
Chapter Twenty

THIS LONG ROAD HOME

It was the most perfect autumn I could remember. As I drove up the hill into the gravel parking lot the sign on the white, old-fashioned church building told me I was in the right place: "Zion Pilgrim Mennonite Church." Parking the car up against the white board fence, I turned off the engine and sat for a long moment. Across the fence the "plain folk," as they call themselves, were busy in the vegetable garden next door. Stooped over the rows, they gently coaxed the last rewards of summer's labor from the dark earth. Behind me, the forgotten clip-clop and clatter of an Amish horse and buggy came and went beneath the canopy of ancient maple trees lining both sides of the road. Here's one Norman Rockwell missed. I really don't know how long I sat there. It couldn't have been as long as it seemed. The phrase, "my life passed before my eyes" began to take on new meaning. With body frozen and thoughts running riot through the gray matter I tracked the pace of the seasons until one year flowed into another and chronology evaporated. Decades of moments were distilled into this single, profound moment that would neither change course nor yield to my anxiety.

I've never been good at revisiting personal horror but personal wholeness required me to embrace this pinpoint in time. The Artist (formerly known as blah, blah, blah and blah...) used a line, "*May you live to see the dawn.*" In an interview, he said that referred to the moment in your life when you were "at peace with your past and

optimistic about your future.” My healing as a human being began just six months earlier; my dawn was in the process of rising. It was a half-century in coming. While fifty is no longer considered old it's certainly approaching the other side of the mountain and I suddenly felt the rough mileage of the wearying, wounding years.

Slowly oozing out of the car I walked toward the back of the property hoping, out loud actually, none of the neighbors would recognize me. An indefinable amount of time had passed since last here and congenial, small talk didn't strike me as a particularly good idea right now. I must remain focused. Swaddled in the earth at the end of the clearing, beneath the golden trees of October, the business of a lifetime awaited me. I was on a collision course with myself. I just didn't know it yet.

The lawn behind the church building was, as it had always been, well kept; a green testimony befitting that strain of people who believe themselves unworthy proprietors of God's good blessings. The moment opened The Floodgate of Remembrance and further robbed my weakening resolve. With the wind sighing heavy-hearted in the treetops I reflected on days of sweeter memory when my children played here. The thought stopped me half way across the lawn. Images of softball games and little boys with suspenders tormenting little girls in white bonnets finally stopped all forward motion. I can only wonder what the neighbors were thinking as I just stood there, arms crossed, pulling at the hair beneath my lower lip.

Frustrated with myself that I lacked the courage to proceed and oblivious to the passing moments, I was at a dead stop, unable to put another foot forward. Feeling thoroughly ashamed of myself I turned around, retreated to the safety of the car and simply sat there, staring blindly through the windshield, paralyzed by my own heartache. There was a committee meeting going on in my head begging for a call to order. “This is insane,” was the only thing I could say. “This should be such a normal thing to do. What's wrong with me that this is such a big deal? I've driven 800 miles and I can't turn away now.” So many voices, so alone. Over the years I've learned one of the redeeming features about being psychotic enough to actually talk to myself is that I tend to agree with me. And I love it when I'm right. “You've got to do this, Joe. If there's any God at all, the degree of the reward ‘*had better*’ offset the

degree of the pain.” Or something like that. The concussions of life sometimes obscure details.

“Turn off engine. Remove keys. Put hand on handle. Pull handle back. Put outward pressure on door. Open door. Put left leg out. Turn body. Put right foot on ground. Get up. **Get up. GET UP.**” With an actual mental and physical pause between each of those steps I tried again, moving with mental blinders through the parking lot and across the lawn. With the autumnal sunlight filtering through the trees and every breeze carrying a different, troubling voice I completed my pilgrimage. I stood between the graves of my brother and my oldest child, weeping, angry and confused. Perhaps a more accurate word might be, lost. Through 49 unbelievable years I'd been a “brave little soldier” but, in this moment, a lifetime of pain and failure uncoiled itself from between the gravestones and slithered up my heart, staring into my soul. This was one of those pivotal moments that can define a life. A moment which, when done, will leave you changed, forever different.

As I looked more closely at the three grave stones I was overtaken by the sense that something was terribly wrong. LARRY BRETT HILL was the name on the stone in the corner and Randy's grave was right next to Shannon's. I was stunned. Lil' Abner would call it “stupefied.” I had zero recollection of the presence of the two, other graves. “Did Larry die? And when was Randy buried here?” Instantly flushed with fury because of an imagined exhumation, my memory banks held no data on the location of my brother's grave. None. My mind presumed he was buried someplace else but when I tried to remember where, there was nothing. And how could I have forgotten the life and death of Brett? Seeing his full name on the stone threw me but how did I lose track of two, such important pieces of information? I was catapulted into an intellectual shock.

My body settled to a sitting position at the foot of my daughter's grave while my head conducted a Chinese fire drill. Every rational thought was running for the nearest exit and I couldn't pull any two of them together. An incredulous and passionate, “What?” was about the only word I could frame. My brain had just exploded and I was trying to jam all the pieces back into my head. I finally pieced the Brett thing together but

remained convinced this wasn't Randy's original place of internment. "Who would've moved him? Why?" At sub-glacial speed, imperceptibly, the first ray of dawn began to break through my clouded brain. Randy had always been here. The real question was, where was Joe and how long had he been gone?

Lying with my face on Shannon's grave, the years fell on me in one, crushing moment. Weeping openly I stretched myself out on her grave and spoke to her through the wall of earth even as I'd laid my face on her mother's stomach and talked through the walls of the womb. "Hello baby. It's Dad. I'm lost, honey. I don't know who I am and I don't know if I can find my way back." Truth was, I didn't even know where "back" was. My life seemed an unending implosion, a black hole in my own universe. Some enlightened souls would say I've been possessed of a narcissistic need for self-gratification. Of course I am. I'm an American. But that has nothing to do with a life-long, attempt to numb myself. Sex, drugs, music, religion and Jesus - I'd abandoned myself to all and here I was, face down in the dirt, talking to a dead person: Legion among the tombs. My vagabond spirit now brought my broken life full circle.

I have never healed from Shannon's death. I cannot watch *Accidental Tourist* or *The Crossing Guard*. I cannot be in the same room with any television program dealing with the death of a beloved child. I will rarely speak of it and can only write about it a few lines at a time. Then I've got to get up and take a "faraway" look. Either that or get lost in a land of forgetfulness from which many people never return. I used to tell a story about an author who moved from the busy city to the quiet of the Appalachian Mountains to write her next, world-class novel. In time, her work on the computer screen caused her eyes to squint and vision to blur. The ophthalmologist told her, "Every now and then, you've got to stand up and focus on the distant mountains. Take a "faraway" look to rest your eyes." Sometimes our heart cannot bear what our imagination finds when lingering long at the pool of memory. If we don't **get up** and take a far away look: if we cannot lift the eyes of our spirit above the raw, red crucible of our broken heart we will never find peace.

I am given to outbursts of opinion and some have identified this flaw as blatant egotism. Risking their good opinion of me once again, I yet

believe life has qualified me to speak, however feebly, about a healthy philosophy of suffering. Should your nightmares ever be unleashed you will need one since our reactions in times of paralyzing darkness are molded by it. People of faith, irrespective of preferred religion, seem to develop "theodicies," theological explanations for disaster in which one finds peace. Regarding the death of a child I've heard people say "Sometimes God looks up the road and sees something terrible and he takes the child 'home' to keep them from it." What kind of moron philosophy is that? Yet their hearts somehow believe such explanations provide comfort. The fact is, any God who robs a parent of one day with a child because of something that *may happen* ten years up the road is an idiot. I've also heard, "God plucked another flower for his garden." What kind of thoughtless bastard would do that? My belief in God has framed my life but deity has nothing to do with suffering. There is no beneficial, divine purpose behind any of it. Quite simply, "Ka-ka" occurs. That's where a healthy philosophy of suffering must begin: in reality. The *only* thing that gives value to suffering is the person we may yet become in spite of it or what we learn of ourselves and our underlying systems of belief because of it. True suffering creates an intellectual vacuum, causing us to reevaluate truth, forcing us to strain for the future like nascent flowers before the sun or live incomplete on the bitter surface of life. True suffering opens a new world. Though some pains endure forever life may yet be filled with joy. Whether we grow deeper and stronger or shrivel into "leaves of grass, the unmown hair of graves," seems determined by elements beyond my understanding. This much I know, we must never give up.

I spent the remainder of the day and evening pondering the great distance between what my life was and what I had hoped it would be. Going nowhere, doing nothing save drifting from stimulation to stimulation, I was now the person I had long eschewed. Tomorrow, I had to disguise myself as a responsible father and give my only daughter to a man who can never deserve her. He'll understand that, someday.

Carrying a boatload of baggage from the previous day I made my way over to the church before the wedding. Fathers become peripherals at weddings. You wish someone needed you but they don't. You wish they would solicit your advice but they don't. You're there for one purpose, to

get out of the way. You get to hang in the shadows as long as you don't stumble down the aisle or mess up your, one line: "Her mother and I." The father is relegated to the roll of spectator long before she says, "I will." Sarah's wedding and my enlightenment the day before combined to quiet my soul. I became a spectator to my own life and, for the first time, saw my children as full-grown men and women. It blew me away. Where did these people come from? Sandy's most pronounced desire for her little children was that they grow to become "honorable" men and women. And they are. In spite of everything, here they stood as classic examples of fine, human beings. When did that happen? They were the people I'd grown up with since I was 18 and they were now my entire world.

Since I was a teenager I've imagined myself a cross between Peter Pan and Don Quixote, the boy who refused to grow up and the dreamer of impossible dreams looking always for new windmills to slay. In consequence I've come to believe that disappointment is much easier to deal with than hopelessness. I've been accused of compounding my foolishness by raising a family of dreamers, children whose imaginations, aspirations and goals consistently exceed their grasp. What is life if not the pursuit of dreams? Such criticisms generally come from dull and spiritually myopic people who are indifferent to any life achievement beyond having a date for Senior Prom. Finding it easier to belittle dreams than to be possessed of one, those who dare nothing will achieve the same. As someone who has lost limbs *and* faith I've come to believe there are none so crippled as those who have no dreams. Foolish dreams can keep our spirit alive when the tedious grindings of life finally erode our Pollyannic beliefs. If being a dreamer is the greatest of their flaws, then they are, of all people, most blessed.

I started the long drive back to Atlanta with crystal-clear skies and a crisp morning. In a tumbling rush of memory I now found opportunity to connect the "loose ends." There are few things more embarrassing than being a fifty-year-old man dealing with pubescent issues. Where do I fit in? Where do I belong? Who am I? Why do I still care? This was becoming stupid. I knew this chapter of my life wasn't going to end with a sudden blast of clarity at a church altar or vision on some, Damascus Road but the road back to Atlanta did seem paved with yellow bricks.

While I had no idea where my place was "in the family of thingsⁱ," I felt myself moving toward it. I began to feel whole. For the first time in my life I knew I was going to be O.K. Good or bad it didn't matter. I was going to be O.K. While hope is the last thing to leave a man it's also the first thing to bloom once he decides to come out of the dark.

The near future was a no-brainer. Nothing was more important than living my life in a manner that might regain my children's confidence. Thinking about the distant future and how I was going to get there, I stumbled into a goofy moment when I began to think about my death and funeral. As a former pastor and marital therapist I'd seen thousands of people deal with grief and learned it's better to be as precise as possible about the way one wants things done. I've seen families degenerate into fist fights over the dress a deceased mother would wear in her casket and want no such agony to await my little ones.

As disappointing as life may occasionally prove for my children, I doubt the bridge of their imaginations can span the distance between what my life was and what theirs have been. They were robbed of Grandparents to tell them stories, uncles to embarrass them, aunts to fawn over them and cousins with which to create moments and memories of their own. They were the final victims of religious abuse and each wrestle with their own demons, agonizing with their own pains. It's a matter of "degrees" of impact in each of them. However, for any generation to find wholeness for themselves, they must learn to look beyond life's unfairness and understand the sum of life's sorrows need not exceed the sum of its joys.

Thinking about the funeral I imagined a mat beside the casket that, when stepped on, would cause my body to sit upright. Either that or have a pull-cord, like the old, talking dolls, in the side of the casket. As people walked by they could pull the cord to get a personalized voice recording. "Thanks for coming and be sure to stop by the table in the back for milk and cookies." The gravestone became a toss-up. I thought writing, "HELP, I'VE BEEN BURIED ALIVE," might prove too challenging for an elderly lady visiting the grave next to mine. I also wondered if the question, "WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?" would engender the kind of public memory my children might hope for. Finally

leaning toward having a map of the cemetery with a "YOU ARE HERE" arrow, it seemed an appropriate, final act of public service. That's the problem with getting older: you actually think you're getting funnier.

I'd been working on my Ten Patriarchal Suggestions, important things to pass on to my children and grandchildren, for a couple of years. Claiming no, true originality it's a work in progress and should be read at my funeral. In its present form it reads from last to first:

- Have lots of fun.
- Keep it simple. Always keep it simple.
- "Laugh often, love much."
- Learn early that focus determines reality.
- Remember that spiritual does not equal intangible.
- The prize you've always dreamed of may come at a cost you never imagined.
- Work as if you don't need the money.
- Dance as if no one is watching.
- Love as if you've never been hurt.

The final one, the most important, will be presented in one of those "envelope please," moments on that inevitable day. The later the better, please.

The humorous moment passed and the monotonous hours started the "file cards" flipping in my brain. One after another I thought about the chapters of my life in the light of my future. Discouragement comes from a temporary loss of perspective and events of the past, few days enabled me to once again see my life as something more hopeful than the present moment. Neither success nor failure is permanent and there is always reason to hold your head up and try again. The events that have made us what we are do not label us nearly as much as our responses to them.

Identical twin boys were separated at birth as part of a social experiment for the nature or nurture argument. One was raised by a ridiculously wealthy family and never wanted for anything. A family of farmers who

managed to survive from harvest to harvest raised the other. The two boys were brought back together when they were 8 years old. The one raised in privilege was placed in an opulent playroom loaded with shelves of brand new toys while the other was placed in a stable filled with straw and dung. Leaving each for about an hour the researchers returned to find the privileged child sitting on the floor with his legs drawn up into his chest, a scowl on his face. Asking why he hadn't played with any toys the sullen faced child said, "I don't want to. They're all just junk anyhow. They'll probably break." As they approached the stable where the other child was kept, researchers heard loud shouts and laughter. Opening the barn door they saw him on top of the manure pile using both hands to throw materials aside as he burrowed into the pile. Asking why he was so happy he yelled with childlike exuberance, "I know there's a pony in here somewhere." Life sometimes demands that we dig through shit before we find the prize. So what? We can waste time and energy asking angry questions about who makes up these stupid rules or we can just start digging: "get up and keep walking."

Since the time of Neanderthal, when brutish creatures buried their dead with ceremony, we've shown ourselves capable of believing in tomorrow. In an evolved species, what is the origin of burying a warrior with weapons and trophies for use in the "next world?" Where does that spiritual component come from? Ask the leaders of ten denominations and you'll get eleven different answers. The real question is, "Who cares?" It's enough that it exists in all of us. The Psalmist referred to it as "deep, calling unto deep."ⁱⁱⁱ Molecular biologist, Dean Hamer, refers to it as "The God Gene," a DNA variation in a gene known as VMAT2ⁱⁱⁱ. Whatever the origin, that intrinsic, "spiritual" component finds varying degrees of value in each of us, its manner of expression as diverse as our preferences. Though capable of exploitation and abuse, there is something in most of us that reaches out to something beyond us. Whether labeled faith, hope, vision or delusion this component keeps us moving when life seems intent on holding us down. Resurrecting hope in those of us who have failed more often than is reasonable, such energies also instruct us in the value of never giving up. "I know there's a pony in there, somewhere."

Driving south on Interstate 75 through the Appalachians and north

Georgia Mountains, I reflected on John Steinbeck's road-weary character of Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Providing editorial comment on men she said, "Man, he lives in jerks. Baby born an' a man dies, an' that's a jerk. Gets a farm an' loses his farm an' that's a jerk. But people is goin' on —changin' a little, maybe, but goin' right on." ^{iv} Sounds like a lot of us. We promise ourselves that, someday, we'll stop living our lives in "jerks." Someday we'll stop making self-destructive choices and be a better Dad, a better child, a better husband, a better person. Though to observers our lives seem an unending "rage against the machine," our desire to make consistently wise choices is genuine, providing a large part of our guilt when we fail. The ability to avoid bad choices that have "starting over again" as the inevitable consequence seems to escape us and we wonder at those to whom it seems to come so easily. Not found on any calendar, Someday will never arrive by accident.

My little ones, we do not live in a meritocracy. No one will ever give you anything you haven't *already* earned. If you spend your life waiting for something miraculous to happen, for the "scales to be set in balance," for God to compensate you or someone to give you "a break," then you will lose. Believer or atheist, it doesn't matter. Neither can you depend on God to "open doors" for you. We must open our own doors trusting deity to help us grab the correct knob. This is neither positive nor negative. It's reality. Someday exists right now, in this very instant of time and every moment must be embraced with the knowledge that it will never come again. Live your lives with passion and raise your children as if they could grow up to write about it.

When I was eight and in the 3rd grade in Villa Park, Ms. Heidhorn exposed me to my first experience in public speaking. Our classroom assignment was to stand beside our desk and answer two questions: "What age would you be if you could be any age you want and why?" Each of the students, in turn, complied with varying degrees of success. One wanted to be 17 so he could drive. The class clown wanted to be 21 so he could drink. A number of little girls wanted to be old enough to get married. And so it went around the room until it came to me. Mostly concerned about surviving the day, I'd never thought about it. Standing slowly beside my desk I said, "I want to be old," and sat down. I have no

idea why I said that. Realizing she wasn't going to let me get away without finishing, I stood up again and said, "I think there's something waiting for me out there." Thoroughly instructed in matters of loss and pain and possessed with an unjustifiable sense of destiny, I guess we'll see. I think I've one more, great adventure left in me. What was it the country philosophers were wont to say? Oh yeah, "Even a blind squirrel finds a nut ever' now an' agin."

ⁱ Mary Oliver, *The Flying Geese*

ⁱⁱ Psalm 42:7

ⁱⁱⁱ *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into our Genes*, Dean Hamer, Doubleday Press

^{iv} *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck, Penguin Press, page 577