

HANGING ON REGARDLESS

I have an aversion to just standing on an escalator.

You can put this down, if you like, to much practice in racing through the Sydney Town Hall station to catch my evening train home. I usually time my departure from the office so that I have just two minutes to spare. Unless, of course, I meet a friend in the street. Or, Alvin, whose laksa shop is half way between the office and the station, and who loves to greet me with a smile and a chat. Or the mobile phone rings. Or I pause at the newspaper stand to glance at the headlines or catch the latest cricket score. Then it is time to dodge and scurry around people who, like me, are scampering with ant-like freneticity through the station.

Of course, there are always a few who don't seem to understand the importance of making it on time. Like visitors to Sydney puzzling their way through the mysteries of the subway station. Or tourists taking a leisurely journey around town, glorying in the fact that they don't have to hurry. Or school girls chatting away in excited groups, each trying to out-shout the other, oblivious to those around them. Or sick or tired or overweight people doing their best just to stay upright in the bustling throng, let alone make haste.

As in many underground rail systems, the Town Hall station escalators are very long. You cannot see your train until you reach the very bottom. So you can't just stand there as your mechanical staircase grinds and groans its way down. What if the train has already arrived? What if it departs while you are still day-dreaming on the escalator? So I squeeze past more sedate passengers and bounce down the steps as quickly as I can, trying not to jostle others as I do.

Most people stand on the left, but every so often there is someone whose feet are planted firmly on the right. Or another carrying large shopping bags that block the way. Or a couple entangled in a loving embrace and so fascinated by each other they are unaware the rest of the world exists. Or a wearied office worker just happy to be heading home, with little care for anyone else. It takes some dexterity to angle past obstacles like these.

When I finally reach the bottom, I look anxiously to the left - with relief if there is no train there, with panic if there is. I lift my eyes anxiously to the information screen. Is it my train? Am I in time? Have I made it?

And then, of course, there is the health-and-exercise factor. Never take an elevator if there is an escalator. Never ride an escalator if you can climb the stairs. Fight obesity. Fight luxury. Stay limber. Stay fit. Don't let escalators or elevators numb you into indolence and infirmity. For decades I have lived under the uncompromising impulses of such principles although I confess that when there are more than five floors, indolence has been known to take over. I do want to enjoy good health but I don't want to kill myself achieving it.

So when I am in a shopping centre or a cinema or a hotel or an arcade, if there is an escalator, I cannot just step on to it and wait for it to carry me upwards like a departing soul to heaven. I have to be active, to stretch the leg muscles and the lungs, to prove my fitness, to make the most of every minute, to redeem the time because the days are evil. If I am ascending, I climb up the steps. If I am descending, I climb down the steps. I can't just stand there.

The other day I was shopping in the city mall and found myself having to take a series of escalators to the fifth floor. There was a lift, but as I have already explained, lifts (up the fifth floor, anyway) are to be avoided if one is to live a buoyant life. I negotiated the first two floors successfully, although not uneventfully. I had to interpose myself between a young man and a young woman eating ice creams, without either spoiling my shirt, destroying their snacks or distracting them from their preoccupation with each other. In reality I doubt if they even noticed me. Then there was a man with two bulging plastic bags. He was enormous, potentially threatening, with swarthy skin and powerful muscles. But he proved to be surprisingly gentle when I invited him to let me pass, leaning like the tower of Pisa to the left so I could lever myself safely through on the right. There was a stooping, elderly lady, whose shaking fingers with their delicate rice-paper skin gripped the moving rail tightly to ensure that she kept her feet. I managed to step nimbly around her without threatening her balance.

Then came the third level. I was just about to go higher when a young mother with a baby in a pusher and a pre-school daughter with a pony tail slipped in front of me. I thought about pushing past but hesitated, not wanting to cause one the little one to stumble.

Nevertheless, still itching to climb higher, I considered possible manoeuvres. Maybe when we reached the next floor I could circumnavigate this tiny fleet and sail on more quickly. My strategy was simple. While the mother steered her course safely through the hazards of this new shore, I would leap like Solomon's stag to the next escalator and skip ahead.

We reached the fourth floor. The mother deftly swung the pusher around in front of me and the little girl followed. She had hold of her mother's blouse with a vice-like grip. Her little fingers were clenched tight and it was obvious she had no intention of letting go. My strategy proved useless.

I stood patiently behind them all the way to the fifth floor. The toddler did not relax her grip for one second. I watched her tiny hand closely. She was hanging on so tight only an earthquake could have prised her loose. She was relaxed. She chatted brightly to her Mum. She was not afraid of the escalator or the people or the noise around her. She was confident and courageous. And she held on regardless. Her mother did not need to hold her or warn her. She knew she was on to a good thing and she wasn't going to give it up for anyone. Those tiny fingers gripped that blouse with a life-saving intensity and trust that were unflinching.

They walked on – both mother and daughter oblivious to my staring – and went their way. I thought of the strength and reassurance that little girl gained from her mother. These are qualities we need, too. In the bustling and hustling of life, it is good to know that we have someone much stronger than we, who, like that mother, knows where He is going and can safely take us with Him. When we are faced with trauma or grief or pain or disappointment, He is there. All we have to do is trust him – to hang on regardless. I remembered how Jesus said we should become like little children – just trusting Him (Matthew 18:3; 19:14).

When I was a boy we used to sing,

He loves, He saves, He keeps, He satisfies
This longing heart of mine,
He fills my life to overflowing
With his joy and peace divine;
He guides, he guards, he watches over me,
He slumbers not nor sleeps,
For He is my glorious Saviour,
And He loves, He saves, He keeps.

William M Runyan

I thought then that this song contained pretty good theology and I still think so now. And that little girl was a pretty good theologian, too, although she did not know it. I hope she never forgets to keep her fingers gripped tightly to the source of her salvation.

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About Dr Barry Chant

Barry Chant is Senior Pastor of the Wesley International Congregation in Sydney, Australia. He is a regular speaker at church services, seminars, conferences and conventions. Hundreds of thousands of his books have been sold around the world. He has degrees in arts, theology and ministry, a diploma in education and a PhD in history. He was the initiator and former president of Tabor College, Australia.

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