

pivot points

Adventures on the Road to Christian Contentment

a memoir

Marvin Olasky



P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2024 by Marvin Olasky

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

Direct Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Copyright © 2000, 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Portions of this book have appeared in columns in *World* and on the Acton Institute's blog. They have been edited and adapted for this book.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Olasky, Marvin N., author.

Title: Pivot points : adventures on the road to Christian contentment / Marvin Olasky.

Description: Phillipsburg, New Jersey : P&R Publishing, [2024] | "Portions of this book previously appeared in Marvin Olasky, *Unmerited Mercy: A Memoir, 1968-1996* (Asheville, NC: World & Life Books, 2010)"--Colophon. | Summary: "For Marvin Olasky, the journey from Judaism to atheistic Communism to Christ was only a beginning. This compact memoir describes his pursuit of both truth and contentment amid various challenges"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023046891 | ISBN 9781629959535 (paperback) | ISBN 9781629959542 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Olasky, Marvin N. | Christian biography--United States. | Journalists--United States--Biography.

Classification: LCC BR1725.O49 A3 2024 | DDC 277.308/2092 [B]--dc23/eng/20231227

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023046891>

For Susan

Contents

Foreword by Mindy Belz	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	xvii
Act One: Turbulence, 1963–1975	
1. Today I Am a Man	3
2. Atheism to Radicalism	9
3. Philosophy to Journalism	15
4. Career to Careening	23
5. Addiction	29
6. Communism to Theism	35
Act Two: Toward Contentment, 1975–1988	
7. Today I Am a Married Man	43
8. Better Things for Better Living	51
9. Good Times in Texas	57
Act Three: The Busiest Years, 1989–2001	
10. Research, Writing, Editing, Uniting?	65
11. Republican Revolution	71

Contents

12. Marvin Appleseed	79
13. Second Time Around	87
14. Washington Disappointment	93
Act Four: Journalism and Teaching, 2001–2014	
15. Seeing the World and Enjoying <i>World</i>	101
16. Journalism or Public Relations?	107
17. Christian or Conservative?	113
18. Good Times in Asheville and Austin	119
Act Five: Turbulence and Contentment, 2015–2023	
19. What Trumps Trump?	127
20. The Big Shock	133
21. A Professional Grief Observed	139
22. Gratitude for a Life	145
Appendix	
A Wrinkle in Journalism History	153
How We Saved <i>World</i> Millions of Dollars	161
Partial Bibliography	169
Index of Subjects and Names	171

Foreword

Just like a slew of other novice reporters working for an editor named Marvin Olasky, I remember where I was when I received one of my first edited articles from him.

It was so long ago that Marvin sent the pages by fax, as I recall. I sat at my desk in a slant of late afternoon light, the pages rolling into my hand, each full of his neat script, lines and arrows shrouding my typed copy, Xs where he had scrapped whole paragraphs. He phoned to say how wide I'd missed the mark and that I should start over. He also said I could do it.

I finished the call stifling tears. I'd put in long days of travel and a near-sleepless night or two to meet the deadline. I laid my head on my desk to cry. Then I got back to work.

This was a rite of passage we who worked at *World* magazine over time labeled as getting “Marvinized.” Eventually we'd realize he made us not only better writers but clearer thinkers. We'd come to see he was one of the best editors anywhere—agile at helping to craft a story (sometimes by drawing on history, baseball, or obscure Old Testament plot twists) and a legend at structural editing.

When he was blunt and critical, he toughened us. When he was kind and funny, he won us. He might cut down a story draft with his notorious red pen one evening, but the next day send a one-word response to a second draft: “Excellent.”

What I missed until much later, and largely due to my pride, is how Marvin was and always is the attentive teacher poring over his students' work, willing them to succeed.

Through years of working under him as a reporter and alongside him as an editor, I came to trust Marvin's editorial instincts, even if he was sometimes demanding. He also listened to a good counterargument. He looked for ways to yield, especially when you could show you had a better idea. Even as he became a nationally respected journalist, political advisor, and scholar, he never forgot the stumbling grad student inside who plucked from his cardboard shelf a New Testament in Russian and watched God transform his life.

With *Pivot Points*, Marvin has turned the editor's scrutiny on himself with self-criticism and introspection in poignant, even uncomfortable ways. Marvin more than dabbled with Communism, wandered through an Ivy League education, squandered some relationships, and admits it when he "resists grace."

He's so willing to own it all that he writes in present tense and first-person, making me think of another self-exacting memoir, *The Education of Henry Adams*. It's written in past tense and third-person, a proper remove for a scion of American royalty. Marvin is the grandson of immigrants and working-class Boston, stepping decidedly toward his own troubles.

Approaching the end of a long career, many of us might want to dwell on accomplishments and high water marks. This age trains us to burnish our public profiles. Yet here we see a public figure recounting often embarrassing stumblings in the dark, processing out loud the way we can only dream a contrite older brother might. These stumblings become moments for mercy and truth as they lead to a deeper walk of faith in Christ.

Marvin is generous with his candor and puts feet to the adage that there is "nothing so wrong with the poor example

of Christians that can't be solved by proclaiming the perfect example of Christ."¹

Life's *pivot points* may follow all our days. Particularly painful, for those of us who learned firsthand to respect Marvin's red pen and tireless coaching, is the account of his departure from *World* in 2021 following decades of commitment and influence. With this latest disruption, we see how mercy and forgiveness can turn away bitterness.

We live in a new kind of honor society with its cancel culture and forgiveness deficit. Sin may lead us to weaken and break relationships, wrote pastor Tim Keller, but the Spirit of God gives us "the ability to realize—partially, never fully in this life—something of the beauty and joy of those future relationships through practices and disciplines of forgiveness and reconciliation."²

The journey unfolding in the pages before you is more than a confessional memoir. It's part of a quest we all can join. It might ease our way when political divides also divide American Christendom. We come away wanting to see our own pivot points anew, wanting to learn again the near-forgotten disciplines of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, in our personal and public lives, now.

Mindy Belz
December 2023

1. Michael Wear, "We Didn't Become Christians Because of the Hucksters," *Fathom*, September 11, 2017, <https://www.fathommag.com/stories/we-didn-t-become-christians-because-of-the-hucksters>.

2. Timothy Keller, "The Fading of Forgiveness," *Comment*, September 16, 2021, <https://comment.org/the-fading-of-forgiveness/>.

Acknowledgments

In previous books I haven't acknowledged all the pastors and teachers who influenced me, and it's now or never. Nine pastors: Edward A. Steele III, Palmer Robertson, Bill Smith, Paul Hahn, Matt Ristuccia, Tim Keller, Jonathan Inman, Greg Grooms, and John Sweet. Nine teachers from junior high through graduate school: Luther Manning and John McCabe, Jacqueline Wollan and John Livingston, Richard Warch and David Musto, John Raeburn and Cecil Eby, and especially my dissertation committee chairman, Stephen Tonsor.

Amanda Martin, Joy Woo, Aaron Gottier, and Cheryl Molin all made useful copyediting comments regarding *Pivot Points*. I appreciate the encouragement, support, and advice that *World* magazine's six other senior editors and reporters—Mindy Belz, Jamie Dean, Michael Reneau, Emily Belz, Sophia Lee, Angela Lu—gave me late in 2021 and early in 2022, when we all resigned. We had a great run, and I'm grateful that God has given all of us good work to do.

My own life is a story of big dreams and small failures. Along with trying to be a good husband, father, and teacher, I've aspired during half a lifetime (with limited success) to contribute to the reformation of American poverty-fighting and the reformation of Christian journalism. Four people who taught me much in those areas have died in recent years between the ages of seventy and seventy-five.

I watched Hannah Hawkins, the widowed mother of five grown children, run her Washington after-school program, Children of Mine, three miles from the Capitol. Like her nineteenth-century charity predecessors, Hawkins infused her program with Christian beliefs. She said, “Without Jesus you’re empty. You’re just out to sea, floating, and don’t know where to go.”

Hannah did not accept government money because “I won’t be able to talk about Jesus.” For three decades she kept going by gleaning food, books, shoes, and cash from local businesses and churches. She never got out of her old, broken-down building into a facility that shined like the faces of dozens of children she cared for. Cancer took her at age seventy-five in 2015, but her labor was not in vain.

In San Antonio, I sat in the backyard of Freddie Garcia, an ex-addict who founded Victory Outreach in 1970. The heat might have led a modern Dante to call the gathering an infernal circle—but lunch at a folding table for ten, with brown, black, and white people sharing visions of God, made it seem a foretaste of heaven.

What a change from a day earlier in his life, when Freddie stood in a gas station men’s room, probing for a vein to shoot heroin as his infant daughter lay on the filthy floor in a nest of shredded toilet paper. Then God grabbed him.

Freddie brought together people with empathy and experience who sat by addicts, mopping their brows as they sweated in withdrawal, wiping away their vomit, reading to them from the Bible, and praying for them. Freddie had organizational frustrations and died in 2009 at age seventy-one, but his labor was not in vain.

During the 1990s and 2000s, I visited the homeless shelter Bob Coté founded in Denver, Step 13. One day in 1983, Bob decided not to drink his usual half gallon of vodka for lunch.

Acknowledgments

Instead, he poured out the bottle's contents and began pouring what he had learned as a homeless alcoholic into a program that challenged men seen as hopeless.

Bob, who died in 2013 at age seventy-three, was straightforward about failures. Year after year, some of the men who staggered in flunked out—but others went onward. His labor was not in vain.

In Asheville I often visited Nat Belz, who with his older brother Joel created *World* magazine in 1986 in a basement office. The Belz brothers' magazine was a labor of love, like the Bailey Brothers Building and Loan in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Nat moved on to many other tasks and stayed joyful. In 2023 at age seventy he died of cancer, the same disease that ravaged Hannah. His labor was also not in vain.

The book you are holding is not the product of macabre thoughts, but I am seventy-three, right in the middle of the ages at which these four heroes died. I'm in good health and hope to add a decade or two onto my forty-seven years of marriage to Susan, to whom this book is dedicated, yet the thought of limited time gave me the audacity to write a memoir.

This would merely be a monument to ego were I not to acknowledge that it's really a story about my folly and God's mercy. He saved me from a political addiction half a century ago, guided me through pivots, and established more of the work of my hands than I had any right to expect.

Introduction

A book of mine that P&R published in 2021, *Lament for a Father*, proved useful to many readers. Some were estranged from their still-living parents and wanted to make amends. Some with deceased dads wanted to understand, maybe forgive, maybe pray for God's forgiveness.

This book, *Pivot Points*, is a sequel to *Lament*. It may be useful for people going through or remembering tumultuous changes in their lives. My latest change came in 2021: twenty-nine years after I started editing *World*, the enterprise took a sharp turn and I needed to resign. Suddenly, my email and media feeds were full of sweet notes from former students and interns, readers of my columns and books, and others. I saw the moral of *It's a Wonderful Life*: one life touches so many others.

My favorite tweet was both negative and positive. A student I taught during my twenty-five years at the University of Texas at Austin wrote, "Olasky was one of my UT profs. He was an a—hole [who required] deeply reported work that made clear, concise arguments. My work was better because he was a man of unshakeable principles."

I'd like to think that last sentence is true, but if so, it's through God's grace and some hard experience. Often that pain-in-the-rear characterization was true. I had to learn that students, readers, listeners, and reporters did not belong to me. God just shared them for a few minutes.

My “unshakeable principles,” though, have gone through lots of shakings, and my overall sense is this: Don’t worry about pivots. Don’t get stuck in one place, looking only one way, out of fear. Don’t be afraid to move around, learning from people you otherwise would not meet and exposing yourself to ideas you otherwise might never encounter.

This is a memoir, not an autobiography. It’s mainly about work experiences. To avoid invading privacy, it includes little about family and marriage. It also skips by helping to start a church and a school, because both of those activities went pretty smoothly, and I’m focusing in this book on the jagged. It reports some defeats, which are prime times for learning and growth.

Looking back, I don’t have a lot of complaints, thanks to God’s mercy, because I’ve certainly done dumb things. Almost all of my nineteen employers in fifty-seven years of working have been fair. (That’s one every three years, with many short-term jobs overlapping my long careers at UT and *World*.) Three times it was important to leave when leaders headed in directions that seemed wrong. My experience in dealing with success and failure in a variety of Christian and non-Christian organizations may be helpful to you.

Overall, I’ve learned to take some chances, humanly speaking, in the knowledge that God is the Lord of mercy, not a gotcha god. Some Sunday school classes treat the Bible as a series of exemplary lives, but it’s more a saga of God relentlessly pursuing his children, rescuing us despite our unfaithfulness. The Bible’s record of dysfunctional families teaches us to lament but also repent. We often fail, but a joyful part of Christianity is the knowledge that God out of his infinite mercy forgives us because of the perfect work of Christ on the cross.

One fundamentalist method of training babies goes like this: Lay a baby on a blanket. Put a bauble just off the blanket, out of his reach. Watch as he squirms and twists to reach it. Then,

when he does, spank his hand. The idea is to teach the baby to stay within a square of protection, under the authority of a parent or supervisor. But that approach communicates to a child that God hovers over us with instant punishment whenever our reach exceeds our grasp.

That approach also goes counter to my own venturing. When I was young, my ideological blanket was Marxism. In middle age, my occupational blanket was tenure at a big university. As a greybeard, my leadership blanket was in an organization I had nurtured for decades. Each time God had me leave the blanket and in the process learn more about him and the world he created.

In our gig economy, the ability and willingness to pivot at times are essential—but freedom from fear requires either a colossal ego or a colossal God. To follow our ego leads us to grab what is not ours. That's the road to temporary dominance and long-term destruction. To follow God is the path of thanksgiving and contentment, with an emphasis on giving rather than taking.

In this book, as in *Lament for a Father*, I've taken the unusual step of writing about the past in the present tense. That's because my own failures and successes seem to seventy-three-year-old me not like history but like a movie (or a comic strip) playing out right before my eyes. You may benefit from thinking hard about how your current actions and patterns may look to you decades from now. This book shows what I now know, but it also shows how you can think about yourself as your present passes by faster than you realize.

· Act One ·

TURBULENCE

1963–1975

1

Today I Am a Man

On June 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy flies out of Andrews Air Force base, heading to Europe. He soon climbs onto a platform, looks over the Berlin Wall into East Berlin, and tells 150,000 listeners *Ich bin ein Berliner*, “I am a Berliner.” On that same June 22, I climb onto a platform at the front of Temple Beth Israel’s sanctuary in Waltham, Massachusetts, ready to proclaim the traditional message of a bar mitzvah day: “Today I am a man.”

At age thirteen I feel Kennedyesque: perfectly—even elegantly—dressed, with short-sleeved white shirt over a white crew neck undershirt, plaid polyester sports coat, silvery clip-on tie, brown belt, gray wool pants, white socks, and black shoes. The Temple Beth Israel sanctuary has padded pews facing east toward a city 5,511 miles away, Jerusalem. An ornate cabinet houses two tall Torah scrolls, each containing in Hebrew the first five books of the Bible.

Traditionally, each thirteen-year-old chants a portion of Scripture during the bar mitzvah rite of passage into manhood. On this Saturday, it’s chapter 11 of the book of Judges, which tells of local warlord Jephthah the Gileadite offering God a deal: *You give me victory, and I’ll sacrifice the first creature to emerge*

from my house. I nail the chanting. Uncles slip checks into my coat pocket.

When someone in the Bible makes a rash vow, the result is predictable. Here, Jephthah wins, his daughter races out of the house to greet him, and he acts “according to the vow he had made.” It’s the second instance in the Bible of plans for child sacrifice. Jephthah’s pledge and Abraham’s almost-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 both seem wrong to me. What could God possibly be teaching through such stories?

In September 1963, my father wants me to go each Tuesday and Thursday evening to a post-bar-mitzvah class for Talmud study. I’m reluctant, since the Boston Red Sox and the *Boston Globe* interest me more. Still, for a month I sit with five other male teens in a room with wooden desks surrounded by bookcases that cover every inch of wall space.

The teacher, Reb Yitzhak (the Hebrew word for *Isaac*), is sixty or so with a long beard and a Polish accent. In each class, playing an Orthodox Jewish version of *Name That Tune*, he asks a student to give him several words in Hebrew from anywhere in the Torah, the five books of Moses. Then he rapidly recites the rest of the chapter from memory. Flawlessly.

On Halloween, spoiling for a fight, I pick out from Genesis 22:2 the words *kana et-binka* (“take your son”). Reb Yitzhak is off and running with—I’ll continue in English—“take your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering.” Then I ask him what for me are killer questions about Abraham’s almost-slaying of Isaac and Jephthah’s apparent slaughter of his daughter: “What kind of God wants such obedience? In what kind of family do fathers kill their children?”

Reb Yitzhak says we’ll get to that later, but for me there is no later. Now that I’m a man, I’m plotting my own course. When it’s time for the next class, I stick a thermometer in hot

water and claim to be sick and feverish. My father isn't fooled, but he gives up. Thus ends my Jewish education, not with a whimper but a sneer.

I move from the Talmud study room to the small West Newton public library, which has similar wall-to-wall bookcases but sharply different content. One bookcase has recent novels, including *The Sirens of Titan*. In it Kurt Vonnegut writes, "Why thank God? . . . He doesn't care what happens to you. He didn't go to any trouble to get you here safe and sound, any more than He would go to the trouble to kill you." Another bookcase has Sigmund Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*. He says believers in God are imagining a perfect father. Childish!

My life as a teenager isn't all about reading books. I make some Sunday afternoon trips to my uncle's warehouse. He sells fifty-pound sacks of rice and other ingredients to Chinese restaurants. Filling the sacks gives me money for cheap seats at Fenway Park and copies of *Mad* magazine. The words of anti-war activist Tom Hayden—his "radical journey began with *Mad*"—could be mine.

Like climate change for some teens now, the Vietnam War hangs over me. It makes me ready to believe *Mad's* cynicism. Brian Siano of *The Humanist* summarizes the magazine's effect on teens like me: "It was the first to tell us that . . . our leaders were fools, our religious counselors were hypocrites, and even our parents were lying to us about damn near everything."

I'm alienated, but so are my high-school classmates and my teachers, many of whom have graduate degrees from nearby Harvard. In summer 1966, post-Judaism, my nightly reading is *The Outline of History* by H. G. Wells, first published in 1920. Its subtitle, *The Whole History of Man*, indicates its one-stop shopping appeal. I like the tale of humans, "at first scattered and blind and utterly confused," then moving "slowly to the serenity and salvation of an ordered and coherent purpose."

The goal for Wells is worldwide socialism, for “in no other fashion is a secure world peace conceivable.” Wells treats religion with condescending sympathy: “It is quite understandable that the Exodus story, written long after the events it narrates, may have concentrated and simplified . . . a long and complicated history of tribal invasions.” That condescension helps me think my parents and grandparents aren’t evil, just antiquated.

Jacqueline Wollan, a willowy twenty-six-year-old, teaches the tenth and eleventh grade journalism elective courses at my school. All the guys have a crush on her as she drills us on the six lovely questions reporters ask: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? Writing for the Newton High School newspaper is a perfect fit for a smart but poor and socially awkward high-school student eager for after-school conversation, since silence most often awaits me at home.

One of journalism’s joys comes my way during spring 1967, when fires twice break out at school. I write about the damage, with an official-looking press pass allowing me to saunter past the no-trespassing sign and guard. Going where ordinary mortals can’t go is an intoxicating feeling that reporters never quite outgrow.

On most days I walk the mile and a half home from school while folding and reading newspapers page by page and only occasionally running into fire hydrants and mailbox pillars. The news from Vietnam is particularly riveting because my older brother, after dropping out of the University of Chicago, is a private there in the First Air Cavalry. He writes, “Everything is messed up, really SNAFU. I’d like to expose the boneheads who start wars to just a tenth of the misery we go through.”

I’m drawn to graphic interviews of returning soldiers and doctors. One National Guard medic describes his surgical hospital as so crowded that it’s “like opening night at Fenway Park.” He describes racing out to a helicopter carrying bomb

victims and unloading all that's left of one soldier: a steel pot helmet with only an ear, a hand, and some dog tags. Another soldier recalls smells and sights in the burn unit, where "you had to walk by these guys who were literally cooked. I mean cooked."

Baby Boomers swing far to the left in response to tens of thousands of American deaths in that war and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese deaths. Many of us feel figuratively cooked and start thinking that America—some call it Amerikkka—isn't as great as we've been told. Donald R. Cutler's *The Religious Situation: 1968* records the search for meaning among smart teens and college students who use their summers to explore not only Yoga and Zen Buddhism but, in the words of Huston Smith, "astrology, astral bodies, auras, UFOs, Tarot cards, parapsychology, witchcraft, and magic."

I sneer at weirdness and consider myself immune to addiction: gotta work! The Olaskys live in a lower-middle-class section of affluent Newton. During the summer I work and play chess. I do well in the New England high-school chess championships but as a junior give up the game to concentrate on journalism—and then lose an election to become editor in chief of the high-school newspaper for my senior year. The winner is a rich kid who hasn't written much. In my disappointment, I attribute his victory to social class bias.

I get a consolation prize—editor in chief of the yearbook—and make the snarky most of it. The yearbook will open with ambitious words: "In past years, a yearbook was assumed to be just a record of the year's activities. It produced nostalgia and spread good-will." This yearbook, though, will include "a critical appraisal of our school organizations and activities." Looking back fifty-five years later, that goal seems audacious and even ludicrous—it's a yearbook, and why expect from it anything more than nostalgia?

Turbulence

The volume reflects anxiety about riots, assassinations, and war. We run photos of students stepping into puddles, standing alone, looking confused. One full-page photo shows a senior with a startled look reading *The Holy Bible* (big letters on the cover). Captions such as “What can I do?” and “Who knows I’m here?” capture our angst.

My answer: Nothing and no one. We’re all alone.