Journalist urges RBC students to take risks

by Vicki Sairs

Editor’s note: Andrew Sharp spoke to our students on January 22 as part of our Pathways initiative. RBC developed the Pathways program to give students windows into the lives and experiences of people from many different walks of life.

Andrew Sharp tipped his hand when he opened his recent RBC chapel talk with these words: “When I was a student at Rosedale more than 10 years ago, chapel speakers would always start by talking about how long it had been since they were at Rosedale. I am not going to do that.”

Students warmed up to his ironic humor and were quickly rewarded with much more than that: Andrew spoke with depth, honesty and hard-won wisdom about things like journalism, fear, and trying to figure out God’s will. He even made them seem to be logically connected!

Opening his talk with a verbal picture, Andrew asked students to visualize a snapshot of one stressful moment in his life. “Our living room is piled high with boxes full of our worldly possessions. We are preparing to move to another state, but I’ve just found out that my job has fallen through. And that is an important part of how I ended up in journalism.”

Artful storyteller that he is, he left his listeners hanging with a brief “I’ll come back to that.”

He then introduced himself more formally: “I work at a small-town newspaper on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, not far from the Chesapeake Bay, in the town of Easton.”

At a small-town paper, he gets to do a little of everything, he explained. He covers town council meetings, police and fire news, weather, local politics, weddings, births, nonprofit news, theater, culture and feature stories. The Star Democrat is a kind of “journal or diary for the community.”

Andrew started as a reporter and proofreader and is now the night editor. “So how did God lead me there, and what does he have for me to do now that I am there?”

These are questions he couldn’t answer completely, but his goal was to give hope to those who experienced the “burden of finding God’s will weighing” on them. “I was and still am the neurotic, guilt-ridden, diagnosed obsessive compulsive convinced that failure is right around the corner and frightened that I will make bad choices that will ruin my life,” he said.

“Questions about God’s will scared me. What if I missed it? What if I ignored his voice? What if he asked me to do something I would be miserable doing?”

He came to Rosedale not knowing what his life call would be and not knowing he was a writer. He did, however, get to work for “the illustrious RBC Camel.” In fact, he was a charter member. “We were really cutting-edge journalism, in the sense that we were making things up, and that’s not really something most journalists do.”

He had fun making up quotes and writing stories and also discovered that “people liked my stuff.”

Andrew referred to his composition class with Lynette Schrader as “Marine boot camp for grammar and structure” which laid a solid foundation for writing (“more so than at Ohio State, I would have to say”). He enjoyed writing and went on to study journalism at Ohio State.

Once out of college, he wrote briefly for a weekly newspaper in Columbus, and then started working for Rosedale Mennonite Missions as staff writer. This was a “great job.” He got “invaluable writing experience” and felt he was “using his gifts to serve the Lord in a tangible way.”

He thought, “Maybe this is my calling here.”

And now we arrive at the boxes in his living room. Baby Michael had joined the family, and Andrew and his wife Stephanie wanted to be nearer family on the East Coast.

By this time, Andrew had developed a theory of God’s will, roughly summarized this way: You ask for God’s guidance, but he hasn’t necessarily mandated one set course.
You pick one path and serve him in that. Andrew and Stephanie tested that theory; they wanted to move east, sought guidance, and didn’t hear a ‘no,’ so they moved forward.

“I did have a huge amount of guilt for leaving a place where my gifts were contributing directly to an important work,” said Andrew. He was also working part time for UPS and wanted to keep that safety net. UPS had great health insurance, good pay, and a pension, so he asked to be transferred to a hub in Delaware, and that was approved.

They packed. In fact, Andrew was packing when he got the call from UPS telling him the position had fallen through. “I had already told RMM that I was leaving. The decision was made. My theory of finding God’s will was not working out very well.”

One of the things Andrew and Stephanie had prayed was that God would close doors if he didn’t want them to go through them. A “long, panicked search for jobs” followed, but the only door that opened was in journalism.

He didn’t really want that job. He didn’t want the pressure of the newsroom, the daily deadlines, the real grind of reporting work, and the juggling of phone calls and interviews that came with the job.

“I am not a go-getter person. I am not that guy. But it was a job,” he said. “So I took it. And I loved it. I still love it.”

Andrew hasn’t given up his theory on God’s will. “I am not a Calvinist, but I also recognize the mysterious dance between the choices we make and the choices God makes in our lives. I could see that play out here.”

He was choosing to work in journalism, but it also seemed like God was putting him there.

How does serving God in journalism compare to RMM? Now that he’s there, what does God have for him to do?

Andrew’s answer: “A lot. Journalism is well suited to Christian ethics.” Journalistic standards require honesty, fairness, digging for the truth, concern for the well-being of the community, integrity, and speaking truth to power.

Andrew is able to bring kingdom values to the discussion of what stories to cover; he and his co-workers can give the powerless a voice and be a part of standing against corruption. If it weren’t for journalists, “there would be a lot of darkness in public places [in government and business], and people would get away with a lot.”

He is grateful for the opportunity he has to write a regular column about “anything.” He sees himself not as a “Christian columnist” but as a columnist who is a Christian, a person whose heart and mind are being changed and shaped by the kingdom of God.

“No matter what I write, then, if I am honest about who I am, kingdom values will get in, even in a column that never mentions religion.” He has written about poverty, forgiveness (after Charleston), abortion (“the hardest one I’ve written”), Muslims (“lots of hate in our area for Muslims”), and refugees.

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He has also written about the debate over a Confederate statue in the community, in the county where Frederick Douglass grew up, just north of Harriet Tubman’s home county. The statue stands where the slave market used to, and there is deep-seated Confederate sympathy still: “The
symbolism is huge.” He is proud of the paper for its stance on taking the statue down.

Andrew was open about mistakes he has made; he is still learning how to navigate this territory. Political column writing can be polemical, and personal attacks are not unheard of. He tries to bring a different tone to the discussion, one “that humanizes the opposition.”

He is glad for the opportunity to be a Christian in a secular workplace. Perceptions of Christians can be skewed; he runs into stereotypes of Christians involving crazy rituals and weird beliefs. The Christian world can look like a “freak show” to people outside the church. “I can show them that Christians aren’t all freaks, or even if I am a freak, I’m a nice one,” he said, smiling.

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He encouraged our students to be honest about who they are. “If you are made different by Jesus, you will not have to manufacture talking points.” In a secular workplace, you will stand out. “Own it. Explain it. That is witnessing, not proselytizing.” Witnessing is sharing about why you are different, what God has done for you, the joy and fulfillment that you can find in the Lord.

“As you look to find a vocation, a place to serve the Lord, and struggle over how to discern his will—don’t be timid. Be willing to pursue your passions and do work that fits your gifts, but look for a way to serve God in those passions. Trust God to lead you in that. He can change your passions.”

Andrew encouraged students to be willing to experiment, “to do things that are uncomfortable or frightening. Following your vocation, following your passions or interests, is not taking the path of least resistance.”

He listed reasons that should have kept him out of journalism: he is an introvert (“I don’t like people”); he was afraid of doing interviews; he doesn’t like calling strangers on the phone (or anyone, really); he doesn’t like conflict; he worries about what people think of him. “These are all bad flaws in a journalist.”

And yet there is a joy in overcoming challenges. “I tried it and it is amazing. I have found it very fulfilling.”

His final advice for students: “You don’t need to be afraid about moving forward in your life and making choices that might even turn out to be wrong.” God is able to take our good choices and honor them, and he’s able to take our bad choices and redeem them.