

When Circumstances Become the Main Character

A personal reflection on Gerald Warre Cornish's St. Paul from the Trenches

BY JOHN HIMMELBERGER

The first time I faced serious health issues, there was a constant temptation to unravel.

The new information seemed ready to interpret my entire life for me: You have wasted your life. You have made bad choices. Now it is going to cost you everything.

A little dramatic? Yes. But those thoughts had a way of making themselves heard.

There were real concerns. I was facing the possible loss of body parts and what that could mean for my mobility. Some of what had brought me there involved my choices. Some involved genetics and things I had not chosen. A mix of my fault and not my fault. Either way, it was my responsibility to respond.

I knew I needed to be proactive about what I was allowing to shape my outlook. I began looking for stories of people who had successfully navigated circumstances they would never have chosen. To me, testimony carries the hope that God will do it again. Hearing someone else's experience can help me recognize a possibility I am having trouble seeing for myself.

At a conference, a speaker mentioned *St. Paul from the Trenches* by Gerald Warre Cornish. I had not told anyone yet what I was facing or what I was looking for. The mention was unrelated to my search, but I was instantly drawn to the book.

Growing up in a military family made its setting especially interesting to me. What held my attention, though, was Cornish's decision to examine and write about Paul's letters in the throes of World War I.

I read it in one sitting.

When I finished, I kept thinking about something that surprised me: the war and his circumstances did not come across as the main characters.

By most accounts, that war was horrific. Yet as I read, I did not sense those circumstances casting a dark shadow over every interpretation of Paul's letters. What came through to me was a man engaging Scripture through his relationship with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

I presumed I was seeing something cultivated as a way of life. And I wanted to discover more of it for myself.

If he could do that in a war setting, perhaps I could learn to do it where I was.

My health concerns had begun coloring my interpretation of everything. New information about my body was quickly becoming a verdict about my future. Everything is ruined. Everything meaningful is slipping away.

Cornish's example brought me back to a distinction I needed:

Circumstances can reveal facts, but they do not get to dictate the truth.

The day before I learned this information, I had experienced happiness, peace, and joy. The health issues already existed. I simply did not know about them yet. Learning about them required a response, but why should that information get to redefine who I was?

Of course it affected me. I am human. There was fear, and there were practical decisions to make. But I did not want fear to become my default disposition.

As I leaned on my relationship with God, the reassurance I sensed was simple: *Nothing has changed. You are My beloved.*

My body was changing. My understanding of my health was changing. His love for me had not changed.

That mattered because what I feared losing was deeply relational and creative. I love making things: music, writing, woodworking, hot rods. I also love sharing the process with the people around me. I did not want to lose that part of my life or find myself sent out to pasture before I was finished participating.

Leaning on God helped me see that this new information had not erased my creativity or changed who He says I am. I still had something to make and something to share.

One of the first things I did was reorganize my woodshop. I looked at the layout with limited mobility in mind and adjusted it to accommodate what my body could do.

Then I built several pieces of furniture.

My body had changed. My mobility had changed. Even parts of my creative process had changed. And there I was, creating.

Finishing that first piece felt amazing, with a little “duh” mixed in. Of course. What was I worried about?

That did not answer every question about my health. It gave me a lived experience of something I needed to rediscover: I could adapt and continue making things.

A pastor at a church I once attended used to say, “Changing things grow, and growing things change.” That saying took on fresh meaning in the shop. There was room to discover a different way of doing something I loved.

Looking back, I am grateful for Cornish’s example. His writing reminded me that I get to prioritize how much attention I give things, and that the priority I assign often affects how much influence they have in my life.

My health deserved attention and responsibility. It did not need to become the main character in every thought, every relationship, or every possibility I considered.

For me, hope, peace, and joy grow from agreeing with who God says I am and who He says He is. I could face the facts of my situation from the security of being His beloved. I could rearrange the shop, change the process, and build something.

That is what I want to carry forward, and what I hope someone else might discover through this story:

Regardless of the circumstances, conditions are perfect for hope, peace, and joy.

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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