

## What Would John Do?

by

**S. J. Fairchild**

*What would John do?* This is a question that crosses my mind whenever there's a thorny problem, a dilemma, or—on a few occasions—a real crisis. It's nothing Biblical relating to Jesus's disciples—nothing of the sort.

The question reflects memories of my great-grandfather John (Fairbairn) Fairchild who faced far worse obstacles than I. His life took turns in which his very existence was jeopardized. (If he hadn't survived, you wouldn't be reading this!)

Let me compare my life challenges to his:

*July, 1832:* John Fairbairn is born in Jedburgh, Roxburghshire, Scotland. He's named after a dead brother and is the ninth child of ten siblings. I can only imagine how he competed for parental attention.

*August, 1941:* I'm born in Denver, Colorado and named after two living grandfathers. I'm an only child. No sibling competition here.

*1842:* John is ten years old, and his mother dies, exhausted from birthing ten children. A mean stepmother arrives and makes life unbearable.

*1951:* I'm a lonely child, but my physical needs are well take care of. I have the usual childhood ailments. Nothing serious.

*1843-1849:* All of eleven years old, John runs away to live with an aunt. He's caught trespassing on Sir Walter Scott's estate and charged with poaching. He confesses; and instead of punishing him, Lord Scott shows him the best fishing and hunting places.

*1953-1959:* Unlike John, I get to go to school, and I'm a good student—meeting my parents' unspoken expectations.

*1850:* John is drafted into military service (92<sup>nd</sup> Gordon Highlanders) in Queen Victoria's army. As a Scotsman, he gets the worst assignment—to occupy the poverty-stricken areas of Dublin, Ireland.

*1959:* I'm granted a student deferment so I can attend university. I have simple challenges: join a fraternity, socialize, don't flunk. I merely read about poverty and war.

*1851-1852:* John, upset by British treatment of the Irish people, deserts, hides in Edinburgh then sails to Boston during rough seas. The name on his passport is John Fairchild.

*1959-1960:* My freshman year in college is a blast. I'm getting good grades, and I survive fraternity hell week.

*1853-1861:* Somehow, John travels to Georgia to live and work with an older brother. He witnesses slavery and is appalled at the treatment of black people. He voices his opinions, and he receives threats on his life. He leaves Georgia to join his sister in Iowa. He becomes a farmer . . . until 1864.

*1961-1965:* I graduate from college, marry my beautiful Katherine, and am accepted to graduate school. While I'm working on my MBA, Katherine teaches school and pays the bills. All said and done, I accept a promising job in Ohio. The future looks bright and unlimited.

*1864:* The Civil War is underway. John answers President Lincoln's call for volunteers and enlists as a private in the Iowa Calvary.

*1966:* The war in Vietnam is going badly. Lyndon Johnson sends me a draft notice. I "volunteer" for Air Force Officer Candidate School.

*1864-1865:* John serves under General Grant and fights in two battles before being captured on December 14, 1864 in Memphis, Tennessee. He's sent to Andersonville Prison in Georgia. For six months, he faces brutality, filth, disease. He's forced to live outdoors with no shelter or clean water. When freed in April, 1865, he's starving, has scurvy, and injuries. He's sent to recuperate in Florida; he weighs 90 pounds.

*1966-1970:* By comparison, my military service is easy. I'm assigned to Los Angeles, and I procure spare parts for F-100 planes that bomb Vietnam. I read about American POWs and

count my blessings. The military pay is low, but we manage. Two beautiful baby girls join our family.

*1866-1892:* John returns to Iowa and learns a new trade—plastering, brick laying, stone masonry. He marries at age 36 and acquires a soldier's homestead in South Dakota. Six children arrive between 1869 and 1878, one of whom is my grandfather. Again more challenges: grasshopper plagues, winter blizzards, tornadoes, and Indians. In a classic "home on the prairie," the family travels by covered wagon to Blair, Nebraska. His wife dies after the birth of their sixth child, and John's health declines. He retires to an Iowa soldier's home and dies at age 61.

*1971-2009:* My job and work experiences take us to five more states and four foreign countries. Our daughters graduate from university and become accomplished educators and artists. We travel the world and visit Jedburgh, Scotland and Andersonville, Georgia to learn more about John Fairchild. I'm in good health and am living a long life.

My life challenges and obstacles are trivial when compared to John's. I can only aspire to match his rebellious, risk-taking nature, and his ability to survive life-threatening ordeals. I do think I've inherited his curiosity, his sense of adventure and fair play.

So . . . every time life throw me a curve ball, challenges me . . . I think about John Fairchild and ask, "What would John do?"