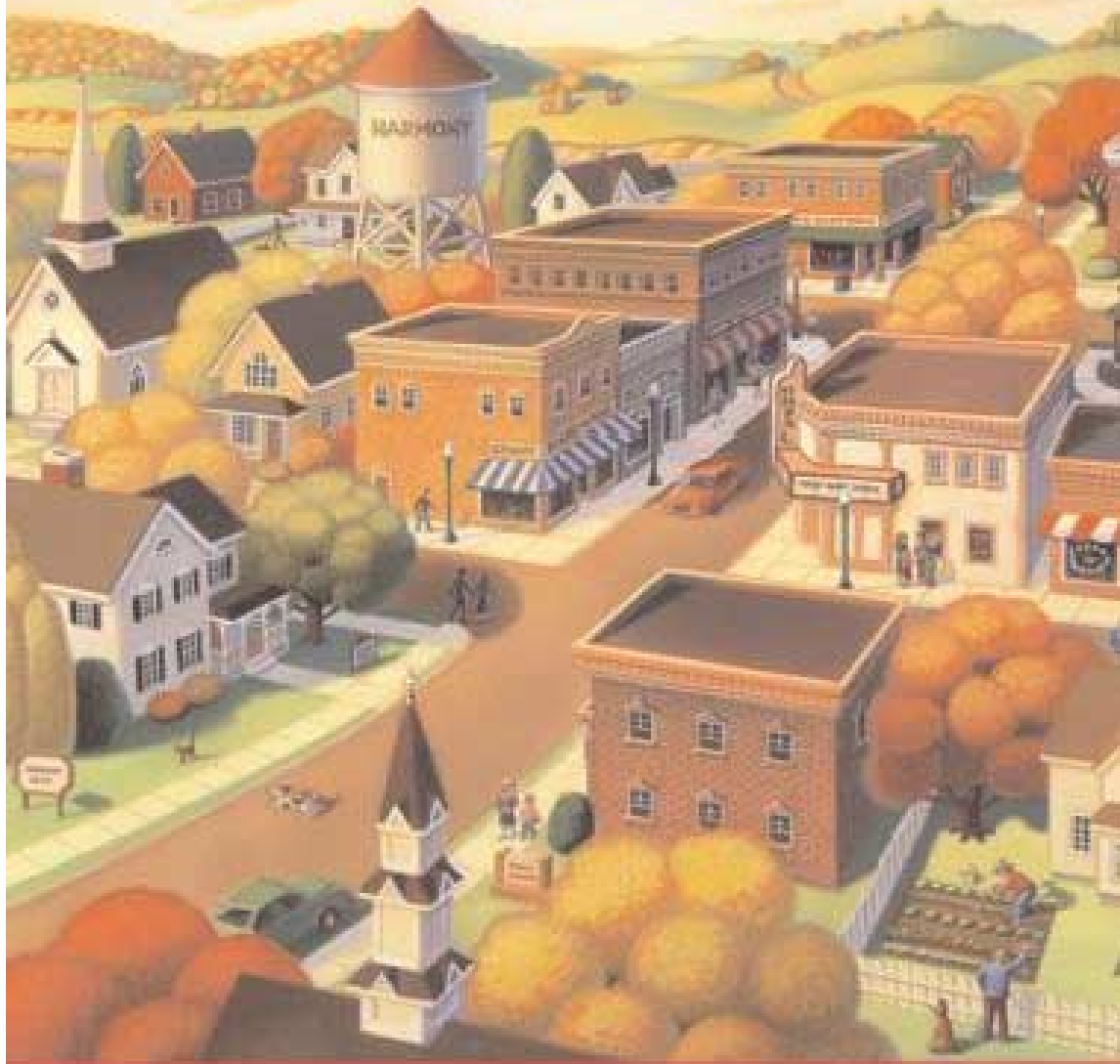


"Philip Gulley is a beautiful writer. This book is just shy of perfect."  
—CHARLES OSGOOD, anchor, CBS Sunday Morning

# Just Shy of HARMONY



PHILIP GULLEY

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**Just Shy of Harmony**

By Philip Gulley

Sam Gardner sat on the porch the Monday after Easter. It was early in the morning. The Grant kids were walking past on their way to school.

"Are Levi and Addison ready?" Billy Grant yelled from the sidewalk.

"They'll be right out," Sam answered.

The window by the porch swing was propped open. Sam could hear his wife, Barbara, giving their boys last-minute instructions.

"Levi, don't forget your lunch money. Addison, if you have to go pee-pee, tell the teacher. Please don't go in your pants. Just raise your hand and ask to use the bathroom. Can you do that, honey?"

The boys walked out the front door with their mother following behind, adjusting their shirt collars and smoothing their hair. "Behave yourselves. Obey your teachers."

Barbara settled herself on the porch swing next to Sam. She let out a heavy sigh.

"Addison's kindergarten teacher called yesterday. Do you know he's wet his pants twice in the past week?"

"He is an unusually moist child," Sam agreed.

A pickup truck rattled past their house. Ellis and Miriam Hodge driving Amanda to school. Ellis bumped the truck horn.

"There go the Hodges," Sam observed.

"I really like them," Barbara said.

"I wish we had ten more just like them."

They swung back and forth in a companionable silence.

"I was looking at the calendar," Barbara said. "I had forgotten this Sunday is Goal-Setting Sunday."

Sam groaned. "Oh, that's right. I'd forgotten too. I don't think I'll go."

"You have to go. You're the pastor."

"Maybe I'll get lucky and die before then."

But the Lord didn't see fit to spare him. Instead, Goal-Setting Sunday gnawed at Sam the entire week.

That Thursday he read the "Twenty-five Years Ago This Week" column in the Harmony Herald. There was a mention of Dale Hinshaw's long-ago mission trip. Twenty-five years ago, one of their goals had been the development of "Lawn Mower Evangelism." Compelled by the Almighty, Dale had ridden across the state on his John Deere lawn tractor. Whenever he passed someone in their yard, Dale would give them a Bible tract and witness to them.

"We just have to throw the seed out there," Dale had told the Herald. "There's no telling what the Lord can do with it." Then he was quoted as saying, "Near as I can figure, I averaged eight miles to the gallon."

This Sunday promised to be another glorious chapter in the goal-setting history of Harmony Friends Meeting.

The first Goal-Setting Sunday was held in 1970, the year Pastor Taylor came to Harmony fresh from seminary, chock-full of grand ideas. Sam was nine years old and has a vague recollection of Pastor Taylor standing at the chalkboard in the meetinghouse basement, encouraging them to splendid heights.

In 1970, their goals were, one, to spread the gospel to every tribe and person in the world, two, to end world hunger, and, three, to carpet the Sunday school rooms.

They'd carpeted the Sunday school rooms first, donated a box of canned goods to a food pantry, and then lost their enthusiasm to do anything more.

Goal-Setting Sunday had gone downhill from there, each year a stark testimony to the growing apathy of the church.

At the last Goal-Setting Sunday, Dale Hinshaw had proposed painting Jesus Saves on the meetinghouse roof as a witness to people in airplanes. "They're up there in the wild blue yonder, bucking up and down in the turbulence. The pilot's telling them to fasten their seat belts. They'll look out the window and see our roof, and it'll fix their minds on the eternal. If they're not open to the Lord then, they never will be."

That was when Sam had proposed doing away with Goal-Setting Sunday. "Why do we even bother? We set these goals and make a big deal out of it for a month or so, then we forget all about it. When we do remember it, we feel bad that we didn't do anything. Why don't we just skip Goal-Setting Sunday this year?"

That had gone over like a pregnant pole-vaulter.

Dale had quoted from the book of Revelation about lukewarm churches and how God would spew them out of his mouth. "Do you want the Lord to spit us out, Sam? Is that what you want? 'Cause I tell you right now, that's what He'll do. You're leading us down a slippery slope. First, we'll stop doing the Goal-Setting Sunday, then the next thing you know there'll be fornication right here in the church. You watch and see."

Any deviation from tradition had Dale Hinshaw prophesying an outbreak of fornication in the church pews. It took Sam several years to learn he was better off keeping quiet and not suggesting anything new.

"Just go along with it," his wife had told him. "It's only one Sunday a year. Let them do whatever they're going to do. It's easier that way."

So when Dale suggested at the elders meeting that it was time for Goal-Setting Sunday, Sam didn't argue.

They scheduled it for the first Sunday after Easter, which is when they've always held it, lest fornication break out in the church.

Dale came to the meetinghouse on Goal-Setting Sunday clutching a briefcase. An ominous sign. After worship, everyone clumped downstairs. Miriam Hodge, the last bastion of sanity in the congregation and, providentially, the head elder, stood at the blackboard, chalk in hand. She asked Sam to pray, so he used the opportunity to talk about the importance of tasteful ministry.

"Dear God," Sam prayed, "may whatever we do bring honor to your name. Let our ministry be proper and reverent, befitting your magnificence."

He'd no...