

Pager:

Why We Must Always Answer Our Pagers



I sat down in 9C beside a young girl.

I could tell she was young; I thought she looked 17 or maybe a young 18. She had blond hair, a ponytail, and a curtain of bangs that covered only her right eye, like Violet in *The Incredibles*. She wore a black elastic choker necklace and pink jelly bracelets. Her red nail polish was chipped, but I think it may have been on purpose. The back of her shirt said “Purrfect” in silver, and headphones slithered their way around her head, following a black, snaked line into a CD player covered in pastel-blue sparkles.

I don’t talk to people much on airplanes unless they make the first gesture. As much as I like to lead with “How’s your soul?” in conversation, complete strangers don’t take too well to this as an introduction. So I lost myself in *Blue Like Jazz*, the book I was reading at the time, and paid her little attention for most of the flight. Until...

Until she began writing in a little pink journal with a big, fat green Crayola marker. I couldn’t keep myself from looking, peeking cautiously out of the side of my eyes, ignoring the guilt that soon came as I continued to read.

I know you are not supposed to read over people's shoulders, and you are definitely not supposed to read someone's journal, particularly a girl's journal, and even worse, a young girl's journal.

But there they were: big, green letters in a little pink notebook on a tray table in 9B. It's not like I snuck into her sock drawer, picked the journal's lock, and secretly flipped through it while she was in the bathroom; it was just sitting there in the open for anyone in 9A or 9C to see. She would write a bit, taking great care to loop the letters just right, as if the shape of the words evoked as much meaning as the words themselves, and then she would sit back and think, lost in her music. I couldn't hear what band she was listening to, but I bet it was the Cure.

Here is how her journal entry began: Chloe ♥s AJ.

That was all. Chloe hearts AJ. This was my first reaction: *No, Chloe doesn't heart AJ. Chloe can't possibly heart AJ because she's way too young, and people who heart each other for real, like God hearts us, don't write it with a big, fat green Crayola marker in a little, pink journal.* I don't know why I thought I was an expert on love, or how I had any business making judgments about this girl's love life, but apparently I thought I did.

She then flipped the page over and began writing again, very deliberately, very slowly, sometimes pausing to fill in letters with the marker or to make a small heart over each *i*.

I gave you a second chance and you didn't take it. You don't know what you're missing out on. I was carrying our relationship. Where were you?

At this point, I was definitely thinking Chloe doesn't heart AJ, or at least AJ doesn't heart Chloe anymore. Her words, so childlike in their font and color, were filled with the questions and pain of adultlike grief.

You just used me to get close to her. You already had her wrapped around your finger and you knew it.

Look, I already said I felt bad about reading her journal. But I have to tell you, at that moment, I felt like I was supposed to be reading it for some reason. It was so *there*, right in front of me, almost as if she wanted me to read it. It no longer felt like a journal to be read by flashlight under midnight covers; it felt like a play to be shared with the masses. The act went on.

Anyone. Anyone at all, just please come and save me.

This was the point where I began to move from feeling that I was backstage peering through the curtains to feeling that God knew since the dawn of time that I would be front row and center in 9C and this girl would be on stage in 9B. "Anyone at all, just please come and save me." I was shouting "Jesus saves!" in my head, hoping for some sort of auditory osmosis, but it wasn't working. And then, as if that weren't personal enough, she continued.

I have so much pain that I'm just holding on. I try to get away but everywhere I go my problems always catch up. I'm so lost in this world. Why can't someone save me?

Remember, this was in green, Crayola marker. These words should have been written in blood. Her words were raw, something I would probably never be honest enough to write, and certainly not something I would write in a little, pink journal on a middle-seat tray table. Finally, the scene reached its climax.

Only one way out. It won't hurt me, but it will others...

With that, the curtains closed as she sat back and stared upward in

contemplation, lost in her music and pain. I sat there, pretending to read my book, becoming more aware of the mounting call rising from the depths of my spirit, thinking, *What can I do here? God, I'm here. I'm available. Do I say something to her? Do I ask her how she's feeling? Do I take her green Crayola marker out of her hand and write the word "Jesus" beside "Why can't someone save me?" What do I do?*

So I did what any confident, bold Christian would have done: I pulled out another Christian book, not thinking *Blue Like Jazz* sounded evangelistic enough from its title, and I put it on my lap.

And I turned the binding of the book toward her just in case she might see the title, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, in sparkling gold letters and turn to me with breathless anticipation in her Bambi eyes and say, "Oh please, sir, tell me about this Jesus you never knew." I confess I was ashamed of myself at that moment. That was all I could muster, all I was willing to do for Jesus because I was too scared of bothering this girl, or sounding weird, or making her think I was hitting on her, or because I was just too lazy. So I put the book back into my bag and began to think.

Not being one to wallow too long in my failure, I soon came up with another plan. I did not feel "called" to say something to her, so I decided I would write something, because nothing quite says, "I care about you, and Jesus does too," than a handwritten note from an airplane-seat stalker who is too scared to talk to you. What I would write, I did not know, and how I would get it to her, I could not conceive. But I knew it was a great plan.

The most convenient way to execute this plan would have been to stick the note in her bag, where she kept her journal. That way, she would find the note long after I had left the plane, and I would not have to actually say anything to her at all. The only problem with this plan was that her bag was sitting right at her feet, and I think she would have noticed if I had started to dig around in it. Even if she didn't notice, surely the guy in 9A

would. And the only thing worse than sticking a note in some young girl's bag while she is watching you is sticking a note in some young girl's bag while she is *not* watching you and another guy *is* watching you.

Plan A quickly turned into Plan B, which morphed into Plan C, and so on until I had exhausted the limits of the English alphabet. I was paralyzed by the multitude of options before me, and all of it was pretense anyway as I lacked the courage to do any of them.

Just as I resigned myself to my indecision, my paralysis was reversed as I noticed movement off to my left. First, the unbuckling of the seat belt, quickly followed by the stirring of the legs. This was the universal signal for all airline passengers who need to get up but are stuck behind the guy in the aisle seat. She was getting up to go to the bathroom.

She's getting up to go to the bathroom!

God was clearly opening doors; He's so good with timing. There was still one problem, though: the guy in 9A who would be watching me stick a note in some young girl's bag. But wait—he was unbuckling too. He was getting up as well. *Hallelujah!*

I quickly settled on Plan C: the business card. As soon as they had both left their seats and I had returned to mine, I pulled out a card, turned it over, and began to scribble furiously on the back.

I'm sorry because I know it's not nice to read someone else's journal, but I couldn't help but notice what you were writing.

I glanced quickly toward the bathroom's accordion door; she was still inside. I wrote faster.

And I want you to know that Jesus loves you and can save you.

I glanced again. The door remained quietly shut, and the 9A guy was loitering by the door, looking into the first-class cabin. This was going to work, I just knew it.

If you'd like to know how, you can e-mail me or call me.
Chris

The burning in my forearm reached its crescendo as I signed my name, and joyful music accompanied me as I bent down toward her bag, stealing one last glance at the door. That's when the accordion sprung to life, and out walked the bag's owner. Our seats were only two rows deep, so I knew I would be caught if I went for it. This wasn't going to work out as I had planned.

I stood back up to let her in, wondering if I could shove the card in her back pocket, but I decided that would be even worse than violating the privacy of her bag. So I stuck the card in my own pocket, feeling a bit led on by God and wondering what I was supposed to do next. After the other guy returned to our row and Chloe and I stood up to let him pass, I thought again about how I could sneak this card into her bag as he went by, but I could not find a good moment to do it.

My problems were soon compounded as we began our descent to land. Time was slipping away, and I still didn't know what to do. I glanced over at her and noticed she was looking out the window. So I started praying: *God, if you really want me to talk to her, I will. Just have her look over at me...right now.*

Nothing. No movement. God evidently hadn't passed along my message to her. Instead, He turned to me and said, *I have something else in mind.*

Okay, God. I'm serious, I prayed. I'll really talk to her if you want. Just have her look now.

She was still looking out the window. God spoke up once more, and again, His message was to me and not her: *Get on your soapbox.*

But I didn't want to get on my soapbox. I wanted to pretend I was willing to obey God without actually having to do it. So I tried negotiating with Him a few more times before giving up on issuing orders to God. I concluded He obviously did not want me to talk to this girl, because I gave Him a chance to show me a sign, and He hadn't, so I had done my part. It was on Him.

I went back to reading *Blue Like Jazz*, and I found myself reading a page where Donald Miller began describing when he first had feelings for Jesus. As I read his words, I went back to thinking that God had not lived up to His part with this girl. I continued to read, though, and soon the thought struck me: *This is exactly what this girl needs to hear.*

With no other explanation save God's grace, my fear disappeared immediately, and I climbed atop my spiritual perch. "Hi. Will you do me a favor? Will you read these two pages of this book? I know it's kind of an unusual request, but I just feel like you should read these two pages."

She smiled awkwardly and said, "Sure." The melancholy faded from her eyes as she took the book into her lap, and I started taking back all the things I had said to God. I realized I had no business giving Him orders; perhaps I shouldn't expect Him to do things my way.

There was one final problem though. I gave her the book shortly before we had landed, and at this point, we were taxiing to the terminal. I was watching her read out of the corner of my eye, which of course I had gotten very good at through the course of the flight, and I could tell that she was reading slowly. I made some quick mental calculations and realized she wasn't going to finish the two pages before we arrived at our gate. So I prayed, asking God to miraculously give her speed-reading skills.

And God showed up—in His own way of course.

Suddenly, the plane came to a halt. The captain picked up the mike and boomed, “Ladies and gentlemen, another plane is sitting in our gate, so we’re going to have to wait about five minutes for them to push back before we can get in there. Thank you for your patience.” Imagine that—God stopped a whole plane just for this girl.

As remarkable as this story was for me, I do not know its end. I did start talking to her after she finished those two pages, and I found out she was 12, not 18, and her parents were divorced, and she had just returned from visiting her father and stepsister in California and had been very lonely there. I gave her *Blue Like Jazz* and have continued to pray for her.

This is a story of fear and longing and shame and obedience, but ultimately, it’s a story of a calling from God to do something He wanted me to do. You may identify with different parts of my experience as you consider what you would have done had you been in my seat. Perhaps you would have been friendly enough to say hi to Chloe from the start, easing into a casual conversation. Maybe you would have been bold enough to respond to God’s leadings when they came to you instead of arguing with Him the way I did. Or you might have ignored the situation entirely and paid no attention to her.

You may relate to my fear or my reluctant obedience, but I cannot help but think back on Erik’s lesson of being available to God. This has been a struggle for me, to open my day’s schedule to God and to put myself into a position to hear Him when He calls. I thought more about the latter, knowing that moments of silence have, at times, brought direction from Him, but also knowing I rarely have time for silence throughout a busy day. I wondered how many times He has tried to reach me as I have gone about my day worrying about myself.

As I thought about being available to God throughout the day, my mind

soon went to those doctors who are on call at all hours of the day and night because they never know when they may be needed. Their pagers could go off right as they sit down to eat breakfast, or as they leave the office for lunch, or as they settle into their couch at night, or maybe even as they take a seat on an airplane next to a young girl.

I am not a doctor, and I certainly don't have a pager; in fact, I didn't think pagers even existed anymore until recently. My friend Jordan is married to a lovely woman named Mindy, who just so happens to be a doctor. So I asked Mindy if she carries a pager, and she said she does, which is great news for this analogy.

I bet that if I were Mindy, sometimes that stupid pager would go off and I would not want to answer it. I would have just taken my seat for dinner, or just climbed into bed, or just finished a long, hard day, and all I would want to do would be to watch *The Dog Whisperer* and fall asleep on the couch. I would wonder who might be calling, or where they were calling from, or what I might have to do if I answered. But this little gadget would be beeping away at me, representing some emergency or someone who needed help. And as much as I would not want to answer it, I suppose I eventually would, because Mindy does every time.

Come to think of it, I do have my own pager of sorts. It's this feeling I get in my gut when I pass a homeless man on the street or talk with someone with whom I know I should share the gospel or ponder committing some sin I have repented for hundreds of times. I can think of any number of times my internal pager has gone off as I drove past a guy on the freeway exit or as I sat in silence beside my single-serving friend on some flight, and I have ignored it each time. In fact, my pager went off for most of my flight with Chloe, and I did my best to ignore the call for as long as I could.

You have heard the beeping of a pager before, and I'm sure you can imagine how the sound would grow fainter as you walked away from it.

Scientists who study the property of sound waves call this the Principle of Dissipation of Sound Waves As You Get Farther Away from a Pager. The funny thing about my pager, however, is that it gets louder, or stronger, the more I walk away from the situation. It tugs me back, beeping steadily, echoing against the walls of my soul. The call is powerful but not demanding, inviting but not domineering.

My pager is the Holy Spirit, and He is the megaphone for my cravings for God. The longings I feel for Jesus in the depth of my soul are amplified through the Spirit's quiet voice, and He speaks to me out of these yearnings more often than I am willing to admit. Like a doctor's pager with specific codes for certain situations, the Spirit gives me directions to follow, drawing me toward the emergencies of this world so desperate for hands of healing.

I suppose part of the reason I try to ignore His directions so often is that I don't fully understand who He is in the first place. And because I don't understand Him, I probably don't fully trust Him either. Does He really speak to me and live inside me? Or is that just an expression people use, like tapping the chest of a young boy whose mother just died and telling him she will always be with him inside his heart?

Jesus had something really interesting to say about the Spirit on the night before He was crucified. As He gathered with His closest friends for one last meal, He was surely sobered by the moment, a cloud of dread lurking quietly behind the smiles. He knew He didn't have long, and He had more words to say than time to say them. But even as He reflected on the years they had spent together, growing in intimacy and seeing God work in amazing ways in their lives, He knew that by going away, He was doing something that would be good for them. "It is for your good that I am going away," He said. "Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; *but if I go*, I will send him to you."¹

Jesus believed something was special, something was very important about this Holy Spirit, because He said the Spirit's arrival was worth His own departure.

Unfortunately, I struggle to hold the Spirit in the same regard as did Jesus. Part of the problem is that I just can't picture Him. I know that "faith is... the conviction of things not seen," and I have never laid eyes on God the Father or Jesus.² But I can picture them both. I imagine God as a vigorous old man sitting on a golden throne with white hair cascading down alongside a shimmering white beard, a powerful scepter in His hand, and earth as His footstool. I picture Jesus with the flowing hair and well-kept beard, lean and mean but with gentle eyes. But the Spirit is different; I don't have a good mental image of this third person of the Trinity.

These pictures of the Father and the Son are ridiculous, of course. The Bible teaches us clearly that God is spirit and does not have form in the same manner as we do, and Jesus may not have been as good-looking as the movies, flannelgraphs, or Jehovah's Witnesses' magazines want us to believe.³ But the simple fact that I can picture them in some form seems to make it easier to relate to them.

Because I have not related much to the Spirit, and because I cannot picture Him as clearly as I can God the Father and Jesus, I did what I assume a lot of other Christians have done: I relegated Him to third best. I thought of the Spirit like a watch I had not seen in years—its alarm went off at the same time every day, but still it sat in the bottom of a drawer. I knew the Spirit was there, and I heard Him on occasion, and if I had to find Him, I probably could have, but He was not on display.

But the Spirit deserves far more than third-place recognition. He has the same prominence of deity as the Father and the Son. The three persons of the Trinity have lived forever, creating and sustaining the universe, sharing limitless power, knowing everything, and existing everywhere.⁴ Even

though the three persons in the Trinity are separated by position and role, God retains His internal equality and unity.

The Father is God. Jesus is God. The Spirit is God.

The fact that the Spirit is the third in a line of God's progressive revelation to mankind does nothing to diminish His importance; if anything, it demonstrates the utter relevance of His presence today.⁵ When we realize He is God of the same essence as the Father and the Son, and we understand He lives within us as Christians, we're confronted by the need to acknowledge our relationship with Him in light of this soul-level intimacy. I would never treat a houseguest with the same lack of regard I often show for the Spirit.

The point in all of this isn't to fully understand the Spirit. It's simply to recognize that He has occupied far too little a place in my life.

I understand He is not a pager, an alarm clock, a megaphone, or a forgotten watch, but these images remind me that He speaks to me. I have given up trying to picture Him, but He is slowly becoming more real in my life. God's Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, is living within me here and now, and His presence in my life communicates one thing above all others: I ♥ you.

This is the kind of love that Chloe and AJ could not have for each other, and it's the kind of love you and I so desperately desire. So when the Spirit speaks to us, as He did to me that day on the plane, or as He did that afternoon when you saw that person in need, we don't have to fear His words.

Just like Dr. Mindy, all we have to do is answer.