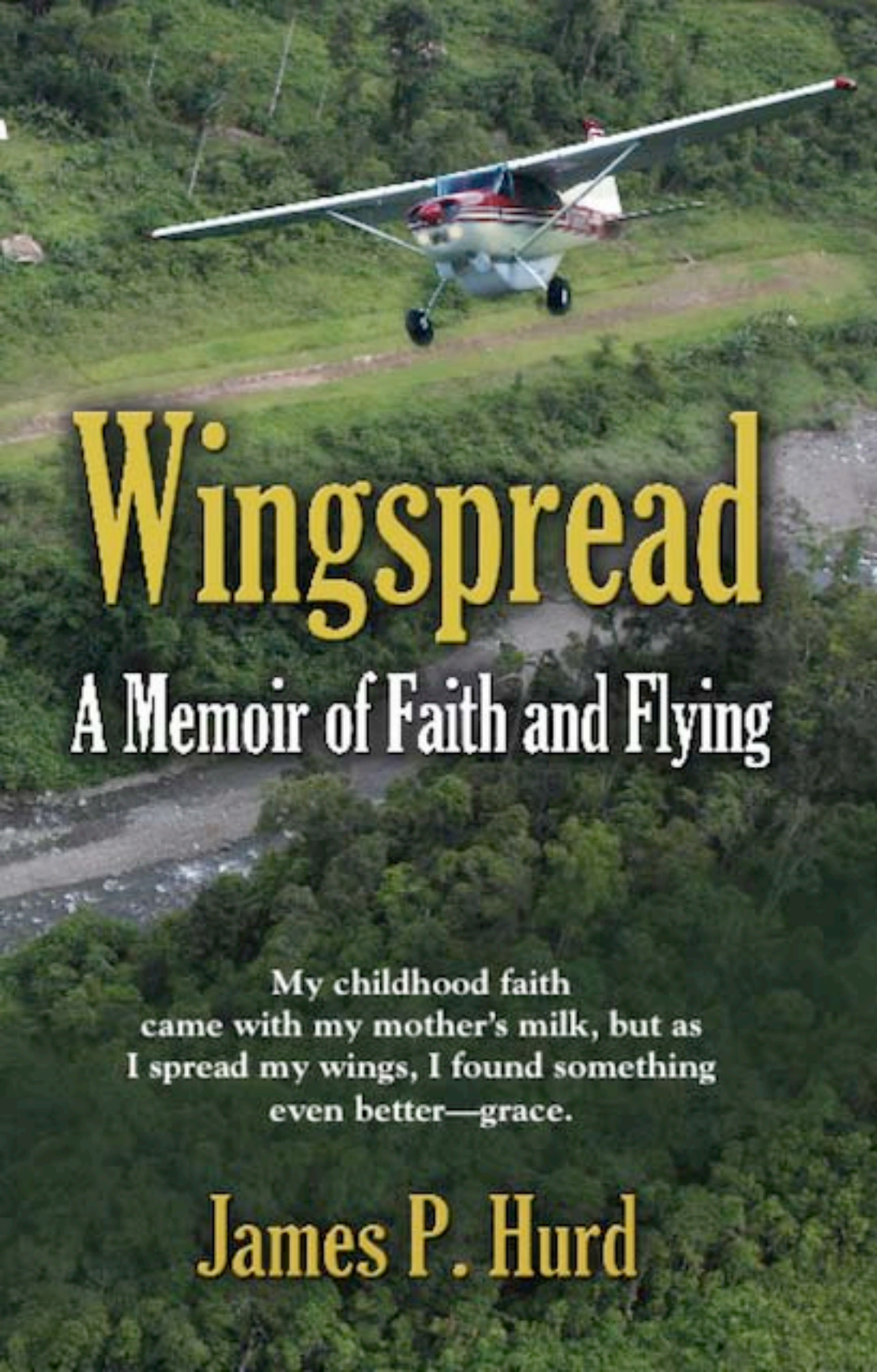
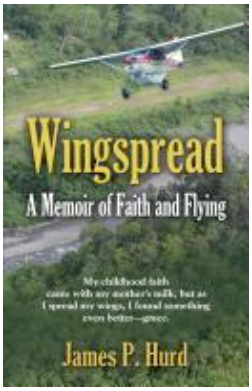

Wingspread
A Memoir of Faith and Flying
My childhood faith
came with my mother's milk, but as
I spread my wings, I found something
even better—grace.
James P. Hurd



When James Hurd spread his wings - attending Chicago's Moody Bible Institute, flying airplanes in rural South America, encountering Barbara - he attempted to leave his childhood Fundamentalist Christian faith behind. Later, he realized how much the grace of God had operated in those childhood years. So, today, he says (it's like confessing a sin), "Hello. My name is Jim, and I'm still - sort of - a Fundamentalist..."

Wingspread

Wingspread:

A Memoir of Faith and Flying

James P. Hurd

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First Edition

Apology

I grew up a Fundamentalist—that's kind of like an Evangelical on steroids. How do you explain this to your friends? It's like keeping a crazy uncle in your basement. You know he's part of your family, but you're embarrassed to talk about him.

I didn't want to write an autobiography. I wanted to write stories about childhood Christian formation, coming of age, and mission bush flying in South America. Someone has said that writing biography is harder than writing fiction because biography has to make sense. For people of faith you don't make your own sense, but you discover it from God. I wrote to discover the meaning of my life and encourage others to do the same.

I wanted to answer several questions. Does my childhood faith "work?" How do I live in a world where the great majority of people do not share my beliefs? What should I do when my certainties don't seem so certain anymore? How do I invent an adult version of my childhood faith (because we all must invent one)? For fifty years I tried to move beyond my Fundamentalist faith, but today, I realize that I never fully succeeded. It has defined my life, and for the better.

I wanted to show people the world through my own lens and to help them see the world through theirs. To strengthen them on their journey with its dead ends and restarts. To help them embrace their struggles and doubts, knowing that God is

big enough for these. To encourage others to embrace their dreams. To witness to the truths I sometimes doubted. To paint a picture of how a childhood faith shines a light down the path of life.

The first section of the book describes the Fundamentalist grounding I received from my parents and church. The second is about leaving home and traveling east to a Fundamentalist school, coming of age, and confronting adolescent challenges. The third section is about bush piloting for Jesus in Latin America, a vocation that fulfilled my childhood dreams and provided several opportunities to end my life. The fourth traces my discovery of the world outside Fundamentalism, a world where people questioned my certainties. The last section describes what life looks like at retirement and beyond—"The last of life, for which the first was made..."

I use some pseudonyms and change a few incidents to protect people's identities.

I need to thank many people. Caribou and Dunn Bros. provided hours of work in a pleasant atmosphere for the price of a cup of coffee. Sharon Knudsen, Dan Taylor and the Christian Memoirs writing group provided encouragement and advice. Rick Fritz read an early draft. Thanks to my editor, Jonathan Schindler, to Angela Hoy for layout, and Todd Engel for cover design. Finally, thanks to Barbara, my greatest critic and encourager.

I

FORMING A FUNDAMENTALIST

My Fundamentalist upbringing cast a bright light, and a few shadows, on all the years of my life. What is a Fundamentalist and how does one become one? What is Fundamentalism's sticking power, so much that it molds one's worldview for a lifetime?

1.

Forming a Fundamentalist

"Fundamentalist"—an Evangelical with an attitude

The Scofield KJV Bible of my parents rules at Silver Acres, the church my parents midwifed in 1937 under the watchful eye of the American Sunday School Union (ASSU). When I am two weeks old, Mother carries me to Silver Acres where everybody is Fundamentalist. I grow up in this fortress of faith, sheltered from the wasteland of worldly wantonness.

Silver Acres Community Church still stands on a sandy lot in west Santa Ana, California, where you can taste the dust when the Santana winds blow in off the Mojave Desert. A white, wood-sided building supports a squat bell tower whose bell rope hangs in the small anteroom as an illicit temptation for young boys.

I visualize sitting in the auditorium (we never call it a "sanctuary") which measures forty by seventy feet and provides room for about one hundred people. Bereft of any paintings, stained glass or wall decorations, it has an acoustic tile ceiling with a few hanging lights. The knotty-pine walls smell of wood stain. On this hot summer day, my mind's eye sees the ceiling fans beating hopefully against the hot, dry air.

I'm a first grader, sitting motionless while the teenage girls behind me play with my red curls. Up front, Pop McIntosh waves his arms and bellows, "All together now, 'There is power, power, wonder-working power in the blood of the lamb..." A piano and rented electric organ accompany our singing.

At Silver Acres, nothing you can see is sacred or holy. Neither the choir nor the pastor wears robes. We recite no liturgy, apply no anointing oil, dedicate no sacred nave or altar, repeat no creeds, and never recite the Lord's Prayer. No crosses or pictures hang on the walls.

Front and center stands the pulpit from which the preacher proclaims truth. Directly below the pulpit sits the communion table with "Do This in Remembrance of Me" carved on the front. The church has no sacred space—we sometimes play tag across the platform, climb up into the belfry, or run races around the building.

The sermon lasts about forty minutes. (Brother Cantrell, a master of words and of the Word, says, "Sermonettes make Christianettes.") We mainly marinate in the Epistles, not so much in the Gospels (he prefers doctrine to narrative). He issues a long altar call, inviting people to come forward and get saved.

The great Fundamentalist movement arose in the 1920s, a reaction against the more liberal Modernists. Growing up in Silver Acres I never hear Modernist words—*church calendar, Apostles' Creed, Beatitudes, surplice, peacemaking, justice.* Or

charismatic words—*slaying in the Spirit, word of knowledge, anointing with oil, prayer language.* Fundamentalist words are different—*worldliness*, *the separated life*, *dispensations, born again, predestination, the pre-Tribulational rapture, vicarious atonement*. I become an expert wordsmith by the time I'm twelve.

Brother Dick Cantrell could pass as Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. Short and fiftyish, he displays a pleasantly rounded midriff and his hair retreats above his bifocals. He always wears a dark suit, white shirt, four-in-hand tie, and polished black shoes. He knows his Bible almost as well as he knows college football scores, deftly segue-ing from Leviticus to Luke, II Chronicles to II Corinthians. I've never heard that he attended seminary, yet he's Bible-school confident and a master of King James English. When he talks about foreknowledge, typology, exegesis and inerrancy, I think him the most intelligent man I know. No flagging zeal here. He says things like, "You just need to believe what the Bible says," "Hide God's Word in your heart," "In the providence of God," and "The Old Testament tabernacle is a type of Christ." (It seems everything in the Old Testament is a type of Christ.) He says, "If you don't have a church home, we welcome you here. We are Fundamentalist, nondenominational, unaffiliated, Bible-believing, pre-Millennial, pre-Tribulational..." (I think, *Can you still be baptized if you don't know what he's talking about?*) He never suspects he does not possess God's whole truth, fresh from the font.

He explains the great sweep of creation, the fall, the chosen nation, the exile, the cross. He *knows* who Jesus is (the God-man), why he died (to pay for our sins), what the Bible is (God's inerrant word), what will happen in the future (Christ is coming again). I feel tucked in, harbored against the attacks from the hostile world and from mainline-church Modernists who question the Bible's truth, especially the miracles. He aerates my spiritual soil, speaking of eternal security and the separated life. He sells certainty, a certainty unhobbled by doubts or alternative interpretations.

When I sit in the pew (we call them benches), my only distraction is Brother Cantrell's daughter, Kay, sitting broadly on the piano bench in her full skirt and see-through blouse. Brother Cantrell never preaches about see-through blouses.

The Cantrells live in the parsonage, a house that we all view as public space—we're always running in and out. Brother Cantrell's wife rolls her brown hair up on the sides. A bit overweight, she uses no makeup, giving her face a faded-out, serious appearance. She wears a large-print blue and white dress, brown hose, black three-inch heels, and a small hat with black lace. Like most Silver Acres women, I don't remember the sound of her voice, perhaps because of the Apostle Paul's counsel: "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence." (I Timothy 2:12, KJV).

In Sunday school we do "sword drills." When our teacher Mr. Hayden shouts, "John 15:3!" we all race to see who can

look it up first. His daughter Linda is my childhood flame. Yet when I fantasize, I think more about Patty. Patty's less fundamentalist, more interesting.

Art McIntosh, who is in training to be a missionary bush pilot, is another of my teachers. "Jamie, I've heard about you," he says. "You won't be goofing off in this class." I quiet down. In my mind, Art McIntosh walks on water.

At home on rainy days, I cut little rectangles out of poster board, write Bible verses on one side and the reference on the other, and store these in a yellow Velveeta cheese box. I learn a holy geography, traverse salvation history, and master arcane theological arguments. In short, I become a Bible brat, a Knower of the Book. My school friends' ignorance on these matters (they don't read the King James Bible) bolsters my belief that I'm somehow part of a chosen group.

Friends and heroes

Gazing around Silver Acres auditorium, I see like-minded brothers and sisters, families like ours that average four to five children. All of them are first-generation transplants from other states. The men wear short, parted hair, no hats and no brand-name clothing. Most wear suits or solid-color sport coats to church. They drive 1940s sedans or station wagons and work blue-collar jobs. Earl Ward runs a gas station. Handsome Ben Henry, car mechanic, impresses my mother. She says, "His fingernails are dirty, but he always has clean hands." Mr. and Mrs. Zanstra (with their dwarf daughter, Alice) milk forty cows

on their dairy farm. Gladstone McIntosh fattens beef cattle. His son Steve and I sometimes shoot birds with Steve's BB gun. Mr. Ballew always walks into the men's potluck suppers balancing a cherry pie in each hand. (I am the youngest potlucker who attends.) Gene Peters, another potlucker, left a goodbye note for his wife one day and then jumped in front of a speeding truck.

The Silver Acres women are more silent, auxiliary, buttresses rather than pillars of the church. They never wear pants and their dresses extend below the knees. This is informal California, but many women still wear hats (a survival of East Coast customs), little or no jewelry, and never any earrings. If any woman wears lipstick or makeup, we view her as worldly, an outsider.

The Catholics have their saints (we call them idols), but we have our own heroes, such as radio preacher Charles Fuller or pianist Phil Kerr. We listen to J. Vernon McGee's slow, folksy drawl on the radio. "Dear friends, you know that all people on the topside of this earth are sinners..." He died in 1988 but achieved immortality in his "Through the Bible" series, which still airs on some Christian radio stations across the United States.

For us Fundamentalists, Billy Graham has an uncertain odor about him since he hobnobs with Modernists. At his Chattanooga crusade he personally pulled down the ropes separating the seats between blacks and whites. At Madison Square Garden he preached with Martin Luther King (a

Modernist) and once bailed him out of jail. The strictest Fundamentalists shun Graham because of "secondary separation" (one should separate from those who refuse to separate from Modernists). At Silver Acres, however, we know that he preaches, "The Bible says...," so we embrace him. When he comes to the Los Angeles Coliseum, I join hundreds of people as they walk down front to the sound of the choir singing "Just as I Am." Such are our Fundamentalist heroes.

And we have our fallen heroes. The infamous 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial featured the Creationist arguments of the great Fundamentalist William Jennings Bryan, who was disemboweled by the lawyer, Clarence Darrow. (Bryan died shortly thereafter.) And Aimee Semple McPherson was a notorious 1920s Foursquare Church preacher who claimed someone kidnapped her and took her to Mexico. But Dad said, "She ran off to marry her first cousin."

Faith at home

Faith isn't just something that happens at church—for me, it came with my mother's milk. After I was born, Dad held Bible classes for the Havasupai people at the Grand Canyon, pastored a tiny congregation up in California gold country at Kelsey, and helped build the Niland church down in the desert, near the Salton Sea.

As a child I navigate a sea of Christian books—*Pilgrim's Progress, Fox's Book of Martyrs,* missionary biographies, and a mammoth volume, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the*

Bible, indexed to the original Greek and Hebrew. Before family meals we sing,

Thank you, Lord, for saving my soul,
Thank you, Lord, for making me whole.
Thank you, Lord, for giving to me,
Thy great salvation so rich and free.[1]

After dinner, Dad reads heroic tales of missionaries or he'll read from a book of illustrated Bible stories. In our living room a wall plaque warns, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last." In my bedroom hangs a picture of a kneeling child in a nightgown—"Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep..." From the time I am four years old, Mother requires spontaneous prayers at bedtime, on the grounds that a bad spontaneous prayer trumps a good memorized one. Silver Acres is big on spontaneity.

Reverend Bunnell superintends the Sunday School Union, the organization that founded Silver Acres. I see him in my mind's eye visiting our home, smelling faintly of cologne, with a neck as big as his head and a body with no corners. He doesn't sit in our living room chair; he pours himself in, filling every crevice. He says, "Jamie, do you want to become a missionary? You should, you know." I never see him other than in his brown suit and shoes. His dark eyebrows overhang his earnest blue eyes and double chin. Tiny black hairs stick out of his ears, and his horn-rimmed glasses rest on rodent cheeks. A baleful portent of eternal judgment, he walks stately,

purposefully, and offers a crushing handshake. He smiles but doesn't tell jokes. My parents greatly respect him. Studying him, I learn that one probably gets to heaven by being serious. When he visits, he and his wife sleep in the bedroom my sister and I share. He shushes us. "Keep quiet; we're having our prayers." As they fall asleep, we can hear their heavy breathing.

I get saved when I am five. Mother drives me to Mrs. Baker's Bible class, where we kindergartners deposit ourselves on her living room rug. She uses a flannelgraph—a flannel cloth draped over an easel—to which she affixes cloth characters from the Bible. "Here's Jesus. He died for you here on this cross because he loves you so much and wants you to believe in him. Will you accept him?"

The first tremors of faith stir in my soul. I raise my hand and say, "Yes, I will."

Silver Acres is big on salvation, because no one is born a Christian—you have to get saved. My neighbor Jerry never got saved. Yet he tells me he was baptized as a baby and thus is a Christian unless he walks away (which I don't think he ever did). In my case I know I'm a sinner and no Christian at all until I get saved. For years after, getting saved at Mrs. Baker's becomes part of my "salvation story." We all had to have a salvation story. My parents wanted all of us kids to get saved and as far as I know, we all did.

For my whole childhood, Jesus appears to me sort of as a character in a Mother Goose story—iconic, without history,

geography or culture—like one of Mrs. Baker's flannelgraph figures. It's easy to believe that this luminous Jesus is God. Fifteen years later the stunning truth dawns on me: Jesus is also a real man, situated in space and time, in a specific culture, who knows my sorrows and successes, who accompanies me. But that will be my second conversion, a story for another time.

Brother Cantrell preaches that after you get saved you should share this good news with others. Our family shares it when we go to visit Uncle John in Texas. He's unsaved (Episcopal Church, Modernist), so we pray regularly for him. Before our trip we lay piles of tracts alongside large squares of red cellophane on the living room floor. We love holding the cellophane up to our eyes. It crackles as we wrap the tracts and tightly twist the cellophane ends. Then we pack these tracts in large boxes in the back of our light green 1955 Ford station wagon. All through California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas we hurl these projectiles at unsuspecting pedestrians, swiveling our heads to see if they pick them up. We know how to share our faith.

I grow up in two worlds—a world of school and town and a separate world of church and home. Our family never goes to dances or movies; no one smokes or drinks alcohol; my sisters wear no earrings, makeup or low-cut dresses. As the Bible says, "'Wherefore come out from among them and be ye separate,' saith the Lord" (II Corinthians 6:17, KJV). We cannot say *gee*, *golly*, *darn*, *jiminy Christmas*, *shoot*, *fart* or *pee*. I

know that separation means shunning non-Christian girls. Okay, most of them shun *me*, but I assume it's because I'm saved and they're lost. In this and many other ways, we separate ourselves from the world.

We drive eight miles each way to church. I wear my polished Sunday shoes, collared white shirt, and sometimes a little sport coat with my pen and pencil set in the inside pocket. We go back on Sunday evenings, and on Wednesdays, we go for prayer meetings. My neighbor Jerry is a Modernist who attends the Methodist church in town. (But he's never heard the word "Modernist.") He goes on camping trips on Sundays, but we are Sabbatarians and keep the Lord's Day special. We don't receive the Sunday newspaper. No school homework on Sundays, no buying gas or groceries. Instead, I read books, play in the orange grove with my brother and sisters, or visit grandparents and cousins. Old habits die hard—to this day, I avoid Sunday purchases.

When I am twelve years old, Brother Porter baptizes me by immersion. I'm not happy—Pastor Porter comes from a church unknown to me, the Plymouth Brethren. I want Brother Cantrell. But Mother assures me my baptism is valid. The onlookers sing "O Happy Day" as I come up soaking wet. Fundamentalists are anti-sacramental—Brother Porter affirms that baptism doesn't do anything for you. It merely signs to the world that you're saved and wish to follow Jesus.

I always wonder about Jerry. He goes to dances and he has joined the DeMolay (Masonic connections?). When we are in

fifth grade, I give him a New Testament, hoping he will get saved like I did. In the summers, Jerry goes off to Osceola YMCA camp, but we Fundamentalists go to Pine Valley Bible Camp, an assortment of tar-papered buildings that formerly housed Marine trainees. (Today, the PVBC website still affirms "...we believe the Bible in the original to be the plenary, inerrant and inspired Word of God…") At Pine Valley I entertain my friends with Bible jokes. Who was the shortest man in the Bible? (Bildad, the Shuhite). First mention of baseball in the Bible? (The big-inning). Smoking? (Rachael lit off her camel). I ask one of the Pine Valley preachers, "Brother Wallace, when was the first tennis match in the Bible?" [Answer: When David served in Saul's court].

He's not amused. "Son, you shouldn't make jokes about God's holy Word." The Fundamentalist leaders revere the Bible.

We sit through long sermons and extended altar calls (although the auditorium has no "altar" as such). The leaders hope that every camper gets born again or at least gets more serious about faith. I usually hold out until after the last song and then sneak down to the altar railing. But if I were more honest, I would have prayed something like, "Lord, if you can't make me a better boy, don't worry. I'm having a real good time like I am." They have "faggot services," when each camper selects a small broken branch, steps up to the blazing fire pit, speaks some sort of testimony or declares a resolution, then

throws the faggot into the fire. Pine Valley helps form my faith.

This we believe

I grow up thinking that people come in only two types—people like us and worldly people with whom we share our faith (everyone else). Outside of the Fundamentalist church, everything tends to atheism. Those outsiders include non-Christians, Catholics and Modernists like my friend Jerry. Seeing Jerry's Methodist church in my mind's eye, it intimidates me with its imposing brick buildings, deeply-embossed wood pulpit and rich woodwork. More women wear hats at Jerry's church than at Silver Acres. My pastor had warned me that this church doesn't believe Jesus is God and that they explain away the miracles. I sing in their choir, but I always have my guard up. I ask Jerry, "Does your church celebrate Easter?" He stares at me blankly. Fifteen years later he will be killed when his 1957 Chevy leaves the road and hurtles into a tree. His sister would later send his New Testament back to me with signs that it was well used.

I secretly envy the Catholics because in *their* church, the priest turns the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, whereas at Silver Acres Brother Cantrell says, "Remember—this is only bread and grape juice. It doesn't do anything for you. It's only a remembrance of Christ's death." We are all teetotalers and Brother Cantrell explains that Jesus actually drank grape juice, not wine. When we receive this

communion meal, I have trouble focusing on the spiritual meaning. I watch the dark liquid pooled by surface tension just at the rim of the tiny cup. I try to see how far I can tip it without spilling. I find out. I taste the sweet grape juice and broken saltine crackers and hear the words, "This is my body, broken for you." It's past lunchtime. I'm hungry and briefly consider asking for seconds.

We believe in predestination, but the cynical poet mocks us:

> Franciscus Gomarus
> Was a superlapsarius
> (He actually gave Adam an excuse)
> Saying God had decreed,
> Foreordained Adam's deed
> God had pre-cooked Adam's goose.
>
> Unknown

For reasons known only to God, God has not precooked *our* goose, but elected us for heaven, predestined us before all time began. We look for a future "house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (II Corinthians 5:1, KJV), a small, quiet, heavenly house, holding only a few of us. We sing, "I've Got a Home in Glory Land" and "This World Is Not My Home." If predestination is true, I have no choice—once in, always in. But am I in, am I predestined? I'm slightly confused. I walk the sawdust trail at various tent meetings to make sure I've done it right.

Our beliefs come in two colors—black and white—like the

white ply board signs hanging in the front corners of Silver Acres auditorium. On the left in black letters—"He that believeth on him is not condemned." On the right—"But he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. John 3:18" (KJV). The blessed and the condemned. You want to be on the left sign, not the right.

Visiting speakers at Silver Acres hang up painted, wall-to-wall murals across the front of the auditorium, depicting Genesis to Revelation, preaching all the way from left to right. The murals terrify me, especially the right-hand pictures—the seven-horned creature, the lashing flames of hell, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the huge, squatting beast waiting to gobble up the woman's newborn child. I get the idea that God is generally ticked off with the world and that Christ is coming back soon, in judgment. I become expert in details of the Second Coming, good news for the Elect, but bitter medicine for unbelievers. Will we Separated Ones face God's judgment? In 1950s postwar America the threat of nuclear holocaust hangs like a sword overhead. We schoolchildren practice duck and cover, scrambling under our desks. But if a nuclear bomb doesn't get me, I know the Second Coming will. I secretly hope he won't come back soon, at least not until I get married.

***

Silver Acres of blessed memory. Silver Acres provided a lens, a template to resolve ambiguities and to make sense of the world. Following the tradition of the likes of Asher Lev and *Fiddler on the Roof's* Tevye ("Lord, I know we're your chosen people..."), we were God's special ones, snatched out of the bondage of the world and the slavery of our own personal Egypt, brought into a new spiritual freedom, destined for heaven. We knew that only God, not we, could save the world.

Silver Acres trafficked in propositions, not metaphors, offering more doctrine and less doing, more faith and less feeling, more theology and less thrills, more belief and less ritual, more history and less mystery. Silver Acres was anti-Modernist, but was itself a modern, Enlightenment project. They proclaimed a beefy belief that the text means something in itself, and that with enough study, you would close in on the one correct interpretation.

I tried to escape this Fundamentalism for fifty years, but only partially succeeded—you can't un-ring the bell. I still enjoy good sermons, read a few Bible verses each day and talk with strangers about Jesus and salvation. What doctrine I learned, I learned first at Silver Acres. I tread worldly ground now, but on feet shod with Fundamentalist sandals. My circle extends more widely now—I join hands on the Christian journey with other brothers and sisters, including Catholics, The KJV no longer sits on my reading table, but the verses I best remember are in KJV dialect.

I mourn the disappeared certainties of my youth, yet the

Bible stories stick. That early sense of calling, of mission, still simmers today. Fundamentalism situated me socially and defined my vocation. So, I agree with Augustine, “The church is a whore, but she’s my mother.” Like the dried-out drunk at an AA meeting, I declare (it’s like confessing a sin!)—”Hello. My name is Jim and I‘m [still] a Fundamentalist.”

4.

The World over the Wall

How do you like to go up in a swing,
Up in the air so blue?
Oh, I do think it the pleasantest thing
Ever a child can do!
Up in the air and over the wall,
Till I can see so wide,
Rivers and trees and cattle and all
Over the countryside—
Till I look down on the garden green,
Down on the roof so brown—
Up in the air I go flying again,
Up in the air and down!
—Robert Louis Stevenson, "The Swing."[3]

While my father taught me to love all modern speed machines, Mother taught me to love reading. A stay-at-home mom (an unexceptional choice in the 1940s), she reared five children in our Cambridge Street home in the orange grove. She created time to read stories to us from the green Thornton W. Burgess books— *Chatterer the Red Squirrel*, *Bobby White*, *Old Man Coyote*. Then, she read from his *Mother*

West Wind "Why" Stories—"The Adventures of Danny Meadow Mouse" and "Why Peter Rabbit Cannot Fold His Hands." It seems Peter was once able to fold them, but Mother West Wind took away this ability because he was lazy. "I like these stories," Mother said, "because they all end happy" [except for Timmy Trout, who disobeyed his mother, got hooked, and landed in a frying pan]. I consumed these stories, first from her lips and then through my own reading.

I visualize my Southern California childhood filled with snowless winters, hot summers, and throat-burning Los Angeles smog that dissipates only when the dry Santana winds blow in from the desert. I see myself lying on our backyard grass under our wooden windmill clothesline, gazing up at the clouds and dreaming childish dreams—dreams that Mother feeds. When I tell Mother I'm bored, she says, "Read *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*," or "Let's plays cards." Our Fundamentalist church frowns on playing with regular "Euchre deck" cards, so we play *Authors*, where each suit has a picture of an author and each card is one of the author's books, such as Louisa May Alcott (*Little Women*, *Eight Cousins*) or Robert Louis Stevenson (*Treasure Island*, *A Child's Garden of Verses*). When I call for a card, Mother always insists that I name the author and book title. I learn to love these books long before I read them.

I carry this love of writers and writing into Mrs. Brennan's first grade class, where I remember the smell of her paper—unlined, manila colored, with tiny flecks of embedded wood

pulp—on which we use our #2 pencils to create letters that represent sounds. Mrs. Brennan believes passionately in two things—phonetics and flashcards. She teaches us to read, not by recognizing words, but by sounding out letters. She holds up a card with an "A" on it and the whole class says, "Ahh, ahh." When the card has a "B," we say, "Buh, buh." When she shows us the "Ph" card, she touches her fingertips together, moves her forearm forward to imitate a long neck, and says, "Remember the goose, class." We all hiss, "Fff, fff," and then wipe the saliva off our desks.

She reads to us out of oversize Dick and Jane books, with Dick, Jane, little Sally and their dog, Spot. "Dick, Dick, see Jane." "Jump, Spot, jump, jump." I think, *I don't know anybody who talks like that. Why do they keep repeating themselves?* Yet the stories burn word-symbols into my brain.

When we graduate to our *Friends and Neighbors* book in second grade, I discover a new universe—the East. Here, all the white children live in tidy houses under huge oak and maple trees and no one is poor. No bullies in this neighborhood—all the kids are friendly. My California neighborhood is different. The Mexicans speak Spanish to each other, bullies (white ones) meet me after school and beat me up, and many of us live in houses where the paint peels from the siding and where the kitchen linoleum shows worn, black spots. In the East, happy boys in knickers sled down snowy hills as squirrels scramble up nearby maple trees. In Orange I never see knickers, squirrels, snow banks or sleds, although

Dad assures me that when he was growing up in Minnesota, he himself had worn knickers. I still remember that *Friends and Neighbors* town—I imagine I've searched for it my whole life.

In third grade I can't wait for Mrs. Surowick to read to us about Pinky and Blacky, two roguish cats who share great adventures wandering around a museum late at night. I never suspect that these wonderful stories are teaching us world history and the love of reading.

About that same time I discover Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Swing" (above). He has me at the swing. I long for the world over the wall—distant, unknown and far from the groves of Orange, my hometown.

At twelve I get pimples, a crackly voice, body hair and something else—a black-leather King James Bible that I carry to church like a stubby fifth limb. Mother considers the King James Version (KJV) a lifeboat that will bear me through adolescence, protect me from the fierce fires of a godless world, lead me into a blessed adulthood, and finally to heaven. Approved by King James in 1611, the KJV guided the faithful at the time of the Pilgrims. I smell the leather, finger the onionskin pages, and bury myself in it like a wood tick. The Bible looms large at home. Mother counsels me, "Memorize Bible verses." The Bible introduces me not only to faith but also to great literature. Later, when I read Shakespeare, I am surprised to find King James English familiar to me.

I soon learn to speak KJV, but not always with understanding—too many strange words and stranger ideas.

Fortunately, Cyrus Ingerson Scofield's notes come to the rescue, notes that seem clearer than the text itself. He outlines the Tribulation, the Millennium and the seven Dispensations—a complete panorama of salvation history, candy for the mind. These notes answer life's big questions—where did I come from, what does it all mean, where am I going, who is God, and what does He require? (In those days, God was always a "He," and was always capitalized.) Early on, these answers form my view of the world.

At our Silver Acres Church Pastor Cantrell preaches from the same Scofield Bible and I become a junior expert in the text. I don't understand all the King James words—mandrakes, begot, shew (I pronounce it "shoe")—but, like the Pledge of Allegiance that I learned in first grade, these words gather meaning as I mature. I read for prizes. My Sunday school teacher, Mr. Hayden, sets tiny airplanes on tracks running across a map of the world. I read the most, advance my plane the farthest, and eventually earn a matching pen and pencil set.

I learn Christianity from my pastor, from other men who preach at summer camps and from faithful women who teach in Daily Vacation Bible School, all of them Bible-wise. They mesmerize me with their stories about God, sin, salvation and especially about the End Times, which holds the promise of heaven or the threat of hellfire. To gain the first and escape the second, I walk down the aisle each time a visiting preacher comes to town with his big white tent and sawdust floor. Besides, I want their little red book—a free Gospel of John

with important verses underlined. In all these ways the Bible teaches me the English language, forges my reading habits, shapes my beliefs. The Bible also introduces me to history and geography as well as to human greatness and frailty.

Reading gives me a passport to far countries, introduces me to historic figures, lets me witness great events and dazzles me with strange ideas. Reading fires my curiosity to think, to dream, to venture out into the world. Later, when I travel to genuine eastern *Friends and Neighbors towns*, I stomp in the snow and marvel at the squirrels (but never see a boy in knickers). I pilot a plane over distant lands and see the world over the wall that Stevenson helped me dream about.

But Mother read to me first.

15.

A Little Help Home

He, who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright.
—William Cullen Bryant, "To a Waterfowl."[9]

It's 1972. My high school friends are risking their lives in the jungles of Vietnam, and I'm flying a mission airplane over the jungles of Amazonas. Barbara and I are now married and living in Puerto Ayacucho. Most pilots respect the jungle; the rest die young. Our single-engine Cessna 185 carries six people at 160 mph, and a bulbous belly pod packs extra cargo—the Indians say she's pregnant. Her modified wings allow short-field takeoffs and her oversize main wheels cushion landings on rough airstrips.

Today I'm making a "school bus" run to return missionary kids to Tama Tama, while back home in Puerto Ayacucho my new wife monitors our progress on the short-wave radio. We pick up two kids at the Caño Panare airstrip, and while we load, loinclothed Panares smudge the plane's aluminum skin with their red-ochred hands. Seventy minutes later we set down

in Caño Iguana, a short airstrip cut through high trees. Here you always land uphill and takeoff downhill. The plane skids to a stop, mud-mottled, as Yuana men in bark-cloth G-strings emerge from the edge of the forest. Jenny Blinco boards—black eyed, dark skinned and eight years old. Her Yanomamo Indian mother had abandoned her at birth, and ants already were crawling in her eyes when a Piaroa Indian man snatched her up and gave her to Tom and Lila Blinco, who adopted her.

Then we take off for San Juan airstrip, a red-dirt scar in a vast savannah. Fred Findley walks out to meet us—thirty-five, with brown hair and eyes, jeans and a colored T-shirt, he wears a broad-brimmed straw hat against the tropical sun. Four years earlier, Fred's father, along with pilot Don Roberson, perished in a fiery crash—search planes spent a week finding the strewn wreckage. Phil replaced Don; then I replaced Phil.

Fred asks, "Do you want to gas up?" I hesitate. It's mid-afternoon. Gassing up means rolling out a fifty-five-gallon drum and hand-pumping the fuel through a chamois filter.

"We have enough fuel, Fred. One hour to Tama Tama plus one hour reserve."

Sam, twelve, gets in the copilot seat, I belt the two littlest kids in the rear jump seats, and the four remaining kids spread themselves across the middle, two under each seatbelt. I push their backpacks into the belly pod and taxi out to the airstrip. At full throttle we roll five hundred feet, lift off and climb to ten thousand feet into a doubtful sky.

A tropical storm

The plane's cruciform shadow (pilots call it "the aviator's cross") follows us across the clouds below, always in the exact center of a bright little rainbow circle. But soon we enter a slate-grey layer and go on instruments. An insignificant speck, a hermetic aluminum cocoon, we're invisible from the ground in the enveloping dark clouds. How to read the secrets of this gathering storm? Lightning flashes illuminate the cabin interior. A bolt strikes so close we hear its thunder over the thrum of the engine. The plane shudders, and I throttle back to turbulence penetration airspeed, slow enough to keep the wings on, but fast enough to avoid stalling in the heavy gusts. I pivot around and stare at the child faces—the smaller ones wan and tremulous, but wearing a patina of courage. One white-knuckled child grasps a brown paper lunch bag. A bitten apple rolls around the floor. Tommy asks, "Are we almost there?"

"About half an hour," I say. "Cinch your seatbelts tight." I follow my thunderstorm training—lower the pilot's seat, secure everything in the cockpit, turn the cabin lights up and close one eye (a precaution against a blinding flash of lightning).

Rain lashes the Plexiglas windshield. I think, *Tropical thunderstorms rarely tear the wings off an airplane—unless you lose control.* Shocking bumps jerk us up, then down. A pencil flies up in my face and the stall-warning horn beeps. The jolts cause the prop to cavitate, now slowing, now speeding the engine. The nose pitches and wallows, airspeed fluctuates 20 mph and the altimeter jumps three hundred feet up, then down.

I smell engine oil. I stare at the instruments and struggle to keep right side up, muscling the controls, no longer commanding but only suggesting. I look out at the insubstantial struts that tether the fuselage to our aluminum wings, our life. A child screams, his tiny arms flailing every time a sharp jolt throws him against his seatbelt. Veteran fliers, these, yet most have never weathered a thunderstorm. I smell sour milk.

We've been out at least forty minutes—usually we're visual before now. Thirty minutes from here, Tama Tama clings to the banks of the Orinoco River, a small island of civilization in a vast sea of broccoli-like jungle. The slim antenna wire wind-whips thirty feet behind the tail, our only communication to the peopled world below. I decide to radio them.

"Tama Tama, what's your weather now?"

"Rain's increasing. Lowering clouds, but I don't know how low."

"Can you see the tops of the trees?"

"Yes."

My hour fuel reserve now seems puny. Why didn't I gas up in San Juan? I feel something unfamiliar—a moist forehead, tightening stomach and clammy hands on the hard plastic control wheel. I know God doesn't reward stupidity, but I hope he doesn't punish it either. I pray out loud, "Lord, please protect all these precious children and lead us to our safe harbor."

Risking the river

We break into clear air. Dark clouds still threaten on both sides, but we see the Orinoco River snaking through the jungle vastness. I call Tama Tama. "We've broken out now. But I'm not certain if we're upriver or downriver. Get Paul on the radio."

I tell Paul, "The river's wider here at a bend and there's two thin, moon-shaped islands. Do you think we're upriver or downriver from Tama Tama?"

He picks up the microphone and ponders. He's navigated the river countless times in a dugout canoe. "I'm almost certain you need to fly fifteen minutes *upriver* to get to Tama Tama."

We see rain and low, black clouds upriver and we have only 1.2 hours fuel left. Should we turn into the storm? Or should we use our get-out-of-jail card—Santa Barbara—a forlorn grass airstrip forty minutes downriver. We would have to overnight there—seven scared kids and I sleeping in the airplane at an unattended airstrip, waiting several hours for a dugout canoe to bring fuel down from Tama Tama.

I waver. How much risk is too much? If we run out of fuel, the choices become simple—the trees or the muddy river. I mentally choose the trees—some of the kids can't swim. Pat Dye at Tama Tama reports, "It's still raining with low clouds, but fairly good visibility."

I make up my mind. "We're turning upriver toward Tama Tama."

The kids stop crying. We descend, trying to keep the river

in sight through the rain. Here, eight hundred miles from its mouth, the Orinoco is still broad, so we fly along the river between the hundred-foot trees that line its banks—when the river turns, we turn. The rain increases. I'm too busy for the radio, so I roll in the trailing antenna. I worry that the lowering clouds will force us into the river or that the heavy rain will blind me. I maintain altitude and slow my airspeed. Have we missed Tama Tama? I strain to see the trees along the riverbank. I watch the sinking fuel gauges and reduce power to save every drop of fuel. My old flight instructor used to say, "You can never have too much fuel." Today, I believe.

Will the rain increase or decrease? Will we see Tama Tama in time or will we speed past it and then not be able to turn around? In this weather, Santa Barbara's looking better and better. I had rejected Santa Barbara only because of inconvenience. But I've got seven kids aboard. Why am I continuing in this heavy rain?

We turn around a sharp bend and see a small opening through the tree line. A quick roll left through the break in the trees, a roll right to line up with Tama Tama airstrip and I feel the welcome, wet grass under my wheels. Many people run out to the plane and embrace the children. We've reached our safe haven.

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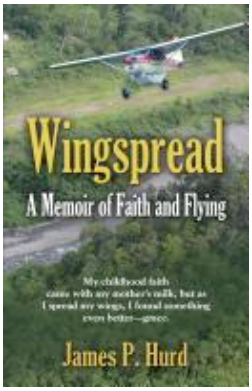
Passengers get scared at the wrong times, for the wrong

reasons. The kids panicked in the thunderstorm, yet the greatest danger was ten minutes before we landed. In bush flying you can go wrong a hundred different ways—ignorance, rusty skills, poor maintenance, unforeseen airstrip conditions, bad weather and especially, bad choices. Pilots aren't always rational (seventy-five percent of pilots think they're above average). What was the risk of *not* reaching Tama Tama—one in a hundred? One in a thousand? Regardless, the risk was too high to jeopardize lives.

Finding one's way in the air is like finding one's way in life. I'm no theologian, but I know that God doesn't always forgive stupidity. I regret my bad judgment, but this time, I didn't pay the price. I learned about flying from that.



When James Hurd spread his wings - attending Chicago's Moody Bible Institute, flying airplanes in rural South America, encountering Barbara - he attempted to leave his childhood Fundamentalist Christian faith behind. Later, he realized how much the grace of God had operated in those childhood years. So, today, he says (it's like confessing a sin), "Hello. My name is Jim, and I'm still - sort of - a Fundamentalist..."

Wingspread