
Chapter Five
PASSING THROUGH THE ELECTRIC CIRCUS

Work hard, go to church often. That was life with Larry and his family. Splitting logs every night to feed wood furnaces, I also parlayed my experience as vaquero at Rehrersburg into a lucrative 42 cents an hour working for Sundberg's Dairy. Eating potato sandwiches for lunch, I worked twelve hours a day, six days a week. "You don't work, you don't eat," was Larry's approach in those days. At least as far as everyone else was concerned. In later years he forgot about it. At least as far as he was concerned.

For the most part, "church" was the black churches in the area with no particular allegiance to any. Larry felt accepted in the black churches. They tended to see his preaching as unique for a white boy and he developed much of his fiery, preaching style among them. He was trying to get an independent church going without much success. His mother and a few families from area churches joined Larry's household in making up the lion's share of the congregation. Living in an old, two-floor country house he earned his money doing odd jobs. He sold Amway products throughout the year and Christmas trees at Christmas [which is generally the best time to sell such trees.] This was also the time when

he severed his relationship with the Ohio District Council of the Assemblies of God. I knew when he wrote the letter but I never knew the details. It was inevitable. Larry saw everyone as against him from the beginning of his life.

Years later, as a printer for the Ashtabula Star Beacon, I had occasion to work with two fellows who went to school with him when he was little. They told me of a small, rather puny kid who said offensive things to classmates as he ran off the school bus to hide behind his mom, waiting on the porch. I pictured him sticking out his tongue from behind her skirts. Unaware I possessed such potentially embarrassing information, Larry told me about a time when they finally caught him. He said they held him down and urinated on him. In his mind he was persecuted, even as a child, because God's hand was on him and the devil didn't want him to make it. Whatever. He shouldn't have habitually "pissed off" his classmates. He's one of the few people I've ever known who has consistently refused to live with the consequences of his choices. In later years he claimed spiritual submission to Oree Keyes, Senior Bishop of the Apostolic Faith Church of God. He claimed such submission until Brother Keyes told him some things he didn't want to hear. Larry then lamented how even Brother Oree had gotten off the mark.

Other men, larger than Larry, recorded Oree Keyes' true legacy. He was elected to lead the original group that came out of the 1906 Azusa Street Revival and "he took the position with the humble heart of a servant. Burdened over the disunity that had come to the original work, he went to the Bishops of these other, smaller denominations and asked if they would consider coming back together. They refused. As a token of his sincerity he volunteered to resign as Bishop if it would facilitate the merger of the splintered factions into the single denomination they would become. The group heard his plea and in 1980 remerged and elected him Senior Bishop of the Apostolic Faith Church of God. Bishop Oree Keyes was so burdened for the cause of Christian unity that he was willing to lay his own future on the line." ⁱ

I was on parole and jumped through all the necessary legal hoops while attempting to build a life for myself. Sandy and I were going to get married. We settled on August 13, 1966 as the day. We'd been

sweethearts, through thick and thin, since I was thirteen. She was the one waiting for me when I was "away," writing and sending pictures several times a week. When I first met her she was quietly self-conscious of her appearance. Problems with teenage acne, an imagined long nose and front teeth with an interesting angle all caused her to feel unattractive. She was wrong. I thought she was the most wonderful, warm thing I'd ever met. She was in my eighth grade class when I moved to Chicago from Villa Park. From the first day I arrived girls were giving me notes and grabbing my body parts in the hall between classes. But not Sandy. She hung out with a "fast" crowd but wasn't. Another product of divorce, foster homes and a selfish mother she wanted a friend as much as I did. Her heart became home to me.

Working as a printer in Jefferson, I had only \$100 with which to buy a suit for the wedding *and* the rings. I wasn't real confident I was going to accomplish that. To make matters worse I took the money, "carried it on up," to church. That's a mistake. Larry and I attended the State Youth Convention for the Church of God in Christ. When the offering plate was passed I felt a huge impulse to give \$20. This had nothing to do with Larry. At the time I believed God was calling on me to give. But God knew I was getting married. What was He thinking? The fellow passing the plate looked at the twenty and asked, "Do you want change?" Now there's a novel idea. Get behind me, devil. Embarrassed, I said as quietly as possible, "No, thanks" but when you're trying to talk over the top of an African-American youth choir who just hit their collective groove, people can't help but notice. Larry observed, knowing my dilemma. Next day he picked me up and took me to a jeweler and a men's clothing store in Ashtabula. He was like a father or best friend gently doing what he could to help, trying to encourage my efforts at doing something for others. He co-signed and vouched for me and, at the end of the day, I had everything I needed and \$20 left over.

We married in August of 1966 at Central Assembly of God in Chicago. Randy was my best man and Ray and Val, my old band mates, completed my side of the line. Randy and Val never took off their sunglasses for the entire service. Larry tried to give Randy instructions at the rehearsal. Big mistake. "Look, man, I don't even like you. I know what to do." Following a few, well-turned expletives Larry got the message. We were all kind of indifferent to whether he approved or not.

While I'd been participating in all the church activities my heart was never really in it for the long haul. I was with him because there was no place else to go. I was there because I wanted out of jail and now I wanted to be someplace else. I've often remarked that it's a lot easier to take the boy out of the street than it is to take the street out of the boy. I was still on parole to Larry's care and supervision, so Sandy and I returned to Ohio for a few months to live in a small apartment in Jefferson. But the strain of that lifestyle was far too demanding and stringent for two, newly married people wanting to enjoy life together. Our hearts weren't in step with the sacrifices demanded. As soon as I was released from parole we moved back to Chicago, both of us quietly glad to be done with Larry.

Gilbert purchased a three-story, three-unit apartment building on Seminary Street, just south of Diversy Avenue. Sandy and I lived in the basement, Gilbert lived on the first floor and Randy occupied the third. What did Churchill say? Those who don't remember the past are doomed to repeat it? It soon became a center for a number of things in the community, none of them good.

Working with my father-in-law as a printer, I also sold stereos door to door but my life was really about music. Jefferson Airplane, Steppenwolf, Iron Butterfly, Paul Butterfield Blues Band we saw them all when they passed through the Electric Circus that year. Psychedelia was in full bloom. Playing guitar with local musicians, I soon became a connoisseur of fine pharmaceuticals. Taking my first LSD trip on Christmas Eve of 1966, I went with friends to see the movie, "The Bible." Sandy, pregnant with our first child, waited at home. Fine tuning a pattern of irresponsible behavior, "Thou shalt have a good time," became my first commandment with promise. For his part, Randy started shooting up paregoric, cooking it down until only the opiate remained. Heroin was the next step for him.

Sandy woke me on the fourth of July. "I think I'm having the baby." The first thought through my mind was, "But this is my day off. What do you mean 'you *think*'?" Wasn't this instinctive? Her answer was appropriate and emphatic: "How should I know? I've never been through this before." I was about to prove I didn't care. We decided she should call the doctor and describe her symptoms. Problem was, we didn't have a

phone. The nearest phone booth was at the gas station on the corner. "Well," I figured, "I can't tell him what he needs to know." Sandy, in labor, walked to the phone while I stayed home. If one of my sons ever treats his wife that way I will tempt the Furies with my response. As if that weren't stupid enough I drove her to Saint Joseph's Hospital, took her inside, left a phone number where I could be reached and left her there. Obviously, I wasn't going home. When the call came they informed me of a close shave with the baby. She was born with the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck. The news awakened something in me.

Ancient cultures continue to teach us that civilizations are remembered by the manner in which they entertain themselves and the way they treat their children as much as any, other contribution. The 1999 report of the National Center for Juvenile Justice indicated that just under three million children, ages 12-18, are arrested every year. That's greater than the population of eighteen states and greater than the combined populations of Alaska, Delaware, Montana, and Vermont. Juveniles also represent 40% of all Americans living below the poverty level. ⁱⁱ We may argue that statistics don't force people to make bad choices but when we add the number of America's dispensable youth warehoused in foster homes, orphanages or other agencies the numbers become overwhelming. Something is wrong. Early world barbarians sacrificed their children on altars in an effort to curry the favor of their gods and perpetuate their lifestyles. When turning our backs on our children becomes the currency with which we purchase our selfish ways, we are little better. A light started coming on in my head. Not a sudden switch but more like a dimmer being turned up, slowly. I knew full well a page had been turned in the book of my life but the word "future" never held any meaning for me. What do I do next? Life hadn't prepared me to make consistently good choices but my baby awakened within me a clear sense of a great need. I *must* change.

We hadn't selected a name for the child. When I arrived back at the hospital Sandy was just being taken to her room from recovery. "We probably ought to give her a name, don't you think?" I asked jokingly. We decided to call her Shannon. We named our daughters with an "S" for their mother and our sons with a "J" for the milkman. Just kidding. Getting Sandy settled in her room I took a bus straight to an all night

party featuring a "*nobody gets out alive*" theme. It would be the last such for a long time. My baby's presence began to exert influence sufficient to keep me home. She was amazing. She didn't cry. She was far too fascinated with her world. We checked on her often to make certain she was OK and she was always just looking around through big, dark brown eyes. I've never understood how parents can abandon a child. Once the song of their laughter and the dance of their eyes penetrates your soul you're never the same. How can a parent do anything but fall everlastingly in love?

Suddenly aware of how little I really understood of life, I had absolutely no idea what it meant to be a good father. I'd never seen one. Any chimp in the jungle can bring home a banana but a child deserves more than maintenance from a father. Sandy and I were the only parents among our entire group of friends. We had no one with whom we might share notes and I certainly had no intention of asking Gilbert. He was the father he was because of the man he was. If I was going to be the father my child deserved I must, of necessity, become a better man. But good parenting and personal selfishness will always be enemies and the father of the child must be more than a child himself. While I now had, in terms of incentive, the raw materials needed to begin constructing a new foundation for my life, I still lacked the personal tools. I just didn't know how to break away from the person I was to become the person I needed to be. Time revealed that fundamental problem to be the plague of my entire life: who was I and where did I fit in? There were, certainly, positive characters and voices in my past but I seemed intent at maintaining opposite polarities, ignoring good counsel whenever bad was available.

To fundamentalists it's nothing more than an attitude problem. "Just obey God and daily crucify the old man." Unfettered and inalterable idealism is the final luxury of fools and youth, the graveyard of demagogues. Self-denial is an illusion to those who lack a well-formed "self" concept. The prerequisite of self-denial is a clear understanding of those peculiar energies in our lives that require denial, that require a continual "no." While Christianity provided the only system of foundation building I'd known, I was disappointed with its inability to live up to its promise: to make something entirely good out of something entirely bad. Like a cop looking for something suspicious, Jesus seemed fixated on

turning my life over just to dump out the contents. And He wouldn't go away.

At our last meeting my Aunt Edith told me that the surprising lack of resistance from her husband on the day she turned me over to nomads lay in something she told my stepfather: "The Lord told us to give him to you." Whether He did or didn't, her belief in its authenticity changed my entire world. When less than three years old, good people were convinced God was speaking to them about me. In my early teens, I heard Larry quote Psalm 27:10, " when my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up." He suggested that God extends Himself to the orphan and widow in a manner designed to offset the unfairness of life. He went on to say the key to that involvement was a spiritual contract, ratification contingent upon the acceptance of Christ as savior. That sounded good, then. I'm no longer interested in a father who insists on a contract before he'll show me his love or let me live in his home. I had a stepfather who did better than that. If God directed my life by speaking to Edith, Larry and numbers of others along the way, then why was I out here in left field and why can't *this* father teach me something without kicking my brains out? As a father, I felt God was doing a pretty poor job. It didn't surprise me that Jesus was born in a feed box worn from cattle spit.

Can finite creatures such as we actually sustain an intimate intercourse with deity that is neither delusion nor psychotic break? The question presupposes the existence of God. My indefatigable belief in the reality of Deity is not based upon biblical declarations of His existence. Neither is it based on the fact that 95% of the world's population believes in a God of some sort. The simple fact there are more heads on one side of any issue proves nothing about its truth. My belief in the actuality of God comes from the fact that the collective intellect of our species has forwarded but two voices for the existence of all things: science and faith. There are significant holes in both positions.

In one form or another the records of all religions contend that specific acts of creation, occurring on a pre-established timeline, were the result of omniscient deity exercising its will. Science contends that order emerged from chaos by accident. Since the Inquisition, when the Church burned people alive for believing the Copernican theory of a

heliocentric universe, the average Christian has recoiled from that notion like a vampire before the coming dawn. But the search for truth is neither offended nor strained by considering the possibility that God *is* a myth and science is more nearly correct. God's ego can handle it and our souls are made of stuff sufficiently resilient to tolerate the tension of coexisting and seemingly antagonistic possibilities. While I embrace the truths of the scientific record, I cannot reject the possibility of God until science can identify the source of helium and hydrogen essential for a really *big* bang. Truth knows neither science nor religion as infallible yet the truths of each point to deity, suggesting the epic stream of creation was invoked by something miraculous. The truths of science and faith must marry somewhere along the line or inner peace is non-existent in a capable intellect.

Too much of America's view of God is strained through the bias of people from whom we wouldn't ordinarily buy insurance with such little justification. If God does exist He must be something specifically more wonderful than a temperamental, cosmic love daddy who'll "whup ya" if you get out of line. And we, to Him, must be something more than the chattel of heaven. I've often imagined God pulling his hair out yelling, "I wish they would stop telling people they know me. Especially that Joe Markko guy." Who cares if God is black or white, male or female, Protestant or Jewish? Who cares if God reads the Koran, Torah or King James Bible? When we get to heaven we're all going to change our mind about a few things. Until then, all civilization expects a personal, benevolent God to behave like one; nurturing, protecting and guiding. That hadn't been my experience thus far. Then again, I hadn't been terribly enthusiastic about cooperation.

I've never blamed anyone for the destructive choices of my life. "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time." But none of us make our choices in an intellectual or emotional vacuum. Our choices find their root in our homogenized values and are the cumulative result of all our yesterdays. The first portion of anyone's life is out of that person's control and is largely a reflection of generations of choices by others. Grandparents and parents establish the arena in which sound decision-making abilities are either inculcated or ignored. The problem is, they cannot teach what they have not learned. Until our faulty mechanisms of dealing with life are replaced by healthy ones, we remain the prisoners of our own

ignorance and will pass that crippling mantle to our children. Someone must step forward to stem that generational tide. But that's an awfully big notion for such a poorly prepared kid.

Repeatedly proving I wouldn't know a good decision if it jammed a blunt stick into my right eye, I stood with one foot firmly planted in an outlaw past and the other feeling for firm ground in Grownup Land. I was 19 and it was finally time to get on with the business of building a life. But life seldom takes our plans into consideration. It was now the Summer of Love and our lives were about to be turned inside out and upside down, everything but right side up.

ⁱ Cecil Robeck Jr., Professor of Church History and Ecumenics at Fuller Theological Seminary, Historical Roots of Racial Unity and Division in American Pentecostalism

ⁱⁱ Juvenile Offenders and Victims [1999 National Report](#)