

*"A hard-hitting and humble mission memoir..."*

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~ A MEMOIR ~

# ASCENT, CREST, PERSPECTIVE: THE MAKING OF A BAMBOO CAMEL

*"...will be a tonic for  
jaded believers and  
wondering seekers alike"*

REV. DR PETER BRAIN,

BISHOP OF ARMIDALE 2000-2012

ROSS W JAMES

## **PART 1: ASCENT**

Chapter 1	Never Met a Girl Like Her Before.....	3
Chapter 2	Innocuous Beginnings .....	6
Chapter 3	Rain Fell on a Sunny Day.....	18
Chapter 4	Looking for Something More .....	24
Chapter 5	No Return from This Place.....	38
Chapter 6	Pivotal Experiences .....	60
Chapter 7	Consolidation and Development.....	83
Chapter 8	Revolution, Mass Media and Social Change .....	104
Chapter 9	Neighbours Reach Across the Wall .....	130

## **PART 2: CREST**

Chapter 10	It's Only a Licence .....	159
Chapter 11	Application .....	165

## **PART 3: PERSPECTIVE**

Chapter 12	Escaping the Ice.....	187
Chapter 13	The Black Dog.....	191
Chapter 14	Design and Anchorage.....	205
Chapter 15	Steadfastness.....	223
Chapter 16	Outside the Comfort Zone .....	240
Chapter 17	The Making of a Bamboo Camel.....	281

~ CHAPTER ~

# 15

## Steadfastness

### RESILIENCE AND PERSEVERANCE

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THE TERMS *RESILIENCE* AND *PERSEVERANCE* are commonly used to explain qualities of response and recovery to crises that affect people and communities in different ways. *Steadfastness* is a word used in some versions of the Bible but is less commonly known to most people. It's useful to briefly look at resilience and perseverance before adopting *steadfastness* as my preferred term.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines resilience and perseverance in these ways<sup>74</sup>:

*Resilience*: An ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.

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<sup>74</sup> Resilience (noun), perseverance (noun), Merriam-Webster.com. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilience>; <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/perseverance>

*Perseverance:* Continued effort to do or achieve something despite difficulties, failure, or opposition.

Resilience is about handling setbacks. To be resilient is to accept a new reality caused by adversity, and to harness mental, emotional, and psychological resources to adapt to or make a ready recovery from sources of stress. In recent decades much research has explored resilience and, as is the way with academia and science, researchers have researched methods for researching resilience!

Mental health practitioners from a variety of allied health, medical or psychological disciplines deliver resilience interventions in times of adversity. Vulnerable people who are typically the focus of resilience interventions include those who have suffered some form of natural disaster such as bushfire, earthquake, or flood; adolescents and young adults undergoing psychological turmoil; refugees and others at risk of trauma because of dispossession, marginalisation, discrimination; and patients recovering from sickness or depression, for example.

Perseverance is about continuance. We move forward when convinced we are on the right track, continuing the effort despite difficulties, failure, or opposition. As with resilience, perseverance has attracted the interest of researchers from psychosocial disciplines concerned with motivation, the formation of beliefs and attitudes, self-efficacy, and the value of support networks.

From here on, though, I choose to use another term, not perseverance.

## **I CHOOSE STEADFASTNESS**

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Cycles of depression compelled serious reflection on that question I posed earlier: How did I achieve what I did in this condition? The insights of design and anchorage were helpful for understanding how I

functioned, but my journals revealed another perspective, another theme of equal importance: steadfastness.

*Steadfastness*: Firmly fixed in place, not subject to change, firm in belief, determination, adherence.<sup>75</sup>

One reason for using steadfastness is that most references have been biblical, the Greek noun *hypomoné* meaning not to be swerved from a purpose. I use past tense to say ‘have been biblical’ because Bible translators increasingly replace steadfastness with *perseverance*, which has another sense in the translation of the Greek verb *epimeno*, which is to remain true to one’s duties such as a leader in the church, as in Paul’s injunction to Timothy (1 Timothy 4:16).<sup>76</sup>

Douglas Moo helpfully explains, ‘hypomoné (steadfastness) is not a meek, passive submission to circumstances but a strong, active, response’.<sup>77</sup> Steadfastness is not fatalism, not a passive submission to whatever happens or to what comes one’s way in life. Our response to Providence is an active one, not swerving from a purpose.

I am content to use the word steadfastness because the word is consistent with what it means to respond to the intervention of Providence.




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<sup>75</sup> Steadfast (adjective), Merriam-Webster.com. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/steadfastness>

<sup>76</sup> See for further discussion of steadfastness and perseverance, especially how the noun and verb forms are translated throughout the New Testament: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/perseverance/>

<sup>77</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James: An Introduction and Commentary*, Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing, p.60, 1985.

Another reason I will use steadfastness is because of an intriguing insight from Vivien Peng. Peng leans on her frontline experience with vulnerable groups in adverse situations to compare resilience and steadfastness.

Resilience is commonly thought of as being a form of emotional or psychological elasticity. Peng notes an assumption that resilient people have ‘an ability to spring back from life challenges . . . back to our original state before we were knocked down’.<sup>78</sup> However, people are never the same after such experiences. In fact, resilience research shows that many do not bounce back or spring back to their *original state* after a crisis. Indeed, it is almost impossible to get back to normal after trauma, even though most do adapt to their new reality and respond well to medication, treatment, and support for ongoing psychological and mental health conditions.

Although perseverance is commonly identified as the partner to resilience, Peng prefers the word steadfastness. Perseverance can be defined as a steady course of action despite setbacks, whereas steadfastness is ‘unwavering and firm in purpose’.<sup>79</sup> Peng points out that steadfastness is a response to adversity with ‘an unshakable core’. Despair is not present here; quite the opposite, for steadfastness acknowledges that, although we may never be complete again after adversity, ‘the pieces that are left are complete and they are enough’.

A living tree is an analogy for resilience and steadfastness. If damaged in some way, the trunk, branches, and leaves are resilient. They recover in some form, even if not the same as before the damage. That resilience, however, is made possible by roots which provide nutrients to keep the tree growing, steadfast in purpose. The tree is no longer steadfast if the roots are irreparably damaged or become unstable. The tree dies.

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<sup>78</sup> Vivien Peng, On being steadfast vs. resilient, *Medium*. [https://medium.com/@create\\_self/on-being-steadfast-vs-resilient-500800680256](https://medium.com/@create_self/on-being-steadfast-vs-resilient-500800680256), Nov 7, 2014

<sup>79</sup> Steadfastness (noun), *The Macquarie Dictionary Online*, Macmillan Publishers, 2020.

Let's return to the middle finger of my right hand mentioned earlier, because it demonstrates how the pieces that are left are enough, even though the story fails as an example of a major adversity in a person's life (it was, after all, a minor transformation of a fingertip courtesy of an axe and the idiocy of five-year-old boys). Regrowth of the flesh and fingernail gave that fingertip an unusual shape. Resilience was absent in following years when I succumbed to self-conscious embarrassment by the deformity. Steadfastness was a matter of accepting my finger will never be normal and that regrowth and restoration, such as it is, is enough and it is not cause for despair. The fingertip that remains is what is left but it is enough for my wholistic mental, spiritual, and physical healing, even if physical healing involves a misshapen fingertip that is by no means normal.

## **WHEN THE UNSHAKABLE CORE IS SHAKEN**

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It is possible for naturally talented people in sport, business, the creative arts, church, and all walks of life who, hindered in some way by adversity, don't reach their full potential, whereas less-talented people who find a way to overcome obstacles have achieved things that others did not expect them to achieve.

Potent examples of people who don't reach their full potential are those who battle with addictions of alcohol, drugs and pornography, or people who are unable for whatever reason to change behaviours that contribute to marriage breakdown, or others conflicted by urges to commit theft or engage in corruption, or those who remain gripped by emotional trauma, for example.

Sadly, suicide is a tragic outcome for some people unable to bounce back from adversity, for whom resilience eluded them or whose unshakable core has been so shaken they lost the will to live.

Thank God, indeed, for organisations that offer holistic and practical rehabilitation and reintegration programs to men, women, and families with professional services to strengthen resilience and steadfastness.

## **TRULY STEADFAST**

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Numerous people throughout past and current history exhibited admirable courage and inspirational steadfastness as they faced and recovered from absolute adversity.

Think immediately of people who steadfastly refused to be bowed and defined by their personal tragedies: those persecuted and tortured for their religious or ideological beliefs; refugees who fled war zones leaving behind families and previous lives in search of safer and hope-filled futures; sexually abused and exploited children, women or men; victims of domestic violence; or those living with various forms of disability due to disease, illness, natural disasters such as earthquakes, or industrial and sporting accidents, for example. Or people marginalised or despised by wider society on account of differences that ought not matter if we are to love as neighbours ought.

I conclude that I am, for better or worse and despite cycles of depression, steadfast in many respects, unwavering and firm in purpose. That conclusion, though, comes only after interrogating the themes in my writings that expose an inextricable relationship between design, the anchorage of providential guidance, and steadfastness. I was steadfast only because Providence designed me with specifications for a task and put in place anchors to hold me secure while riding out the storms.

Some examples of steadfastness I have exhibited are reported elsewhere in this book, but I'd prefer to tell you about those whose steadfastness impressed me as I worked alongside them. Fearless, sacrificial, and committed, these people are to be acknowledged for true steadfastness even though they are little known beyond their immediate



context in Cambodia, Indonesia, Mindanao (Philippines), Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan and elsewhere.

Their situations are diverse. Some turned away from education or career and business opportunities to pursue what they know to be their calling, serving communities in need. Others endured lengthy periods from family. Several continued to work despite illness or trauma caused by atrocities or religious persecution. Many were in constant danger from extremists who harboured deep hostility towards their faith. Some frequently entered areas where kidnapping and armed robbery were rife, and where conflict between warring factions could break out at any moment. Others walked through jungle, waded through mud, or trekked into and out of deep valleys, often for days, to serve their communities.

They did it all with steadfastness!



Malu Manar participated in a training course I led for radio broadcast journalists to develop different strategies for peace building. Malu was a journalist whose small stature contrasted her oversized intrepid boldness to investigate allegations of government military atrocities against secessionist fighters. Malu saw extra-judicial killings of people, however her advocacy and reportage became too dangerous, causing her to relocate away from where she had achieved so much. I can use her real name because, sadly, Malu passed away from ill-health in late 2020.

Malu's colleague, Janelle (not her real name), was at the same course. In her daily operational role Janelle was assigned by her radio station to memorise the contact details of secessionists who reported military crimes to journalists. It was a precaution in case the military raided the news room to capture information from documents or computers. During the training course concerned participants asked me to hurry to

the café of the training facility because an army major was pressuring Janelle to give him information. I was to seat myself at the back of the café and discretely observe them in case he tried something. How I was to intervene should anything untoward occur was not adequately explained, I must say. Certain details such as how I might overpower a trained soldier carrying a sidearm seemed to be of no concern to anyone but me. The major eventually departed when Janelle refused to give him what he wanted. Janelle thanked me for ‘being brave enough to protect me’ (brave? I’ll settle for naïve), then she giggled a little as she said the military man had asked her why the foreign guy at the back of the café was watching their table.

If you’re permitted only one word to describe the qualities and characteristics of Malu, Janelle, and others like them who work in that situation and seek to expose lawbreakers with dedication, the only adequate word is: steadfast.



Just prior to my first visit to Cambodia, an Australian tourist and two companions were captured then murdered by remnants of defeated Khmer Rouge hiding in the jungles, as were 45 villagers who along with 200 others were forced to carry supplies and build defences against government forces.

I sent 18 trainees into the streets of Phnom Penh to get their shoes dirty and ting, to talk with anyone they met about Independence Day, supposedly a time of national celebration that was scheduled for the following day. We were surprised so few on the streets knew of the national event or had an opinion of what the commemoration could mean. What were the reasons, we wondered? Perhaps they were confused, for Cambodia has celebrated four forms of freedom or change of ruling powers in its recent tortuous history: independence from the

French, a coup by Lon Nol to overthrow the reign of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the overthrow of Lon Nol by the Khmer Rouge, and the defeat of the Khmer Rouge by Vietnamese forces who installed Hun Sen as prime minister. The trainees drew on their own experiences when they concluded Independence Day had become just another reminder of violence as the default for solving national problems and in so doing had stolen national self-respect and cultural identity. Recent genocide, ongoing political instability, and a teetering economy rendered a celebration of future hope and self-determination meaningless.

Our workshops planned strategies for radio programming to offer hope and reconciliation as a nation attempted to recover from the horrors of genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge. Those horrors were very personal to program producers in the workshop who, having suffered horrifying experiences under the Khmer Rouge, found personal peace as they followed the Way of Jesus. Shrapnel remained in the body of a woman shot as she escaped a Khmer Rouge slave camp. Another lady had been buried in a mass grave with others who died from heavy blows to their heads—she had only been knocked unconscious, not killed. She remained traumatised with the memory of struggling out of that mass grave over bodies and her subsequent escape to a refugee camp in Thailand. Another producer regularly sighted a former Khmer Rouge soldier in the streets of Phnom Penh, a man to whom she had been forcibly married before she escaped into the jungle. Yet another person knew that inside the infamous Tuol Sleng prison where the Khmer Rouge tortured people they deemed to be enemies of the state, was a photo of her aunty, a medical doctor, whose body was mutilated for the ideological crime of having an education and whose portrait had been posted to a wall of the torture prison by her tormentors as if a trophy.

They suffered under ideological violence against society, were themselves scarred by personal trauma, and yet these producers were

truly steadfast in their purpose to make known to their audience pathways of hope and reconciliation.



In South Asia, a translator helped six men and I to communicate, but that didn't hinder our understanding. Their keenness to learn was palpable. The brilliance of the short radio dramas they produced was astonishing: from the thoughtful and careful application of key communication principles in the scripts to the self-produced sound effects that accentuated the drama recordings. With just a hand-held audio recorder they captured footsteps receding into the distance down a concrete passage way. With their vocal cords the only sound effects instruments available, they made the dramas come alive with the sounds of barking dogs, clucking chickens and distant gunfire.

More impressive, however, was the willingness of these men to embrace hardship and danger they faced because of their faith in the one they had discovered to be the Prince of Peace.<sup>80</sup> They weren't the only ones I encountered from regions where security issues prevented identification. What was unique about this cluster was they could not even take away any acknowledgment of their learning such as a certificate of achievement, for fear their luggage would be inspected by others who would administer harsh treatment, even death.

Truly, steadfastness to walk the Way enables such people to count the costs with faith and courage.

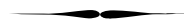



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<sup>80</sup> Isaiah 9:6: 'unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. .. and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace' [NIV].

Vijay regularly travels from Kathmandu, Nepal, to Okhaldhunga south of Mt Everest to support a community radio team. The first 60 kilometres out of Kathmandu is a sealed road. From there road conditions are so bad it can take 11 hours to travel 200 kilometres to a transit stop, then another 17 hours on another bus to Okhaldhunga. In many places the turning space on narrow roads in that mountainous terrain is so tight buses must reverse backwards and forwards to negotiate a corner, or if a bus comes from the opposite direction one bus will back up to a wider section of the road and create room for both vehicles to pass each other. On one trip, Vijay was one of 70 passengers on a bus with capacity for 30 people. Twenty passengers perched on the roof; Vijay was lucky: he procured a space in the passage between seats and grimly held on to a rail for support as the bus lurched along unsealed mountain roads. It is customary for Vijay to join radio station staff, Binu and Dhanu, as they walk for hours through rice field terraces laboriously hewn from the mountain sides to interview farmers and others they meet.

One of the operational principles that defines community-centred media is to get your feet dirty by walking where your audience walks. You need to be steadfast for this work. Vijay is merely one among scores of others throughout Asia who proves it.



We called her *Ammala* (mother) out of respect so I never did find out her given name. A grandmother, she was older than anyone else in our group. Years before, Ammala fled Tibet when Chinese soldiers invaded the nation. Ammala and her family tramped through desolate mountainous terrain, scavenged food from isolated villages, and sheltered in the forests of the harsh and dangerous snow-bound Himalayas where Mt Everest and several more of the world's highest peaks are found. Eventually they

found refuge in northern India, where many emigres live after fleeing Tibet.

Ammala was one of four Tibetans in our workshop learning how to write radio scripts. With the other participants, Ammala's comprehension of communication principles changed from puzzlement to understanding and conviction, as we developed programming ideas with translation from English into Tibetan and back again for my benefit. Her writing and programming skills moved from hesitancy to certainty. The final exercise was to produce the template of a 30-minute program for a wholly new radio programming initiative to her people in Tibet. Ammala wrote and rewrote her presenter's links, disciplining her writing for the minds of the radio audience she wanted to tell about the spiritual peace she experienced after reading stories about the life of Jesus.

It was about 8:30 pm. The electricity failed yet again. Ammala lit a candle, continuing to write at her desk. She later joined us on the candlelit veranda for a cup of tea and a chat. Suddenly, Ammala leaped to her feet, lunging towards her room. Startled by her anguished cries we rushed to her side, but the damage was done. A gust of wind had wafted a curtain across the candle, knocking it onto the pile of her scripts. Five hours of work reduced to ashes.

Ammala gazed at the charred remains then silently relit the candle. What I recall is not the illumination of a flickering flame in that hot, mosquito infested room. It was the glow of a gentle, peaceful face, creased with a smile of steadfastness. And that is why, for years afterwards, I kept a charred fragment of Ammala's scripts on my desk. It reminded me of a small band of Tibetans, anointed to share a message of beauty, not ashes (Isaiah 61:3) with their suffering nation.



Journal: Paphos, Cyprus, 2 December 1994.

*In successive suicidal waves the Mediterranean Sea smashes onto the rocks, ocean power reduced to harmless froth and bubble. These are the tides and currents that legends say gave birth to Aphrodite, the goddess of love here in Paphos. The same currents that brought Paul and Barnabas to this place to tell a proconsul the redeeming message of Jesus to which he responded and made God the foundation of his life. In so doing, Cyprus was the first country to be governed by what came to be known as Christians because they followed the Christ. Many Byzantine churches and monasteries are richly decorated with murals and icons, but I won't have time to visit any. In front of me on the seafront boulevard English tourists, retirees probably, stroll up and down in their thick coats, woollen scarves, and tweed caps, pushing against the cold, November wind. Behind me are the Troodos Mountains where, according to Greek mythology, gods sit on the highest peak, Mount Olympus. I can see Mt Olympus. I don't see any gods.*

*Yesterday I was at the UNESCO World Heritage site where the remains of ancient Greek temples, Jewish synagogues, and Christian churches built in Roman times are preserved. The icy November wind swept across the ruins and snuck around the trunk of a tamarisk tree I huddled behind in a futile attempt to remain warm while reading the first half of Acts 13. It was the account of Barnabas and Paul. A few metres from my miserable shelter is the so-called Paul's Column. According to tradition, the column marks the place where Paul was flogged and tortured. [The book of*

Acts in the New Testament doesn't record a flogging in Paphos, which renders tradition a little dubious.]

*I'm at the end of two months of testing travel from South Asia (Pakistan) to East Asia (Cambodia) and now West Asia (Cyprus). The effects of two bouts of serious illness are on the wane, but I'm tired. I didn't feel like coming to Cyprus to deliver the week-long workshop for 20 Arabic-speaking radio producers. But I did because it was the right thing to do, and I'm glad I did, I'm glad I did the right thing.*

I stood shivering with cold behind that tree and encountered a valuable insight into steadfastness. I'd observed religious piety on different sides of Asia. In one place, long-bearded men wrote a holy word on a piece of paper for petitioners to swallow, hoping the holy word would heal their illness. In another place, saffron-robed men took alms from devotees who hoped to earn merit and cancel wrongdoing because of their gifts to the monks. Now, in this place, pious religiosity seemed superficial when compared with a man's determination to draw strength from adversity and continue doing what he knew he must do, with an unshakable core.

## **PERSPECTIVES ON STEADFASTNESS**

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How could I achieve anything when suffering depression? A part of the answer is design; another is anchorage to ride out storms.

Then there is steadfastness.





To be steadfast is to be firm, unwavering. I would have acknowledged there were times and places and storms throughout the ascent and crest from which I didn't flee and instead embraced the struggle (James 1:2) but I didn't recognise that as steadfastness.

For all that, I can identify times when I certainly was not buoyant, when my design was tested beyond tolerance. Medication restored the body's depleted resources of chemicals linked to depression, but too much travel, too much work, and too much stress periodically overwhelmed medication and dragged me into frustration and despair.

Indeed, I recognise that in my case steadfastness—as with any character trait—could sometimes be an asset and sometimes a liability, sometimes salt, sometimes pepper.



At the end of a health communication initiative that I had collaborated on with FEBC and Curtin University, Professor Colin Binns wrote:

*It is often convenient for us to work with large medical centres or research groups in the developing world but to work with the semiliterate rural poor is where the challenge lies, this is the real international health, and this is where Ross has specialised.*

Let us get some necessary perspective here. My own circumstances are unremarkable when I consider the steadfastness that others demonstrate as they face ongoing persecution, continuous harassment, or injustice.

Here is another perspective. Steadfastness should never be mistaken as stubbornness or obduracy. To be unwavering is *not* to be immovable. Steadfastness *allows* for movement or change in response to conditions that are no longer valid, and yet still remain unwavering and aligned to an unchanging end purpose.

Steadfastness is characterised by consistency and depth, which is quite opposite to a disturbing and too-frequent trend for shallow virtue signalling. Virtue signalling is a characteristic of people who easily swing from one fashionable moral cause to another, deploy outrage or empathy with politically correct words to signal their moral virtue, but don't commit to long-term action.<sup>81</sup> Virtue signalling is fashionable, but it's a show of strength without an anchor. If it doesn't have an anchor, it's not truly a strength. An anchor keeps you attached to a core truth or conviction. An anchor holds you firm even as it resists the tugs and twists of the threatening storms of life. Anchors keep people steadfast.

And yet another perspective from my daughter, Amy. After reading an early draft of this chapter Amy reminded me of the time as a small child when she nearly fell from a height on playground equipment. She avoided injury by holding onto a bar calmly and steadily until I could get into a position to rescue her. I'd taught the girls to 'hang on tight and you'll be all right' if they ever slipped on a climbing frame. Here was the evidence they listened! Amy says I was so proud of her that day for holding on. 'While in comparison to the steadfastness chapter it's trivial,' she wrote, 'it was interesting to me that even when I was a five-year-old you were instilling that attribute in us [and] how you nurtured me to develop my own steadfast approach in so many different aspects of my life too.'

I've never considered myself to be steadfast, but several people who know me well have commented it was obvious steadfastness was the engine that kept me going. Amy's reflection makes me wonder if I might have nurtured others with fuel for their own engine of steadfastness, without my even knowing it at the time. And, I wonder, how many others unknowingly nurtured me with fuel for my engine?

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<sup>81</sup> I owe this insight to an ABC Radio National program: Unfashionable Virtues: Steadfastness, The Minefield, with Waleed Aly and Scott Stephens, 13 Jun 2018. Podcast: <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/theminefield/unfashionable-virtues:-steadfastness/9860580>



If I am anywhere close to being steadfast, the following caveats necessarily keep it in perspective.

First, I have enough objectivity and ego to recognise that I embraced struggle with steadfastness to overcome trials that came my way. But I have enough humility to admit the embrace wasn't always buoyant with joy. Sometimes resilience was absent, which—when accompanied by temporary depressive episodes because of unmanaged stress, overwork, lack of exercise and tiredness—gave way to complaints, resentment, negative attitudes, and a lack of joy. I wrote just before a sabbatical to refresh mind and soul:

*I've had fun these past years but have lost joy; I sense struggle but not the joy that James expects to accompany it.<sup>82</sup>*

A second caveat, and I emphasise this, is that if any characteristics of steadfastness are identified in my life, it is only because of the sustaining hand of providence. I permit myself to entertain the idea that depression was a gift that rendered me incomplete. I'm not complete, but design, anchors and steadfastness hold together the pieces that are left. That is enough for Providence. That is enough for me.



But a further theme must be acknowledged, one that brings balance to the themes of design, anchorage, and steadfastness. It is the day-to-day life that my family and I lived.

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<sup>82</sup> James 1:2 'Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds' [NIV].