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The Invisible Hand

ADAM SMITH, WHOSE HISTORIC WORK *The Wealth of Nations* was published in 1776, said there is an “invisible hand” that guides all human economic activity.

Economics alone? Evidence continued to mount for me that this maxim was too limited—that there was an Invisible Hand at work guiding *all* of life. At least the events that had loomed so large early in my marriage and business career seemed to indicate there was a subtle yet profound influence shaping my direction in life—God’s Invisible Hand.

This influence had first surfaced toward the end of high school when I began applying to colleges. I saw two possibilities. One was Kenyon College, a liberal arts school in Ohio with an adjunct Episcopalian seminary. By attending there, I reasoned, I could go on to seminary, leaving the door open to some form of ministry. The other option was completely different. It was to apply to MIT,

one of the nation's top schools for engineering and science. Acceptance there would point me to a career in business.

Although I felt that ministry would somehow be the "right" thing to do (don't ask me why), my heart was really leaning toward a career in business. My dad had graduated as an electrical engineer from the University of Toronto, and deep down I wanted to be an engineer too. I was anything but certain of the outcome as I dropped the applications into the mail. If college and career were indeed linked, the replies from those two colleges would point me in the direction of my life's work. Anxiously I awaited the responses.

Which Way to Go?

I heard from Kenyon first, with an unqualified acceptance. I was pleased, but not exuberant. Could I possibly be accepted at MIT, my first choice? I knew the competition for admission was as tough as anywhere in the country. A week passed, then a month, six weeks, and still no reply. Then it happened. I was at home the day the mailman delivered the long-awaited envelope with the return address: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Holding my breath, I opened the letter. When my eyes fell on the word "acceptance," I gave a loud and sustained "Whoopee!!!" that echoed through the house, bringing my mother running at full tilt. Never mind that it was conditional on my maintaining at least a C+ average my first semester. I was in. Nothing, I determined, would keep me from becoming a graduate engineer. I was on a career path, at least at this point, toward engineering

and the sciences, not ministry. There it was—the Invisible Hand steering me. In any case, I was the happiest senior at Elyria High School on that day in May 1956.

Once at college, however, a measure of spiritual inquiry continued—enough that I attended church regularly and found myself in vigorous religious debates, defending the idea of an omnipotent God. I saw myself as a moral person. I avoided trouble—at least serious trouble.

The Pest

But I was also cautious, especially with the tack taken by a freshman classmate named Dave. Dave kept telling me I needed to be “born again,” using terminology alien to my Episcopal upbringing. Regularly, he would “just happen” to be at the intersection where I would start my daily ten-minute walk across the Charles River Bridge connecting Boston, where I lived in the Sigma Chi fraternity house, with Cambridge, where the campus was located. Try as I might, I could avoid neither Dave nor the nettling conversations that ensued whenever he intercepted me.

In a word, what Dave was selling, I wasn’t buying. He struck me as narrow, religious and pesky. He seemed to be locked into a formula, and I had an argument to counter every one of his neatly packaged theories.

I heard some of Dave’s same formulas presented when, one night during my senior year of college, curiosity took me to an evangelistic crusade meeting. At the conclusion, I strode to the front platform, where a counselor began showing me Bible passages. “Here’s the scriptural pattern for changing your life,”

he said. “Now, John 3:16 says . . . and in Romans 10 . . .” But I still wasn’t buying. It seemed too simplistic. It involved faith, and faith didn’t seem to square with intellect.

In spite of my unwillingness to accept such an approach, I considered myself an open person spiritually, holding to a certain reverence for God. I even wondered again if I should consider some form of more direct ministry, at least for a period of time. After all, wouldn’t that be more worthy than simply plunging into a secular work career?

I’ve got it! I remember thinking. *I’ve had two years of ROTC training. I’ll do a stint as a chaplain in the Air Force.* That sounded elevated, noble. So I took counsel with Dr. Theodore Ferris, the eloquent rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in Boston where I had been attending most Sundays.

“John,” he intoned, “I wouldn’t advise going into any kind of ministry unless you truly sense you are called to it. Wait for that call. If it’s genuine, you’ll know it.”

Before long, on-campus interviews began. Boeing in Seattle was the first to offer a position. That was followed by an offer from a much smaller aerospace firm in the town where I had grown up—a company where I had worked as a lab technician the previous summer. By taking a position there, I could not only live with my parents, but I would be a mere three hundred miles from Wendy, still in college at the University of Toronto.

I chose to work with Lear, the smaller firm. Dr. Ferris’s wise advice helped me take the business-oriented option with a clear conscience. I simply didn’t have the strong sense of call toward ministry, and it would have been wrong to try to manufacture it.

So the slide rule, not Episcopal vestments, became the signature of my trade. The Invisible Hand was at work—shaping, directing the steps of my life.

A Living Reality

In retrospect I realize that during college and the years that followed, I had my spiritual heels unduly dug in, resisting various incremental means by which God was trying to draw me into a deeper relationship with himself. (I'm so grateful he didn't give up on me.) Though much of what I had encountered in the presentation of Christianity during those college years was unappealing, I began seeing in others—especially Wendy and her family—faith that was a living reality. For them, God wasn't aloof. He was personal. They approached him as a close friend.

Wendy's dad was an Anglican minister, in fact the president of a theological seminary. Her mother was an active church leader. But it wasn't their credentials that made the impact. It was the natural way their spiritual views were integrated into the rest of their lives. They seemed to joyfully live and breathe their faith.

Wendy was my greatest example. She "walked out" a quiet yet confident faith—not complex, but sincere, deeply satisfying to her and with winsome appeal to others. So I watched, I admired, and I considered. But I also struggled, time and again thinking, *This faith business defies logic, and I'm not about to put my brain on a shelf. I need to understand more.*

Years passed, encompassing my first job, the beginning of our family and the major challenges of my early years in the family business. My career was firmly launched and successful. I had so

much to be thankful for! I couldn't but agree with the evidence that God was involved in many ways in my life and business. Yet here I was, in my late twenties, rigidly steeled against fully yielding to anything I couldn't analyze and reason my way through. *I don't want to become like one of those*, I concluded, recoiling from my image of the stereotypical fundamentalist Christian—blindly accepting, dogmatic, unimaginative and just plain not much fun. How I struggled!

But with the passage of each year, there was a growing sense that I was somehow spiritually incomplete. The Invisible Hand of God was still at work, nudging, prodding, encouraging me to see that there was more.