

# science & theology

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DISCOVERIES, RESEARCH AND IDEAS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

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# Essayists detail lives filled with purpose



Photo Courtesy of Leo Reagan

At The Power of Purpose Awards ceremony, essay subject Brother John (left photo) talks with Deb Murphy of Lionhart Books and Caroline Sutton of Random House, while contest judge Paul Davies (right photo) speaks to the crowd.

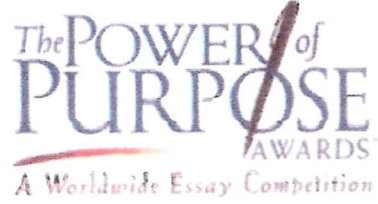


By Frederica Saylor

When scrubbing the bathroom floor or sharing an umbrella on a rainy day, most people don't think they're fulfilling their purpose in life. Purpose, they may say, refers to something greater — like ending suffering or running a multi-billion dollar corporation. Divining the meaning of their lives is something most struggle with, often realizing that even in the smallest acts, purpose takes seed.

To spur people around the world to think about this idea, the Templeton Foundation sponsored "The Power of Purpose Awards: A Worldwide Essay Competition." In

September, out of more than 7,300 entries from 97 countries, 19 winners were selected. (The Templeton Foundation also publishes *Science & Theology News*.)



Michael Reagan, president of Lionhart Books and managing director of the contest, said the competition was designed to illuminate the brightest aspects of individuals. "The winners saw and gave ex-

amples of the best of the possibilities of human nature," he said.

"I think these days, when you say the word 'purpose,' it's being defined by these bestsellers, which I think is fine, but it shouldn't be that narrow," said Hugh Delehanty, editor in chief of AARP Publications and contest judge. "I think it's the possibility of touching someone's life in a deep way, and I think these stories can do that: they can inspire people."

Submissions were accepted in the categories of personal reflection, journalistic report, scientific inquiry and fiction. The judges — including

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"Nature cannot be divorced from God."

— Niels Henrik Grøgen, page 3

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# Purpose

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Delehanty, Nancy Brinker, founder of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation; Paul Davies, a professor of natural philosophy at the Australian Centre for Astrobiology; Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund; and Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose-Driven Life* — then selected one grand prize winner, four second-prize winners, four third-prize winners and 10 fourth-prize winners.

August Turak, whose essay "Brother John" won first prize, said his story was one he'd been thinking about for more than 35 years. The contest finally prompted him to write it down, but he said he had no expectations of winning.

"The greatest thing that has happened with me since this award are the people who have written me, saying, 'My life's a mess, and your essay's given me hope,'" said Turak, a businessman and founder of the Self Knowledge Symposium. "To heck with \$100,000 — that's absolutely the most incredible thing that's come out of this."

Randall Frame, acquisitions editor for Judson Press, said his experience working with Haitian nuns whose purpose was to nurse and hold malnourished children moti-

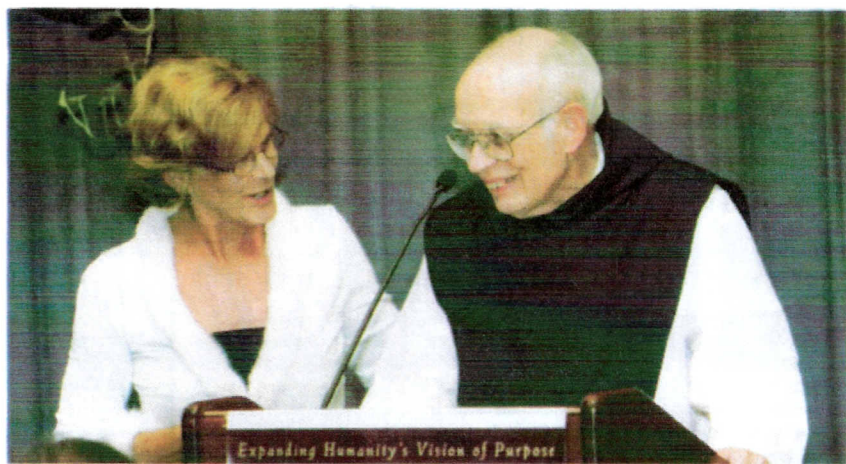


Photo courtesy of Lou Reagan

**Caroline Harkleroad introduces Brother John at the Power of Purpose awards ceremony. Brother John was the subject of August Turak's grand prize-winning essay.**

vated him to submit his essay.

"I just think people in our culture, especially, have gotten a lot more selfish when it comes to purpose," said Frame. "I think purpose is a lot more often defined as succeeding financially, and in business and power, as opposed to being defined as giving ourselves to others. We have lost sight of the fulfillment that can come from sacrifice and are too focused on the perception that purpose comes from wealth."

Inspired by a column she read

about black women's organizations of the 1930s to 1950s, Elizabeth Orndorff composed her fictional essay about a woman whose service was to maintain a bathroom at a beauty parlor for black people.

"To me purpose is servanthood — our purpose toward God is serving others. So I remembered the story of these women that kept a bathroom," said Orndorff. "I hope that this will inspire [people] to see that purpose does not have to imply a lofty, huge, headline-gathering act. It

can be the smallest, menial thing ... If you can find a purpose in cleaning a bathroom, then you can find purpose in anything that serves other people."

Reagan said the winning essays will be published as a book. In the meantime, the pieces are available free of charge to any publication that wishes to reprint them.

"The idea here is to inspire," said Reagan. ■

Frederica Saylor is health editor at Science & Theology News.

## PREVIEW OF UPCOMING ISSUES

- American churches participate in 40 Days of purpose
- Neo-Darwinism and process theology meet at California conference
- Palliative care meeting focuses on easing children's pain
- Barbara Forrest and Paul Gross take on intelligent design
- An update on Peter Benson's work about spirituality and youth
- Easily digestible, information-packed primers on some of the biggest ideas in science-and-religion

**W**hen the Templeton Foundation launched The Power of Purpose Awards, thousands of people around the world responded to the integral question: What is purpose? Below are abstracts from the top five winners. To view all the winning essays, and to learn more about the contest, visit [www.powerofpurpose.org](http://www.powerofpurpose.org).

### August Turak • Raleigh, N.C. \$100,000

"Brother John" is the true story of how the author's contemplative retreat at a Trappist monastery turns both magical and terrible when a simple monk offers to share an umbrella on a cold and rainy Christmas Eve. This simple act of loving-kindness proves almost more than he can bear, and becomes the catalyst for a gut wrenching reevaluation of life, love and the terrible yet fascinating nature of God.

### Mitch Abblett • Newton, Mass. \$50,000

"The Face Collector" A combat veteran has carried a heavy burden of pain and guilt since the Vietnam War. In the years since the war, he has found atonement and a mission in life through his work as a photographer and through teaching others about the

power of caring, empathic contact with others.

### Alan Hirshfeld • Newton, Mass. \$50,000

"How Wonderfully We Stand Upon This World" In 19th-century England, an unschooled bookbinder named Michael Faraday overcame almost impossible economic and class obstacles to become the greatest experimental scientist of his time. Faraday sought to understand the natural world in the belief that the revealed knowledge would nourish the collective soul of humanity. His legacy is nothing less than our own technological society.

### Leslie Larson • Berkeley, Calif. \$50,000

"Grace" "Grace" tells the story of a 74-year-old woman who struggles to learn both to read and write. And not

just to write, but to write poetry. Her patience and perseverance overcome a barrage of obstacles — including the fading enthusiasm of her 20-something tutor.

### Struan Stevenson • Girvan, England \$50,000

"Crying Forever" "Crying Forever" is Stevenson's moving account of the people he met in Semipalatinsk in 2003, people the Western world would largely have forgotten. These people are the true victims of the Cold War in the area of East Kazakhstan where the Soviets carried out more than 600 nuclear tests between 1949 and 1990, using the half-million local population as human guinea pigs. Stevenson's essay explores the daily life of these communities, their suffering, pain and sense of hopelessness as they struggle to survive in a polluted environment.

## Purpose-driven bestseller



Having sold more than 17 million copies, Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* does better on bookshelves than John Grisham, Stephen King and even J.K. Rowling.

According to Lynn Garrett, religion editor for *Publishers Weekly*, books like Warren's are topping the charts because people are looking for help in finding meaning and direction in their lives.

"[Consumers] want books that will help them strengthen their relationships, strengthen their marriage, help their lives and help them have a deeper relationship with God," said Garrett.

The founder of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif., Warren devotes his life to helping individuals and communities attain purpose. Prior to writing *The Purpose-Driven Life*, he devised The Purpose-Driven Church seminars and wrote a book by the same title, which launched a following that today incorporates more than 250,000 churches in more than 125 countries.

This best-selling book delves into the question "Why am I here?" According to Warren, the starting place must be with God. He outlines God's plan for people's lives, helping them to find their own purpose. Written in a devotional style of 40 short chapters, the book is the cornerstone of the national 40 Days of Purpose Campaign.

To learn more about 40 Days of Purpose, read our December issue

— Frederica Saylor