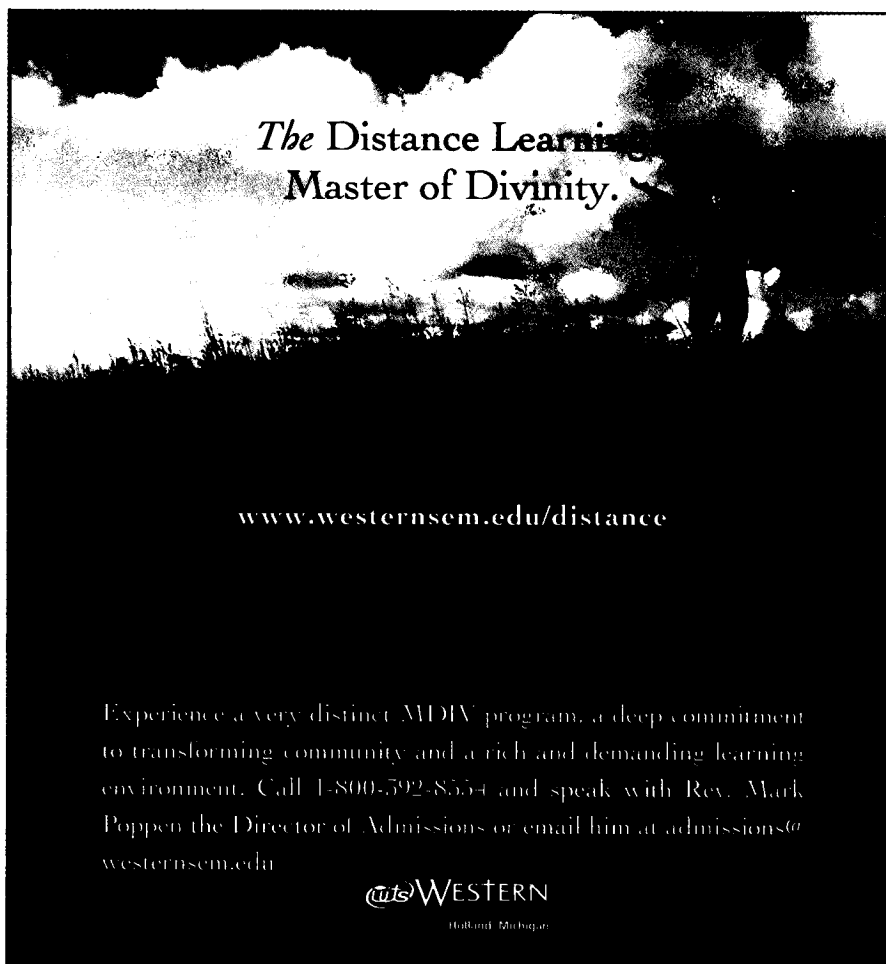
The problem is, if you *really* want to be biblically safe, you should go much further. You should avoid almost all negative speech whatsoever. Here's how one of my Bible commentaries defines evil tongue: "This refers to any derogatory or damaging statement against an individual—even when the slanderous or defaming remarks are true—which if publicized to others would cause the subject physical or monetary damage, anguish, or fear."

In other words, about 70 percent of all conversations in New York.

Love not sleep, lest you come to poverty.
—Proverbs 20:13

Day 77. The other day my grandfather asked me, "Do you sleep with the beard under the covers or over the covers?" Now that I'm aware of it, I can't stop thinking about it. I switch positions every few minutes.

It's just one of the reasons I'm having trouble sleeping. The problem is, I'm downloading so much spiritual information during the days that I spend my nights awake in



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bed trying to process it. (Incidentally, the author of Proverbs would be fine with my lack of sleep; he considers sleep a sign of laziness that will lead to poverty.)

As I lie in bed tonight, I think about a colorful brochure that I received from a creationist organization. Maybe I let myself off the creationism hook too easily. As unlikely as the six-day scenario may be, shouldn't I at least give it the benefit of the doubt?

So I do an experiment. I try to put myself into the mind of my biblical alter ego Jacob. I convince myself that the earth was formed a handful of generations ago. I can't 100 percent believe, but for a few minutes, I almost believe it.

And it is fascinating. The first thing I notice is that I feel more connected. If everyone on earth is descended from two identifiable people—Adam and Eve—then the “family of man” isn't just pabulum. It's true. The guy who sells me bananas at the deli on 81st Street—he's my cousin.

But even more powerful is this feeling: my life is more significant. If the earth is 10 billion years old, I'm barely a drop of water in the ocean that is the universe. But if the earth is 6,000 years old, then I've been alive for a decent portion of the world's existence. I'm no bit player. I've got a speaking part in the movie of life.

My thought experiment crystallized a key tension I've noticed in the Bible. On the one hand, the Bible teaches extreme humility. Humans are sinful, barely worthy of praying to God.

On the other hand, there's a certain—I don't know if arrogance is quite the right word. Maybe pride. Humans are the pinnacle of biblical creation, the ones God saved until last on the sixth day, beings who are vastly superior to the beasts and nature. We are made in God's image. (As the 17th-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza said, if triangles could think, their God would be eminently triangular.)

I believe that's a key motivation to creationism: the need to feel less inconsequential. I remember Mark Looy—the publicist for the Creation Museum near Cincinnati, Ohio—saying: “Evolution says that we are the product of random processes. That we evolved via pond scum. When we say that, we're not applying much value to humanity. If we say we're a product of accidents and random processes, how much purpose and hope does that give to our youth?”

Since I'll never convert to creationism, I have to find some dignity and self-esteem and sacredness even with our mucky origins.

He who despises his neighbor is a sinner . . .
—Proverbs 14:21

Day 84. I've been trying to love my neighbor, but in New York, this is particularly difficult. It's an aloof city. I don't even know my neighbors' names, much less love them. I know them only as woman-whose-cooking-smells-

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nasty and guy-who-gets-Barron's-delivered-each-week, and so forth.

Well, except for Nancy in 5I. We met because our son and her beagle are about the same age, have pretty much the same vocabulary and share similar interests, such as running around the hall.

Nancy is a former hippie who was once friends with Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin. In fact, she looks like what Janis Joplin would have looked like if Janis Joplin had lived another 35 years. In the '60s, Nancy took a lot of drugs, had a couple of disastrous relationships with men, did some waitressing, wrote some poetry and now lives alone

with her dog and listens to Howard Stern every morning. She almost always wears sundresses and knit caps. She calls herself "the kooky lady with the dog."

She's painfully shy, almost skittish. She'll visit our apartment occasionally, but when I knock at hers, she always just cracks the door open and pokes her head out. "I'm painting one wall at a time," she once explained. "I don't want anyone to see it till it's done." She also once told me that I unnerved her because I maintained too much eye contact. (Which is, in fact, a problem for me. I often forget to glance away intermittently during conversations and have to remind myself to do so; otherwise people will think I'm a psycho who keeps a cup of noses in my freezer.)

Nancy was married for a while after college, but she couldn't have kids. So she's become the unofficial godmother to our son. For the past few months she's been sketching a portrait of him. "I'll be finished soon," she promises. "By the time he takes his SATs."

And today she brings Jasper an early holiday present: a wooden Noah's ark with a menagerie of little painted animals. She thought it'd be good to get him a biblical present. I

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make Jasper say thank you, a phrase he pronounces without those tiresome consonants, so it sounds like a-ew.

"You know, it's interesting," I say to Nancy as we sit at the kitchen table watching Jasper march the giraffes onto his boat. "I was reading in one of my Bible commentaries about how the flood is such a tragic story—the drowning of millions of people and animals—and how strange it is that it's always made into cute kids' toys."

Nancy looks wounded.

"I didn't . . ." Ugh. What a putz. I had tried to show off my biblical knowledge, and I ended up insulting my only friendly neighbor. The Bible tells us not to be know-it-alls—"A prudent man conceals his knowledge . . ." (Prov. 12:23).

"I love his ark," I say. "It's adorable . . ."

"Don't worry," she says, recovering. "At least I didn't get him the stuffed ten plagues."

Nancy is a good neighbor, probably the best I've had in my time as a New Yorker. I decide that this will be one of my missions for the year: Do something righteous—a good deed, a mitzvah—for my neighbor in 51.

... For God is with the generation of the righteous.
—Psalms 14:5

Day 91, the end of month three of Project Bible. Thanks to the beard, my alter ego Jacob is looking more

and more religious. Or to be precise, more and more Jewish. I know this because I was stopped by some tourists on the street the other day and asked, "Where in New York can we get a good knish?" More to the point, I was told by a guy at the soup kitchen where I volunteer, "You look really Jewish." Hard to misinterpret that one.

On the other hand, my ethical state leaves much to be desired. This occurs to me as I am sitting on the crosstown bus today reading Ecclesiastes.

I'm concentrating hard. Too hard. I feel a tap on my shoulder. I'm annoyed. I don't like strangers touching me. I look up. It is a 50ish man.

"Excuse me, this lady is feeling sick. Could you give her your seat?"

He points to a tall brunette woman who was standing right in front of me. How did I miss this? The woman looks horrible: Her face is sallow, nearly the color of lima beans. She is doubled over. And she is weeping.

I get up in a hurry with mumbled apologies. To paraphrase Ecclesiastes, there's a time for reading and a time for getting off your butt.

I realize that I was what is known in Hebrew as a Chasid Shote. A righteous idiot. In the Talmud, there's a story about a devout man who won't save a drowning woman because he's afraid of breaking the no-touching-women ban. He's the ultimate pious fool.

The moral is the same as Jesus' parable about the Good

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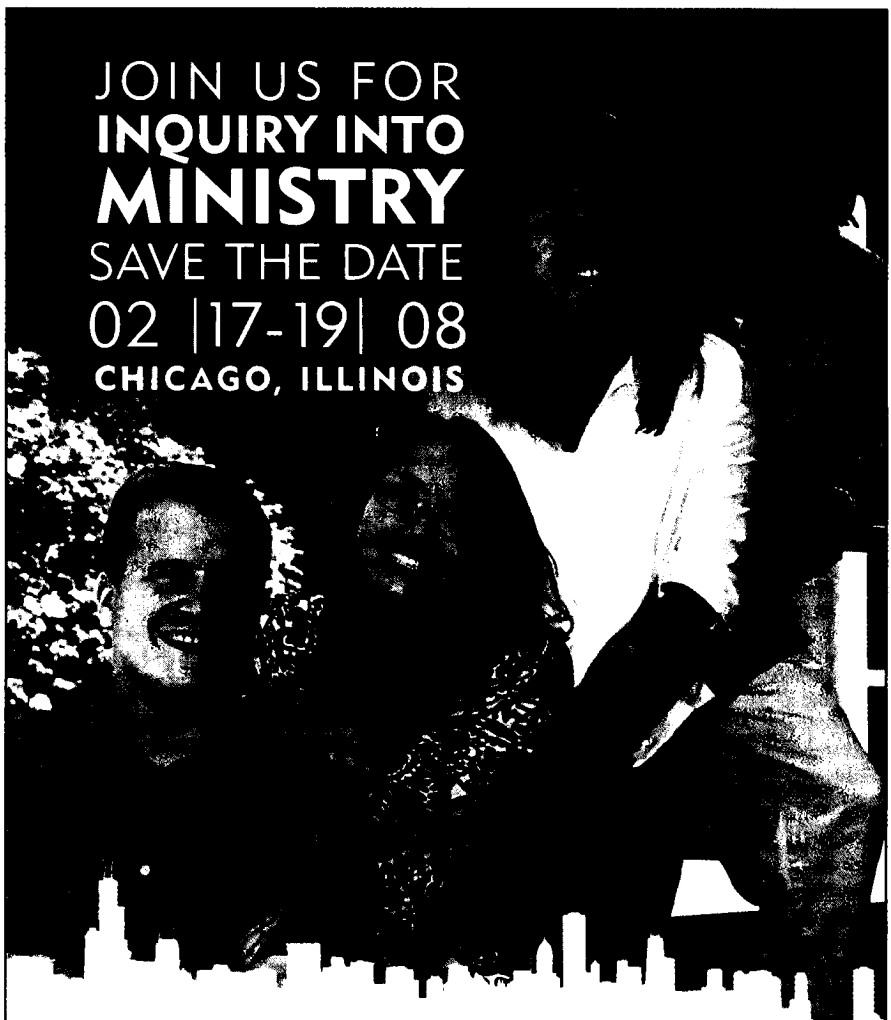
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Samaritan: Don't be so caught up in the regulations that you forget about the big things, like compassion and respect for life. The righteous idiot is what the Christian Bible calls a Pharisee—one of the sanctimonious legalistic scholars who criticize Christ's followers for picking grain on the Sabbath.

One of the reasons that I embarked on this experiment was to take legalism to its logical extreme and show that it leads to righteous idiocy. What better way to demonstrate the absurdity of Jewish and Christian fundamentalism? If you actually follow all the rules, you'll spend your days acting like a crazy person.

I still believe that. And I still plan on making a complete fool of myself to get this point across. But as with everything involving religion, my project has become much more complicated. The spiritual journey now takes up far more of my time.

My friend Roger was right. It's not like studying Sumo wrestling in Japan. It's more like wrestling itself. This opponent of mine is sometimes beautiful, sometimes cruel, sometimes ancient, sometimes crazily relevant. I can't get a handle on it. ■



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