
Chapter Fourteen
THE TENTS OF SHILOH

Sandy and I lived in an old, Victorian house divided into first and second floor apartments just north of Windsor town center. The attic, the third floor above us, played host to neighborhood squirrels who mistook it for a gymnasium or pick-up bar. There was a lot of bumpin' goin' on up there for such little creatures. The house was part of a large, old farm subdivided generations before. With a wooded lot next to us, barns to use and fields in which to run, it was a true haven from the dark cloud hanging over the CRC farm. We used it to raise Dobermans, goats and children, not necessarily in that order, the best we knew how. Home life was humble but it was home. It wasn't an armed camp in which the soldiers were held suspect and whipped daily for the crime of being human.

We were poor. Sandy once told me "We're *not* poor. Poor people don't know what hamburger tastes like." She was an amazing partner who put up with more than any woman should. She was as committed to the idea of building something lasting for the Kingdom as I was. Probably more, given the austere lifestyle required of the women. Handmade, floor-length dresses, a covering on her long, uncut hair and no make up provided her daily uniform. From Muslims to Amish to Holiness sects, cultures that turn death into victory often require an outfit. They were also required to keep "downcast eyes," a biblical phrase used to describe modesty in women. In our case it was translated literally and, in

public, the women walked looking at the ground. Sandy worked tirelessly for her family with little reward for her efforts. I'm certain that's true of many women in our culture. But I don't think many make the kinds of sacrifices made daily by the women of the Church of the Risen Christ. Or the wife of Joe Markko. That had its own, peculiar burdens. Being married to a visionary is never easy. Lacking the ability to arrive, they're always en route.

Living away from the farm provided some semblance of normalcy. Shannon, Sarah and I went on snowy, Christmas Eve walks in the "four-corners and a streetlight" village, peeking in the windows of the antique shop, looking at all the wonderful things. Jesse, Jon and I struggled with eternal father and son issues, complicated by the crippling diet of Patriarchal mumbo jumbo being fed us. While in the process, we became goat herders and adventurers, hitchhiking to goat shows, building barns and genetic patterns. But my children were also dealing with a man fighting battles on several, significant fronts. The first was the crushing reality that life, as I knew it, was over.

When released from the hospital I couldn't take care of my own toilet issues. I was no longer in possession of devices essential to holding paper. I couldn't button my shirts or sit upright from a prone position without help, using a lawn chair recliner during church. I had a wife, four children, a total of \$900 a month in government aid and absolutely no hope of finding gainful employment. Such moments can do strange things to a man's head. It took me four years to gain back sufficient courage and strength to act on an unsolicited conversation with Larry. Making a truly rare visit to our home he told me I needed to get off my lazy butt and realize I had an example to set for my children: I better get a job. In spite of its lack of human decency, it has proven the best, single piece of advice I've ever received. It was my, "Go west young man."

Along with the physical struggles of any person in such a cauldron, I was fighting the whole God and Church of the Risen Christ "thing:" Is God really in any of this? Randy and Cookie were gone. Laura held us in suspicion and we were demoted to particles on the edge of nucleus influence, outsiders in the very community we helped create. Everyone was uncomfortable with that. I felt myself close to many of the people at

the farm. They were my friends. Larry once told me, "People would like you if you burned a swastika into your forehead." And they did. But it just wasn't allowed.

Interpreting unusual events as supernatural evidence of God's love convinced me to hang on. The whole of my left thigh was troubled with a topical infection, the ultimate result of the last skin graft. Each morning I soaked in the tub to enable a gradual removal of the dressings, stuck to the seeping wound. It wasn't healing. People "laid on hands," to pray for it at church service on Sunday morning and, when we changed the dressing again before bed, it was completely covered in new skin. I have nothing to gain or prove by saying that these thirty years later. When I shared a testimony the following Sunday Larry said, "God wouldn't have done that for you if He wasn't pleased with the way things are going around here." I'd loved him as brother, friend and father but it was time to get out. Constantly at war with a ton of negative energy simmering below the surface, it became an oppressively dark time. And all we ever wanted to do was tell people about Jesus. You know, "Change the world ___?"

Coming home from what would prove to be one of our last evenings at the farm we turned the corner and headed up the hill. Our hearts sank as we realized the flashing lights we saw were fire engines in front of the house. While the building hadn't burned to the ground, it was uninhabitable. We didn't know it, but the next chapter of our lives had just begun. Living at the farm was out of the question. With four children and zero dollars we had neither family nor friend, outside the church, to whom we could turn. Except for the "goat people." Sandy and I developed a friendship with a couple living in Ravenna, just north of Kent. I met them while attending continuing education classes at the Kent branch in Burton. Ken Poje taught genetics and nutrition of dairy goats, a class I would later take over as instructor. The second floor of their home was like a small apartment and, with his wife Linda, he invited us to stay while we got back on our feet.

While I tried to find temporary work Sandy scoured the roads looking for somewhere we might call home. Leave it to her, she found a winner. It was another small farm *with a house* in Mesopotamia, about 7 miles from the CRC farm. She was excited. We never had our own house. I

don't remember where we got the money for deposit, rent and utilities. Sandy probably minted it. She had become accustomed to stretching a dollar until it screamed for mercy. Then she slapped it around and stretched it some more. After six weeks in exile we moved into, what became for us, The Tents of Shiloh: a place of peace. Communication with the farm slowed drastically.

I wasn't allowed to know the location of the "hideout" so I sent a letter of resignation to Larry through someone trusted with that information. Through that same person I later learned my letter was publicly belittled. I expected as much but it no longer mattered. The only line I remember was the one that proved most honest: "There are many things that could be said and many others that should remain unsaid." A sentiment I still share. As much as this story *does* reveal, people would be proud of me if they knew what I was holding back.

A short while later Larry sent a message via the prophetess, Dianne. Coming into our home she would not be seated. She was there to deliver a message, an obscure bit of Old Testament: "Oh, Amasa, why shouldst thou die?" That was it. She turned on her heel and left. After 11, extraordinary years in his congregation and a relationship covering most of two decades, his final word to me was, "die." It was, I suppose, designed to be a prophetic warning for my good, but his power over me was broken and the message only made them look like characters in a badly acted melodrama. It was over and we were left with the wreckage of our lives. But we couldn't give up on God. I believed I had a calling on my life and if the gifts and calling of God were truly "without repentance" then I might yet redeem something from these years. The bible speaks of God "redeeming the years the locusts have eaten" but none of us ever imagined the locusts might be carrying the banner of the Cross.

Some people believe Larry planned his little kingdom from the beginning. I don't think he was that intelligent. He simply let things happen. He let respect turn to adulation and genuine Christian love to a loyalty only God deserves. He took a group of street people, many of whom came from horrifically dysfunctional families, and provided the sense of community and purpose for which they longed. It was especially powerful in an age when millions of America's youth were looking for something to believe in. Because he had no one to whom he

was accountable, he eventually became spiritually corrupted, believing of himself what he allowed us to believe. To this day he sits in the house on Fortney Road. Supported by a few, remaining women he will be convinced to the end, I am certain, the rest of us were ungrateful wretches who never really appreciated what we had. The words of John Lennon describe him now,

*"He's a real nowhere man
Sitting in his nowhere land,
Making all his nowhere plans
For nobody."*

Larry World was out of business. Twenty-five years later his explanation for the demise was "a few disgruntled members made angry by the fact that developing spirituality meant losing money." Like many a sociopath, sold on their own stories, he firmly believed life would have been glorious were it not for all those damn victims. Now in his early seventies, there should be some concern for those women still with him when he dies. They will then realize they threw their lives away for nothing. I believe the possibility exists for a mini Heaven's Gate or Jonestown. I hope not. My sister, Laura, remains there still; "handmaiden" to the prophet, robbed of her entire life in the name of a Savior who died that her life might be more than a dead end. Guided from conspiracies in the street to conspiracies in the spirit world, she's lost in the plot changes.

Why did we do these things? How do I answer that? It's like the fellow who took off all his clothes and jumped off a ten-foot cliff into a cactus patch. When someone asked, "Why did you do that," he responded, "It seemed like a good idea at the time." That makes about as much sense as anything I might now say. Each of us, I'm certain, had our own, personal reasons. I was looking for a father and family. The music also played a powerful role, but good tunes and a father weren't *that* powerful a psychological factor. I'd lived without both before and "family" seemed sometimes overrated. Charlie Manson had a family. I do not believe myself alone when I say we did it for the love of God - the same, pure motivation that takes others to the priesthood, a convent or the backside of a desert.

Unfortunately, we also gave our love and loyalty to a pastor who morphed from purveyor to perverter of the truth over a period of 12 years. We were led to believe that God both required and rejoiced in our sacrifices. Second, we believed we were doing it for a *heavenly* Father who loved us. Third, we believed Jesus was really coming back. If those last three pieces weren't present, we would neither have tolerated nor endured the things we did. Over time, everything became an interwoven, suffocating blanket under which some good people continue, paralyzed, 30 years later. Intolerant of any faith that condones giggling the Unhealed seem trapped in a scary world of fire and brimstone, looking always over their shoulder for something that was never there.

Indeed, it would be decades before a renewed interest in the roots of Contemporary Christian Music would provide the energy necessary for me to move toward wholeness. Phone calls from historians, musicians, producers and radio DJ's caught me by complete surprise. Why were people so interested in this old music? Slowly, I began to wrap my head around the wild and joyful notion that maybe, just maybe, God used us as one, small piece of something that changed the face of Christianity in America. That's not only a long sentence, it's a great, big thought.

We thought we were building a Christian community and school where broken people could prepare their lives to bless others. That was our original vision. We were called, as Larry put it, to be a "pure Word bride." "Those called by the Word," he taught, "must be given to the Word." And we were: heart, soul, mind, spirit and body. The music began as a tool to draw crowds, nothing more. It was the message that mattered and its value and clarity were very real to us from the beginning. With the exception of a few crusty, old soldiers who refuse to die [the lost tribes of Fortney], the music and its legacy are the only things to endure. I cannot help but think of that old, Christian idiom:

"Only one life will soon be passed
And only what's done for Christ will last."

There are presently varying claims as to who was the very first "gospel rock" band. I say, "Who cares," and, other than historical accuracy, "Where is that energy coming from anyhow?" Together we were all part

of a movement history records as being greater than the sum of our parts. Only a God can think that big. I pray my fellow travelers from ASFB may be able to separate the worst church experience imaginable from the joy of being used by Him in such an enduring way. Our challenge has not been to *enjoy* the fruit of our labors. Our challenge has been to *identify* the fruit. Along with a handful of others, the All Saved Freak Band helped pry the entire Church from her collective rut to embrace and encourage diversity in worship. That wasn't an easy thing. By the mid 60's, Pentecostal churches were celebrating their own importance while establishing their own liturgies and it proved some fairly stony ground in which to sink a plow. Had it not been for the "liberal" churches and "sinners," it might never have happened.

One of the many things I learned as a result of those years was a lesson now a permeating characteristic of my life. That's the thought expressed in the old proverb, "Question Truth." If it doesn't stand up to scrutiny, it isn't Truth. Divine skepticism is a healthy thing. Christians say "Amen" until we include the Bible and teachings of our heroes but can we honestly say we're seeking Truth if we avoid inconvenient questions simply because they challenge our beliefs? Our contemporary religious heroes and their well-rehearsed foolishness must come down.

The Quest for truth is not for weaklings whether believer or atheist. It is only for those who are willing to have the path on which they walk bathed in the blood of their own hearts. Such statements are flowery nonsense until Chicken Little runs riot through *your* life screaming, "*Your* sky has fallen." We spend countless hours in "first strike" prayer in hopes *our* cataclysms will be divinely preempted. But what if they aren't? What if life, faith or our sacrosanct convictions don't live up to their billing? What if we awake to discover we've been led down the wrong path and we're uncertain of the way back? Such moments force us to shift our inner center of gravity. When things we've long "hung our hats on" wither in the light of new revelation, what we do next will shape our destiny. Do we dig deeper or quit? Damn all personal embarrassment! Those who've been in the storm long enough know that, in the end, the only beliefs that matter are those that shed light in dark places. Everything else is preference or window dressing.

Our souls cannot become strong or deep unless we're willing to challenge our minds with heavy matters, things for which there are no easy answers. Where are the independent Christian thinkers in this Age of Man? The call for unity has become a call for conformity but God doesn't become smaller as a result of thinking outside the "party-line" box. He becomes big enough to finally capture every thought; to finally bring peace in His wake. Maya Angelou said, "Independent thinking migrates every day in search of nourishment." If you've hit a dead-end with God, where do you turn? Where do you migrate? Where do you find nourishment? Especially if you have another vice that prevents you from ever, totally abandoning your hunger to know Him. Where was I now to turn? Who could I trust? Where was God in all this mess? I'm convinced that if there were no mystery to life there would be no seekers. But where do we look? Einstein said, "When the solution is simple, God is answering."

We left the farm in the winter of 1979. There was an Assembly of God church five miles away in North Bloomfield. Sandy went to the mid-week bible study and all of us were in church the very next Sunday. I was about to discover how truly out of whack I'd become. My view of myself, my concepts of Christianity and my understanding of ministry and marriage all needed a significant amount of healing. It wasn't quite Tobacco Road time: "blow it up and start all over again," but I knew I couldn't make such things happen on my own. Like it or not, I now needed the very kind of Christian I'd disdained for so long. Where there is no humility there is no growth. With hearts broken, spirits traumatized and our minds cluttered with the wreckage of a dream, we determined to move forward. When you awaken to a morning when the sun doesn't rise, you must reach up and turn on a light. I was 31 years old. It was time to start again, again.

ⁱ Thomas Francis, Lord of the Strings, Cleveland Scene Magazine, Dec. 8, 2004