

A ROAD OF
UNIMAGINED
ADVENTURE

a memoir

*How Big Words
Have Shaped My Life*

KEVIN NOBLE
SPRINGER



NASHVILLE

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For
Suzanne
“Rejoice in the wife of your youth,
A lovely deer, a graceful doe.”
Proverbs 5:18–19



Suzanne Nadal and Kevin Springer, age five

INTRODUCTION

The Garage

Camarillo, California

When the Apostle Paul was detained by the Emperor Nero in Rome in AD 60, he had to wonder what God was doing. For the next two years he was under house arrest, but he continued ministering to visitors and encouraging churches through letters.

God grounded Paul, a consummate Type-A activist, compelling him to sit down and write. Paul's four "Prison Letters" (also called epistles) were written during that period. They include letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and a little letter to Philemon—four of the most translated and influential letters in the history of the world. What Nero meant for evil, God used to advance his Gospel to the entire world, up to today.

I'm no Paul, but I identify with him. I too have a Type-A personality. And I love starting things—ministries, magazines, books—to meet new challenges and influence people to live for God.

My own activism came to an abrupt halt in March of 2020 when California went on COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. I sheltered in place, turning our guest house into an office, feeling like God put me under house arrest.

For my wife Suzanne, though, this was an opportunity to clean out our garage and sort through over fifty years of marriage and childhood memorabilia. The quarantine was a strange answer to her prayers for time. For more than a year she had been disciplined online by Joshua Becker, the guru of minimalism, and this was her chance for us to conquer our Mt. Everest of accumulated history. She loved to say, “We can’t leave this mess to our children when we die. Besides, their heritage is in these boxes.”

Groaning as I looked around the garage, I knew I was cornered.

I volunteered to sort through 38 legal boxes stuffed with photographs. Suzanne tackled the numerous document and “sentimental” boxes.

You could say this book is a story inspired by minimalism—discarding the superfluous. As I sorted through decades of photos, I came to see a clearer sense of my life. But this is not about my life so much as God’s life in me, because the patterns and principles that make my life meaningful are available to anyone. This is the story of how God works in all of us when we allow him access.

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

The idea of sorting and, mostly, discarding a lifetime in photographs paralyzed me. Staring at the boxes, I saw nothing but chaos. But then Suzanne and I got an idea. Why not organize everything into piles based on where we lived? We had moved from California to Maine and back, with a significant tenure in the Upper Midwest.

With this approach I eliminated thousands of pictures—blurred, duplicates, or of people long forgotten. But I also iden-

tified hundreds of pictures of people and places that jogged memories of unimagined adventures and relationships, victories and defeats, joys and sorrows. The sorting process was emotionally draining at times, which surprised me. I would wake up at night dreaming of experiences from our past. Out of this troubling process, patterns emerged.

Looking back on my life at age seventy-two, I asked a fundamental question: What was the thread that connected the phases of my life? What was it that had directed me? The answer became clear. Each step was initiated by what Suzanne and I call a “Big Word.” Big Words is my way of capturing the experience of God, clearly and without doubt, speaking to me, guiding my path, in ways that have been life changing, demanding, and always for the better. The Holy Spirit is the source of Big Words, filtered through diverse means: Scripture, preaching, prayer, dreams, visions, angels, those in authority, friends, casual comments, or God’s small voice deep in the soul. They come with a promise of blessing, rooted in an intimate relationship with Christ.

Big Words usually came at life’s crossroads—those moments of choice that defined my future. They came when I was seeking God, and they came when I was running from God. Sometimes their fulfillment was delayed for years which, despite doubt, deepened my faith. “Was that *really* God’s voice? Yes, I know it was. What is he up to?”

Big Words were sometimes misunderstood or misinterpreted, only to be clearly understood after they were fulfilled. Some were risky and costly. They were never boring.

How do I know Big Words are God’s voice? I just know. Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). I know Christ personally; he knows me inti-

mately. He died for me; he was raised from the dead; and he is seated next to his Father, above all authority in heaven and on earth. He said, “Follow me, and I will guide you, lead you, speak to you, empower you. And you won’t do it alone, you are a member of something bigger than yourself: the body of Christ, the church.”

Big Words are the master keys to an adventure with God. Noah heard God’s voice when told to build an ark. Abraham did not question God when directed to leave everything behind and move to the land God would show him. Moses obeyed God’s Big Word at the burning bush to lead Israel out of Egyptian slavery. Mary trusted God’s Big Word when an angel told her she would be the mother of Jesus. The Twelve Apostles heard Christ’s call to “come and follow me” and they changed world history. Paul heard God’s voice on the road to Damascus and was transformed from a persecutor to the persecuted. Every outstanding leader in the Bible received Big Words—life transforming words—from God.

Big Words are never big lies. Jesus promised, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the *Spirit of truth*, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you” (John 14:16–17). The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, confirms Big Words. And the Holy Spirit, working with the Word of truth—the Scriptures and confirming testimony of the church—forms a secure perimeter against falsehood and deception.

Every significant move of my life, each project or adventure, was initiated and fulfilled by God. My part was to listen to him and obey his call—not an easy task. I did not always follow through well, sometimes miscalculating and falling short, even losing courage at times. But his calls, his Big Words, were decisive, and his words trumped all other voices. I stuck with God and determined

his voice and nothing else would shape my life. When I failed, he was there to lift me up.

Responding to Big Words means living an explorer's life. While sorting through pictures of my life, I carefully traced my geographic moves, first as a child carried along by my parents, later as an adult with Suzanne, tracking a journey that Jesus had MapQuested before my birth. All he required was my cooperation, my willingness to say, "Not my will but your will be done." That is easier said than done.

I'm inviting you to join Suzanne and me on our bumpy adventure, hoping that you discover one for yourself. There is no greater travel guide than Jesus because his destination is the City of God, the New Heavens and New Earth.

ONE

Set Apart

*Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Birmingham, Michigan*

*“It’s a good thing that God chose me before I was born,
because he certainly would not have afterwards.”*
—Charles Spurgeon, *The Spirit of Charles Spurgeon*

I was shaped in many ways by my parents. And so I will begin with my grandparents, who shaped my parents in so many important ways.

When Denna Miller walked into a room, her beauty—particularly her penetrating blue eyes—made people want to know her. She did not disappoint them; she was more than a Mona Lisa smile. With a confident personality and quick mind, Denna usually was the center of attention.

And when she met Karl Mathews, she knew what she wanted. Karl was a handsome, slight man, an inch shorter than Denna.

He also was reserved, rarely sharing his interior life. Opposites do attract.

Their relationship quickly bloomed into romance, and Denna got her man. They married on a Monday, June 5, 1911, at the First Methodist Episcopal Church in Danville, Illinois. Danville was a midpoint between Mattoon, Illinois (Denna's hometown) and Indianapolis, Indiana, where Karl was born, and where they had met.

After a short honeymoon, they settled down in Indianapolis, planning to have children immediately. More than anything, Denna wanted to be a mother.

Life rarely cooperates with our dreams. Years passed, World War I rocked the globe, and monthly disappointments turned to daily discouragement. Then, when she had lost almost all hope, in summer of 1916 Denna was blessed—actually, twice blessed. She was pregnant with twins.

On April 19, 1917, Denna and Karl became the parents of Elizabeth Ann and Mary Louise. But, like so much of Denna's life, joy was tarnished by grief: Mary Louise died shortly after birth. Tiny Elizabeth Ann survived, and immediately became the light of her mother's life—active, inquisitive, always competing with mom for center stage.

As the years passed Denna bonded deeply with her daughter. She and Karl tried in vain to have more children. But that was okay. They had Elizabeth Ann.

Then tragedy struck. One frigid morning in the fall of 1924, Denna, in her flowing nightgown, walked across the living room past seven-year-old Elizabeth Ann and close to an open-flame gas heater, common in those days. Denna's flammable nightgown touched the flames, and instantaneously she was engulfed in fire.

Her burning nightgown fused with her porcelain skin. The fire was over in a deadly flash. “I remember my dad putting mom in the bathtub filled with cold water,” Elizabeth Ann said years later. “She died quickly and in agony.”

Just like that, little Elizabeth Ann’s life was changed forever.

Karl’s life was changed too. He had carried a secret throughout their marriage. With Denna gone, Karl was through hiding. He was homosexual. Soon Andrew, who became known in the family as “Uncle Andy,” moved in.

Uncle Andy was a kind man with a big smile, an extrovert like Denna. But for Elizabeth Ann, Uncle Andy could never replace her mother. This was 1925 Indiana, and for the next twelve years Elizabeth Ann struggled with confusion, anger, shame, and the fear of her family secrets being discovered by her classmates. And more than anything else, she missed her mother’s love and care.

Witnessing the disastrous, violent death of her mother, the ongoing challenge of being raised by two gay men in 1920s and 30s Indiana, and the absence of a mother’s compassion and unconditional acceptance resulted in emotional insecurity my mother carried for the rest of her life.

Under these circumstances, Elizabeth Ann turned to the only place she could find comfort and moral clarity: the Church. During her senior year at Shortridge High School, she completed her confirmation at the Advent Episcopal Church in May, 1936, and, after Bishop Joseph Francis laid hands on her, she received her first communion. Elizabeth Ann may have lost her earthly mother Denna, but now she was adopted by her heavenly Mother, the Episcopal Church.

A month after her confirmation, Elizabeth Ann graduated high school.

During her junior year at Shortridge High School, Elizabeth Ann had met William Noble Springer, Jr.—called Bill—a kind and engaging student. Everyone loved Bill.

Bill was the opposite of Elizabeth Ann’s father Karl. She was immediately drawn to him and looked up to him. Literally. Elizabeth Ann was five-foot-two and beautiful; Bill was six-foot and handsome. Their attraction was mutual.

Descending from Hoosier stock, Bill was particularly proud of his “Noble” family heritage. He was a direct descendent of Noah Noble, the fifth governor of Indiana, and James Noble, the first US Senator from Indiana. Indiana’s Noble County and the city of Noblesville were both named in honor of Bill’s predecessors.

My paternal grandfather, also named William Noble Springer, lost his left arm when he was fifteen in a train accident—a loss from which he never fully recovered. Unresolved anger fueled depression and, later, abusive actions toward his family.

Six years later, Bill’s father married Elizabeth Harris Archer in the Central Christian Church in Indianapolis. Elizabeth—called Momo by her grandchildren—had been raised in a wealthy family. Her relatives included a Congressional Medal of Honor winner (in the Civil War); successful businessmen; a President of the University of Indiana, University of Maine, and Butler University; physicians; the wife of a Prime Minister of England, and a poet (who, I presume, was not wealthy!).

Momo tended to be formal, dressed immaculately, and loved all things green. She was kind, but distant. She also held the family together and suffered through an unhappy marriage.

Shortly after marrying, Momo had a daughter, yet another Elizabeth—called Liba—Noble, and nine years later, on March 10, 1917, my father Bill was born. In her memoirs, Momo described my aunt

Liba and father Bill as “loving, devoted, smart, and religious . . . They were both baptized in the same pool in the Central Christian Church in which Noble and I were baptized before we met each other.”

After high school in 1936, Bill took a job as a salesman. Because of the Great Depression, there was no money to attend college as his sister Liba had back in the 20s. But that did not deter or discourage Bill; his outgoing personality was made for sales. He was immediately successful. Two years later, on April 16, 1938, Bill and Elizabeth Ann married in the Anderson Methodist Church, just outside of Indianapolis.

Bill and Elizabeth Ann wasted no time starting a family. My mom gave birth to my sister Deena Kay (named for her grandmother, though spelled differently) in November 1939, then my brother Robert William (called Robin) in October 1943.

In 1946, my father’s employer, E.C. Atkins and Company, transferred him to Milwaukee. He was doing well with the company, a real up-and-comer. This transfer was a promotion with more pay and responsibility. The Springers settled into the western suburb of Wauwatosa, and soon Elizabeth Ann was pregnant with their third child.

I was born on October 16, 1947 and named Kevin Noble. Kevin, for the sixth- to seventh-century Irish Saint Kevin of Glendalough. His name meant “of noble birth.” I was also given the family name of Noble. Why I, and not my older



My mom, Elizabeth Ann, holding me at my baptism, April 17, 1948

brother, was given the Noble name was never explained to me. Six months later I was baptized in Trinity Episcopal Church, the initiation of my long and fulfilling upbringing in the Episcopal Church.

Why This Family?

Most people at some point in their lives ask questions like, “Why was I born to *these* parents? At *this* time in history? In *this* culture?” I’ve certainly asked these questions, especially when I was struggling with my parents’ unresolved dysfunctions and how they affected me. My father was a good man, but he had grown up without a healthy model of what it meant to be a husband and father. He wasn’t prepared for the challenges of my mother’s mercurial, narcissistic, controlling personality.

If you do not believe in God, the response to these questions is simple: I came into existence by the random union of two strands of DNA at conception. That is what makes me uniquely me. Nothing more, nothing less. Time and chance. You play the hand you were dealt. Fundamentally, you are on your own.

Of course, random selection frees us from the burden of seeking a transcendent meaning or purpose in life. Meaning and purpose are optional, though most people choose a purpose because, evolutionary psychologists hypothesize, a passion for purpose is built into our genes.

I am not suggesting that people who reject the idea of a transcendent God lack purpose. I believe this drive for more than mere survival—for significance—is something evolution cannot explain.

In any case, if you believe there is a God as I do, answers to the why questions become possible. God has something to say about this. He expressed his view to the prophet Jeremiah, over 2,500 years ago:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
 and before you were born I consecrated you;
 I appointed you a prophet to the nations. (**Jeremiah 1:4–5**)

The Lord told Jeremiah he was not here by chance. God knew him before his conception—knew his parents, where and when he would be born, his gender, race, height, intelligence, personality—everything about him. And there is more: before Jeremiah was born, God consecrated him—set him apart—for something wonderful, for a specific purpose. Jeremiah was appointed “a prophet to the nations.”

My calling has been different from Jeremiah’s calling; it has been a unique calling fitted to me that gives me purpose. That is what this book is about: how I was called and shaped by Big Words. This story indicates how every man and woman in this world is set apart by God for a purpose that matters for eternity.

Some 450 years before Jeremiah, King David wrote the same truth in Psalm 139:13–16:

For you formed my inward parts;
 You knitted me together in my mother’s womb.
 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;
 my soul knows it very well.
 My frame was not hidden from you,
 when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
 Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
 in your book were written, every one of them,
 the days that were formed for me,
 when as yet there was none of them.

Listen carefully to these words “fearfully and wonderfully made” and “days that were formed for me.” David says I was “made in secret, intricately woven”; by implication, he was designed carefully to fulfill his God-ordained purpose in his generation.

Both Jeremiah and David are saying that men and women have designer genes, donated to and nurtured in us by parents God chose before we were conceived.

That’s good news and bad news.

My parents, particularly my father, were deeply committed to caring for me. But my mother’s insecurities, high control, and erratic behavior were embarrassing and drove me inward. She was not easy to live with. When I was in high school, I had fantasies of a stranger calling me out of class to inform me that I was adopted and this amazing couple had come to reclaim me. If I were honest with myself, I thought I could have done a better job than God did in choosing my parents.

I never met my grandmother Denna, due to her horrific death, and I cannot remember my maternal grandfather, Karl, speaking a single word to me. I can barely remember meeting my paternal grandparents, William Noble and Elizabeth Harris Archer because (as I will explain) my father moved our family far away from them—deliberately putting distance between us and my grandfather because he was a dangerous man, most likely a child abuser—although I did not learn this until I was in my forties. This absence of grandparents was a tremendous deficit to me growing up.

So, why did God choose this family for me before “I was formed in the womb?” How can I make sense of it? Not that God owes me an explanation.

But here is how I see it now, with 20/20 hindsight. God used my mother’s brokenness to drive her to the church, and she held on

to that relationship for the rest of her life. She may have had only a mustard seed of faith, but God was the object of her trust—and God never let go of her. Her struggles alienated her from her children, but they never separated her from God’s love. She insisted that I be baptized, attend church every week, and complete my confirmation.

Timothy Keller writes that what is essential in the process of becoming disciples of Jesus “is, to put it colloquially, becoming like the people we hang out with most.” Because of my mother, the people I hung out with most were God fearing, men and women of integrity. They helped shape me into who and what I became.

My mother was also fiercely committed to her marriage. My parents were married imperfectly for fifty-two years, but only death separated them. My father cared for and loved my mom, who to the best of her ability loved my dad. Some psychologists say what kids want to know most is that they are loved by their parents. I believe it is just as important that children know their parents love each other. Confident, emotionally healthy children tend to come from devoted parents.

My mother wasn’t always easy to love, but dad loved her nevertheless, sometimes to a fault. He decided that, come hell or high-water, he was committed to loving and protecting her.

I could write so much more but suffice it to say that I’ve come to peace with and have an appreciation for my parents. I don’t have an exhaustive understanding of why I was born into my family, but this is an adequate understanding. And, perhaps most significantly, where they came up short, I have forgiven them.

On to Birmingham

In 1949, my father received another promotion and was transferred 375 miles east to Detroit. I was two years old. My family settled

just north of Detroit in Birmingham (a fashionable city of 15,000), on Dorchester Road. Soon after, my mom gave birth to a third son, Scott Mathews.

Dorchester Road was loaded with young, professional families. Many of the men were business executives. This neighborhood was the first place I could venture out of the house, and the first person I met was Suzanne Nadal, another toddler who lived across the street. Like the Springers, Bob and Phyllis Nadal then had four children, two girls and two boys.

Suzanne's father, Bob, was part of the group of Harvard Business School graduates that Henry Ford II brought in after the Second World War to rebuild a company that had fallen on hard times. I loved being around Suzanne's family, especially her mother, Phyllis. She was kind and engaging, and she served the best snacks I had ever tasted. The Nadal's home was peaceful, happy, harmonious—where I wanted to be when not in my home.

Suzanne was six weeks older than I, and was baptized on March 28, 1948, by her paternal grandfather, William Thomas Nadal, known by the family as Poddy. He had earned his PhD at Harvard and eventually became president of Drury College (now Drury University) in Springfield, Missouri. When Poddy retired from Drury, he became a Congregational pastor. He and his wife Kathryn had hearts for God, something they passed on to Suzanne.

Suzanne and I were almost inseparable for three years. We played together and managed to get into our fair share of trouble. Those were the days when moms let their kids roam the neighborhood with no fear of danger.

One day Suzanne and I decided we could use some candy, so we hatched the idea that it would be easy to poach a few pieces

out of the bins in a market three blocks away. (We were five years old.) I stood watch while Suzanne lifted the booty, and we got away with it.

We were walking home, smiling and enjoying the fruits of our sin, when my older brother Robin spotted us. He always suspected we were up to no good, and this time he was right. Stealing apples from a neighbor's tree is one thing, but grand theft from a grocery store crossed a line. He grabbed me by the ear (it hurts to this day), and ratted Suzanne out to her mom. We both had to confess to the store manager and pay for our sins.

Suzanne was my first friend, through thick and thin.

Birmingham is where I remember my first church, Christ Church Cranbrook, a beautiful, historic stone structure surrounded by lush gardens and lawns. The wooden pews, as is true of most Episcopal parishes, creaked when you sat down, stood, or kneeled through the liturgy. The colors were vibrant, the cross at the front of the church and liturgy thrilling. I had a sense of meeting God in every service, and the crucifix reminded me that Christ, the Son of God, died for me.

In 1952, my father became an employee of the Borg-Warner Corporation when it bought out Atkins & Company. Borg-Warner opened new opportunities for him, and he took advantage of them. He decided to take his young, growing family to a new, growing territory: southern California.

Once again, I was moving, and I had no control over the move. No more Suzanne. No more Christ Church Cranbrook. No more Birmingham or Dorchester Road. My dad decided we would drive the 2,300 miles across the country to experience the majestic mountains, deserts, and National Parks. Bob Nadal helped arrange a new Ford station wagon for the trip.

On the day we left, the entire neighborhood came out to send us off. Just before leaving, my mother called out Suzanne and said, “Suzanne, you have to kiss Kevin goodbye!” Reluctantly she stepped up as all the other children giggled. She kissed me on the cheek, we looked each other in the eye and sadly parted. My last memory of Birmingham was sitting in the far back of our station wagon, waving to Suzanne who was waving back. I thought, “I will never see her again.”

Boy, was I wrong.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin Noble Springer is a retired pastor of the Desert Springs Church in Palm Desert, California, magazine editor, and author of numerous books and articles published in multiple languages. In 2006, *Power Evangelism*, cowritten with John Wimber, was named the twelfth most significant book in evangelical Christianity in the past fifty years by *Christianity Today*. His other titles with John Wimber include *Power Healing*, and *Power Points*. He also wrote *The Way to Maturity* and *The Kingdom and the Power*, co-edited with Gary S. Greig. Kevin is married to Suzanne Nadal, his wife of over five decades, with whom he has conducted marriage seminars in North America and Europe. They live in Camarillo, California, near their three married children and five grandchildren. Kevin earned a B.S. in Biology from the University of Southern California and an M.A. in Theology from Ashland (Ohio) Theological Seminary.