

## Faith at Work Over the Life Course

David Brenner

*David Brenner is the board chair of AI and Faith and a Seattle attorney with 35 years of experience in counseling clients and litigating claims related to technology, risk management and insurance. He attends West Side Presbyterian Church and is actively involved in programs that integrate faith, science and technology with faculty of the University of Washington, Seattle Pacific University, and Seattle University. He is a graduate of Stanford University and UC Berkeley's Law School.*

Over and over, in various formulations, the Psalmist says, “God puts my life together”. My current favorites are two nearly adjoining verses in Psalms 4 and 5 paraphrased in Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*: “At day’s end, I’m ready for sound sleep, for you, God, have put my life back together. . . . Every morning I lay out the pieces of my life on your altar and watch for fire to descend.” There’s my goal: to daily submit to God’s powerful reassembly of the pieces of my life.

This is clearly a lifelong process. The first half of my work life in a successful but stressful corporate litigation practice was more about keeping all *my* options on the table than presenting them daily on God’s altar. The switch to laying them out for God’s reassemblage began about twenty years ago when I attended a reunion of Stanford Christian Fellowship, my college fellowship group. Like me, many there were reading Bob Buford’s “*Half Time*” books. We liked his question, “now that we can actuarially expect to live in decent health to 80, what are you planning to do with the new last third of your life?” But some of us viewed his slogan “from success to significance” as a false dichotomy – too dismissive of spiritual “significance” while still seeking material “success”. I nevertheless dutifully made my five-year plan for escaping to “significance”.

A few years later, my wife Madeleine and I were invited to attend the biannual Laity Lodge Leadership Forums, a rarified gathering of 200 A-list business, political, media and cultural leaders, who came together around the theme of faith and work life integration. At first, I was transfixed by the money and power present, even as I absorbed the sincere stories of difficult “eye of the needle” challenges extraordinary success posed for these persons I thought of as “Christians with Jets.” As I attended two more of these gatherings, my interest in “success” decreased as my interest in “significance” expanded.

In 2008, the pieces of my work life reshuffled further when I was asked to chair our law firm’s service to nonprofits alongside my longtime litigation role. As such, I attended a meeting of leaders promoting Seattle’s rapidly emerging global health community through a new umbrella group, the Washington Global Health Alliance.

The highlight of the conference for me was a presentation by Dr. Bill Foeghe, the godfather of the Gates’ commitment to global health and the one man thus far in history who – but for his modesty - can claim to have permanently eradicated a disease (smallpox). Dr. Foeghe had my attention from the outset when he stated to this room full of secular leaders that “until 50 years ago global health was medical missions.” Missionary doctors had impressed me from an early age with their dedication as they raised funds in my pastor dad’s Kansas church.

I approached the newly named director of the Alliance about doing the Alliance’s legal work, and also mentioned the big church I attended. We got the legal work, but it was the faith connection that really

interested her. The Alliance wanted a connection to the faith world and needed some volunteer leaders to make that happen. I stepped up and helped launch the “Faith and Services Committee.”

It was clear to me from the outset that this Committee needed to be interfaith. An Islamic doctor and a Jewish prosthetics expert joined me as co-chairs and we allied with faith congregations across the region and major hospitals. Our mandate was to develop best practices for sending volunteer doctors and nurses on short term health and disaster relief missions. Along the way, I found to my surprise a greater ease than ever before in sharing my faith convictions. Working shoulder to shoulder on our common goal of harnessing faith and science for improved maternal and childhood health led naturally to free and easy discussions of our faith motivations.

My law partners were intrigued by how Jewish, Muslim, and Christian faith leaders and professionals were all working companionably and energetically with scientists at prestigious secular institutions. This opportunity to share my faith indirectly with them was a great encouragement after two decades of feeling inadequate in that area of my discipleship. Much of my prior legal representation in the nonprofit sector was for churches. Since these legal matters often involved Christians behaving badly, they tended to discredit the claims of Christ among my colleagues. By contrast, the interfaith work for the Alliance provided a much better context for explaining my motivation and belief to my colleagues. With this integrating and energizing work, my five-year “Halftime plan” quietly slipped past ten.

Then on a Monday morning in October of 2011, a shocking event occurred which, in the words of the Psalmist, most certainly felt like God’s consuming fire. My office phone rang just after 11:00 and I heard a voice asking if I was the husband of Madeleine Brenner. Rushing to the hospital a few blocks away, I learned that Madeleine had suffered a grade 5 brain aneurysm while exercising at her health club. After twelve hours of deep brain surgery and 8 days of no improvement, she passed away.

In those days of crisis in the ICU, as our family and friends compared notes, we began to realize the many startling ways in which Madeleine had been closing up shop with no idea of what was coming. Things like, instead of foregoing chocolate for Lent as usual, the letter she wrote each day over 40 days to a close friend or family member, affirming specifically their great qualities and thanking them for the joy they gave her. Madeleine’s remarkable though unaware preparations blew away the usual “why” question of her death at only 54. But I found it much harder to get past the question of “how did I not see this coming?” I see now this was about trouble in “laying the pieces of my life on God’s altar”.

In the years since, God has graciously reassembled the pieces of my life in new ways for which I am very grateful. After several years, I married a wonderful Presbyterian pastor/scholar, Laurie Wheeler Brenner, who pluses up everything she touches. Thankfully, my kids’ strong faith has held. They moved forward with their lives, my daughter as an ICU pediatric nurse and son a naval aviator.

I have found myself in a whole new way of working “significantly” that draws on the above lessons. Several years after Madeleine’s death, my volunteer work in global health drew to a natural close. It also became clear that, having reached that *Half Time* point of sufficient material “success” and experiencing my wife’s remarkable gifts as a preacher and teacher, her calling manifestly deserved priority of position. So I placed myself on a glide path out of the law.

Freed from the demands of billable hours and business development, I began to look about for “bridgebuilders” across the yawning chasm of political and cultural rancor that was splitting the

## Faith@Work Matters (DRAFT | not for circulation)

evangelical world. The best I found were evangelical organizations with strong analytical capability and a broad spectrum of participants like *Christianity Today* and the National Association of Evangelicals. I resolved to connect further with such organizations.

How that could work became clearer in 2017 around the emerging discussion of ethics and artificial intelligence (AI). For 30 years I litigated difficult insurance claims on behalf of policyholders, primarily technology companies in the later years and also organized many legal professional education programs on technology risk, giving me a solid background in this area.

Remarkably, the risks posed by artificial intelligence involve questions at the heart of Christianity and the world's other great religions such as: why are humans different from robots? Can humans learn too much and try too hard to create things in our own image? What is truth and how can it be protected? Is human choice real? Despite this, in the mushrooming discussion around ethics and AI little room has been left for the voices of religion, even as tech leaders largely follow an unquestioned and often unacknowledged materialist dogma. Many AI professionals practice a personal faith, but an organizing and catalyzing force is needed.

For that purpose, two years ago, drawing on the interfaith structure and lessons learned from my global health years, I joined with sophisticated theologians, philosophers and ethicists across the spectrum of the major faiths and faith-oriented AI professionals to create AI and Faith. [aiandfaith.org](http://aiandfaith.org) Our mission is to provide faith-derived ethics resources to help technologists and students in the arena of AI integrate their faith and work to help boundary the risks of the products they are creating and studying.

So, God continues to daily reassemble the pieces of my life, and occasionally I even get to glimpse the fire. I strive to sleep soundly and see what each morning brings.