
Chapter Fifteen
AS DIFFERENT AS ANYONE THEY'D EVER SEEN

Courage is doing what you're afraid to do and no one ever had courage who was never afraid. If we're going to enjoy all life holds we must master our fears, converting the energy fear creates into the energy of hope. It's either that or live lives of no purpose other than to safeguard our own comfort. There are times when courage is not an option. In those moments there is seldom a Legion of Super Heroes or He-Men of the Universe to come to our aid. There are only ordinary people attempting to find their way through a life that consistently bites off more than we can chew.

There are very few, if any, things more demanding on our meted reservoirs of courage than forgiveness. Forgiveness implies risk. Needed most when deserved least, forgiveness makes demands on us we're not spontaneously inclined to satisfy. Most of us have no problem forgiving our "enemies." It's our friends and families we limit. And why not? We open our hearts to them in peculiar fashions. We trust them completely. Our love allows them to hold the lynchpin of our hearts. That's why they can hurt us so thoroughly. But it's not possible to love completely without hurting occasionally and people who find limits to forgiveness never really needed it themselves. Mandated forgiveness, "God requires me to forgive," never healed anything. True forgiveness is more than compliance to a standard supplemented with well framed words. Love has a higher standard and true forgiveness cannot be

separated from love. Not only does the quality of our forgiveness expose the veracity of our love but “there is no revenge so complete as forgiveness.” [Josh Billings]

“Hallelujah.” Pastor Bob Bailey was pacing the platform in a red and white-checked jacket that looked made from a tablecloth in a cheap restaurant. It was a conscientious, fashion statement in a sanctuary marked by bone-white walls, red carpeting and red cushions lining the pews. About five foot tall and four foot around, he sported a mustache that looked like a balding caterpillar lying on the lip of a smile that knew it. He had a great sense of humor but he wasn't feeling funny right now. He was feeling inspired. “Folks, isn't this wonderful? It makes you wonder why anybody would want to backslide.” I didn't get it. If this is what these people call a “move of the Spirit,” then they had nothing I wanted and I was wasting my time here. Distracted by the smell of cigarette tobacco on people around me, I wondered, “Who do they think they're kidding?” The quickness with which I criticized these people, especially against the backdrop of my own life, caught me by complete surprise. This was troubling. I wondered if we'd been led so far astray I couldn't recognize a simple move of God's spirit when it occurred. It troubled me so deeply I made a decision right on the spot. “I'm staying right here until I'm healed enough to know what truth is, until I find a healthy balance in my thinking.” That was it. Hadn't met with the pastor or Board. Didn't know any of these people. Didn't need to. God could meet me here as well as anyplace and these people seemed harmless enough. Ready or not, here we come.

We stuck out like sore thumbs. With long dresses and head coverings on Sandy, Shannon and Sarah and a decidedly Amish look to my long-bearded face, we suddenly plunged into a world from which we'd been isolated for 11 years. This was definitely going to require some adjustment. Our personal lifestyle convictions were rigid. What you wore, where you went, what you did and even what you laughed at were etched in stone. To deviate was compromise, the dreaded “C” word. My experience with the Church of the Risen Christ caused me to suspect the genuineness of anyone's experience with God if they didn't share our convictions on these matters. They were, at best, worldly and more likely apostatized. Once Christians, perhaps, but now only going through the motions.

My brain understood this kind of thinking as antithetical to the spirit of Christian love and growth but it came like a knee-jerk reaction. Just about the time my critical heart began to question *their* experience I was reminded of my own need. Instead of worrying about the 2x4 in their eye I needed to take care of the lumber yard in my own. Preeminent on an extensive list of unassimilated truths was the acceptance of people for who they are, not for my fantasy of who I think they ought to be. I had to embrace the notion that my opinion of another's experience meant absolutely nothing to God and was, therefore, worth nothing. That's not so easy for someone indoctrinated in the "school of the prophets."

We dug right in: Sunday school, mid-week service, the whole "nine yards." I put my knowledge of music and musical equipment to work developing a Sound Room for the Church. As a family we'd been singing four-part a cappella for years, so stepping into the Choir director's spot seemed a natural fit. Believing that nothing but a grudge is ever gained by doing anything halfway, I felt the need to make up for lost time. Knowing the inner struggles I was going through, Pastor Bailey took me under his arm and took the time to develop as much of a friendship as I was able to allow. He understood that I still pursued an opportunity for ministry and was, in fact, actively engaged in the Assembly of God Correspondence School, Berean Bible College.

Every Saturday night I hosted a radio program from six to midnight at WCVJ in Jefferson. Certification from the FCC as a licensed broadcaster helped me anchor the station's "sign off" slot for the week. Playing pre-recorded programs along with normal DJ chores, I still had about 3 hours every evening for music and comment. I spent days going through their extensive library of Christian music. Though I knew other survivors of the Frog Alley Freak Farm listened in, I never played any ASFB tunes. As co-founder of the band I felt a deep personal connection to the music but it quickly became part of my past best left there.

On the way home, early one Sunday morning, I was alarmed to see a man standing beside the road, waving his arms. I was surprised at how quickly I resorted to survival mode. Passing him by the thought struck me, "I wonder if the Good Samaritan was concerned for his own safety?" What can be said for men who tell the whole world to do right who also pass up opportunity for the same? I turned around but locked

the doors and cracked the window. Though it wasn't raining at the moment, it had been and he was soaked. "Do you need help?"

Placing both arms on top of the car, he leaned forward, maneuvering his face near the slightly, opened window. The shout, full of breath, was laden with the relief of someone who escaped something, "Thank God." He was in Cleveland, had his car stolen and hitchhiked 50 miles in the rain. A very clear voice arrested all other thoughts: "Take him wherever he wants to go." I thought, "I hope he doesn't want to go too far, Lord, I'm almost out of gas." "Take him wherever he wants to go." The fact that it was 1:45 in the morning and I had "divine" functions to fulfill in a few hours never entered the equation. Whether there is actually a God who communicates with people is irrelevant. I believed it so.

The drive to his home took us past the church building and my joy overflowed. I mentioned I was being considered for the Assistant pastor's position and he told me a story. Years ago, it seems a previous assistant pastor from this very church had fallen on hard times. This sounds like a preacher story, doesn't it? He lost his home and my hitchhiker, a neighbor, took him in until he got back on his feet. In the morning I was able to verify the name and story.

At the time, there seemed something incredibly just about the whole thing. A specific official, from a specific church, shows up on a specific, rainy, country road in the middle of the night to set the scales in balance. It might very easily have been coincidence but the story spells out the same. I include the episode here in an effort to demonstrate ongoing events that convinced me, God never forgets. He knew where I was and that I was trying, real hard. I felt myself in step with the Divine will, being led just like millions of other young men and women around the planet. That kind of belief is empowering and drives one to be more meditative in an effort to sort through all the voices crowding into your head, screaming for your attention. I was the sole graduate of the original CRC vision; the only one to actually make it to a place of ministry in his local community. Thankfully, I was not the last. Surviving a war was no longer important when I realized that dying isn't the worst thing that can happen to someone embracing a "balls to the wall" concept of Paradise. Truth is, neither surviving nor dying is nearly as troublesome as living.

Within six months of my arrival Bob asked if I would consider becoming his assistant pastor. A fulltime position, paying \$500 per month and medical benefits, it enabled me to finish my Berean studies while helping him grow the church. It also put me in an excellent position with the Assemblies of God. While they will *license* individuals with proper credentials and training, they won't even consider ordination without two, consecutive years of fulltime ministry. I was on my way. Bob didn't show me a "fork-in-the-road." He showed me an entirely new road teaching me many critical lessons about a balanced approach to ministry and life. He taught the enjoyment of life as a legitimate concept.

He also taught me, by his example, that we can only take people as far as we ourselves have traveled. He had, what many felt, was a rather simplistic approach to ministry. I loved him but I also knew his habits. With minimal time spent in sermon preparation he relied heavily on spontaneity. People are eventually disappointed when all they get is extemporaneous enthusiasm. In consequence he built a congregation hungry to move forward. Bob was a better man, in terms of purity, than I would ever be. Time eventually confirmed that observation to everyone.

But the situation threw the door wide open for someone drastically different from himself. Bob knew it was time to move on and accepted a pastorate in Tiffin, Ohio. Within a week the Deacon Board approached me to ask if I would consider becoming their pastor. I was as different as anyone they'd ever seen. Deeply honored and humbled, the opportunity further convinced me that I was moving in the direction of God's calling. And God seemed to be speeding up the process. Maybe this is what He had in mind for me from the beginning. Maybe. I served as Assistant Pastor for 8 months, long enough for the congregation to observe the ministry I believed God gave me. They believed it was what their local Church needed and elected me as their pastor. It was 1981.

This was huge. I was now a licensed minister with the largest Pentecostal fellowship in the world. Sudden credibility, respectability and clarity of vision provided all the energy necessary to walk through this unexpected door. This is what all those years, all those sacrifices were for: training for ministry to touch the world. I was in awe of the faithfulness of God. He never lost track of where I was or what was in my heart. I couldn't help but think of all the people who passed through

the Church of the Risen Christ. For an instant I wondered if Larry would be proud of me when he heard. You know, like a spiritual father toward a son? But it was only for an instant. I knew better. He couldn't afford to be proud of Judas. Neither could he afford to legitimize my efforts or anybody else's church. Infallibility is so constricting.

The only change I immediately implemented was the addition of a consistent program of local evangelism and community outreach that started the church growing again. It had very little to do with me. Anyone with a heart for it would have achieved the same results. They were ready to grow, numerically and spiritually. I had no interest in numerical growth except as an indicator of life. All living things grow. If they're not growing it's probably because they're already dead.

But the Church of the Risen Christ was only five miles away. That meant ministry in the same community. I had to protect this local congregation from any shadow of scandal that might carry over from my eleven-year experience. Besides, one never knew what Larry would do. Decades later, Glenn Schwartz told me that Larry jokingly suggested they get up a car load on a Sunday morning to "surprise" me. I was correct in my efforts to place distance between them and myself. I wrote a letter requesting my name be removed from anything promoting their ministry. Neither did I want them using the music I wrote to help garner financial support. An unreleased album, "The Sower," recorded before I left, was about to hit the streets. My written Declaration of Distance meant the last album would likely remain unreleased since much of the music on it was mine. This was not a retributive act to cause harm. It was simply an effort to cut all connections with something aberrant, something that might yet cause grief.

One Sunday morning, about 15 minutes before the service started, I received a phone call in my study from my sister, Laura. She was calling for Larry. They received the letter and were calling to let me know legal actions were pending if I didn't retract my statements. Laura verbally waved a signed document in my face. About a year prior to leaving, Pam Massmann approached me in the kitchen at the farm with a single sheet of paper. Laying it on the counter she said, "I need you to sign this." It was a document stating we were signing over any and all financial claim to any of the recorded music. Everyone in the band was

required to sign one. "What if I don't sign?" was my natural response. "Then you're out of the band." Uncertain as to how that might be since I was co-founder, I signed. I was never in it for money, anyhow. Laura was insulted and denied any coercion. She didn't know. She wasn't there and, now, her defense mechanism kicked in. I didn't hold her responsible. She was doing what she was told in the only manner she'd been taught. Truth is, neither threats nor the document had any power to prevent me from *withdrawing* the material.

The fact that I was about to step into the pulpit to minister to God's people didn't concern them in the least. I took the humble position and relented. I didn't want to harm them and I still bore a genuine love for Larry though I wanted no connection to him. Forgiveness doesn't mean I must expose myself to ongoing pain. I felt the New Testament position best: "If this thing is of God, there's nothing we can do to harm it. If it's not, there's nothing we can do to save it." A Joe Markko paraphrase, to be certain, but it communicates the moment. That was my last contact with any of them.

Celebrating my new found importance, I settled into a pattern of ministry that brought accolades, satisfaction and appreciation everywhere but home.