



*The Hope Cycle*

Oscillations of Dreams  
Achieved and Hopes Dashed

by

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## Preface

Can an “ordinary” middle-class life be interesting and even inspiring? Can lessons be learned from the mistakes and frailties of regular people? Can nuggets of truth be found in events not steeped in turmoil, extreme trial, or poverty? Can faith survive in an atmosphere of so many apparent failures in the undulating roller coaster of life? I believe that the answer to all of these questions is “Yes!”

Everyone experiences trials and disappointments in life, to some degree. No one escapes trouble, no matter how much money one has, or how well/poor one's up-bringing has been. Some folks taste long draughts of heaven; others long draughts of hell; most of us get glimpses of something in between on this earthly journey, which should prompt us to search for the way to the better place. This is one man's story of not searching, then finding that the Seeker of Lost Souls had found him, even when he wasn't looking. Then come the oscillations of day-to-day living, trying to find one's place in this world, as well as one's place in God's big-picture plan.

The characters and events in the following story are, respectively, real and actually happened (or will eventually happen). Only the names have been changed (mostly) to protect the innocent and the guilty alike. Some well-known persons' names have been kept for veracity/reality. A few severe trials have been omitted, in order to protect the privacy of certain individuals. After all, love covers a multitude of sins, even mine. (1 Peter 4:8) All of us go to the grave with secrets that no one else needs to know. Most of the dirty laundry is mine; what isn't mine has only been mentioned for context in the larger story. And what isn't mine may also be my skewed perceptions of the events. As my wife frequently states, “perception is everything”. That is why need to give people the benefit of the doubt. The following stories will create your own impressions of me as well. Grace is needed for us all!!

“Now we see only a reflection as in  
a mirror; then we shall see face to face...”

1 Corinthians 13:12a

“Remember the word to your servant,  
upon which you have caused me to hope...

those who fear you will be  
glad when they see me,  
because I have hoped in your word....

my soul faints for your salvation,  
but I hope in your word.”

Psalms 119: 49,74, 81

"For everything that was written in the past  
was written to teach us, so that through  
endurance and the encouragement of the  
sacred writings, we might have hope."

Romans 15:4

“Hope deferred makes the heart sick,  
but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.”

Proverbs 13:12



## Chapter 1

# The Funeral

I hate funerals. But then again, who doesn't?

But this one is different – IT IS MY OWN.

Hello, my name is Inigo Montoya. I am prepared to die. <sup>1</sup>

Wait! I am dead, but my name is not – you know. I am Russell Hosea Wicklow. I died four days ago at the premature age of fifty-five. Unknown cause. The doctors said it was a heart attack. But that's what they always say when they really don't have an answer. Now my body lies in a beautiful casket, only because I had a decent life insurance policy that allowed my wife to splurge on the final remembrance details for the rest of the family. Oh, what a mess. Parents aren't supposed to bury their kids. Everybody knows that. But here they are, along with my grandmother of ninety-four. She's just lingering in a painful existence, while I am enjoying bliss with my wonderful Savior in Paradise. Go figure. But then again, this is not her story. That is another book. She certainly told me many stories of her life that could fill a book. However, this is my story.

The casket will be closed soon, and the only thing left will be photos and memories. The body will eventually decay, but nobody will be ruminating on that gory fact. My wife and daughter and her family, and the rest of the extended family take one last look before the undertaker closes the

history book. The tears shed will show how much adoration, devotion, and affection that one garnered in life. It will be a fitting end to one chapter in their lives as well. After all, stories aren't co-written, only intertwined, like the multi-colored strands in a finely woven rug.

Nowadays, we don't have normal funerals. We have memorial services, where many people talk about their remembrances of the deceased. Where hardly anything negative is spoken. Where the roastee is made to look almost like Mother Theresa. Funny, how our friends' love covers a multitude of sins.<sup>2</sup>

I hate funerals. Not because they are sobering, but because people tell such lies. The sobering only happens in part due to the sad reminder that death will eventually come to all.<sup>3</sup> The other part is glossed over. Most people think they are ready to cross over to the other side. They want paradise, like everybody else. Nobody really wants to go to hell to live in torment forever. They all want that blissful existence with no pain, worries, or heartache. But why should God let us into his paradise? Few seem to ponder that question. Oh, sometimes that sentiment comes out of the closet at funerals; but it is quickly forgotten, when everyone gets back to one's normal routine of life – life devoid of their loved one who just left this plain of existence.

But I digress into ruminations of philosophy. And why not? I am the dead one who knows a few more things about plains of existence, now that I am in one of them I am currently experiencing, apart from my faith in it. After all, faith is only what we patiently hope for, not what we already have. So eerily enough, I am seeing things from two different worlds at the moment, as I watch my old friends and family mingling in the Rose Room.

## Chapter 2

# Early Days

Tourist to local yokel: “Have you lived here all your life?”

Local man: “Not yet!”

Most folks cannot make that answer in truthfulness, as that would mean that they never once left their hometown to visit any other place on the planet. That would be most miserable.

And so it is with me. Born in central Pennsylvania in 1964, I moved to Florida from Pennsylvania with my parents in the spring of 1968. My father was in the U.S. Air Force, stationed in Miami. They rented a small flat near the end of a cul-de-sac, not too far from the air base. (It wasn't until I was in my 20s, before I ever heard the word “cul-de-sac”, a fancy borrowed French phrase that basically means a dead-end turn-around in a residential neighborhood.) The planes would roar overhead at all hours of the day, so I was told.

There is very little that I remember from those days. It is funny how our early memories are usually only still snapshots of quick events that happen, then fly away. I don't remember my brother being born, or the compact Chevy that my parents drove. Or the beauty of the palm trees and the tropical air.

But I do remember the magical cypress tree. It had low, thick branches, by which one could quickly climb to get a better view of the street and the neighbors. Of course, the neighbors watched me, too, as I climbed that tree every day.

One of the mid-level branches had a dimple where possible decay was setting in. It was deep enough to place a pencil upright without it falling over. Well, one day while climbing that tree, but what did I find in that dimple but a lollipop! And that continued for many days. It was as if the tooth fairy had made a deal with the dryads to compensate me for having less-than-white teeth. After several weeks of finding a lollipop every day, a strange gift took the place of the lollipop – a banana. I wasn't sure whether I should be happy or just perplexed. I don't remember how long the lollipops continued thereafter. That video is long gone.

After my father got out of the military, it was time to find a job. A local mining outfit in the town of my nativity had decided to move its headquarters to one of its small-town mines in the heart of West Virginia, in a town called Benchmark. Maybe it was an optimistic name for where West Virginia wanted all of its towns to be one day. It was a middle-class town, due in part to the burgeoning company, which employed hundreds of the locals in the mining operations, and now would be employing another hundred in its new main office. Some friends of the family who worked for the company, and who were set to move to Benchmark, got my father's foot in the door. And so, [singing] “we loaded up the truck and moved to Bev-er-ly, Hills that is, swimming pools; movie stars”.

Well it wasn't to Beverly; that was another town deep in the mountains, but it was to the hills. I suppose a few people had swimming pools, as did the town park. While there were no movie stars, the town did have an old movie theater called the Asterisk. The Washington D.C. Elite used to take summer vacations, before World War II, to this part of West Virginia, to escape the summer heat in the city. There was a large hotel in the center of town that attested to these annual visits, with large framed photos of visiting government big-wigs and their lackeys, the photos hanging in the lobby

and hallways. So the town, at least in part, benefited from a decent, yet dwindling, tourism industry.

My family spent that year, my first school year, living in a 2<sup>nd</sup> floor apartment, of which I have no recollection, whatsoever. I have seen the pictures, but none jog my memory. We then moved into a 1900s house, just outside of town in a somewhat friendly neighborhood. On the last day of kindergarten, the entire class took a long walk from the school. We meandered past my house, where I remember seeing the moving van being unloaded. I was graduating to elementary school and to a new house, all in the same day.

The “new” two-story house was laid out nicely. It had a living room and adjacent parlor, separated by glassed pocket doors, the kind that conceal themselves inside the walls. They were rarely revealed. The walls were made of plaster and lathe with a covering of wallpaper. I thought it was funny and a little false, when I was told that the plaster contained horse hair in it, in order to help hold it together. It sounded like an old wives' tale to me, as if I had enough wisdom as a young boy, to know what wives' tales were. However, one year the wallpaper came down to make way for a fresh look. Lo, and behold, that plaster actually had dark hairs embedded in it!

The basement housed a coal furnace for the house's heat source. I remember the coal truck coming to the house in the fall, putting the chute into the small basement window, and loading up the blackened room. The room was definitely not a place in which to play. I stayed out of there as much as possible.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the town had a yearly festival in the fall, called the Black-and-Blue Festival. It turns out that blackberries and huckleberries grew like wildfire in the lush countryside. Nearly everyone in the county picked the berries and canned them or made preserves from them. So, annually, there was a big hullabaloo to the berry god, with a parade and a dance at the high school and games for kids at the town park

and lots of hot food and berries for sale. There were three-legged races, turtle races, and eggs tossed. There was a hog-calling contest. Of course, no hogs came, so no one won. Soooo.....we just sat around and listened to the bluegrass music. (Or was that blackgrass music? It was the Black-and-Blue Festival, after all.) Well, *I* didn't listen to the music, because the festival had not been held in 20 years. Apparently, a blight showed up in the '50s and wiped out both types of bushes in the county. The blackberries, however, were making a comeback by the time my family moved to Benchmark. When I would spend the night with a friend who lived about ten miles from town, he would take me to the berry patch in summer, where we would pick and eat to our hearts' content.

The Methodist Church had a large presence in the county, with two large church congregations in town, and several more scattered about the countryside. My mother was raised in the Methodist Church, so we would attend Sunday service at Francis Raspberry UMC. I always thought that was an odd name for a church's namesake. My grandparents had a widow neighbor named Frances; she was the only Frances I knew about. So I thought Francis was a feminine name that was just spelled incorrectly. As my reading skills improved, I was able to see that the church marquis did not display "Raspberry" but Asbury. I was made to go to Sunday school as well, which was no fun at all. (I don't remember if my parents went to Sunday school; if they did, they never talked about it.) However, I was given a large Bible at a young age. Since I loved reading as a child, I would often read the Bible aloud to myself. However, I have no recollection that anything in the Bible made an impression upon me.

I fell in love mostly with the Hardy Boys mysteries. I remember spending countless hours on the single bed in my brother's room, reading those novels. They were so captivating. Both of my younger brothers (yes, now there were two) shared a large bedroom on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of our turn-

of-the-century house. My own bedroom was smaller, overlooking the side and back yards, with a window to the roof over the back porch. However, even though it was my room, there was never any heat in that room in the winter. For some reason, the duct work did not allow any air through; so, it was too cold to spend any time in there. That is why I slept in the single bed in the big bedroom. I suppose it was an even trade for my partial independence.

One year my parents had purchased a set of encyclopedias – yeah, the entire set of books A-Z, with new yearbooks arriving every year thereafter for several years. What a fascinating set of books they turned out to be. I don't know how my parents had the money to purchase them. Somehow I inherited those books and still owned them till the day of my death. The “E” book had been lost over the years, but I had managed to purchase a replacement. Its red cover stood out like a sore thumb amid the black and brown covers of the original set.

Those were the days of playing wiffle ball in the back yard with the neighborhood kids in any kind of decent weather. We had a long thin sidewalk that went from the back basement door to the end of the property, where the old outhouse used to be. That area was home plate. Like the big green monster at Fenway, we had the big white monster, which was the house itself. If one hit the house with the ball, it was a home run. There were round dirt spots on either side of the sidewalk for first and third base. The only person who hit more homers than me was David, a kid two years younger than me, who lived a block away.

If we weren't playing wiffle ball, then we were riding our bikes. One year for Christmas, I got a green chopper for a present. It was actually fairly dorky-looking, but at the time, I was the coolest kid in the neighborhood. Our street only ran for four blocks, but that was plenty for some high speed shenanigans. The first block was where I lived; the second

block was flat like mine; the third block was sloped on both ends. The fourth block was one downhill slope to the third block, which was slightly offset from the third block, so that one had to make a quick turn, coming to the third block. At that turn was a large blue mailbox for outgoing mail. Hence, we kids called that Mailbox Hill, because it was at the top of a perpendicular street that was a steep hill.

We never rode down that hill because it was too dangerous, as the first intersection below was quite busy. It was thrilling and challenging to ride down the sloped section of block four as fast as we could, heading straight for that mailbox, then taking the slight turn as sharp as we could. For all the years that we did that stunt, we never had a run-in with any vehicle. However, there was one time that could have been disastrous. I had Kelly's bike instead of my own. Kelly was a neighbor girl, who had a girl's bike. (I'm not sure why I was riding her bike at the time.) As I came flying down the slope, the front wheel started to shake violently, eventually wrecking the bike and throwing me head-over-heels to the pavement, right in front of the mailbox. Miraculously, I was not hurt at all, to my utter surprise, but nonetheless, I was quite shaken. Of course, I did not tell my parents about that joy ride.

There was plenty of work to be done as well. With an old house, there were always improvements to be made. So my dad made me help him on Saturdays with his projects, or with mowing the grass, or with trimming the hedges. He made me work hard, which wasn't enjoyable at the time. Looking back, I was glad for having received a good work ethic.

The neighbors were of all ages. They had names like Chicken Joe, Slim Jim, Ginny, Pearl, and Mutt, and an elderly couple across the street, Garland and Sarah (she never learned how to drive a car). One kid down the block had a myna bird, which would say certain phrases repeatedly, like "Where's Robby?" His sister's name was Weedle, similar to the name of

the round-bottomed toy people (Weebles wobble, but they don't fall down). And then there were the Puffinburglers, who lived on the lower street. They never smiled, and drove very old cars. Their house always had too many trees and bushes around it, so the property always looked dark. They kept their dogs in pens in the back of their property, but never showed them any attention. The dogs would bark incessantly and drive us batty. We kids had to walk by their house on the way to the bus stop, which gave us an eerie feeling – just what we needed right before school.

The Steinbecks also lived on the lower street. They had seven kids with widely varying ages. The mother would sometimes come to the house in summer and help my mother to can homemade ketchup. It was the worst stuff you ever tasted. It would ruin a helping of french fries in an instant.

My dad decided to coach a Little League ball team, so I was automatically on the team, although I was just average at baseball. At 9 years old, I got to play the last inning in right field, where nobody ever hit the ball, because there were no left-handed hitters. The right-handers never pulled the ball in my direction.

By the time I was 11, however, I was the starting catcher, and continued in that position for my last year. By the end of that last year, I was anticipating making the all-star team. To my chagrin, an 11-year old made the team as the starting catcher. I didn't even make the backup squad. I was very disappointed. Our team, however, was tied for the best record with the Comptinos, who had the star pitcher in the league. We met in the final game to decide who would be champions for 1976. Well, my vindication came in the game, along with a little surprise from our team's best pitcher. His dad had recently taught him how to throw a curve ball, which worked brilliantly against the Comptinos. In the final inning, the game was tied at one. We had two guys on base, and I came up to bat. Without having a hit in the game, I hit a

grounder that got through the middle, scoring both guys on the league's star pitcher. We held them to no runs in their half of the final inning, and we won the championship.

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One day in sixth grade, I was in Mrs. Mueller's room during lunch break, with my pal Alvin Branch. We heard the fire siren in town; then shortly thereafter, we saw a fire engine roar past the school. Alvin's house was only about one mile away. He flippantly stated out loud that he hoped the fire truck was not going to his house. We thought nothing more of it, but went to our separate classes when the bell rang. About an hour later, Mrs. Battleship, a young teacher, came into our class sobbing. She told us that the fire was indeed at Alvin's house. He had been pulled from his class and sent home. His house was not a total loss, but his father had died from smoke inhalation. It was an eerie feeling that came over me as I remembered his words about the fire truck.

I eventually got to spend time with Alvin again about a month later. He, his mother, and older siblings were living in a rented house in the country. Alvin had lost all his clothes in the fire, along with his extensive baseball card collection. I remember him wearing some ghastly shirt, that I would never have been caught wearing. He didn't seem to mind; he was simply glad to have clothes to wear. I also saw a few old clothes of mine, which I had contributed to a collection that the school had organized. Every time that I would go to his rented unit, I could see the grief that his mother bore from the trauma of losing a house and a spouse. It never seemed to lessen, even after several months when she allowed a younger boyfriend to move into the rented house with her. Alvin did not like him. I did not like him, as he seemed to not care for her loss, but only wanted a sugar momma in his life. Well, she eventually got rid of him, and the family moved into a more

spacious rental, where they lived for a few years.

In eighth grade, I spent the night with Alvin at this house. It was winter, and his mother had to work the next day, which was Saturday. When she left for work, he coaxed me into going onto the frozen pond behind the house. Wouldn't you know it – Alvin fell through the ice. Fortunately, he was quickly out of the frigid water, and we hurried inside to dry his clothes in the dryer, before his mother got home from work. She never knew.

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As a kid, life was mostly good. We could roam the four blocks with little supervision. In the summer, the retired man across the street with the rust-colored car, Garland, would sit on his high porch, chew his spittin' tobacco, listen to the local radio station, and watch over us kids' doings. The stairs to his house would be a thorn in my flesh in the near future.

In the summertime, when school was not in session, we kids sometimes got bored. There was a little corner store about three blocks away, where one could get penny candy, unless one did not have any pennies. Well, we remedied that. My brothers and I had piggy banks that were made from translucent glass. Somehow, scads of change made their way into the banks; I have no idea from where the money came. When we got the hankering for something cool and sweet from the store, we would take a butter knife and coax the coins from the insertion slot in the bank. Since we could see the coins, the quarters were the ones that got coaxed the most. If the banks were mostly full, a few coins missing were not noticed at all. After a few dollars had been purloined from the piggy, we would walk to the store and buy chocolate milk and candy bars!

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Christmas Day was usually over-the-top. My parents were not well-to-do by any means. But Christmas Day usually brought a ton of presents. The tree had barely room to stand amid the wrapped goodies. We ended up getting the usual high-dollar items, such as bicycles, stereos, watches, and, of course, tons of clothes. (I still have my valued watch that I got in 1981 – a silver Pulsar lighted digital watch, which has only had a few replacement batteries in over 35 years. And does anyone remember the doomed technology of 2-track tape players? They were mini 8-track machines, and I got one for Christmas in the 2nd grade. They never took off, (just like the Beta videotape medium.)

Which brings me to the aforementioned word “valued”. I am not sure that I valued any of the gifts that I received, except for a few, namely that watch, and two guitars – one on which I learned to play, and one top-of-the-line Ovation that had a fantastic sound, and of which I owned for about 20 years, partly out of fear/respect for my parents who bought it, and partly because it was a high-quality instrument. I finally sold it because the rounded back became too much of an obstacle when playing the instrument while standing up. Out of all the Christmases as a child, the only other gifts that I can still remember getting was an 8-track/turntable combo, with several worldly music albums, and that metallic green “chopper” bicycle, complete with long front forks. Neither lasted that long.

When I was 11 or 12, the time came for that talk about the birds and the bees, which was only a little awkward, when I knew the basics already. That talk was just a precursor to the real bomb that was about to be dropped.

## **Chapter 3**

# **The Bomb(shell) and Beyond**

As if learning the correct anatomical names for certain body parts in the presence of both parents, wasn't embarrassing enough, the next topic would be completely unexpected. It turns out that my dad, who acted like a normal dad, was not my real father. I had a different biological father, and my dad had legally adopted me when I was three years old, long before the memories started kicking in. My normal surname was not my birth name. Wow, did this all seem really weird! It was too much to take in at first, and it took a while to actually sink in. One thing it didn't change – the fact that my dad still loved me and related with me the same way now, as in the past.

The odd thing was that I was not curious about my biological father. He left the scene from the get-go, and someone else stepped in at the right time to fill that father-figure gap. So, it felt to me like there was no gap. It felt natural. Dad was my father, and that was all that was necessary. Cool – now let's get on with life.

Some of the greatest times in my childhood happened at my grandparent's cabin in the woods, in central Pennsylvania. It was originally a tiny house, with a tiny kitchen, but with no inside bathroom. I remember going to the outhouse in cold weather, which was not fun at all. It had two doors, one for the guys, and one for the “gulls”. They had a small TV, which only picked up two channels from the antenna, on a good day. They had a dart board, with a baseball diamond on the reverse. I would spend countless hours

“playing” a complete baseball game as I threw the darts, like a big-league pitcher.

My great-grandmother knew all kinds of card games, and she taught me how to play Shanghai rummy. I never did learn how to play pinoche, though. I thought it odd that a deck of cards did not have any numbered cards lower than 9s. Whenever we got together there with many relatives, Pap would make home-made ice cream. It was the creamiest ice cream I have ever tasted, and it was even better with peanuts.

The camp had a small wood stove, which took forever to heat up the open room in chillier weather. My grandparents eventually installed a few heater fans within several walls. They also expanded the cabin by about eight feet to the south, in order to create a bathroom, and to expand the kitchen. What a change! No more walking to the outhouse. My grandfather also had a round corn crib at the cabin, which the deer loved. Once in a while, the black bears would come for the corn. One year, my grandfather started gathering day-old donuts from a Dunkin' Donuts shop about 30 miles away in the nearest town. He would dump them into a long wooden trough on the ground, which drew many animals especially black bears, for a snack; this, of course, was the goal.

That camp became a great place of enjoyment through my teen years, and even into my young adult years. Roxanne (my future wife) and I would occasionally take friends and relatives for a weekend in the autumn. It was a frightening thing, in every year of life, to get to the cabin after dark, because one had to unlock the door with the possibility of a bear walking around the corner while one was turning the key. Those days ended when my grandparents could no longer take care of the building, and there was no one in the family who lived in Pennsylvania, in order to accept an inheritance on state land. One could not live outside the state and own a house on state land. Those were some of my favorite memories.

When I was approximately 12, my parents let me walk to the town park, which was about ½ mile from our house. In the summer, I would join friends at the town pool for hours of swimming. That was well before the days of paranoia – the days before the diving board was removed. On one of these treks to the park, my middle brother accompanied me. (I had no idea where the youngest brother was. Maybe we left him at home by himself.) On our walk back home, we were about three blocks from the park. All of a sudden someone called to us. We were on the sidewalk by the bank, and the person calling was by his car, an older white car of which I was not familiar. I just knew that it was old and ugly. This guy had not shaved in some time, and he had horn-rimmed glasses. He said, “Hey boys! Don't you remember me? I'm your uncle Cecil.” Talk about the alarm bells going off. We had few relatives with which we were close, and there was never any mention of Cecil. We immediately turned around and high-tailed it out of there, hoping that he and his friends were not following us. I had never been so frightened in all my life.

In '76 on Halloween night, I was out walking the neighborhood as usual. It was unusually cold for that time of year. As I was heading back home from down the street, I figured that I would do a little scaring before I turned in for the night. I decided to withdraw my arms from my zipped-up coat and flail around as if I were some silly ghost. To do so, I had to have high ground so that people could see me. So I started up the old neighbor's stairs to get to his embankment. Instead, I tripped over the drain pipe in front of the stairs and fell nose-first into the concrete steps. (I bet your stomach is turning right now.) Somehow I managed to get up, screaming like a banshee, running across the street to my house, where my parents took over the first aid, and the real-life, scary, bloody scene of Halloween. Needless to say, my nose was broken. I

had to wear protective headgear to school for a couple of weeks. It had a protrusion that ran down over the nose. It made me look like a freak. I was so embarrassed.

By this time, my family had quit going to Francis Raspberry's church, and had intermittently attended a different Methodist church. There were a couple of kids my age, who I knew from school, who went there as well. In the latter part of that school year, I was forced to go to the church's catechism class to learn of its official doctrine. (It should have been termed "cataclysm" class.) Three other kids were in this class, which was necessary to complete in order to become a member of the church. I remember nothing from the class, as it made no impression upon me. (I was probably so bored, that it was wonderful not to remember.) I did come out of that trial as a bona fide member of the Methodist Church, with my own offering envelopes – as if a pre-teen has any money to give anyone, much less to a boring church organization. The worst thing about it, was that I was made an acolyte. That, however, did not last long. God was granting me mercy for dealing with those catacomb classes.

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I got involved in Boy Scouts around age twelve. I am not sure how, because I never participated in Cub Scouts, or Webelos, or even 4-H. But it turned out to be mostly enjoyable. There were weekly scout meetings with older boys, who thought they were hot-shots, trying to make you into a quasi-military squad. I found the saluting, standing, resting, and posturing a waste of time. I just wanted to get on with earning my ranks and merit badges (and of course gaining knowledge about the same). Oh, and there were camp-outs – some in rustic tents, and some at Scout camp in cabins.

The summer camp at the Scout camp was the best. The property had a large beautiful lake, where all the water-related

merit badges were earned. This was where I was afraid to swamp a canoe, until I found out that it wouldn't sink, even full of water. There was a pavilion for the crafts merit badges. There were open fields and plenty of woods for outdoor-related merit badges. No one stayed in the cabins at summer camp. They were reserved for the counselors. One would sleep in tents on a wooden platform at various locations on the grounds. All the campsites were in the woods and had individual names like Boondocks, Duck Hollow, Bear Trace, and Totem Hill. If one's scout troop got the draw of staying at a campsite far from the parade field, one wore that hardship like a badge of honor.

Of course, one of the best things about camp was meal time. Each troop stood in a single-file line at the front of the mess hall. A few camp counselors (older scouts) would tell jokes, or stories, and would make us sing silly songs. The loudest, straightest troop would be the first to go into the mess hall and claim its table.

One year, I remember a particular event that happened in the mess hall. After each table got served its food, whichever table finished all its food first could request seconds, of which there were enough for maybe four tables out of twenty. The requirement for requesting seconds was that the food trays at the table had to be empty. So, someone in my troop decided to get creative. When the food trays arrived, we immediately dumped all the food onto several plates, then held up our empty food trays and requested seconds, way before any other table had the chance to dole out their food from the trays. It actually worked. Although, to this day, I am not sure, whether that was slightly underhanded, or just a bold move to stake one's claim.

And then there was the year at camp, when I forgot to pack extra underwear. Imagine living all week in the same pair of underwear. How stupid can one be! (I felt embarrassed, even though no one else knew it.) At least I got out of them

when I got to swim.

Every year at summer camp, on Friday night, parents were allowed to come for the nighttime skits and singing in the natural amphitheater, where there were bleachers for sitting. Then the troops would walk to the far end of the lake and stand single-file, facing the lake, for the ceremony of the inductions into the secret society of the Order of the Arrowhead. The “Indian chief” would stand in the middle of the lineup, next to his assistant and a roaring fire. His “runners” would get their whispered instructions from the chief, then run back and forth in either direction, seeking the inductees, pulling them from their ranks, and bringing them to the chief. The runners knew who to pick, because the troop leaders would stand behind the inductees and hold up a white handkerchief over their head as the runner would pass by. The runner sometimes needed two or three passes before knowing which boy to grab. After all inductees were brought, they were led away to a secret meeting, where further instructions were given, related to the new membership in this secret society. The first time I experienced this, it was eerie. It got to be familiar over the years, even being quite tedious.

On one of my earlier camp-outs, the leaders did not do a good job of supervising the boys. We ended up at the mouth of a cave, where several of the boys in my troop pulled out bongos and started to smoke what they said was marijuana. They passed it around to me, but I flatly refused. I thought these boys were stupid for doing this. At the very least, they were not in keeping with the Boy Scout laws, which exulted in being morally clean. At the very worst, they were doing something illegal. It was the same boys who always told the dirty jokes at night, when we would stay in the cabin at Scout camp. By the time I was 14, I had earned my own way to Life Scout, just one rank below that of Eagle Scout.

Well, back to the birds and the bees. They were flying thru my neighborhood, because there was a pretty girl, slightly

younger than me, who lived a few houses away. As I approached my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, I started taking notice of her. Then I started to spend more time with her. I went to scout camp that summer, and she visited me on Friday night. That was the same year that I forgot my underwear. Well, that flame died out, and someone else swooped in behind me to court her. That someone turned out to be the same person who had gotten me interested in pop music in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Now, however, he wasn't happy that I had been vying for his girl. Since that time, we became enemies. No big loss, because it turned out that he was just a bully, and arrogant, to boot.

The days of childhood were over, and it was time for adolescence. But something happened that autumn that would change things forever.



## Chapter 4

# Re-direction

Life was good, carefree, and full of fun for a middle-class kid in small-town America. My family lacked for nothing. My parents had decent jobs. We had good relations with our grandparents several hours away. I was a bright student at school. My family had just finished a great summer vacation at Niagara Falls, with a side trip somewhere in Ontario to see the shrine of the Lady of Fatima. I was not impressed, nor interested in some dead Catholic woman. I actually knew nothing of Catholicism. Maybe my parents were seeking for some spiritual truth. I wouldn't have known. When life is going well, and there is no spiritual guidance, thinking about God is far from a teenager's mind.

Well, something was brewing, because there was frenzied and focused activity. A fanatic preacher with a crew cut was having Bible studies at the Klugman's, who lived at the east corner of the zig-zag on Mailbox Hill. My mom would walk to their house to listen to what this guy had to say. He claimed that he had colorectal cancer at age 35, but after some time crying out to God, he was miraculously healed. How could anyone pass up listening to what he had to say, especially since he was not only healed, but fired up about God himself? As I found out later, there were also monthly meetings in the conference room of the local resort, Indian Fountain. The Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship hosted speakers who not only spoke about their businesses belonging to God, but they also “spoke in tongues” as it was called. People spoke non-English phrases by the Spirit of God, not by

any foreknowledge of a particular language. It sounded crazy to me, but I saw it – rather heard it – firsthand. This wasn't concocted hokus pocus, like I would later see at religious meetings twenty years hence. Nor was it snake handling, like a few fanatics in eastern Kentucky practiced. There was something tangible and authentic about the charisma that many people experienced. It seemed as if they were really turned on to God.

There was also live Southern Gospel music at these meetings. Since I was newly interested in music for the last two years, watching live performers was fantastic, even if their style of music was not what I was listening to, on Pop radio. Very soon, the aforementioned activity spread to my house, as the fanatic miraculously-healed preacher, Keith Dryer, was invited to my house to host his Bible Study. In the midst of his personal revival, Keith had become an interning Methodist pastor. I am sure that he felt God calling him to full-time Christian work, and this course of action was probably the only way that he could conceive for him to be able to deliver his message to the public. Of course, there were other folks, newly converted to this fanaticism, who would also speak at these gatherings.

One guy named Jonathan Smithson thought that the lining up of the planets in 1982, was a precursor to the imminent return of Jesus to Earth. I'm not sure where he got his doctrine to support such nonsense, but, then again, I knew fairly little about the Bible, except for what was ingrained all those intermittent years in the Methodist Church (which wasn't much).

I remember the trading cards of KISS, the rock group, that were burned at these meetings, although I am not sure from where the cards came – unless they were mine. And I don't remember willingly giving them up. Apparently the rock group looked and acted in Satanic fashion – as if I knew what real demonic activity looked like – or anything else that was

remotely associated with Satan. All I knew was that pairing face paint with rock music was pretty cool, and that KISS did it long before the glam hair and make-up of the eighties' metal bands appeared.

One thing that stood out to me during this time of spiritual fervor, was that my mother just quit taking her medicine for epilepsy, claiming that she was healed by a previous act of Jesus<sup>4</sup>. Well, after two more epileptic episodes within the year, the epilepsy was gone – never to return. It was quite the act of faith, and a miracle to boot. Another man that I knew, stopped wearing his eyeglasses, and his sight became 20:20 – another miracle of faith.

At one of the house meetings at Charlie Stinebaugh's house on November 8, 1978, I vaguely remember, Linda B. approaching me mid-way through the meeting. She asked, quite out of the blue, if I wanted to pray to receive Jesus. I really had no idea what she was asking me, but I went along with her, and followed her lead. What happened the rest of the evening was quite surreal. I felt drawn to continually pray and thank and praise God. It was an other-worldly and unnatural feeling that led me on that night. (I am not one to put too much stock in feelings and weird occurrences, such as the Mormon missionaries do. A little euphoria equals not a transformed life.)

However, from that point forward, I felt the tug of God's spirit in my life. I wanted to know and experience all that the folks in that meeting were experiencing and living. I had a new desire to read and understand the Bible, not for the sake of historical knowledge, but for experiential knowledge and truth. Whether it happened that night at Charlie's house, or whether it was some time shortly thereafter, I knew and understood that I had been "born again", given new life by the Spirit of God. What an eye-opening experience I had during that time! What new roads and experiences were soon to come!

I then started attending with my parents, the informal meetings that were still being held in various persons' houses. I saw many people who seemed to be interested in experiencing and knowing God, sometimes receiving a physical manifestation of his workings. At one meeting, I remember the leader asking if anyone wanted to be "filled with the Holy Spirit". After one woman stepped forward, the leader and others placed their hands on her, and she immediately spoke very loudly in a language that she had not learned naturally. I knew that this woman was not faking this. Something super-naturally tangible had happened to her.

From these meetings, I also grew in my understanding of God and Jesus, through a never-ending hunger for the Bible. I obtained a pocket-sized New Testament with study notes. I took it to school with me every day in 9th grade, and read it in study hall in the library. I also found some creative religious tracts that I took to school and gave to my friends, as a way of telling them about the transformation that had taken place in me. One classmate, named Marty, snubbed me when I gave him one. He laughed at the mere thought that I believed anything written therein. (Thirty years later, I found out that Marty had been married four times, and not because each wife had died. His lifestyle without God had wrought a wrecked life.)

There was one overarching attribute about this "revival" going on in the area. It wasn't religious fanaticism that stays inside the four walls of a church and acts, well, religiously. This was a genuine move of God's spirit, radically changing people's purpose in living, and it could not be denied. It was not a man-made phenomenon. People were excited about this newfound faith. A family atmosphere prevailed, and there were close friendships made.

In the summer of 1979, a close-knit group from the home meetings decided to venture out and start a formal church. In my naivete, I did not know that this was

unnecessary. (It was like the nation of Israel begging the prophet Samuel for a king, so that they could be like all the surrounding nations.) The leaders chose Keith to be the full-time pastor. Rightfully so, Keith was one of those living miracles, who was radically transformed in this revival. But why not just continue in the informal meetings? Why did we have to show the community that a "reformed church" was needed? Keith was a fantastic shepherd and teacher; that was a given. He decided to leave the Methodist church job. So... on a hot Sunday in July, we met on the back lawn of Elmer Klugman's house for the initial church service. I don't remember the details of that day, except that I walked home just three blocks away.

That summer, my parents also took the family to an outdoor music festival in central Pennsylvania, simply called the Jesus Festival. The festival had been started in the mid-70s by a guy named John Musky, and it consisted of Christian musicians and Christian speakers in a whirl-wind day-long schedule for three consecutive days. It was kind of like a never-ending church service on steroids, in the outdoors. It was a remnant of the Jesus Movement, which started in the late 60s. Thousands of people would camp out and enjoy nationally-known and regional musicians performing their music. Public speakers were invited, from as far away as Australia. These folks would teach from the Bible, and inspire the audience to learn to walk as followers of Jesus.

We only attended for one day that year. It rained the whole day. The natural amphitheater hillside became a mud-laden sliding board, that kids readily used for their entertainment in this tropical environment. That evening also awaited the arrival of B.J. Thomas, a current popular singer, who had allegedly become a Christian recently. Since I was just 14, I was not interested in hearing him sing. I wanted to hear pop/rock music, not soothing adult contemporary. It turned out to be a long day, as I awaited the music to be

finished ahead of the long ride home. That day, however, would signal the beginning of many summer festivals to come, both as a spectator, and as a volunteer.

As time passed, the house church meetings continued on Sunday mornings, with various families joining the original ones. One elderly woman, who had been involved with the original house meetings, had gotten her oldest son to rent out the 2nd floor of his workshop building to this new church group. So, the FigTree Church now had a larger place to meet than what individual living rooms could accommodate. The floor was laid out with five rooms, excluding the bathroom. The largest room was built in an L-shape fashion, so that the speaker in the corner could see in both directions, but the people in each middle-to-rear section could not see each other. I remember playing guitar and singing with my to-be brother-in-law that first year in this building. (I had been taught how to play guitar by Barry McElhatan, just a year earlier.)

At this same time, there was also a regional movement happening in Oklahoma. Some people call(ed) it the "name-it-and-claim-it" movement, because it emphasized the speaking part of having faith in God. It took some of Jesus' statements on faith, and "took them to the next level". No doubt there were people with great faith, who were living miracles, and who then attempted to teach hyper-faith - as if faith was some kind of formula that one only had to memorize, or as if one's own faith was something to have faith in, instead of trying to trust God. Some literature from these folks is what was used as initial Sunday school instructional materials.

As part of an outreach to let others know of our newfound joy in finding God, we used to go to a nearby town named Hanover, and purposely engage persons on the town sidewalks, in order to start a conversation about God. A local gun shop owner there, (who happened to be Mormon), allowed us to use his electricity and his juxtaposed parking lot, which happened to be three feet above the adjacent sidewalk. This

would be a makeshift stage for playing music. I had been inspired by an artist named Don Francisco, so I would play and sing several of his spiritual songs for the passersby.

Two years later, an elderly couple, who was involved in the church, decided to donate land to the fledgling group, and the leaders decided to build a church building on the land, which was several miles outside of town. Much clearing had to be done, and many hands gladly pitched in to help cut down trees. One member had heavy equipment, so he was able to excavate and prepare for the basement to be built.

The basement was finished, but that was all there was for several years. There was not enough money for the main floor of the building to be built. So, for the next four years, church services were held in the basement. The building was partitioned to include a kitchen, a nursery, classrooms, bathrooms, and a stage. It was cozy. I spent my high school years attending the church services there, often playing guitar and singing solo.

There was a local Christian radio station that was 30 miles away. It not only played music, but also ran segments of different persons teaching from the Bible. The leaders of the Figtree church decided to spend money for a daily half hour segment so that Keith could record messages and have them aired every day at a certain time. In conjunction with this teaching, a phone number was provided to the public in order for folks to call for real-time prayer. A small building that was already on the FigTree church building grounds had a phone installed inside, so that listeners could call and request prayer for them. I manned the phone only once during this radio program; no one called. (It was just an observation).

The radio program lasted only a couple of years. Perhaps it was because money was needed to build the main floor of the church building. I don't know why. I was only a teen, and was not privy to, nor interested in, financial decisions. (It is a little scary when a loan is secured for a

non-profit organization, realizing that trustees are responsible to pay on that loan, especially if one is a trustee.) My parents were never trustees, but no financial problems were encountered over the next few decades (if ever).

In the years leading up to my high school graduation, many people came and went, as far as the congregation was concerned. There were never more than 50 people at any given service. If a stereotype was needed for the kind of church that was evolving, I would have called it Methocostal, because it was a sort of an amalgamation of Methodism and Pentecostalism. We had wonderful pot-luck dinners on special occasions. The family atmosphere still prevailed, but that close camaraderie that individuals previously had, seemed to fade into just brotherhood. Instead of having several families together in one's house for an evening, that close fellowship now only took place at the church building. Life had settled into a routine. The initial excitement from the late '70s had cooled.

In the course of time, I continued high school. Mr. Plumtree, the history teacher, was mean and surly, and he would embarrass one and make one look stupid at the drop of a hat. I hated his class. I ran track in tenth grade, but I was just an average runner. I learned how to drive a car with a manual transmission, because that was all my family had. It was frustratingly difficult, but I finally mastered it. My dad also had an old Ford truck that he used for hauling wood. It had a 3-speed on the column, and was cool to drive, especially with my younger brother, who always wanted to go fast down the old dirt road to the house.

When I was a junior, I got a job at the local Dairy Queen. That was pretty cool for several reasons. Can anyone say "free food"? Plus, the guys actually got to cook the hamburgers on a real grill. In the busy season, it was fast-paced, hard work. In the off-season, I would take my guitar and sometimes play when we had no customers. I was paid

\$3/hour. I eventually learned how to make all the ice cream items as well; I was proud of that fact, because not everyone could make that final curl in the soft-serve cone. In my senior year, I made a bet with my friend Alvin Branch that he could not make the state track team, seeing that this was the only year that he had run track. He proved me wrong, and I had to make ten strawberry-banana supreme parfaits for him – one per visit, whenever he felt like dropping in. I think I still owe him four or five.

I made good grades in high school, but I was not the guy with personality-plus. I never made the list of "most likely to succeed at....." or "best dressed" or "best looking", etc. I did make the National Honor Society, but it has made no difference in my life. When I graduated, I cried with my friends Scott and B.J., two buddies who shared first class study hall with me in the library. We have barely seen each other since. My parents sacrificed and surprised me with two gifts for graduation – a piece of junk Chevy Vega and a brand new top-of-the-line Ovation acoustic guitar. Both were much appreciated; however, the guitar was not only a beauty; it had a great sound. I kept and used that guitar for more than twenty years. I felt as if I needed to keep it for the sake of my parents. Eventually, I grew tired of the rounded back, which made it difficult to wield the guitar while standing. I advertised it in the local paper. The purchaser got quite a deal. (No one ever plays Ovations any more publicly – just another observation.)

It was during this time of my life that I encountered a moment of trial in my young faith. The congregation at our fledgling church had been taught for years now that faith in God could bring about healing, miracles, and other answers to prayer – through the name of Jesus. One day, I was driving to a certain destination in the countryside. As I approached a hill, I saw someone by the side of the road, flagging down passersby. I stopped to see what the hub-bub was about. A

hundred yards away a team of men was working on an excavation site for a new house. A trench like a foxhole had been dug for some reason, but not the entire area for a basement. An elderly man had been in the trench, when the dirt wall collapsed on him up to his chest, which apparently was traumatic enough to knock the wind out of him. Another guy that I knew from school was there, trying to resuscitate him. There were also several other people standing around just waiting for an ambulance to arrive. I was as helpless as they all were, to lend a hand.

I had heard of recent stories of fellow churchgoers who had prayed a man back from the dead. Could the same happen in my presence? My faith failed me at that moment, as I realized that a tangible manifestation of God's power was not going to come from me. What if I spoke the name of Jesus, commanding life to return, and nothing happened? I had never done something so dramatic like that before, nor had I actually seen anyone else perform such a miracle. The doubts arose in my mind like a whirlwind. Or was it that I could not conjure enough boldness in front of these adults? Or was it that I had no clue how to put real faith in an almighty God, into action? Or had I been duped into thinking that I could speak the name of Jesus like a magic incantation, spoken from a dabbler in spiritual realms, who was not prepared to deal with real unseen powerful forces? The ambulance arrived, while the man was still trapped in the dirt. I left the scene without saying a word, or doing anything at all. I continued to my destination, thinking about what had just happened, and what had not. I told no one of this incident, not even my friend Roxanne. This incident was not forgotten through the ensuing years; it was not until twenty years later, that I got some insight regarding the source of miracles.

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That summer, my parents took our family and some friends to a different festival called Creation, in east central Pennsylvania, at a place called Muddy Run. We camped for the duration in a pop-up trailer camper. The festival was also set in a natural amphitheater environment. That was the festival that introduced me to the amazing Phil Keaggy, who played acoustic guitar only, that time, along with his friend Peter York. During the Amy Grant concert on Saturday night, the venue lost electric power. She and Brown Bannister finished the night with one guitar and one microphone rigged up from some unknown power source. Candles could be seen spread out on the hillside, held by thousands of people, as simple praise songs to God were sung.

My friend Roxanne had accompanied us, and I had spent some great time getting to know her better. We all had arrived home late on Sunday, feeling a little sick, however. Everyone ended up with different measures of vomiting and diarrhea, from water contamination, as it was later discovered. Many of the attendees of the festival also experienced the same. Was this an attack of Satan, or a natural phenomenon, or God allowing us to be humbled after such a wonderful experience? Or all the above?



## Chapter 5

# Indiana

I thought I wanted to be a math teacher at one point in my high school career, even though English was my strong subject. Neither won, as I ended up going to a Bible college in Port Lane, Indiana. How I picked that obscure school, I'll never know. I did not have a strong leading to go, but I thought God might be leading me there to learn some skill in order to influence the world for Him. (I should have stuck with English; I probably could have been a prolific writer.)

Port Lane, IN, was ten hours from my home. That is a long way for an 18-year old. I started off as a music major, since I had some skill at playing guitar. My first day there with my family consisted of taking a music placement test. Boy, did I feel stupid. However, it was just a way to let the professors know with which classes I needed to start. It was an old, small school that had opened in the early 1900s, and had eventually expanded to include several city blocks on the outskirts of the city. I roomed with another freshman who was from Michigan, and who was also a music major. We hit it off fairly well. Both of us auditioned for a traveling singing group, and we both were selected. What a surprise! The year turned into quite a learning experience, as I had to learn to read music, and learn to sing bass for the four-part harmony.

There were six persons in the group, three guys and three gals. We called ourselves Shalom. Over the months, we grew close to each other; we had a blast, traveling in a college van up to three hours to perform concerts, mostly in church services, but a few for retreats and conferences. What a joy it was to travel the flat right-angle roads in Michigan, Indiana,

and Ohio in the winter time, staring at empty farm fields and barren trees! The leader, Melanie, could play piano, so some of our songs were to her accompaniment, while others were sung to background tracks. Later in the year, I even got to accompany one song on guitar, even though I was just an average player.

The group also had a sound man that joined us for the concerts, as we brought our own sound board and speaker system to each concert. His name was Robbie; he did not ordinarily join us during the weekly practice sessions; but he was very funny, and it was a joy to have him around. He and his roommate showed up in the cafeteria one night, with half of their beards shaved off. He was always cutting up or acting goofy. His steady girlfriend was quite the opposite; we never got to know her well. It was just an observation.

At a few of the concerts in winter, a professor from the school accompanied us. He preached in the church services. He told us a story of one of his past preaching experiences in a black church. (Ninety-nine percent of us college students were white.) He was obviously not accustomed to the congregation being vocal during his preaching. One phrase that was used periodically by the congregants, which was meant to encourage a repeat of the concept given, was "Shake that bush again!" That was so funny to me, being from such a different cultural background.

One Sunday, we had two concerts in the home-town of Port Lane, so we did not have to travel far. After the evening concert, Robbie and I were driving the sound equipment in the college van back to the school. We ended up following some students from the college, who had attended the concert, although they did not know we were following them. Searching through the glove box, I found a flashlight for directing traffic, the kind with the pointed, conical orange nose. As the passenger, I turned it on, and rotated it in my hands, which slightly gave it the appearance of a police car's

flashing light. The fellow student's car ahead of us actually pulled to the side of the road, as she thought we were the police! Robbie and I laughed all night.

I remember a concert weekend in Michigan. We sang at a church gathering on a Saturday evening, so we traveled there in street clothes, instead of in our dress clothes. The guys were showed to a small library room in the church building, where we changed clothes for the concert. Right as I had removed my pants, a woman unknowingly came into the room looking for something in particular. She didn't even see me, then left shortly after she had entered. The other guys got a hoot over that one.

That year, I had a weekly private voice lesson as part of my music curriculum. I was taught how to properly sing, breathing correctly, and enunciating vowels properly with open mouth. It was very different from singing along with the songs on the radio. I especially did not like the fact that I had to occasionally sing in front of peers, who also had private lessons. The “correct” singing felt very unnatural and operatic, but it did provide me with good understanding for musical endeavors in the future.

The guys in my dorm wing were fantastic, except for one. He was an older guy from Kuwait, who never smiled and kept to himself. He definitely stood out at our monthly wing meetings. The other guys were easy to get along with – Marcus, Kent, Dan, Brantley, Kevin, Tom – and Brent, who was one of the coolest, yet most humble guys, I had ever gotten to know.

I was introduced my first year to a “Christian” coffee house called Barry's Berry several miles away from the college. Bands would play on a monthly basis, and attendance was free. So I got to see some fantastic groups, such as The Joe English Band, Prodigal, Randy Matthews, Farrell and Farrell, and some local groups. While at these concerts, I met two local females, Kathy and Lisa, with whom I became

friends, even maintaining a friendship long after I had left school. The aforementioned coffee house was also affiliated with a local non-denominational mega-church that I attended when I did not have weekend concerts with Shalom. This church met in a building that could seat a thousand people, clearly the biggest church building that I had ever been in. The service was always very relaxed, the music was good, and I enjoyed being there. For some reason, I went to the church office one day, where I was met by the young female secretary, who had a clean-shaven face; she was clearly able to grow at least a goatee. It was just an observation.

My parents had allowed me to take my car to college – that junky Chevy Vega that had a habit of not running right. For Christmas break, I offered to take some friends to Pennsylvania on my way home. So, I and three older girls crammed our belongings into that hatchback and headed home. One girl was Adrienne, who was a little flighty; I liked her, because she was easy-going, funny, and had beautiful, curly, dark hair. The other two girl's names elude me, but one of those nameless girls always wore a dress and never shaved her legs. It was just another observation.

In the spring, I also got involved a couple of times with some local Christian groups who were picketing in front of some old theaters downtown, protesting the use of these for pornographic movies and storefronts. I remember being taunted by one proprietor while I was picketing. It was an eerie feeling for an 18-year old. A few years later, I learned that the Christian coalition was able to effectively close down the porn shops in the city.

In the middle of this city, in the flat state of Indiana, there was an unusual geographic feature – a very tall mound that had a small park area with basketball courts. I don't remember if it was man-made, but I found it rather odd being in the middle of the city. It was really cool to go to, even at night, when it probably wasn't safe. Another unusual site in

the city was a Delorean car dealership. I would pass it on my way to the mega-church. It was the only one of its kind that I have ever seen.

One of the local churches, where Shalom performed a concert, was where my buddy Wayne's father was pastor. I occasionally helped him at the Sunday night youth group. This counted as my weekly "Christian service", which I had to account for at school. The normal concerts with Shalom counted during the weeks that we were singing. During the last week of school, the youth group had a scavenger hunt. I met a good-looking girl named Tina, who accompanied my team. She was not a student, but a young adult who had started to help with the youth group. I was temporarily smitten, but providence took over. I really wanted to get to know her better, but alas, I was heading home the following week. (Finished before it started!)

My parents had sold their new house that they had built in 1980, just three years after building. They had rented a smaller house just up the road. So I returned from school to a new domicile, where I would share an attic bedroom with my brothers. That was the year that I was introduced to the music of U2, specifically the War album. The song "New Year's Day" is still one of my favorites and is played every.....

The highlight of my summer was attending the Jesus festival in central PA. My close friend Roxanne and I volunteered for the physical setup before the festival, which made me feel like I was an integral part of something big, at least bigger than the little world that I was used to. We helped with temporary fencing, grass mowing, and cleaning old movie-theater chairs that were set up in an open-air pavilion at the top of the hillside. We also helped mow a series of letters in a small field of high grass. Then we poured bags of lime within the letters, so that, from the air, J-E-S-U-S could be plainly seen on the ground.

At some point in the week, I decided that it was time to

get serious about following this person/God named Jesus. So on Friday, I joined many others in the muddy pond, just to the north of the stage, and I willingly got baptized in my 18<sup>th</sup> year of life, declaring to the world that I had spiritually died, and was being raised from the dead in a new life dedicated to living for the God who loved me. It was a milepost in my young life.

I returned to Port Lane in August 1983, having signed up with a new roommate, Dennis, and with a renewed desire to be led by God's spirit in the new school year. It would turn out to be a wild spiritual ride with a decisive ending. It also started out with a disappointment.

My cool friend Brent was from southwest Minnesota, an eight-hour drive from Port Lane. He was only at school for one week, when he decided that he was not going to continue, but instead return home to a part-time job. I, and other close friends, were shocked. We were heart-broken, as tears flowed the day he left. I would only see him one more time after that day.

I connected with Wayne again, helping him out with the youth group at his father's church. (Tina was not there, and I never learned of her life or whereabouts.) This would be my fall semester weekly service offering, required by the school. We had a blast, trying to influence troubled teens to learn to pursue God in a personal way.

In the basement of my dorm, there was a large closet with a chair and an end table. It was a prayer room, and I decided to use it purposefully on a regular basis. About every week, I spent an hour there talking with God, and interceding on behalf of people in my life. There was a window in that room. Early in the semester, one day in that room, I thought I heard God telling me to go across the street and talk with the elder person on his front porch. I could clearly see him from that window. So I went across the street to the house and had a short conversation with that man, which turned out to be quite

awkward. He didn't seem to be interested in my spiritual topic. Did God really tell me to do that? Possibly. After all, it is not my job to convert someone to the truth. It is only my responsibility to obey. It was another observation, this time a serious one.

I wanted to earn a little money this semester, and be more of a “servant”, in general terms. So I answered an ad in a local newspaper for periodic help at an elderly person's house. The ad was placed by the older woman herself, a woman at least in her 70s, if not 80s. She lived not far from the college campus, so I could walk to her house. It was an older house, but not in bad shape. The woman turned out to be very crabby, because she thought that I should know how to do ordinary things like gardening, or fixing a door hinge. Needless to say, that job did not last longer than three weeks, because I felt fairly useless, and I did not need constant berating by a bitter old lady, reminding me of that uselessness. It is ironic now, since I have become that do-it-yourselfer, who only contracts a professional when the job is too complex and/or not too expensive.

Classes that semester turned out to be non-relevant in my young mind. I had changed majors from Music Performance to Missions. It was probably my newfound fervor that precipitated this change. So, I found myself in a couple of classes, which required much reading on topics that were new to me and whose lectures were boring. They were Missiology and Cultural Anthropology. At the very least, the latter, I am certain, is quite important to sociologists and psychologists studying human behavior in the varied world cultures. It just didn't grab my attention, though. I got my worst grade of the semester in that class. The former class had to do with the history of formal missions organizations in the last two centuries, which I underestimated the importance thereof. I really didn't know what was needed or required to become a “career” missionary, nor how much time was

involved. It didn't matter, because a degree in that direction was soon to be disrupted.

As the semester progressed (or digressed, which was a more realistic explanation), it became clear that a certain effeminate roommate was becoming emotionally dependent upon me. It was more than an observation. I was subtly being manipulated into spending more time than normal with this person. In the midst of this, there was much conversation with this Christian who willingly acknowledged the struggle of dealing with homosexual feelings and tendencies. I thought I was big enough to be the agent of change, believing that God's word condemned homosexual behavior, and that God's power could "change the leper's (or leopard's) spots", as the old hymn stated. This tug-of-war culminated in a late-night call to one of the maintenance men, who was purportedly a powerful man in "drawing out demons", for lack of a better term related to someone who was clearly not possessed by a demon. This conversational meeting turned into several hours of praying, demon-commanding on the part of the maintenance man, and much crying and wailing on the part of my roommate. I am not sure that anything changed after it was all said and done. It was another interesting observation.

The further manipulation of me continued, underlain by my naivete and my lack of vision. Since my parents were paying my room and board, I had to get their approval to attempt a move off-campus for the second semester, which is what Dennis wanted. That phone call was a tip-off to my parents that something was not quite right. When the semester ended, Dennis did not want to go home to his mother and sisters for Christmas. So I asked my parents if he could spend Christmas vacation with us. They consented; so the small house with the attic bedroom was full for Christmas that year.

Shortly after Christmas day, pastor Keith came over to the house for a serious talk with me and Dennis, separately. Before the conversation with Dennis ended, I was transported

to Roxanne's house for some serious explanations for her. Since the time at the Creation festival a year and half earlier, I had been sweet on her. The kettle was simply on the back burner, while the water was kept warm. In the meantime, my father and Keith were transporting Dennis back to Port Lane, where they collected my belongings from the school. It was sort of a rescue. I never saw Dennis again; my college career was also over. It was the best thing for the both of us, although a few years later, I did make contact with him again via phone. Civility occurred. The water was under the bridge.

Quitting college at this point was most likely a good decision. I just don't know why God allowed the completely quirky circumstances to push me in that direction. However, I have come to several conclusions regarding the direction I was taking. Notwithstanding the benefits of education in general, I have come to believe that formal training in the "ministry" is not necessary to be used by God in his kingdom. It might be required by certain and numerous Christian church and para-church organizations, but God uses and wants to use ordinary people – blue-collar workers – in building his kingdom. After all, Peter and the other apostles did not become pillars in the early church by studying the catechisms for years under the traditional religious leaders. They simply lived with, observed, and did, what Jesus told and showed them. Period.

Secondly, pursuing a "ministry" career via a college degree, is quite costly – even cost-prohibitive – when the end result is simply knowledge of the Bible and religious traditions, without having obtained practical skills necessary for making a living. Unless one has a clear calling from God to do the latter, I believe that one is wasting his time going in the wrong direction. Having said that, no time pursuing God and his kingdom is wasted, even if that pursuit goes to the right fork when the left fork would have been the way God intended. All things work together for good, for those who love God, who are called to serve him according to his good purposes (Romans 8:28).



## Chapter 6

### Now What?

The winter of 1984 started with me wondering what to do next. Where was God in the midst of this mess, this scholarly failure, this personal failure? At the beginning of the previous semester, I had desired to serve God with all my heart. Now it was four months later. Could I say the same? There were three possible answers to this outcome. One could say that God had closed the door for finishing Bible College. One could say that the devil ruined my college plans. One could say that I ruined my college plans. A certain music professor at college used to say, “He who aims at nothing will surely hit it.” To a large degree, spending three semesters at the Bible College gave me no concrete vision for my future, only ambiguity. That was part of the overall dilemma.

My (now) girlfriend Roxanne was a junior in high school. Remember that my parents had sold the new log house, probably because my school tuition had put them in a bind. That was not too hard to figure out. Plus, at that time, my youngest brother was being sent to a private Christian school. That decision eluded my comprehension, because my middle brother was not sent there. Maybe the youngest was more prone to bad behavior and needed “Christian remediation”? Regardless, money must have been tight.

The smaller house that we were renting was owned by an eccentric middle-aged bachelor named Wade. He was a maintenance man at a hospital in Baltimore, MD. He lived with his parents, so he had amassed a considerable amount of saved money. He had told us that God led him to build his

house in the middle-of-nowhere West Virginia. He loved astronomy, and sometimes tried to interest us with “lectures” while we lived at the former house. He had a crazy hair style. Most of his head was almost shaved, except for the top, from the crown to the forehead, which was a naturally wavy mess of salt-and-pepper, mostly salt. We kids thought he looked like a punk rocker. He had a slender build, and he wore glasses that were not in style, but that reminded one of glasses from the 40s. He had the corniest laugh, which included guttural stops and snorts, and that vaguely reminded one of Lily Tomlin's laugh. He always wore maintenance-type clothing, even while he was at his second house. If it was hot outside, he would always just wear his white round-collared white undershirt, which was always present under his drab buttoned long-sleeve shirt. It was an obvious observation.

My brothers slept in this guy's attic, which was partially finished, but which had to be attained via the pull-down ladder which stowed itself in the ceiling, but clogged the foyer when down. I slept on a couch in the small guest bedroom on the first floor. Even if it were a sofa-bed, the room was too small to allow its full opening. I didn't mind too much. At least I had a room of my own – until Wade occasionally visited to do periodic maintenance on the house. He slept in my room, and I had to squeeze into the attic temporarily.

To this point, I was mostly just interested in pop/rock music, except for the aforementioned stint into Southern Gospel. One day, as I was reading some forgotten periodical, I noticed an advertisement for a free cassette tape of Antonio Vivaldi's Mandolin Concerto, when one joined the Musical Heritage Society. With barely any money, I joined the music club. That Vivaldi cassette had four long pieces of recorded music. I never knew that classical music had ever featured the man'-do-lin. I simply thought that the man-do-lin' was built for bluegrass. That recording is, to this day, one of my

favorite classical pieces of music. Through the music membership, I obtained other standard classical recordings, as well as “weird” recordings, such as traditional Chinese music, and Gottschalk's Monster Piano Concert. And who cannot love the bazouki-like sound of the harpsichord? Breathtaking!

I needed a job now to start paying off the student loans that would start to come due in six months. One does not go to a private school, even for three semesters, and walk away unscathed financially. It would eventually take ten years to pay off my student loan debts. I managed to get a part-time job at a Mom-and-Pop grocery store. Actually, Mom completely ran the store, while Pop wrote speeches for important people in the federal government.

The store was re-built on top of a basement, whose previous above-ground portion had burned to the ground several years prior. The basement was not used for anything; it had the marks of charring on the cement blocks from the fire. I learned how to run a cash register, price items, stock shelves, and run the deli, including making sandwiches. I eventually gained the trust of the owner to allow me to open and close the store, which allowed her time away from the non-stop daily grind of running a small business by herself. I took pride in being able to run the store by myself. I felt a great sense of accomplishment, and I proved to be responsible and faithful in running the place. I do remember selling cigarettes to my girlfriend's father, who lived two miles from the store. He smoked that long thin brown kind, the kind that looked sophisticated, as far as cigarettes go. He had to give them up a few years later, after he had open-heart surgery – a positive blessing from a negative situation.

About nine months later, I got a different part-time job as a security guard at a nearby private residential development/resort. The next-door neighbor of my girlfriend was a new state trooper, who also worked part-time at this development as a security guard. I didn't carry a gun; as a matter of fact,

there was little security in the guarding. I basically kept a log of visitors who came and went, almost at will, but sometimes only at the request of a resident. It was quite the boring job, especially when working the midnight shift. One couldn't sleep even during that shift, because there were a few stragglers who came home after midnight, needing the gate manually lifted to enter the development. There was nothing worthy to remember about that job, except for relieving the two dirty old men who also worked part-time, and for the time that I saw a rat gnawing away at a hole in the interior paneling from inside the wall.

When I took that job, Roxanne was a senior in high school. I decided to “rob the cradle” and ask for her hand in marriage. I had purchased a fairly inexpensive ring. I asked her out to a local restaurant for dinner on her birthday, five days before Christmas 1984. She said yes, and we ended up that evening explaining to her father that we were mature enough and that we would wait until Roxanne had completed her college training, which was already planned. I was probably a little forward, but the plan met with little resistance.

I hated working the midnight shift, because after sleeping five or six hours after having worked, I would wake up groggy, and then anticipate doing it all over again that night. One of those groggy afternoons in February, when the foggy, rainy, snowy weather reflected my mood, Roxanne surprised me with a thoughtful Valentine's gift, replete with balloons crammed into my car. It brightened my spirits so much – especially during a depressing, searching, wondering time of my life, which seemed to mimic the depressing weather of February. Did I mention that February is the worst month of the year? (A personal observation.)

Roxanne graduated from high school that spring and immediately started her college program at the regional community college. It was a medical program that would only

require one solid year of classes to produce a certificate. It seemed that Roxanne had a concrete vision of her future in mind. Sometimes on my days off, I would drive with her to school and go to the library while she attended her classes. That way, we could spend time together which would ordinarily just be driving time for her. In the midst of this, a late summer wedding was planned for 1986.

We had stayed involved with the Figtree church. Sometimes I would lead the worship services with only my solo guitar, mostly in a folk style. At other times, a group of guys would lead worship in a bluegrass style. There were only a handful of youth in that fellowship, which made it difficult to actually have a youth group. However, there was still a tight-knit group of families, who attempted a semblance of a larger family structure. From time to time, a meal was planned after the Sunday morning church service. That was usually a nice time of fellowship and more intimate conversation. Who doesn't like a church dinner with free food and iced tea?

The summer Christian festivals that we first enjoyed in the late 70s continued into the 80s. Each year, the festival was a highlight of the summer. For several years, Roxanne and I, and our siblings, volunteered for three or four days of the week-long preparation and actual festival. We got discounted prices that way; it also felt great being a servant to something bigger than ourselves, even if that meant cleaning old outhouses, and wiping down hundreds of dusty old theater chairs, which were set up, under the pavilion. Of course, we camped in tents, while Mom and Dad slept in the pop-up camper. Nobody liked having to wait for a shower in the small bath houses, where a thousand other people were also waiting. To hear the inspirational speakers and great pop/rock musicians of the day, was soul-stirring, even if we had to wait, one particular year, for the group Servant to set up an extensive light show before they ended the night with their musical set. They managed to convince the festival overseers

into rigging up their own lighting system, using the festival's power source. This amounted to extra set-up time, which caused the band to start about two hours later than planned. The show ended up being fantastic – the only time I ever saw Servant live.

Joe English Muffin, Petrafied, Melvin LeFever and Broken Parts, Randy Stonehenge, and Phil Keneggy were all repeat guest artists. A regional band named Daybreak also made an impression upon me. There were so many artists who not only played great music, but who also took the time to encourage the tens of thousands on the hillside to desire a closer walk with their Creator.

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In August 1986, Roxanne graduated with a certificate in phlebotomy, and started applying for jobs at a few regional hospitals. She ended up getting hired at a hospital about 75 minutes from home. That is called starting from the bottom. Around this time, I had procured my first apartment in a large town called Winslow, between Roxanne's new job site and my job location. It was a small attic apartment on the third floor of a real estate business. It had no closet in the bedroom or cabinets in the kitchen area, but did contain a stove and refrigerator. It even had a working bathroom!

We got married at our home church on Labor Day Saturday. Roxanne and I had written our own vows. My middle brother was the best man. Roxanne's sister and close friend Vonda were her bridesmaids. It was a simple, straight-forward wedding with no special music throughout, although I did compile the recorded music for the beginning march and the ending departure/photo shoot. It was also a simple reception, with only a meal - no music or nonsense traditional wedding “games”. I am sure that this saved Roxanne's dad a boat-load of money as well. We honeymooned only about 1 ½

hours from home. We did not have much money; we even borrowed Roxanne's dad's car for the trip, as our cars could not be trusted for a long trip. On Tuesday, following the holiday, we were back to work.

That first year of marriage was bittersweet. We both worked crazy hours, sometimes against one another, sometimes on the same shift and day. We sought out a local church in Winslow, in which to get involved. We attended a few with some friends that were a part of their respective fellowships. None really felt like a good fit, however.

Sometimes, Roxanne would have nightmares, and she would end up screaming in the middle of the night, which really frightened the elderly neighbors one floor below us. If I tried to hold her when I heard her screaming, it just made matters worse. At times, she would jump out of bed and fall on the floor. The elderly couple must have complained, because, at one point, the landlord confronted me, insinuating that there might be some abuse happening. I just told him the truth, whether he believed it or not.

We both drove jalopies. I still had the Vega, and Roxanne drove a Ford Maverick that she had bought from her brother. I ended up trading mine for a Ford Fiesta, just barely having enough money for a down-payment. We both had started with junky cars that seemed to always need some type of repair. The Fiesta eventually ended up in the same category. We never lacked for food, but good transportation was iffy at best.

A year later, we changed apartments, moving about one mile from the first one. It was a middle floor unit, so we could hear everything that happened above us. The people below us probably heard the same. In August, Roxanne found out that she was pregnant. Shortly thereafter, I managed to get hired as a clerk with the state of West Virginia in Charleston, working the swing shift – one midnight, two days, two evenings, with the weekends off. If there was overtime, two midnight shifts

would be worked, which made the weekends non-existent. It was during this year, in which a series of encounters with drunk people started and continued periodically through the first half of the 2000s.

I was driving home from somewhere in October, and I was close to the apartment. I noticed a young woman walking along the road, sort of staggering. I stopped and asked her if she needed help. She was clearly drunk, and asked me if I could drive her to her home. I took her into the car, and proceeded to drive in the direction that she stated. If she told me her address, I didn't recognize it, so I wasn't sure if she knew where she was leading me. Anyway, we ended up south of town near a car dealership. At this point, she was not sure where we were going. Plus she was feeling very sick. I pulled into the car dealership lot, she opened her door, and proceeded to vomit on the ground. She then got out of the car, and fell to the ground. I asked one of the car salesmen to call an ambulance, which he readily did. We both stayed with her till the ambulance arrived. I never saw her again.

The winter was long as usual, with Roxanne expanding. May arrived, and so did Eva, our first and only child, on Friday the 13th, in the early afternoon. It was a most joyous occasion. However, a day after bringing her home from the hospital, we had to return, due to her being jaundiced. Roxanne stayed at the hospital with her, and was completely exhausted. Thank God for modern medicine. Eva was back home in a couple of days, healthy and beautiful – just in time for her first fingernail clipping. Which I flubbed, by cutting her finger instead of the nail. Boy, she did wail!

Roxanne and I had decided to move back to our hometown area to be closer to family members, so that they could be involved in caring for Eva, when Roxanne went back to work. So, two weeks after Eva was born, we moved out of the apartment and went back to Benchmark, where we rented a small house belonging to Roxanne's grandmother. That was

another blessing from God. We got to live in a real house for very cheap rent. It had a huge yard to mow, which I didn't mind. The yard also allowed for great times with Eva growing up. The house was right next door to Roxanne's parents; it was almost as if we had a built-in babysitter. I would drop off Eva to Roxanne's mom before I went to work at 3PM. Then two hours later, Roxanne would be home from work. It was definitely a time of new beginnings, with a new baby. It turned out to be a real joy in raising Eva, except for the times she would not go to sleep at night. Sometimes I would have to rock her on my shoulder to get her to fall asleep, often peeking in the full length mirror to see if her eyes were closed. One day, I was attending to Eva in her crib. I had the sidewall lowered for some reason, and had turned around to do something, when I heard a crash behind me. Eva had tumbled over the side onto the floor. There was no injury, and I thanked God for protecting her against my carelessness.

Roxanne and I also started attending services at the FigTree church, again, after being gone for two years. It was a homecoming of sorts, since we had not established a home church in Winslow. Keith was still the pastor at the FigTree church. He had two kids a few years younger than I. The older boy could play piano. The church actually held three formal services per week. I had started to feel drawn to wanting to know God more, since Eva had been born. I think I had started to drift away a little, not into a sinful lifestyle, but just one of neglect. Because of this, I attended every service every week.

After a while, I started to equate my spiritual progress with my church attendance. My zeal for God was tied with my own expectation of being at the church every time the doors were opened. Too often that happens in the world of American Christendom. Spiritual growth and stature is sometimes equated with how much one is involved with a church organization. (The two are actually mutually exclusive

even though they can be related.) Loving church is also not the same as loving God. I found that in some ways I was loving my church (involvement) more than I was loving my wife. It became a poignant observation, because it came directly from Roxanne.

In the summer of 1989, the pastor asked me and my father to join him and his youngest son on a volunteer work trip to McAllen, Texas, and subsequently to Saltillo, Mexico. I jumped at that opportunity. I had just enough vacation time saved from my government job. However, three days before the trip, Roxanne was in an auto accident. She had been waiting at a side road in order to pull onto a busy highway. While looking one way, a driver from the other direction had lost control, left the roadway, and hit her car at the edge of the road. Several hours later, when I was wondering why Roxanne had not made it home yet, the hospital called with bad news. Roxanne had suffered a concussion. I grabbed a container of Cheerios, and took Eva to the hospital. We brought Roxanne home that evening, but I wondered if I was going to make the trip, since Roxanne could not take care of Eva for a few days. Eva's parents assured me that they would take care of both of them, so that I could go on the trip.

The day of the flight, we had to be awake at 4 AM to make it to the airport. We made it to McAllen by mid-afternoon, arriving at the house of a local missionary couple in their 50s. The organization was called Men With Missions, and it existed strictly to provide work support to church building projects in impoverished areas around the globe. The missionaries actually led a Spanish-speaking church in McAllen. We met up with three other volunteers that day. We then had a late supper, and had a late-night orientation that lasted until midnight. I could barely keep my eyes open.

We did odd jobs around the house the first week, including repairing the travel trailer that served as housing for volunteers. On Sunday of the first week, we left for

Monterrey, Mexico, which was a four-hour journey through mountainous and desert terrain. It was my first time seeing such an environment; it was quite beautiful. We re-fueled in Monterrey, a city the size of Pittsburgh, then went on to Saltillo, another hour to the south.

Saltillo was an older-looking city with a population of 400,000. We stayed at the houses of different families, who were members of a local church. The houses all had barred windows for security. They were not wide on the city street, but went deep into the city block. There were several rooms for sleeping, and a living room with a TV. In the middle of the rooms was an open court yard, where cooking and eating took place. I had never seen a layout like this, which was normal for those living in the city.

The next day we started to mix and pour concrete for the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor walls of this same local church's building, which was in the middle of the city. We learned how to mix concrete by hand, after the electric mixer quit working the first day. It was back-breaking work, especially when filling 5-gallon buckets and lifting them up to help the person on the second floor, using a pulley to haul them upward. By the end of the week, we had completed our task of building the walls. Another team would be onsite later to frame the ceiling and pour its concrete. We ended our two-week trip with a day at South Padre Island, a beach on the Gulf Coast, just a few hours from McAllen. It was a fantastic trip.

In the midst of this church involvement, I attended monthly men's meetings, which were for church government. It was not only for the elders, if there actually were any, but any of the men were allowed to come and input their ideas. I volunteered to be secretary, and did so for a couple of years.

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In late summer of 1992, my youngest brother, who had

just finished boot camp in the Marines, was being stationed at the now defunct El Toro Marine Base, just south of Los Angeles. His length of duty there was unknown, so he decided that he might as well take his car for the duration. I readily volunteered to make a cross-country road trip with him, so that he did not have to drive three or four consecutive days, all day long. So, on a dreary, cloudy afternoon, we started out on a trek through the beautiful mountains of West Virginia, Virginia and Tennessee, where we stopped for the night in Cookeville. (I might be a bit biased about my love for the WV mountains; those of Virginia and Tennessee are just as wondrous, especially in the summer.)

The next day we only made one stop in Arkansas for lunch and to enjoy the view of the foothills of the Ozarks along interstate 40. We then made it all the way to Oklahoma City, where I picked up a small piece of pottery in an Indian-themed trinket store. I was now further west in the United States than I had ever been. Western Oklahoma was quite barren, but there was still a beauty in the dusty landscape.

The following day took us into the mountainous region of the northern half of New Mexico. The length of this entire state was beauty to behold, but, alas, no time to visit except for a lunch stop in Albuquerque. Then an even greater beauty awaited in Arizona. We stopped for the night in Winslow, AZ, where I did make a stop at a street corner and started singing that Eagles song "Take It Easy".

The ensuing day started with little driving as we stopped just West of Winslow at the Meteor Crater Natural Landmark. This huge basin is more than 550 feet lower than its ridge, which diameter is a mile long. It is purported to be the result of an actual meteor crashing into the earth a long time ago. We started to make the entire circle trek on the rim, but decided it was going to take too long.

Then our driving took us through beautiful red rock landscapes on the way to Flagstaff, where we departed from

our east-west route. We decided to take a quick trip up the mountains to the plateau, in order to visit the Grand Canyon. We were only able to spend an hour there at the South Rim, but the views were breathtaking. We met a young guy there who asked us if we had ever seen the canyon on nitrous oxide ( $N_2O$ ). We weren't sure if he was making a joke about laughing gas, or was simply referring to a lightning storm, which creates nitric oxide (NO). Either he used the incorrect word or thought that lightning produced laughing gas. I wasn't sure if he was fooling himself or us, or whether he was already high on some other substance.

The last leg of our journey awaited us as we backtracked to Flagstaff to head across the rest of the southwest desert. We arrived at Needles, California at mid-afternoon. From there, it was long stretches of long straight driving up and down lengthy but low inclines and declines. The car started to overheat in the desert air, so we had to drive at a slower pace with the windows down, which meant no air-conditioning. This went on for two hours until we reached Barstow. The trek from there through the mountains northeast of Los Angeles occurred as the sun was setting and into the early night. The extreme temperatures finally fell, which allowed for cool windowless driving through the mountains, with lights of houses dotting the landscape.

God allowed us a complete trip with no real car problems nor any other negative incidents. We spent the night at a La Quinta Inn within the area of Santa Ana. It was an unusual hotel, as some of the rooms, including ours, were formed out of old concrete grain silos. The rooms were indeed circular and were the actual concrete walls, albeit with one window. Our sleep was interrupted by a lone cricket that had snuck into our room and echoed its unseen chirp sometime during the night. We finally got back to sleep, only to be rudely blasted just outside our window by a passing train, whose horn scared the crap out of us shortly after sunrise. To

make our stay even worse, the official hotel brochure actually bragged of the phenomenon that we had just experienced. It was meant to be a reminder of an earlier time of agriculture among the sprawling city suburbs. I never again stayed at a La Quinta hotel.

The next day my brother drove me to the John Wayne airport in Orange Co. for a flight back to Richmond. We had someone take a picture of us in the airport lobby, my brother dressed in his Marine browns. He was ready to report for duty. The rest is his story.

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In the summer of 1993, Roxanne and I attended the annual Christian music festival to which we had been introduced in 1979. Roxanne's aunt and uncle were there, unbeknownst to us, until we ran into them one day, within the crowd. They had some friends who were there with them, and we were introduced. It was a couple, about eight years older than me; the wife was from India. This introduction would later precipitate a life-long friendship that I did not anticipate.

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There was a certain guy and his wife who were faithful attendees at the FigTree church. They also had a couple of kids who were close to Eva's age. The husband was friendly and funny. I attempted to foster a friendship with this person, since he sometimes had a day off during the normal work week. I would occasionally visit during my evening shift work day. Well, after a while, this man flatly stated to me that he was not interested in a close friendship, much to my surprise. This news was disappointing as I knew that involvement at the FigTree church could not only consist of church activity, but had to involve friendship, a sharing of life

together. Maybe I did not try hard enough, but no one seemed to be interested in sharing life together outside of the time spent within the four walls of the church building. Perhaps I was looking for an ideal situation that could never exist. Or, perhaps I was the one who was being too forward. If that was the case, I never got the hint.

I was actually more than disappointed. After three years of involvement at the FigTree church, I called it quits, for all intents and purposes. The departure came at a fortuitous time, as my work situation was changing. My split-shift position was changing to one of complete day shifts. My schedule became Sunday through Thursday, with Friday and Saturday being my days off. I don't think anyone missed me at the church. I didn't miss anyone. How can one miss someone who is not a friend?

The change of work situation also came at the time when Roxanne and I were closing on a house that we were buying. The time of due diligence actually turned out to be four months, as the lending company that we had chosen, dragged out the approval process. This turned into a time of stress both for Roxanne and me. The long wait did not help.

We finally moved in to our 1940s bungalow in January of 1994, with the help of Roxanne's aunt and uncle and our parents. There was about six inches of snow on the ground, and we almost got the moving van stuck in the front yard. Buying an older and cheaper house would turn out to be one of the best decisions we would ever make. With all of these changes happening at once, how could a new chapter not begin?



## Chapter 7

# House Church

I finally found what I was looking for. Roxanne's aunt and uncle, Nancy and Rico, the same ones who helped us move, invited us to their house on Saturday nights, to study the Bible. The only downside of that invitation was that they lived 70 minutes away. There was one other couple who joined us, the couple we had met the previous year at the Christian festival. They lived about 30 minutes away. Their names were Landon and Nasreen. They had met through a Christian pen pal service in the 1970s. But I digress, as that is the beginning of their story.

Roxanne was content to not come to these informal gatherings. It was probably because Eva would be out too late. (She continued to take Eva, who was five years old at this time, to the FigTree church on Sundays, while I worked.) Nonetheless, the time of fellowship, breaking of bread together, sharing life together, and studying the Bible in an informal way, was all a breath of fresh air during my period of staleness. Nancy and Rico's kids had all flown the coup by that time. So maybe they were feeling that empty-nest syndrome, which contributed to the warm feeling of our new fellowship.

Shortly after we started meeting, Nasreen announced that she was pregnant, which was great news, as she was almost 40 years old. In October, the baby came, yet we did not stop meeting at Nancy and Rico's house. At this time, Nasreen and Landon were also attending a church in their home area and became well-acquainted with many people from that fellowship. One older woman had even helped

Nasreen to learn how to drive. But I digress again.

For the next two years, we continued to meet for spiritual nourishment and to seek God through prayer and study of his word. One day, Roxanne's aunt and uncle decided to stop meeting with us on a regular basis. We respected their decision, with no bad blood between us. Despite this change, I kept on meeting with Landon and Nasreen at their house. Occasionally, Bill, an older friend from Landon's Air Force days, would come and stay at Landon's place for a week or more. He was a bachelor, and a very gentle, humble man from Iowa. I thoroughly enjoyed spending time with him each time he visited, which was sometimes only once a year.

In March 1994, I decided to professionally record a demo of two songs that I had written. I called a guy who had a recording studio in his basement, and who did not live too far from where I worked. Preston was a drummer/vocalist who was a friend of a co-worker's husband. I set up an appointment to meet with him and let him listen to my songs accompanied by just an acoustic guitar. He advised me to reach out to a friend of his who could do a good job of arranging the songs. So I thought it wise to pay this fellow named Jay to do something that I could not. During the next few weeks, Jay hired a couple of other musicians who were brought in to the studio to play guitar and bass. Preston played drums, while Jay arranged. I listened to the recording sessions, until it was my time to record the vocals. Preston then mixed the recordings, and I had myself a professional demo.

In April of that year, Roxanne's cousin Phil, and I, decided to spend a week in Nashville at the Gospel Music Association's Dove Award week. I took a bunch of my demos on cassette. We attended several concerts during the week; I attended several songwriting seminars – some boring, some interesting. I gave several cassettes to record company representatives during an open house. One country music rep

actually wrote me back some time later, asking for more songs. I did not have any more to give. One night Phil and I had walked from our hotel to a venue that was hosting a Christian DJ/preacher. I listened for a while, but got bored. So I decided to walk back to the hotel by myself. Right outside the venue, a guy interrupted my walk and wanted to talk with someone. Of course, he was drunk. I ended up talking with him for over an hour. I think that there were some spiritual topics, but I can't be sure. After that trip, I never pitched any more music demos, but I did continue to write songs, if for nothing other than my own satisfaction.

Sometime around 1998, Landon and Nasreen invited some friends from their church to our Bible study. Eventually, several families were regulars, and we even rotated meeting at their houses. There was a young couple in their 20s. There were several older retired folks, and a few who were Landon's age. I quickly became friends with the young 20-something man, Darrin. We shared a taste of "New Age" music, and intimate conversation. He introduced me to Deep Forest, a duo from France, who created mesmerizing instrumental music, combined with recorded snippets of indigenous pygmies, speaking and singing in their native tongue. He and his wife had a 3-year old named Martin, who was from the wife's previous marriage. At that time, my family had a chow dog named Ginger, due to its light brown/gray coat. Martin ended up calling her Broccoli, for who knows what reason.

The times that we spent together as a coalescing group reminded me of the first year that Roxanne's aunt and uncle hosted me and Landon and Nasreen. We even planned purposeful times of outreach to the public, including a Bible giveaway one day at the local Kmart, and literature distribution at the local mall. Landon and I thought that the overall vibe that we felt was definitely God moving us in the right direction – being a house church.

After about a year the elder couple in our group moved

to Florida. Another older woman moved on with other friends. That left us five represented families, four of which were still associated with Landon's traditional church. I was the only one who was not involved at a local traditional church.

From that point forward, things started to get weird. Two of the women in the group were sisters; one was recently divorced. The husband of the youngest couple had previously confessed to me that his wife was sexually frigid, only allowing him “pleasure” on their honeymoon. That was weird enough, but apparently it was the catalyst for this guy to get together with the divorced woman, who was twice his age.

When the sinful nature is allowed to run amok, then no good thing can come of it. When this relationship was found out by the group, there was no listening to admonition on the part of the guilty party. Landon and I tried to counsel the young man to no avail. The group that we thought was tight-knit and spiritually growing had suddenly disintegrated. House church was over. Another dream dissolved, almost overnight.

Landon and Nasreen, however, remained faithful friends. We continued to meet on a regular basis, while they still attended their local traditional church services, and while I continued to work on Sundays.

## Chapter 8

### A Brief Interlude

In 1998, Roxanne's brother Marcus, and his wife, decided to take a trip to Paris (completely off the cuff with last-minute planning). They asked Roxanne and me if we would join them. Marcus was also a state employee, while his wife was a school teacher. So, we planned a trip for the following year in March, during spring break. We were just going to wing it, following no set plan, and needing no guided tour. Roxanne and her brother and wife obtained passports. Mine was still active, but I renewed it, as it was about to expire right after our trip.

March happens to be the worst month of the year. (I used to think February was the worst, because it is usually the snowiest month; however, just when spring is around the corner, winter won't relinquish its grip. Welcome to March. Argh!!!) It was to be an overnight flight from International Airport to Paris. Of course it was snowing to beat the band when we left for the airport. Fortunately, by the time we arrived at the airport, the snow had stopped, and the plows were just finishing their snow removal from the runways. Our flight was on time. We left about 9 PM on a plane with nine seats wide on every row. Roxanne and I were in the middle five seats. There was an Asian woman sitting next to me. I eventually struck up a conversation with her, and she did not even mind. She was now living in France, but was originally from Vietnam. She had married an expatriate from France, which was not unusual, seeing that Vietnam had been a French colony till 1954. We talked about life and religion. She told me that she had been a Buddhist all her life. I then explained

to her that I was a Christian and what that meant. We both listened to each other intently for about an hour, and then the conversation was over. Nothing changed, but some seeds were sown.

I don't think we got much sleep, if any, on the six-hour flight. It was a sunny morning as we landed at Paris-Orly airport, around 9AM. We sleepily picked up our luggage and headed for the subway for an hour-long trip into the city's center. On the first subway stop, we were greeted by our first interesting character. Our car was nearly empty, so this musician picked our car to house his mobile musical gear: an electric guitar, mini-amp, backpack, and mic stand. He proceeded to sing us a song, obviously looking for money. By the time we had parted ways, he had a few new coins in his pocket.

Our "hotel" was very close to the Eiffel Tower – on a narrow street called Rue Cler. Each morning, there were produce vendors along the streets, ready to provide us with fresh strawberries and baguettes. We grabbed a quick nap, then walked to the long park in front of the Tour Eiffel. The trees on either side of the park were still bare; the temperature was in the 50s on a clear day. So we made the top of the tower our destination that afternoon.

The Eiffel Tower is over one thousand feet high, with the radio antennae. It was finished in 1889 for the World's Fair, and for the centennial anniversary of the current republic of France. Its contract with the city was for 20 years, at which time it was to be demolished. But the French government saw in it a communications advantage. So, it has remained to this day – and the world is glad for it. Ascending via elevator, one gets a strange feeling, not found when one is on top of a mountain looking at the valley below. It is almost as if being suspended in mid-air. I was relieved to find that the viewing platform was completely enclosed with wire fencing. I had been to the top of a replica at King's Dominion theme park in

Virginia, several times. The viewing platform was open to the sky, and there was only a waste-level metal rail to keep you from falling. I still get a queasy feeling as I write these words, remembering the 300 feet height of the replica. At the top of the real tower, I was quite comfortable to press against the cage, and marvel at the beauty of this city of 800+ years. God didn't put up with the tower of Babel; why did he allow this work of man to be built as a monument to the godless science that the modern world worshiped? It was the tallest building in the world, when it was finished. These thoughts passed as we descended, having taken numerous photos through the square holes of the cage. Having landed at the first level, I decided to take the stairs to the ground, just to screw up my courage.

We ended up over-sleeping that first night due to jet lag. When we awoke, we had short time to get ready for a reserved lunch halfway across town. Marcus had made lunch reservations at a hoity-toity restaurant the day before. Roxanne and I followed their lead to the metro, en route to the restaurant. The metro was quite crowded, so we held our belongings quite tight. At one stop, a tall scruffy man entered the car, and boisterously mouthed some French words to the occupants, none of which we understood. He finally shut up. Then I noticed that he dropped a small paper cup on the floor. He stooped to pick it up, then waited for the next stop, at which time he departed, to the relief of the crowded car. However, Roxanne decided to check her belongings, and noticed that her small purse had been unzipped. Her wallet had been swiped. Cash and a credit card were gone. In that moment of distraction, the man with the paper cup had picked it up with one hand and pick-pocketed Roxanne's purse with the other. Her passport had not been taken, only money. Our stop was the next one, and we exited, bewildered, hoping to somehow catch a glimpse of this thief.

We made it to the restaurant on time, but quite

flustered. After ordering, we knew that we had to put a stop on the credit card. I don't even remember what we ate. We came back to the hotel, and phoned home, asking Roxanne's dad to call the credit card company to cancel her card. That was done rather quickly, and we were relieved that the situation had not been worse. We all tried to put Roxanne at ease, and to not let this incident ruin our time in Paris.

That evening, we took the metro to the Arc De Triomphe. It is a city landmark, built to honor the French Revolution and the victories in the Napoleonic wars. Its full name is the Arc De Triomphe de l'Etoile (the Arch of Triumph of the Star). The arch is at the center of 12 radiating avenues, one being the famous and long Champs-Elysees; hence, the star reference. Because of this location, there is non-stop traffic around the monument; it is a true roundabout. An underground walkway was built in order to get to the arch, as a pedestrian stroll would be impossible. There is a museum inside the structure, which was closed at the time we were there. After a time of reading all the gloating victories, we headed down the Champs-Elysees for sightseeing and shopping. We parted ways with Marcus and Rita, who were on a mission to find some great French food and “eat through the pain.”

On the morrow, the day dawned clear for the third consecutive day. It was to be a day of general sightseeing. We started by walking across the Seine on the bridge that led to the Ile de la Cite, one of the two natural islands in the middle of the Seine in Paris. Of course, situated on this island is Notre Dame Cathedral, the most well-known of Catholic cathedrals in Europe. Started in A.D. 1160 and finished in 1260, it is considered to be one of the finest examples of French Gothic architecture. The innovative use of the rib vault and flying buttress, the enormous and colorful rose windows, and the naturalism and abundance of its sculptural decorations, all set it apart from earlier Romanesque architecture.<sup>5</sup> As if I

knew anything about historical architecture! I just knew that it was quite a marvel to see the gargoyles on the outside and the awesome stained glass on the inside.

We did learn that some of the gargoyles actually played a role in draining rain water from the roof slopes. The main face of the structure was not very photogenic that day, for there was scaffolding in place to accommodate some facial repairs. The interior was as opulent as expected from a European religious edifice. As awesome as architecture can be, I always think of how much manpower and money was wasted by the Catholic Church to build a monument in support of its religious doctrine, in stark contrast to the poor living conditions of the ordinary vassals of the countryside.

Returning from the island, we came across the popular Pont Des Arts, the “love locks” bridge across the Seine. It is a place of many artistic vendors, as well as thousands of padlocks, a sign of forever love by couples who secure the locks, then throw the key into the river. (The “lock” section of the bridge was removed in 2015, due to the weight of the locks damaging the bridge structure.)

That afternoon, we went to The Louvre, hoping to see some of its treasures. What a pleasant surprise to find that admittance was free to the public for that day only! While we could have spent several days there, the rooms that most fascinated me were Napoleon Bonaparte's apartment rooms. The furniture and chandeliers were luxurious beyond comparison. There was a most impressive loveseat – a one-piece chair with two seats, adjacent to each other but facing opposite ways. I suppose that it was the custom of the day for courting to take place while talking, but not facing, each other. It was quite a unique piece.

Our last day was bright and cool, like the others had been. We took the metro to the countryside to see the Palace of Versailles, the most opulent castle-esque residence of King Louis XIV. Of course, it was amazingly beautiful with all of

its luxuries, enormous dining halls, and large chandeliers.

The trip, however, could not be concluded without a taste of local crepes. We found a street vendor selling the same and were not disappointed.

My real disappointment came a couple of weeks later, when my camera film was developed incorrectly with too much brown tint. I had to take my photos back for redevelopment, which was the only time that I ever had to do so. The photo memories were and are still amazing.

## Chapter 9

# A New Direction

In the late summer of 1999, I was invited to the first ChristNight event, held at the First United Methodist church building. It was to be a night of worship, with singing and personal testimonies from teenagers and young 20-somethings, regarding how God turned their lives around, after living a selfish, sensuous teenage decade. I personally knew one of the young men, Matt Capers, from my time at the FigTree church. I was excited to hear what he had to say.

I sat alone in the back of the building and listened intently to the raw, unpolished testimonies of these kids, and some of their parents. It was exciting to hear of the turnaround in their lives. Their dramatic change was in some part, due to the influence of a funny, godly man in his 40s, who had no kids, and who did not even live in Benchmark. His name was Jim Evanoch. I had known of Jim for some time, but had never really spent any time getting to know him. After all, he did live an hour away while running his own business. I was actually surprised to know that he was married, and I was happy when I finally got to meet his wife at a Chinese restaurant one Sunday. Jim was one of the most likable persons one could ever meet, and I never had poor fellowship with him.

Shortly after the first ChristNight, a large group of young people decided to meet regularly at their several homes, to worship and pray together, and to study God's word. I was invited by Jim to participate in this group, even though Jim and I were the oldest ones in attendance. We met periodically throughout the winter and spring, but by the next summer, the

attendance had petered out. So, a handful of the remnant, including Jim, Matt, and I, kept meeting at the gazebo in the town park, along with Matt's new wife Jenny. A few others joined us after Jim ran an advertisement in the local paper one week. It read: "Meet me in the park – God." That was it – plain and simple. Matt and I lead worship in music, and we all shared from God's word, encouraging and praying for one another, every week. When the weather turned cold, we either met at someone's house or at the local Art House, where we rented a room for the winter. The group did not grow in numbers; different folks would periodically come and go.

In that first winter of the Remnant meeting together, I devised a plan for some special worship gatherings at some local churches. I was attempting to get some other folks involved in the Remnant, while trying to keep the spirit of ChristNight in a more informal manner. I was able to get a handful of churches to allow our "Saturday Night Splashes" to occur, but there was never any large turnout of people who were interested.

Meanwhile, over the next few years, a ChristNight was held periodically at the local high school, mostly led and planned by Jim and his local church friends. These were well-attended. It was almost like a concert atmosphere, with a large rented sound system, and colored lights as well. A few of the events had guest speakers, some professional sports figures, who happened to be followers of Jesus. They turned out to be fantastic motivational speakers and a catalyst for God's Spirit to move in the lives of people in the community.

As long as someone else was doing the inviting, planning, and hosting the event, it went well. After the third or fourth ChristNight event, there was a lengthy pause between the next one – more than a year. Jim encouraged ME then to plan another ChristNight. Around 2002, I had started to help my father-in-law at his Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) meetings, which were held in the homes of students, not at the

schools, where most other regional huddles met. I led the youth in songs of worship each meeting, and sometimes I added counsel to the teaching or encouragement that night. I had gotten to know many high school kids, and some of these helped to participate in the ChristNight. I handled most of the preparations for the event, which was held again at the local high school. I had invited a local band from a church two counties east of us to be the main music worship leaders. They were great musicians and godly people to boot. I remember two things from that night. I remember sitting on the bleachers before the night started, telling Jim that I was exhausted from all the planning, and that I wasn't even excited to participate in the event. The 2nd thing I remember was that I had to work with a local electrician to tie the rented sound system into the building's three-phase electrical system. The electrician was a guy with whom I used to work at the local Dairy Queen. The night went off without a hitch.

As time passed, the Remnant lingered and held on to our informal meetings, and to our intimate fellowship. Some new folks became regulars; then they eventually moved away or decided to go to college. Matt and Jenny became parents, and they decided to move away. The Remnant came to an end. Around 2005, someone else had planned another ChristNight at the local high school, and I was invited to help with the praise music. Near the end of the night, I was supposed to play guitar for a teen who was to end the night with a popular song; my preparations with the sound had been fine earlier in the evening; however, when I turned up the volume on my guitar pre-amp, there was no sound. So, we just performed the song in the large auditorium, with a faint guitar sound, while the vocals came through loud and clear in the sound system. Why do these humbling things always happen to me? I had simply failed to plan for a dead 9-volt battery.

I continued to help with the FCA meetings through the end of the 2005 school year. One of Eva's best friends

graduated from high school and from FCA. Eva was a senior the next year, so I decided to not participate, but to let her have her independence at the meetings, and to see how she would grow in a possible leadership role. Another chapter in my story was ending, as so many did. It seemed as if all the new chapters that started in my life, eventually came to a close. Would nothing ever last longer than a few years? At least my marriage was still intact. At least my friend Landon had not abandoned me. I still had good health. But where was the next adventure or failure going to lead me?

## Chapter 10

# Eva Grows Up – A Simultaneous Interlude

It took about two years for Lisa Evangeline Johnstone to really start growing hair. (But I digress – on purpose!) When it did grow in earnest, Roxanne and I had ourselves a little Shirley Temple. She was the cutest kid that I had ever seen. During those years in the rented house, Eva and I loved to play with Legos together. We also loved to watch Gerbert, a video series of a small child, who happened to be a puppet. He had lots of problems as a child, but his adult friends would give him biblical advice to turn things around.

Around Eva's fourth year, we got four baby ducks in spring just for her, and we managed to erect somewhat of a pen for them. We fed them, and nurtured them to adulthood, which only took about three months. One summer morning, I went outside to feed the ducks. One was missing; we knew that these ducks could not fly yet. So we suspected a wild animal had snatched it. A few days later, morning revealed only two ducks. A few more days later, the sight was not so mysterious. It was a grisly scene with both ducks present but mutilated. I had to perform burial duty. No sign of the perpetrator was ever found. Needless to say, we did not get any more ducks.

Roxanne enrolled Eva in a local dance academy when she was in kindergarten. Eleven annual recitals and endless drives to dance class later, Eva called it quits. I was quite proud of her skills and discipline, and her ability to maintain good school grades (well, that last point actually was prompted by me and her mother). The recitals every year at

the local high school, however, were quite long, despite the fact that the older dancers always had great choreographed dances.

During Eva's early years, almost every evening before bedtime, I would read to Eva from The Beginner's Bible. She thoroughly enjoyed the usually-inserted select Bible stories with the pictures. It was a well-written children's Bible. Of course, we would pray as well. I wanted Eva to experience how a Christian should live and to desire to please God.

During one of the autumns soon after moving in to the bungalow, I was in the front yard raking leaves with Eva and her cousin Kevin. Of course, I piled the leaves high and threw the kids into them. (Leaf-raking at my house was a month-long project.) Eva was wearing her favorite black slip-on shoes, which she probably should not have been wearing. During one of the throws, one of her shoes fell off, and she could not find it. She was fairly upset about it, because the task of finding it would be like finding a needle in a haystack (almost). So I paused and prayed with them, that God would allow us to find that shoe. Little by little, I raked the entire large pile, slowly and methodically out of the yard, into the woods, until, close to the end of the pile, the shoe appeared. Thank you, God, for answering my prayer regarding an insignificant shoe.

Eva was a talker. She was an only child, so what would you expect? Eva's 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher was close to retirement; she was constantly frustrated with Eva's talking in class. In 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, she was one of only four girls out of a class of 25, a little unusual, but the class had the best veteran male teacher. Two of those girl friends have remained close, while the other one who did not remain close, has passed on to eternity. But those stories belong to them. In 4<sup>th</sup> grade, Eva had to get glasses, after the teacher told us that she could not see the chalkboard. Looking back, I am not sure why I was upset at her needing glasses. Correcting the issue was a

wonderful thing.

That was also the year that she started taking piano lessons. We had a spinet piano, which was given to us by my grandparents when they liquidated the estate of my great-grandmother. It was built in the '40s. The quality of sound left something to be desired. I thoroughly enjoyed listening to her play, especially when she learned how to play the Peanuts theme song, Linus and Lucy, by Vince Gauraldi. I was quite impressed that she had learned to play that very difficult piece. However, after 7<sup>th</sup> grade, we let her quit the lessons, because she lost the desire to play.

In 5<sup>th</sup> grade, Eva joined the elementary school band, choosing to play the clarinet. She would go on to play that instrument throughout her entire high school career. She did dabble with the alto sax in high school. A couple of years she went to Honors Band at a nearby community college. Several of her band mates were there with her for two days of intensive band work. The second night displayed their work in a fantastic concert for the public.

The high school band was in a rebuilding phase, while Eva was part of it. There were not more than 30 kids who played an instrument. The halftime show at home football games was not very spectacular with a small band, but the kids played their best, and were proud of it. Roxanne and I were also quite proud of Eva's musical accomplishments.

When 9<sup>th</sup> grade rolled around, Roxanne and I decided that it was time that Eva be a part of a spiritual flock, which was made up of a number of her peers. That was unlikely to happen at the Figtree church, since there was no other person there who was Eva's age. Her good friend Kathy, who was almost a year her junior, had moved away a few years before. She was the only one Eva's age who had attended the Figtree church for any length of years. Eva had another friend from early childhood, Emma, whose family had periodically attended the same Methodist church where I had been

catechized. I started taking her there on Sundays, while Roxanne still went to the Figtree church out of respect for her dad, who was a traditional assistant pastor there.

It was not long after we had started to attend the Methodist church again, that the leadership had decided to hire a full-time youth worker, a move that had never occurred in that church before. Part of that decision was precipitated by the young forward-thinking pastor who had just started his lengthy tenure. The church had also recently started a 2nd service on Sunday mornings, which was quite informal, with music provided by a couple of guys, exclusively playing acoustic guitars.

The youth leader had just come from eastern Ohio with his wife. He had served in the same capacity at a church there. He quickly established rapport with the youth of the church, including Eva and Emma. This youth group and leader were exactly what I was looking for, in order for Eva to participate, and in order for further spiritual progress in her life to occur. I also got involved with a small group at this church, who met on Sunday mornings, and at different folks' houses on Thursday evenings. It was a breath of fresh air for the whole family.

It wasn't long before I started playing guitar with the Sunday morning duo. One of the guys was a part of the Thursday night meetings, so a natural relationship started to develop, which was my goal. I wasn't interested in doing the usual religious thing again; I was interested in making friends with whom I could serve God.

The new youth leader, Ron, also played guitar, and we soon hit it off well. One of the guys who played guitar in the early Sunday service, decided to move his family to southern Virginia, in the first year that I attended. He was the music leader of the duo; so after he and his family moved to another town, the other guitar player faded out. This caused the new youth leader to also be the early service worship leader. I soon

started playing guitar with him on Sunday mornings. He also recruited a couple guys from out-of-town to play drums and lead guitar. So I started playing bass and occasionally keyboard, until we got Eva's friend Emma to play keyboard for us. She had started on piano at a very young age, and could play very well as a teenager.

For the next three years, Eva loved to be a part of the youth group with Ron. The meetings were on Sunday evening, and I would sometimes attend. There was food and games, and Ron loved the kids as they were his own. Sometime within those three years, he and his wife gave birth to a daughter of their own.

During one of the winters, I chaperoned a group of the youth on an overnight trip to Ocean City, MD, where there was a Methodist youth retreat. It consisted of an inspirational speaker, Reggie Dabbs, and guest musician Jeff Deyo. It was held at a large convention center in town. It was my first time to Ocean City – January, 2003. There is nothing like going to the beach in the middle of winter. The youth had a really good time, fellowshiping and hearing God's word from a man who could speak to them on their level.

One other particular trip I remember was only with two youth, and neither of them were Eva. Several times I had attended an event called Acquire The Fire in Charleston. It was a high-powered youth event with contemporary music/worship, fantastic drama, and inspirational speakers. This particular time, I can't remember why Eva was not with me, but instead I was driving Josh and Kelsey to the event. As we approached downtown Charleston, we stopped at the first traffic light, after exiting the interstate. I immediately yelled out "Chinese Fire Drill!" All of us jumped out; Josh went to the wheel; I went to the back seat; Kelsey ended up in the front passenger seat. Josh drove us the rest of the way to the hotel. I know that he was nervous, but we all had such a laugh, because it was so unexpected. It was the only time in my life

that I had actually performed a Chinese fire drill.

During Eva's junior year in high school, Ron's wife found out that she had breast cancer. It was caught early, but this turned out to be the catalyst for moving back to Georgia to be closer to family. This was quite the blow to the currently established youth group. Ron would be dearly missed, because he had made such great relations with the kids, who dearly loved and respected him. Still, God was moving in the life of someone else who was also coming east across the Ohio River. Another single-syllable-named person applied for the youth leader position, and Ross was soon on his way to Benchmark.

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Eva and her friends only had one year to establish a relationship with Ross and his family of seven. One year was not quite long enough, after three great years with Ron. However, this year was not a waste at all. The youth group continued a summer tradition of attending Helping Hands, pulling Ross into a week of camping out. Helping Hands was a two-week Methodist excursion for youth groups, working on home-improvement projects for lower-income families within the county. I had helped out with these projects before, except that I had not done any camping with the youth. If I was expected to actually work intelligently during the day, then I needed a good-night's sleep, not a half-starved night chaperoning 15 kids. So, I helped Ross during the day of the project week, as he became the chaperone.

Ross and I hit it off well, having guitar-playing in common, and a love for early Jesus Movement music. We also shared a flair for the rebellious, when it came to toying the line of traditional religion. Of course, this got him into more trouble than it did me, since he was a church employee. So, I would encourage him to not rock the boat too much. This was

meant to keep the peace, but to also be patient with everyone, especially with those who were not as innovative, when it came to dealing with the youth.

Of course, Eva graduated high school with honors prior to Helping Hands, in an outdoor graduation ceremony, in June 2006. She had also been chosen as Prom Queen in May, along with her King, friend Brad. We all thought that was a funny surprise since it was so unexpected. Roxanne, Eva, and I prepared that summer for a college send-off, along with four of her close friends, who were all attending Marshall University in Huntington, several hours away. After two days of moving Eva into her dorm on a hot August weekend, Roxanne and I headed home with tears in our eyes, as new empty-nesters. Eva had grown up.



## Chapter 11

# Mexico and the Caribbean

Roxanne's cousin, Phil Petrocelli, was on a similar journey as we were. His parents were Uncle Rico and Aunt Nancy, the same ones who hosted the “house church” years previously. Phil was closer to my age, so I connected with him much easier than with his other younger siblings. He was plugged into a church close to where he lived. In 2002, some folks in his church decided to join a work project in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, the sister border city of El Paso, Texas. The project was planned through a small U.S. ministry, constructing a concrete house on the outskirts of the city, for a poor family. Phil asked me and my family to join his team for the week-long project. I loved to travel, so this was another opportunity to see another part of the world, and to serve God in some small fashion. This would also be Eva's first trip out of the country.

Shortly before the trip, Phil found out that he could not get leave from his job. So I did not get to work with him. His team of 16 persons, however, turned out to be fantastic people, none of whom we had met heretofore. Our first meeting that mid-July day was at the airport departure entrance. There were several youth among the team, with whom Eva connected easily, since they were close to her age. We flew out of Dulles International Airport, which was closer to Phil's church. After a non-eventful flight to El Paso, we rented five vans at the airport.

We stayed the first night in a local church's gymnasium in El Paso, sleeping on our air mattresses, and taking turns using the two showers. This is where we saw one team

member who would eat room-temperature vegetables from the can. We later learned that he had recently lost a ton of weight, and that he was simply trying to maintain his weight. We were also told that he was not a believer, but an attender at their church services, both purposefully. We had little to no conversation with him all week, not for the lack of trying. (It was just an observation.)

The next day, we had no problems crossing the border into Ciudad Juarez, a city of over one and a quarter million people, about 1 ½ times the size of El Paso. It took a little doing, however, to find the McDonald's where we were to meet the ministry coordinators. They then led us to the “compound”, a huge walled enclosure, where we would be camping for the week. It was as big as a football field. The inside turned out to have no buildings, only two partitioned areas that served as latrines and open shower areas. There was nothing else except for dirt. So, as we were the only team working for the ministry that week in July, we pitched the tents as close as possible to the latrines. The toilets actually were partitioned themselves with curtains for privacy, but the shower area for each gender was not. Shower bags had to be hung on a simple frame, then filled with cold water, in order to bathe. Else, a simple bucket of water was used to splash the soap and scum away!

That evening, we drove to the house where the team had built the previous year. We visited with the family for about an hour; the team thoroughly enjoyed trying to communicate with their old friends. We then drove around the edge of the desert, admiring the beautiful landscape.

The team had learned a few lessons from the previous year. One large lesson was that having a dedicated couple to handle all the food preparation for the team's meals, was of greater benefit to the team, instead of alternating the work among the different families each day. The dedicated couple did not help with the construction of the house, mostly, as they

would go daily to the market to buy food for us, prepare the next day's bag lunches, and then prepare the evening meal for us when we returned from the job site. This arrangement was agreeable to all, and it worked perfectly. The "cooks" would prepare a light breakfast before leaving, drop off their van's passengers at the work site in the morning, and then head to the market to purchase food.

The work site was literally on the edge of the city, a pallet slum right next to the empty desert. We were to build a small "house", approximately eight feet by 20 feet, for a family of four, a husband and wife and their two young kids. The base was to be a concrete pad, with "framed" walls. We had brought our own hand tools, but used shovels that the ministry provided. We mixed concrete by hand, which task seemed to be the custom when working with little resources outside the U.S. The first day started slowly, figuring the exact spot for the house, measuring the dimensions, and building a frame for the slab. By the end of the day, though, we had finished the concrete pad.

There were a few "finished" houses around our site, but about half the dwellings were comprised of neatly stacked and tacked pallets, with cardboard on the outside to cover the empty spaces in the pallets. There was electricity in the community. People would climb poles with thin strands of wire and connect straight to the wires running from pole to pole. At the other end, they would just connect one outlet, from which they could connect a light and a radio inside their small shack.

On the second day, we framed the house, in preparation for a very thin exterior wall. The lean-to roof was also completed that day. We also got a break from mixing concrete. On this day, we met a few of the next-door neighbor kids, who lived in a pallet shack. They were two young girls, with white puppies in tow; and they spoke perfect English! The explanation we got from them was a little convoluted.

Apparently, they had spent a few years with relatives, living in Utah. Now, however, they were back home with their parents. Those were all the details that we could obtain. We would see them and talk with them each of the days that we worked there.

In the evenings, we sat around a campfire on the few chairs we had, and talked about the days' happenings, as well as getting to know the team members better. There were a few concrete blocks and boards for a makeshift bench, upon which to sit. It was hot at night in the tent, which made it difficult to sleep for any length of time.

On the third day, we wrapped the house frame with tar paper. The roof also got its share of tar paper and green shingles. Chicken wire was carefully stretched around and attached to the house. Then it was time to mix more concrete for the parging of the walls, covering the chicken wire with concrete, thus making a solid but quite thin wall. We finished with those tasks about mid-afternoon, so the ministry team took us to a local Christian school, with which they worked. They had a few repairs to be done as well as some painting. We also hung out with the kids, and a few of the teachers, trying out our Spanish as much as we could. That night, the pastor of our church team started to feel sick. He was the only one; we prayed for him before retiring. During the night, my air mattress somehow incurred a small, slow leak. My hips would displace the air to my head and my feet, which meant that my mid-section was lying directly on the ground. I had to endure that for the next two nights as well.

On the fourth day, the pastor woke, not feeling any better. He went with the team to the house, but just sat by, watching us work. Besides installing the windows, we mixed more concrete for a sloped base, extending about twelve inches from the house on all sides. This would help with keeping mud away from the house when it rained. The whole team worked on this last project, which wrapped up before

lunchtime. The new homeowners asked if the team could inscribe their initials and date into the newly-lain concrete at the base. So, most everyone obliged. However, when the ministry partners arrived to do a final inspection, they were not pleased to see writing in the concrete around the house. We never really understood why it was such a big deal to them, but after explaining that the homeowners had approved, they had to drop any idea of re-working the concrete.

We took our lunch at the Christian school. By this time, the pastor was feeling much worse, and could barely walk. After we had prayed again, the cooks decided to take him to the hospital across the border in El Paso. After we had finished the work for the day, we headed back to the compound, where we finished preparing the meal that the cooks had to somewhat abandon, since they ventured back to the U.S. They arrived at the compound after dark without the pastor. He had been kept overnight, to get a round of intravenous fluids to counteract a simple, but serious bout of dehydration.

The next morning, we packed the tents, all the gear and food, and headed for the Christian school to finish the small projects there. Around lunchtime, the cooks arrived with the pastor, who had spent a well-rested night in the hospital. He was still feeling badly, but much-improved from the day before. We said our good-byes to the kids and teachers, and to Juarez itself, as we headed back across the border. A decent hotel room would be our dwelling for the night, before heading home the next day.

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The youth leader at the Methodist church, Ron, had wanted to go on a foreign short-term mission trip with some of the youth. (Remember that this is when Eva was still in high school.) With the backing of the leadership, he started to plan

a trip to Trinidad in 2004, working with a new outreach there started by an organization called Youth With a Mission. One reason to go to this location was that the locals spoke English. Some fundraisers were planned to pay for part of the trip. The Methodist church budget at that time did not include funds for mission trips, as such things were not customary among the parishioners. In July 2004, a large group of mostly adults, and about four teenagers, flew to Port of Spain, Trinidad. My wife Roxanne, Eva, and my good friend Jamie were also participants, along with Ron's wife. (Jamie had become a close friend even though he was about 10 years younger than I. We had shared a love for the same styles of music [both of us played instruments], as well as our skepticism of much of what was taking place in formal religion of 21<sup>st</sup> century America.)

It was the rainy season, and clouds hung low, draped over the mountains around the airport. Our hosts, Kevin, an American, and Eduardo, a Columbian, met us with transportation, and we drove for an hour to a medium-sized town called Cunupia. Youth With a Mission had recently bought a piece of ground just outside the town. They had constructed four small houses, two for Kevin's and Eduardo's families, and two for guests – one of which was also the communal kitchen for large groups. There were also two American interns staying on the property, working for several months there. Patrick, a local who had devoted himself for a year to be a full-time worker with YWAM (as Youth With a Mission was known), was living in a rented apartment off-campus. Most of the women slept in the kitchen house with no air conditioning. It was crowded, and the air was stiflingly humid. The men slept in Patrick's apartment in town. The apartment did not have air conditioning either, but we had a little more space than the women, as there were less of us.

YWAM's goal was to build a jungle obstacle course on their several acres of ground, which would eventually be used

by visiting groups of youth during times of school vacation. So, one of our projects for the week was to start clearing some overgrown areas, clean up trash and old automobile debris, which had been left by previous owners, and to plant flowers and shrubs around the newly-built houses. Of course, the first day working there, it poured rain from a popcorn thunderstorm. Actually, I think it rained every day for at least part of the day, except for our leisure day.

We had a communal lunch in the kitchen house every day. Patrick loved to cook, so he made us local dishes, spicy rice and beans and meat dishes, which were fantastic. The men washed the dishes while we ate at the kitchen house. Kevin's and Eduardo's families joined us for meals sometimes. Eduardo had a few kids who were teenagers, with whom our teens meshed very well.

A few days, we also teamed with a local Pentecostal church in town. We planned and ran a Vacation Bible School one day. The day prior, we walked between the rains among the houses in the community, inviting children to come to the next day's VBS at the church building. We quickly found out that Cunupia, and indeed Trinidad as a whole, had a large population of Blacks and Indians, one of the latter being the pastor of the church. Apparently, in colonial times, subcontinent Indians had been imported by the British to Trinidad, in order to work the sugar cane fields. Of course, Blacks at that time were brought there as slaves. We found many houses with Hindu prayer flags, an inheritance of their subcontinent origins, halfway around the world. For the local church, there was a ripe mission field nearby, in which to work.

Jamie, Ron, and I played musical instruments along with some of the church's musicians for the VBS. Roxanne had a small group of kids with whom she taught Bible lessons. Many of the group helped lead songs and associated hand motions. I think the pastor was pleased with the work that

day.

One day we all went as a group with the pastor and some others, to a more centrally populated area in town. There he erected a small sound system, using a homeowner's electricity, and began to blast his preaching to the surrounding towns-people. Apparently (again) this type of intrusion was not frowned upon in the Trinidad culture, as many people used this media for all kinds of enterprising endeavors. As the bombardment continued, Jaime and I struck up conversations with a few locals, one named Ed. As the evening wore on, we walked a few blocks with him back to his “house”, which was nothing more than a shack at the end of a high school athletic field. We shared with him casually the good news of Jesus, to which he intently listened, and about which he also conversed. We ended up praying with him about some ailment that he had. As darkness approached, we left our new friend and walked back to where the group had been. The outdoor preaching was over, and everyone was concerned that we had just disappeared without telling anyone. Sorry! Well, no harm – no foul!

The next day, we were in the vans, riding to someplace in town I cannot remember. We happened to spot Ed walking in town – and he happened to spot us – another chance encounter with someone we would never see again. Riding in the vans with open windows also gave us the opportunity from time to time to try out our newly-learned local gesture. It was a level upturned palm directed toward someone, almost like waving, but it meant more than just “hello”. It was a gesture that entailed the sentiment of “life is relaxed; don't worry, be happy; peace to you”. It was new to us and cool to give to strangers.

The last full day of our trip was a full day of leisure. We took the vans on a long ride north over the mountains, which led us to one of the most beautiful beaches I have ever seen. It was at the base of a mountain, with scattered palm

trees, and a small U-shaped bay. Except for the local vendors constantly badgering us with their wares, we had a great time enjoying the ocean, food, and sand. Of course, to the locals, white folks at the beach meant that there was money to be had. However, we didn't let the annoying vendors ruin our day.

The next day, we returned to the United States. While exiting Trinidad at the Port of Spain airport, everyone passed through security successfully, except for Ron. He was taken to a private room, away from the rest of us. We weren't sure why he was detained. About an hour later, he re-appeared and joined us in the waiting area. He said that he had to wait awhile in the private room, along with a few others. Then he was asked a few questions regarding the purpose of his trip, and he was allowed to join us, as we waited for an uneventful flight back to the U.S. None of us could figure out the purpose of the interview. He surmised that it might have had to do with his camouflage pants.



## Chapter 12

# Thailand – Part 1

Sometime, during the late 90s, I had received in the mail, a letter from John Jacoby, asking for my support for a new organization that worked with persecuted people groups in a few remote locations around the world. It was not unusual to get solicitations from many different Christian para-church organizations. However, the thing that caught my eye with this mailing, was that the organization was headquartered only 70 minutes from my house, in a town called Royal Fork, Virginia. How could there be a global ministry in the middle of Nowhere-Appalachia Virginia? I decided to take a chance and send them money. I would periodically receive a newsletter, detailing the work that was ongoing. The main focus turned out to be helping the Christian Karen (pronounced Ka-REN) ethnic groups in Thailand and Burma.

Legend has it that well before 1800, a Karen man had received a dream, stating that one day a white man would bring his tribe a golden book, detailing the truth about God and existence. That turned out to be true, as the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw Adoniram and Ann Judson sail from America as full-time missionaries to Burma, where they worked all their lives with the Burmese, as well as with the Karen.

The current problem was an ongoing struggle for survival for the Karen and other minorities in Burma. A sort of civil war had been waging among them and the Burmese military government since the 1960s, and rooted in the sides taken during World War II. In that war, the Burmese had sided with Imperialistic Japan. But America had found an ally in the

small group of Karen. Long story short – after the war, the American military abandoned the Karen after they had promised to support them in their desire for independence as a nation called Kawthoolei. So, the Burmese government wanted to exterminate them, waging a drawn-out civil war with all the minorities that sided with the American military.

The Karen lived mostly in the mountainous regions in eastern Burma, along the Thai border. As hostilities increased tremendously in the '90s, many thousands of Karen fled Burma and found refuge in one of several refugee camps on the Thai side of the 200 miles of border with Burma. One of these camps was just 10 kilometers north of Mae Sot, in a flat area called Huay Kalok, along the Moei River, in west central Thailand. This camp housed approximately 6500 Karen. John Jacoby, who used to be a staff member in the Ronald Reagan administration, had somehow become friends with an Indian-born doctor, who had married a Karen woman in Thailand. This couple would end up being the local handlers for the tangible support that would mostly come from the United States, through John's brainchild, Christian Liberty Worldwide (CLW). They lived in Mae Sot and provided medical supplies, food and water, and Bibles to those stuck in the camp.

In 1997 the Democratic Karen Buddhist army (a splinter group and “enemy” of the Christian Karen), along with some Burmese military, made a bold move and crossed the Moei River into Thailand one night and burned the entire camp at Huay Kalok. No one was deliberately killed that night, but everyone pretty much lost all their possessions. The Thai authorities at the camp had clandestinely disappeared the day before, causing many to think that they had colluded with the enemy in a planned attack. Eventually fire trucks from Mae Sot arrived on the scene around midnight, but did nothing to squelch the small remaining fires that were already dying. They were only there for a photo shoot to show the rest of

Thailand that they tried to avert a catastrophe. Most of the now-destitute people were eventually moved or had already fled to Mae La refugee camp, which was about 40 kilometers north of Mae Sot.<sup>6</sup>

Christian Liberty Worldwide established itself in 1998, and started raising money to assist the Karen refugees in Thailand. In 2001, CLW purchased property near the burned-out Huay Kalok camp, and erected a large school and dormitory, surrounded by a high concrete wall on all four sides. It stuck out like a sore thumb, in the middle of cornfields and poor family's shacks, on the outskirts of the tiny Huay Kalok village.

In January 2004, the CLW newsletter invited supporters to its inaugural international conference in Mae Sot, Thailand. The conference would showcase the work that CLW staff were doing and coordinating, as well as to showcase the school for Karen orphans in Huay Kalok. Of course, my desire for global travel was again quite piqued at this opportunity. This was a chance to see firsthand how my donations to God's kingdom work was really being put to use. So, I scheduled my leave at my workplace, purchased the airfare, and booked a hotel in Bangkok.

August 3rd arrived, and I was flying from Richmond to Dallas. After a short layover, it was time for my first overnight flight to anywhere. It would take 13 hours to get to Tokyo. During the flight I would check the in-flight geography video, showing where the plane was, in relation to the earth's land masses. I wondered why the plane was not flying due northwest, straight to Tokyo. I later learned that, due to the circumference of the earth being greater the further one gets to the equator, planes would fly a more northerly route in order to shorten the actual mileage needed to get to a destination. What looked like a curved route over Alaska, then "down" to Japan, was actually more direct than it seemed.

Arriving in Tokyo at 4:30 PM local time, I could actually see the countryside in daylight. After another short layover, I was headed to Bangkok, which was still another 2800 miles, a longer distance from the east coast of the U.S. than to the west coast. Arriving in Bangkok at night to a crowded airport did not bring a warm-and-fuzzy feeling, only a very warm feeling, as the tropical heat hit me, as I left the airport confines. There was, however, a driver for my hotel, waiting just outside for arrivals like me. I finally got to the hotel at midnight with a major case of jet lag.

After about 2 hours of sleep, it was back to the airport to catch a puddle-jumper to Mae Sot. It was Thursday, August 5, regardless of which day my body felt it was. A fellow conferee, Sheldon, had stayed at the same hotel. We met on the way to check out and rode together to the airport. John Jacoby met us at the airport along with three other conferees. He had our tickets for the short flight to the border town. It only took about two hours. Even though it was the rainy season, the weather was decent for viewing land from the plane.

Arriving at the Mae Sot airport, the weather had deteriorated, the further we got to the mountains, which were shrouded by fog. We arrived about 10 AM, where a designated driver met us and drove us to the CLW vocational school. The school was actually about seven miles north of the town in farm country. Passing “middle-class” houses in the small village, we started down a dirt side road, whose houses dwindled to open bamboo huts. Just ahead was a huge, nicely laid-out concrete building in the middle of a cornfield. The school building was very spacious, with four classrooms, a conference room, two guest rooms, and a spacious open area on the first floor. The 2nd floor contained two dorm rooms, and a large meeting area, from which one could enter the large balcony. Both floors had western toilets, but the students mostly used the eastern-style holes in a partitioned area behind

the detached kitchen.

We initially met the other conferees who were already at the school. There was a traditional pastor from Wisconsin, Sheldon, whom I had met at our hotel, and three young guys in their 20s – two of whom were Mennonites sporting beards, but not mustaches. There was Vickie, a CLW staffer from Royal Fork, and her daughter, and photographer Eric, another CLW staffer. Besides me, Kaye – a grey-hair close to eighty - was the last one counted. We then met the school staff, and finally the students. John then gathered us conferees and gave us an overview of the situation in Burma, which had caused the mass exodus of refugees.

After lunch, we were driven back into MaeSot to exchange money and visit the downtown market area. We saw exotic fruit that I never could have imagined even existed. There were also plenty of large fried insects, as well as fresh-caught eels for sale. We then went to the river border to the Friendship Bridge, one of two such in the country. It was a legal crossing zone into Burma, whereby both sides can visit the other, as long as one had the correct identification. We crossed the river, and had to have our passports stamped for leaving Thailand. Then we had to be cleared by the Burmese officials, which took about half an hour, as they manually scanned for our names in their handwritten records.

The Burmese border town of Miyawaddy was supposed to be a display to the world of how good things really are in Burma. While Mae Sot looked like a modern American small city, Miyawaddy had dirt/bricks for a main thoroughfare. The buildings looked run down; people lined the streets, just sitting and looking bored; and the town just looked generally dirty. The side street to a large Buddhist temple had a drainage ditch full of some nasty water/sewage/who-knows-what. Two local guides were assigned to our group during our short visit. We were kept from going to the Buddhist temple for about twenty minutes,

due to some high-ranking military officials who were in town and had stopped at the temple for some apparent blessings. Once we were allowed in, we had to pay a small fee just to get into the “prayer” room. Several people were praying to the statues in this room. We hung around for about 15 minutes. I sat down and prayed for this blind land. (Later on, the local CLW staff questioned whether I was a Buddhist; I had to explain that I was simply praying to God for those present.) Our escorts made sure that our short visit was “safe” and full of “assurance” that Burma was a pleasant place in which to live. So much for propaganda! They could not have used enough whitewash to disguise the shambles of the town.

We crossed back into Thailand and visited a tourist junk market, the kind one finds in many of the poorer countries, set up specifically for tourists, where the vendors will say in broken English “Special price – just fo yoo!” We were then driven back to the school for supper. Afterwards, there was a formal introduction time with the students and staff/teachers. There were two female mentors, NayNay and Ser Get, and one male mentor, Paw Paw, who could play slide guitar using a Bic lighter! The forty-six students were “graduates” of the CLW schools in three different refugee camps; therefore, all were in their mid-teens. Not all were true orphans, but many had seen family members shot by the Burmese military.

I awoke very early the next morning – around 3:30. The jet was still lagging. We visiting men slept in the boy's dorm room, on some relinquished bunks, while the ousted boys slept on mats on the hard tile floor. At 6 AM, the boys were roused, and they started their school-day ritual of lining up their plastic chairs in the meeting room, singing a few songs, and having prayer, along with the girls, but not with the adults. Then they scurried to their individual chores before their breakfast.

The conferees had a hot breakfast consisting of a soupy

rice porridge at the school. We then set out for our first visit to one of the CLW projects inside Burma. A few of the Thailand CLW staff now joined us for the visits. We traveled further into the country along the Moei River, where we had to pass through one Thai army checkpoint. Since there had been good relations previously created with the Thai authorities, a small “payoff” of fresh chicken and a bottle of vodka was all that was necessary for our clearance.

Our contact David was already waiting on the Thai side to escort us across the river. There was a long, narrow boat awaiting us at the river's edge. The porter had to make two trips to transport all our team. We then walked for about ten minutes along a flat dirt path, past open bamboo huts and a group of girls playing soccer on a muddy field. Many people were smoking large, dark cigarettes.

We arrived at the mainly-Buddhist Karen village called Thit Kay Ya, where CLW had built a Christian school and medical clinic for the people. Several teachers and a medic were fully funded for their work there. This was a planned visit, so the students were prepared to sing us a few songs in Karen and in English. Then we conferees each spoke for about five minutes apiece, to the crowd of students and adults who had gathered. We told them that we were from America, and that we were praying to God for them, for their safety and unhindered living. We passed out candy to anyone who wanted. We also passed out cross necklaces, which were made by folks in the U.S. In this village was also a small unit of the Karen National Liberation Army, who kept on the watch for possible raids by the Burmese military. They even accepted the colorful kid's necklaces eagerly. We walked through the village to where the medical clinic was, which was surrounded by high corn and soldiers with walkie-talkies. There were several people in the clinic who were mildly sick. Pastor Sheldon took the initiative to pray aloud for these folks, with hands laid. Our visit was about two hours, with no visible

incidents. We retraced our steps back to the boat and crossed back into Thailand. I had just actually crossed an international border illegally!

The second illegal crossing was about an hour to the north, past the Mae La refugee camp (which we were to visit in two days). We easily passed two more Thai army checkpoints enroute to the river crossing. A longtime CLW Karen friend met us and led us to the river, where two boats were waiting for us. We crossed the river and walked up and down a few steep inclines for another ten minutes as we reached the village of Ler Per Her. This village had been burned-out and relocated wholesale two times within the last four years. This mostly-Christian Karen village had now been pushed to the river's edge. CLW had built a Christian school, church building, and medical clinic in this village.

We gave a presentation similar to the one in Thit Kay Ya, except that there were many more residents and students in Ler Per Her. We also passed out candy and played games with the students. A young full-time teacher who spoke English very well, translated for us. We attempted to fix one man's metal detector in order for him to detect land mines. I am not sure if we made any difference. After two hours visiting the village, we crossed back again into Thailand. At one army checkpoint we were stopped, not to be checked for our credentials, but so that a group of schoolgirls could sell us some hand-painted key fobs as their fundraiser. The square wooden fobs contained the current year of 2547, which measured time according to the Buddhist era. We arrived back at the CLW school to meet a surprise U.S. Senate delegation of four staff persons, who had come to Mae Sot on a short fact-gathering mission for one senator from New Jersey.

The students and staff had prepared a presentation for us this evening, which included many songs, scripture reading in Karen and in English, and a play about the Three Little Pigs. It was quite entertaining, seeing these East Asians performing

their rendition of a classic European children's story.

Saturday allowed the students to sleep in, as there were no classes. The team departed at 8 AM, however, to journey to Umpium refugee camp, two and a half hours south of Mae Sot. Vicki was in charge of this trip, as John was accompanying the Senate delegation to the same villages we had visited the previous day. We drove over a beautiful, winding mountain road that quickly led to a remote area where only a few bamboo huts lined the hillsides along the way. As we approached the camp, we passed an empty army checkpoint. The camp was open with no fencing. We walked a short distance inside the camp to a CLW-sponsored open-air church building shelter, where the CLW orphanage children and some adults had gathered.

The entire atmosphere was subdued. The children sang a few songs for us. Then we spent a few minutes talking with them, trying to encourage them to follow Jesus in the midst of their terrible situation. We mingled with the small crowd, attempting to speak with the young people who could speak a little English. I met a young man named Moo Dah Shee, with whom I spoke at length, as his friends tried to help him communicate. I could tell that he wanted to converse so badly, but was so limited. I could also see that he was happy that a foreigner had picked him, with whom to hold a conversation.

We spent lunch with the local pastor there in the camp. Then we were encouraged to cut short our visit, as some Thai army guards were roaming through the camp, and we did not want to be caught in our “unofficial” visit. Therefore, we did not get to see the CLW orphanage or high school.

Since our day was cut short, it was decided to spend the spare time at one of the popular waterfalls on the way back to the school. We stopped at Ko Tha waterfall, whose cascades were only about 70 feet high and 15 feet wide at the top, but fell over ten or more tiers, which made it a beautifully concise waterfall in a darkened ravine in a relatively small park. Many

people were in the pool at the bottom. I saw and photographed flowers there that I had never seen before. After a while there, two Thai soldiers appeared, unarmed, scoping out the situation. We later learned that they had actually followed us from the refugee camp. They eventually left before us without incident.

We drove back to the school for supper, played with the kids for a while, and conversed excitedly with the students who were from Umpium. They were animated to talk about us seeing their “home”, even if it was a “prison” for 10,000 people. After all, for those who had seen violence, at least it was a safe place. John gathered us together later that evening for a debriefing of our day, and to prepare us for another long visit to the largest refugee camp in Thailand.

The jet had finally stopped lagging, so I got a decent night's sleep. Before our usual hot rice porridge breakfast, I got to play guitar with a few of the boys, showing them some tips for better playing. As the students prepared for their Sunday morning church service at the school, we conferees loaded the vans for the hour-long trip to Mae La refugee camp.

The camp sprawled for two whole miles with hundreds of grey bamboo huts extending from the road to halfway up the jagged jungle mountain. There were several Thai army checkpoints at this camp, and it was fenced, right at the road. This camp has officially been a refugee camp since 1986; now it was home to about 40,000 Karen, some Christian and some Buddhists. The Burma Border Consortium, a group of non-governmental organizations, regularly provided rice and clothing throughout the camp.

About midway along the camp, we all exited the vans, stepped through the gate, and were greeted by Karen youth, who were ready to escort us up the steep hill to the CLW school. It was a planned visit, so we were presented with two beautiful songs by the young students. We were then led right next door to the block church building, which could hold about

200 people. (Block structures were technically not allowed in the camps, as the Thai authorities considered the refugees to be temporarily abiding in their country. Somehow, CLW had gotten permission to build this wood and concrete structure; maybe it had to do with more chickens and vodka.)

We had stage seats with the pastor and interpreter, as we were to be the main speakers this morning. A young girl was playing hymns on a keyboard powered by a car battery, as the building slowly filled and the service began. Everyone sang several hymns; the youth sang several modern-sounding songs. Several of the conferees then spoke at length, with an older female interpreter. I was next-to-last, so I kept my talk fairly short, as we were already beyond their normal ending time. (Several churches used the same building throughout the day.) How does one encourage a group of people who are stuck in limbo for an unknown period of time?

After the service, we went back to the school building where a hot meal had awaited our arrival much too long. Tepid soup and warm soda – my kind of combination! We ate it, albeit tentatively, as the students watched us adults eating, while they had to wait. Kaye had been whisked away with Min-Min to visit the home of her CLW-sponsored child, somewhere amid the endless maze of beautiful foliage and bamboo huts with drying laundry. The students sang a few more songs for us while we ate, including one young girl who clearly, nervously sang a solo, accompanied by acoustic guitar. Peter and Martin taught the kids a few new songs, and we played games with the kids for a while. Several of the adult leaders spoke very good English, as a result of the legacy of American missionary Adoniram Judson working in Burma 150 years prior.

At 3:30 it was time to leave. The boys in their bright red Karen vests escorted us down the muddy hill, two kids per person, to make sure that we did not slip and fall. It was an awesome sight to see their hospitality. We hugely hugged at

the gate, then quickly departed. We were stopped at one Thai checkpoint, but were waved on, when Min-Min “confirmed” that we were Americans with a United Nations delegation.

We arrived back at the Huay Kalok school for supper and free time with the students. We then formally addressed the kids and said our official good-byes, as we were unsure of our departure time the next day. It was quite an emotional time for all of us. I finally broke down and had to hide in the restroom, while the flood of tears ran its course. We ended up playing games with the students late into the evening.

The next day, I naturally awoke at 5:30. I slipped out of the dorm room as quietly as possible. In the big room, I set up the chairs for the students before they had the chance to do it for themselves. As they sleepily crept in, I sat quietly until they had all gathered. They then sang their daily Reveille song, a hauntingly beautiful other-worldly “a capella” slow ritual. They prayed, and it was time for chores before breakfast and class. We conferees met with John for a detailed discussion of the origins of CLW and what we could do about the situation in Burma and in the refugee camps. After lunch, we paired up with the kids to talk with them about anything that they desired. It was one last bonding time, and an opportunity for them to practice English. We left mid-afternoon, each of us carrying a stack of farewell cards, personally addressed to us in the kids' broken English.

Dap-Dap accompanied us to Bangkok via air, as she was to be our tour guide the next day. (The only reason that we left Mae Sot a day earlier than expected, was that all the flights to Bangkok on our last day were already full. So we got to experience the capital for a full day.) When we arrived at the airport in Bangkok, we caught several cabs to take us to the city. Eric and I had a cab to ourselves, but it took an hour to get through the heavy traffic. By this time it was dark, and the cab driver eventually pulled into a side alley at a hotel that we knew was the wrong one. Eric and I thought that we had

been split from the rest of the team. However, a strange woman opened Eric's door, and plainly asked him if he was Eric! We were dumbfounded, until we found out that Pee-Bon was a friend of Dap-Dap's, who had re-arranged our lodging for the duration of the trip.

The next day we became normal tourists. We spent a couple of hours at a downtown mall. We then took a tour van to the Grand Palace, where we saw the golden and elaborately-ornamented buildings, built by the kings of the Rama dynasty from the late 1700s to the late 1800s. The temple of the Emerald Buddha was in the middle of these grounds. The site was one of the most highly revered, and visited, temples in Thailand. We decided not to enter due to the long line of would-be visitors. We then drove outside the city to the Samphran Elephant Zoo. We got to pet two highly-sedated tigers and get our photos taken with them. We saw a crocodile show, with feats of showmanship. The main event was an historical show with white elephants, some of which could play soccer. We ended our night with downtown sightseeing, and much, too much, shopping.

The last day of the trip, we headed to the airport at 4:30 AM. The flight to Tokyo was uneventful. I barely made it, however, to my connecting flight back to the States. I was the last one to board the plane. To my surprise, the whole plane had first-class-style seats in the coach area. As a matter of fact, the layout was even roomier than in first class. The flight seemed very long, and I did not get much sleep. My mind could not escape the emotional overload that had been dumped upon me in the last six days. What was I going to do with that fantastic, yet sad, experience? It was too much to coherently sort it all out.

I caught my last flight from Dallas with plenty of time to spare. As soon as I had sat in my seat, a friend of Eva's surprisingly approached me. She and her parents were just returning from a trip to San Antonio. What a coincidence to

see them on my flight.

My first night home did not contain sleep – not because my mind was still wound up, but because my body was feeling sick. Roxanne and I ended up at the hospital with the fear of malaria. However, it turned out to be just a bad stomach virus, which a round of antibiotics would eventually eliminate. After another week missing work and feeling like crap, I was finally feeling better by my 40th birthday.

Besides describing my trip to family and friends, I needed to tell a larger audience of my experience. I decided to approach the editor of the local newspaper to see if she was interested in publishing a story of my trip. Of course the answer was affirmative. The paper was always looking for unusual experiences, especially big-picture stories. So, I interviewed with the writer and gave her some materials to read on her own. I was a little leery, hoping that the story would be accurate, but not feeling confident of that. I was rewarded with a great article, alongside a great color photograph of some Karen boys in their distinctive red sleeveless tunics.

A couple of months later I was given the opportunity to tell my story and the plight of the Karen people, at my grandparent's church senior Sunday school class. The year 2004 came to an end as I proudly wore my new red Karen vest to church service on Christmas Day.

## Chapter 13

### Ireland

Several years prior, my friend Landon had loaned me a video about several annual, spiritual pilgrimages in Ireland and England. I was instantly enthralled with the truly spiritual events, mixed with the mysticism and beauty of Ireland. These were not just cultural events enjoyed by the public, but were actual sites of pilgrimage, where one stayed awhile, and spent time with other Christians, worshiping God in ways not used to, and reflecting on drawing closer to God. Of course, one of those pilgrimages honored the memory of St. Patrick. (What is a trip to Ireland without at least one reference to St. Patrick?) It had to do with a climb up rocky Croagh Patrick, 2500 feet above sea level. Well, living in the Mountain State gave me opportunity to hike many mountain paths. So, the idea of climbing a mountain in Ireland, like a million other people do every year, was very enticing. So, in the spring of 2004, Roxanne, Eva, and I planned our trip for the following spring. This trip was planned even before we enjoyed our work week in Trinidad.

The trip was planned to coincide with Eva's spring break, instead of in the summer, when the annual pilgrimage up Croagh Patrick was taken in July. Our work schedules precluded such a summer trip. So we made a go of it, in the month of March, having signed with an actual tour company. We flew overnight from Washington, DC, to Dublin, arriving mid-morning to a cool, foggy spring day. Our bus driver was a grey-haired gentleman, but not over 70 years of age. His surname was Cooney, and he was a veteran of guiding tours throughout Ireland. From the airport, we passed through some

rural country before arriving in the city proper. One sight was the mansion of the country's President. It looked just like the United States' White House. Then we were reminded that the office of President was not quite the same as that of the United States.

Our first day was a mix of touring, seeing notable sights within Dublin from the bus, then later walking about on our own. There were many people walking the pedestrian-only streets, and even a few street musicians in the unfavorable temperatures (for such endeavors). Many of the shops and offices in Dublin had their names displayed in Irish Gaelic spelling, which intrigued me. So I had to get an Irish lexicon to figure out how to pronounce the words. Many of the multi-homed townhouse buildings had ornate front doors, of all different colors. All had oval transoms, which added to their beauty. That afternoon, we got a tour of the famous Guinness brewing distillery, which also provided us with two free, large glasses of the dark brown ale. Even with our pizza, the ale did not taste good. (Roxanne and I never did like the taste of beer of any kind.) Well, that evening, we also got a tour of the Jameson whiskey distillery, led by a young Russian woman, whom, I'm sure, was working during her school break.

After the tour, a meal for the whole tour group was arranged, along with live music from a local acoustic trio. It was traditional Irish music at its finest, with a fantastic fiddler, acoustic guitarist/vocalist/drummer, and acoustic bass player from the now/then defunct group Thin Lizzy. There were even male and female traditional dancers to entertain, as well as to invite us onstage to participate. One person from each table was required to come onstage to learn a few dance moves, and to dance with the opposite-sex dancer. Of course, I was picked by everyone else at my table, to make a fool of myself. It was great fun, however, and the photos proved it.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> day started with a full Irish breakfast.

Although there were no bangers and mash, there were sausages, and black blood pudding, which was sort of like a round sausage patty. It was not my favorite, but we did not go hungry. Another stroll around Dublin brought us to St. Patrick's Cathedral, the largest cathedral in Ireland. First built in the 13th century around an extant parish building, the cathedral allies with the Church of England. The floor tiles throughout the building were quiet exquisite. They were just one of many upgrades since the full restoration of the building in 1865 by Benjamin Guinness, the 3rd son of the famous brewer Arthur Guinness. The adjacent gardens had many blooming flowers, which surprised me, since it was only mid-March.

The next stop was the nearby Trinity College. Its claim to fame is that it houses the famous Book of Kells, the ornately-decorated scribal copies of the four Gospels from the eighth century. The book itself is kept under glass, and a page is turned each day for public viewing. The day that we saw it, the page was largely text with hardly any fancy artwork. It was disappointing, but I bought a book that reprinted all the artwork pages. Absolutely amazing! The library within the college was also awesome, as it resembles a cathedral in its own right.

One last stop within the city was Dublin Castle. It is a weird conglomeration of buildings. The lone castle turret appears as if there is another part of the castle underground – like the scene of the Statue of Liberty at the end of the original Planet of the Apes movie. Attached to the turret is a cathedral, looking like it certainly does not belong. On the opposite side of the turret is a brick building extending perpendicular to the cathedral, which also looks completely out of place, as the turret is sandwiched between the two additions. It turns out that the lone turret was part of the old city wall, which also had several other turrets. There is even an ancient arch under the 18th century buildings that can still be viewed by the

public! What did I tell you? Posterity literally builds upon history! And it seems that the icons of medieval history consistently get annexed! The building complex now houses public administration offices.

The tour bus left Dublin and headed southwest through many miles of flat lands, grey skies, and black fields of peat. Two-thirds of the way to Cork, we surprisingly came across our first set of ruins, a huge castle complex with a surrounding wall, set upon a hill in the slightly rolling plains. It was the Rock of Cashel, the largest set of ruins that I had ever seen. The only problem was that it was not a stop on our tour. It was magnificent, and all we could do was take a few pictures from the roadside! Just northwest of Cork, we did make a stop at another iconic castle ruins. It was the famous Blarney Castle. Started in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by Dermot McCarthy, king of Munster, the castle is taller than it is wide or long. There are 127 steps to the top of the castle, where one can (must) bend over backwards to kiss the Blarney Stone below walking level. Legend has it that Queen Elizabeth ordered the Earl of Leicester to take possession of the castle. The McCarthys somehow came up with some form of delays, the news of which was sent back to the Queen, who was so irritated, that she stated that the reports were all “blarney”! Many other legends also surround the history of the stone itself. Now, it is said, that one can obtain the gift of “delaying” gab, by properly kissing the Blarney Stone. Of course, we all kissed the stone, but no change of speech habits occurred due to that smooch.

Outside the ruins, we only had a short amount of time to explore the beautiful gardens. We explored the Wishing Steps, Witch's Kitchen, and the Fairy Glade, which all contained various legends of weird phenomena and spells to obtain good fortune. We spent the day wondering what it was like to own the property and live in a castle with an actual roof, half a millenium ago. Did the castle's windows have glass at one

time? How did the residents consistently stay warm in a seasonal climate? Half a day later, we were on our way to the next destination.

As we headed toward the southwest mountains, we encountered many patches of dark yellow-flowered shrubs called gorse. This seemed to be the only flower in bloom in the wild, at this time of year. We also passed many misty fields of rich green with white sheep. Furthermore, we passed a small cluster of ogham stones, which were surrounded by protective fencing. I am not sure if they were grave markers; however, it was awesome to see the first Irish runes carved so many centuries ago. We started to encounter large lakes, some with beautiful stone shores, some flanked by low mountains, and some neighbored by farm houses with neatly laid-out fields, divided by stone fences. Of course, there were many Irish crosses seen, and not just in cemeteries. There were some scattered around towns, as in Killarney, our destination for the night.

That evening, we walked around town for a while, but didn't really see anything outstanding, or, shall I say, memorable. The next day turned out to be promising, as the weather appeared to favor more sun than clouds. We were heading due north to meet the central western coast, which did not jut as westerly as the southern fingers did. We passed many sheep pastures, stone walls, ruins, and a lake with large white boulders, on our way to the best stop on the tour: The Cliffs of Moher. At midday, we reached the cliffs, and our breaths were instantly taken away at their beauty, as well as that of the ever-waving dark turquoise ocean.

The cliffs are 700 feet high in some places, which is about three-quarters of the height of the Eiffel Tower. There was a little walking path with a protective wall around the areas where the turf sloped down to the edge. The warning signs were everywhere to caution would-be adventurers of instant death from falling. However, there was one wide flat

slab of rock that one could walk all the way to the edge, even dangle one's feet over the edge, without fear of sliding down. Of course, Eva and I walked to within five feet of the edge before crawling on our bellies to the precipice, to get a view of the bottom, and, of course, to take photos and video footage. The clefts of the rock wall housed hundreds of white seagulls, which in themselves, were marvelous to watch. It still gives me the creeps, as I recall that fearful experience (that just had to be done!) From the cliffs, one could look westward and barely make out the beginning of the three Aran Islands, Inishmore, Inishmaan, and Inisheer. Oh, how I wish we could have visited that World Heritage site of “saints and scholars”. (That will have to wait for another time.)

The vastness of the undulating cliffs in the brilliant sunlight was just so awesome in its grandness and sheer beauty, which made me think of God’s awesome creative power. Plus, I found out that there really is a fear of dying, when confronted with the immediate possibility of falling off the cliffs. I would rather not die from a stupid accident, but for a much nobler reason. Obversely, it was also funny to later watch people slowly crawl to the edge, starting their crawl 20 or 30 feet from the edge!

After a couple of hours at the cliffs, we headed north again, stopping at a little eatery for some traditional fish and chips. Boy, were they greasy! Then the road north led us to the Burren, a karst landscape that was much different from the rest of Ireland that we had seen the previous few days. It was mostly rocky, with brown grass. I did not see any green grass, but, in places, there were cattle, apparently chewing the old growth. By the time we got to Galway in the early evening, the clouds had rolled in again. Galway sits at the mouth of a narrow bay into which flows the River Corrib. The shore was dotted with dark brown and grey marbled pebbles, and we were drawn to the water, even though the temperatures had significantly dropped. In Galway, we saw several houses with

thatched roofs, which completely surprised me.

The next day was our last full day in Ireland. The rain and wind had managed to force its way into town, so there was no walking outside. However, our tour guide took us to a little museum just outside the city, where the John Wayne movie “The Quiet Man” was filmed. A small house had been turned into a wax display with several human figures. I was not impressed, but I suppose that the locals were glad that a famous Hollywood actor had been to their village in order to make a movie! That day, we also visited a crystal manufacturer and seller. We got to see a craftsmen take a small shallow clear glass bowl, and etch an interwoven opaque pattern into the bowl, using only a grinding wheel. In five minutes, a perfectly symmetrical pattern was etched on the surface by a creative hand. And we were amazed! But the best was yet to come. We visited the showcase of huge and expensive crystal creations. Every piece was dazzling and intricately carved, with some being three feet high; and some having one separate color of dark blue, dark red, dark green, or yellow glass mixing with the clear glass; and all with hefty price tags, reflecting the handcrafted brilliance. It was quite a site to behold!

The next morning, our bus driver ended our tour in Shannon for a flight back to London. It was an uneventful ride to the airport under grey skies. The flight to London was less than an hour. After a short layover, we finally boarded the plane to take us back to the states.

However, our takeoff was delayed due to a parts failure. We were informed that it could be an hour delay. One hour passed, then two. We were then informed that a new part had to be transported to the airport from who-knows-where. Now the delay was an unknown time period. But the worst was just beginning. They told us that the air conditioning in the plane had to be shut off to prepare for the repair. After another hour of rising temps, stuck in the same seats, we

passengers were getting quite frustrated. The stewards did serve us drinks and snacks, and they finally were allowed to open the hatch doors, to at least get a little air flow. After six hours of waiting in the plane on the tarmac, the part had finally been replaced, and we were home-bound, only to endure another six hours of normal flying. It was a joyous occasion, when we finally landed at Richmond International Airport. It was a sad ending to an otherwise awesome trip.

## Chapter 14

### Thailand – Part 2

My first trip to Thailand and Burma had given me the desire to do more to help the Karen people, even if it seemed small or insignificant. I wanted to do something more than just give money to an organization. CLW constantly advertised that they were looking for volunteers to help at the Hany Kalok school. Well, I wondered what I would do. What I could do. I could teach guitar-playing. I could teach Bible. I could teach some simple mechanical repairs. So, with sheer enthusiasm to make a difference in some Karen kids' lives, I made my intentions known to the CLW staff in the U.S. They said that they would inform the Thailand staff of my pending arrival.

Changes were in the making at my workplace. Re-organization of the computer teams were aligning with the time that I wanted to go to Thailand – shortly before Thanksgiving. My supervisor was also being moved to a different team, so she did not care if I wanted to take five weeks of leave, which I had saved prior to November 2005. Consequently, the logistics for taking off work were in place, and I had no work responsibilities that someone else needed to cover. The only other concern was that I was leaving wife and daughter for one whole month – a length of time which had never separated us hitherto now. Both were onboard with my desire to travel again. So I booked my flights and two hotel stays – one night in Bangkok on November 14, and one night exactly one month later.

I had a late flight to Los Angeles on November 12. The airport was like a ghost town around 10:30. My flight to

Hong Kong was delayed, so we did not depart until after midnight. I slept for several hours, and enjoyed a good meal. (Airline food is rather good on international flights.) Sometime during the flight, I noticed that my Oriental neighbor was reading a Chinese Bible. So, I inquired of him if he was a Christian. He informed me that he had been a Buddhist for over 50 years. One year prior, a woman had explained the Gospel to him. At first, he did not understand, but he continued to watch the videos about Jesus, that she had given to him. He eventually felt Jesus speaking to him, and he immediately changed, becoming a Christian. He was currently attending a church in Los Angeles with his wife Cecilia. His name was Gordon, and he could read Chinese script. Go figure. Gordon? Was Chinese?

We had to make an unplanned stop in Seoul in order to re-fuel. Apparently the head winds had been too strong; there was not enough fuel to fly all the way to Hong Kong. We landed at 6:30 in the morning on Nov. 14 and were back in the air fairly quickly. While the flight was then longer than expected, we made it to Hong Kong with plenty of layover time to catch my flight to Bangkok. We arrived at the final destination at 4 PM, got to my hotel at 6 PM, and I was asleep by 8 PM.

The next morning I took a cab to the downtown bus station. The cab driver actually helped me get a bus ticket to Mae Sot. It was only 15 months since my last trip to Mae Sot, but Thai Air had ceased flights from Bangkok. I had to endure an eight-hour bus ride. The lay of the land was mostly flat all the way to Nakhon Sawon, a town roughly in the center of the country. About an hour prior, we passed a short mountain that ran north to south. The odd thing about this was that we were not in the mountains or the foothills. The mountain just popped up, out of a very flat plain. A stop at a bus station for lunch surprised me with free food, which I did not know was included in the bus fare. Three hours later, we were crossing a

jagged, beautiful mountain range at sunset, taking a winding road westward to Mae Sot.

We arrived at the bus station at dark. I was expecting someone to be waiting for me. No such luck. I tried to call Min-Min directly, but could not reach her. I was able to call Roxanne back home to get her to call Min-Min. She was successful in reaching her; my ride showed up shortly thereafter. Min-Min stated that she knew that I was coming, but was not sure when. I got to the school with no harm done. I met my young counterpart Min-pen, from Georgia, who was staying at the school on a long-term basis, sleeping in the girl's dorm room, and mentoring on a daily basis, as well as periodically teaching ESL class. Paw Paw was no longer the male dorm parent. Ebene had replaced him, and we hit it off very well.

I awoke the next morning at 3 AM in my spacious guest room, which was technically shared by Tom, a 70 year-old distant relative of John Jacoby's wife. Tom and his wife had been renting a house in Mae Sot for the last several months, and were teaching at the school every day. Occasionally Tom would stay overnight at the school, in the same room that I was assigned. I finally got up at 5 AM, took a shower and washed some clothes by hand in that same shower.

After breakfast, I met the students, Tom and his wife Janet, the girls's dorm mothers – Hser Get and Hser Won, and finally Mack, another 70-something distant relative of John Jacoby, whose personality was so magnetic, gentle, and inviting, that I was immediately drawn to him. Mack and his wife had been temporary residents at the school during the summer, helping to teach and organize the library. She had returned to the States, while Mack was leaving Thailand a few days after my planned departure.

The first full day at the school, I simply joined the classes to see how they operated. That same night was the

first night of Loy Krathong – the Buddhist festival of lights. In the Thai language, “loy” means to float, while “krathong” is a small container, traditionally made from a piece of banana-tree trunk, containing a candle, incense and flowers. The krathong floating on the water symbolizes one’s willingness to let go of hatred and anger. Loy Krathong is one of Thailand’s best-loved festivals, occurring at the November full moon to mark the end of the rainy season. On the night of the festival, Thai people make a wish as they launch their krathongs on the rivers. Some people place hair and fingernails inside the krathong: by doing so, they want to float away their past mistakes and negative thoughts. It is a purification ceremony to enlighten the mind – part of the Buddhist lifestyle.

The students, dorm parents, and I walked into the village to see the festivities. There was loud music for the entire time that we were there. Many people lit luminaries, and floated them across a pond. I felt like I had to keep an eye on the students, as an unplanned chaperone. We just stood around and watched for quite a long time – so long that the kids were looking quite bored. We finally left, and walked back to the school in the dark.

A typical school day started with a worship time led by Tom. He played an electronic autoharp and sang hymns. Tom then taught Bible class every day. Janet taught crafts; Min-pen taught ESL class, and Mack taught science and math. I quickly found that there was not really a slot for me to teach. However, Min-pen let me help her, inviting me to help teach some songs as part of her teaching English. I also took the initiative to look for items around the school that needed repaired.

There were a few other ways in which I found a way to serve. Besides having a daily personal time of prayer and Bible study, I made it a practice to join the staff each morning for a short time of prayer. Furthermore, I would help the boys

in the morning to dry the breakfast dishes after the girls washed them; I would help the boys and girls with learning to play guitar in the evenings; and I would sit with the kids during evening homework time to answer any questions that the kids might have. During the homework time, I also started to teach myself how to read Thai.

Janet soon allowed me to take the boys from her crafts class. So I found items that needed repaired including two motor bikes, bicycles, door latches, shower fixtures, and a non-functioning light at the compound gate. I let the boys use ratchet and sockets to dismantle certain parts from the motorbikes, in order to get the wheel off so that the tires and tubes could be replaced. I showed them how to fix certain parts of the bicycles. They learned how to use screw drivers and a drill to fix door latches. I showed them also how to replace a speedometer on one of the motorbikes. A couple boys also helped me to re-wire a light fixture to restore light in one of the large compound entrance globes.

The first Saturday of my stay, I was on the balcony teaching guitar to a few girls, when I heard a commotion in the courtyard below. All of the boys were lined up in a bucket brigade, with Ebene coordinating the tasks. I could see a large hole in the concrete driveway, through which the buckets were being raised and lowered. I soon learned that Way-Neh Lin was in the “cistern”, scooping up the non-fecal waste water and sludge from the entire compound. The boys above were then putting the sludge on the large, leafy plants in front of the compound walls. Apparently, this was a task that was done annually.

Since I mostly worked on my own schedule, I had quite a bit of freedom. A couple of times, I rode the repaired motorbike with Min-pen into Mae Sot. I had never driven a motorcycle in my entire life. Most of the motorbikes used in Thailand were of the automatic variety. There was no clutch to use when manually changing gears, so I only had to get

used to the foot gears. After three rides into town and some practice around the school, I finally got the chance to chauffeur Min-pen back to the school from town – at night! So my first long-range drive came in the dark, with a rider behind me, on the left side of the road! This gave me enough confidence for several later solo trips into town.

Mack was at the school for the whole day, while Tom and Janet usually left at lunch time. So Mack, Min-pen, and I would enjoy each other's company at lunch – when there was lunch. Some days, there was no food at all for the kids. Mack and I remedied that a few times, driving into the village to get bags of tangerines, cookies, and candies.

Min-pen let me help her with the ESL class. We would teach the kids new songs in English, explaining the words as we went along. On Thanksgiving Day, we had a Bible lesson about giving thanks. It was just another dry day in Thailand as we talked about the American tradition. No turkey for us, nor any of the other usual fare. During the week after Thanksgiving, Min-pen traveled with Tom and Janet to Bangkok for doctor's appointments. So, Ebene and I split the ESL and Bible class duties for the week. I emphasized the need for the kids to read their Bibles in Karen. Only one out of four regularly did so. Of course, we also read the Bible in English to help them in their learning as much as possible.

In one Bible class, we read Psalm 136. I would read the beginning part of the verse, while the rest of the class read the ending together. Of course, the ending was the same for all 40 verses - "His love endures forever." They thought it was quite funny. I guess that they never had read that Psalm before.

November 30 was a normal school day. The students studied in the evening after supper until 7 PM. Then they started to prepare for the Sweet December celebration. They pulled out the drums, guitars, and amplifiers, and set them up in the courtyard. This was to be an outside party. The Christmas tree was placed on the balcony and colored lights

were strung in various places. The kids played many songs, and several groups acted out some Bible story skits. Mack and I were put on the spot and asked to sing Christmas solos. So we frantically searched through an English hymnal for a song that we each knew. A capella, we pulled off our solos. Then we enjoyed a special rice soup. At 11:30, Mack and I each gave a brief devotion. Then at midnight, everyone gathered on the balcony and shouted three times “Sweet December!” Besides Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve, Sweet December was a Karen holiday. What fun we all had during a cool, moist night that produced a bit of fog. The next morning, the students were allowed to sleep in, despite it being a normal school day.

On the remaining Saturdays, I took the motorbike into town to visit Mack for breakfast, just to talk about life. There were also many trips throughout the week to get supplies at the hardware store for the weekly projects. The week after Sweet December, Min-pen and Tom were back on the job, so I planned on wrapping up the final work projects with the kids, while finishing a few others by myself. I always joined the kids for the Sunday morning church service at the school. I helped a few of them learn songs for the evening service as well. Christopher and I sang a duet on one of the evenings. Many of the late afternoons were spent either teaching guitar or playing soccer and volleyball with the kids.

On my final Wednesday at the school, I asked Ebene if we could serve communion together on Sunday. He was okay with the idea, but after relaying our plans to Tom, I got reprimanded for usurping Tom's authority. I was told that only official pastors could administer communion. I knew my freedom in Christ would eventually get me into trouble. I never really got along with Tom. Our conversations at lunch usually revolved around him. He never asked about my life or family. I sometimes felt as if I were intruding upon his “right to serve”, as he was at the school long before I was. It was

just an observation.

On my last Sunday at the school, I met Mack in town for breakfast. Then we headed to the house of the Thailand CLW administrators, the Sunghas. The family was going to take Mack and me to Mae La refugee camp, in order to participate in their church service. When we got to the camp, we were met at the gate by Beethoven, a student who had been at the Haui Kalok school during my previous trip. He escorted us up the hill, where the church service promptly started. Jack and I each spoke for about ten minutes to the congregants. There was much lively music from the teens. After service, we were lead to the CLW school and given a quick tour. Soda and cookies were humbly served to us for lunch. Min-Min had previously purchased winter coats at the night market in Mae Sot. She distributed them to some of the kids at the CLW school. It really did look like it was Christmas Day.

We arrived back in Mae Sot about 3:30; I spent another hour at Mack's house, then rode back to the school. The students were already in their evening worship service, so I did not disturb them. I took a shower and retired for the night. I woke up at midnight, as I often did, having to take sleeping pills to help me find some shut-eye. This night, Tom had decided to stay overnight, so I went to the other guest room to be alone in my thoughts, music, and fitful sleep.

Monday, December 12, brought about a day of letter writing for the students. Letters were written and pictures were drawn for their sponsors back in the States. I helped many of them to write sentences correctly in English. This continued into the afternoon. In the evening, I watched a movie with the students. It was an Indian legend in which a polar bear guides two teens in finding their stranded father.

The next day, I had to find some things to do by myself, as the students were preparing good-bye notes for Mack and me. They did not want me to watch them preparing them, so I wrapped up my work tasks by re-painting the volleyball lines

in the courtyard. I prepared for my journey the next day to Bangkok. At 6PM, there was a special service given for Mack and me. We had to sit in the front, facing the students. Several kids sang; some gave us a corporate thank-you in English. Then each of us was given a Karen Christmas gift. Mack and I each spoke to the students and staff of our gratefulness and appreciation, and a great opportunity to serve. After we all had a sweet dessert, we took many pictures together.

I awoke early the next day, as usual. I sat in the big room and journaled awhile, waiting for the morning light. As the kids awoke and made their way downstairs to their chores, I spoke with some of them, especially Paw Sah Eh and Silver Paw, thanking them for their tears the night before. Tears are the best indicators that one has made a difference in the life of someone else. Min-Min had also come for breakfast, in order to take me to the bus station. So, after breakfast, it was a quick good-bye.

It was a bumpier bus ride to Bangkok, than the one to Mae Sot. The bus was stopped three times at police checkpoints on the way to Tak. That was just the first hour. I only had to flash my passport once, however. On the way, I read the cards of love that the students had created for me. Once more, tears were the norm for part of the trip. As the bus fin-ally reached the Bangkok station, there were plenty of taxis waiting to take my money. I paid one to take me to the Comfort Suites hotel, the same one where I had stayed in November. This time, the hotel did not have a reservation for me. I quickly showed them my printed confirmation, and the truth came to light. Both my hotel stays were to be on the 14th, one in November, and one in December. They thought that my second reservation was a mistake due to the day of the month being the same. As it was the hotel's fault, the clerk called other hotels and found a room for me at another place. A tour service owner volunteered to drive me to Louis' Tavern

(real name) for only five dollars. On the way, he told me that it was a 2-star hotel, so I was expecting somewhat of a dump. However, when we arrived, I found that it was more like a 5-star hotel that one might find in the states. They had a red Christmas tree in the lobby, with colored lights in places, and Christmas music piping from the ceiling. It was also closer to some shops and street vendors, several of which I visited for some much-needed supper.

My cab was early for me the next day. The driver was cordial as he drove me to the airport, where I checked-in around 1:30. I had to visit the Overstay office, which surprised me. I had to pay 400 baht (\$10) for apparently overstaying my visa. I guess that my stay was one day beyond my 30-day allowance. It was no big deal.

The flight to Hong Kong was uneventful. On the flight to Los Angeles, I missed the first big meal, as sleep finally caught up to me. I eventually did get breakfast right before landing in the States. It was a very fruitful and satisfying trip, to say the least, even if I had to create my own paths of service and teaching at the school. I was also grateful that the 20-something Min-pen had turned out to be so very gracious to this guy twice her age, helping me to fit in where there seemed to be no place.

## Chapter 15

# Ciudad Juarez

Roxanne and I had started to participate in Sunday school adult classes at the Methodist Church in Benchmark, shortly after Eva had joined her friends in regular youth group activities. In 2004, Donna, a friend in our class had been researching the Methodist Church's short-term missions projects around the globe. UMVIM was the church's Volunteers in Missions arm for teams to perform week-long humanitarian and/or evangelistic work. Operacion Hogar in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico was the project that she had in mind, and she wanted ME to organize a trip there. Of course, I was ready to go back to Mexico for the third time. And I believed that God was initiating this idea, so that his children would learn to do works of service in behalf of his kingdom. So, I studied the Operacion Hogar manual, its goals for building houses for low-income families, its rules and stipulations, and its financial requirements. I ran it by my friend and youth leader Ross, and we presented the idea to the church leadership.

The pastor had previously gone on a similar trip with his wife, so he was definitely on board with the idea. So, at the end of 2005, we started planning and fundraising for an April 2006 trip, which would coincide with the local school system's spring break. Ross was able to get a handful of youth to commit to the trip. With as many adults, we had a group of 12 planning to go, including Roxanne and Eva, and Eva's close friend Megan, who attended a different church.

After months of raising money, getting parental

permissions, and securing passports, we booked the flights to El Paso, TX. It was a little concerning to some that we were headed to the murder capital of Mexico, a sprawling city of two million people. Crime was purported to be organized by gang members and drug cartels. We were promised by our host, however, that we would have a safe and uneventful trip, as long as we stayed in our prescribed areas. After all, our trip to the same city in 2002 was completely safe.

We arrived in El Paso on a Saturday afternoon, where we met Ross' mother-in-law, Marjorie, who could speak Spanish, having been raised partly in Puerto Rico. We also met our trip coordinator, Jose Luigi Gonzalez. He was a portly, mustachioed, salt-and-pepper, middle-aged man with a wife, two grown sons and a teenage daughter. He had led projects for several years as the onsite “maestro”. Now he coordinated the projects and teams with higher oversight. He had an old school bus waiting to transport us across the border. Getting access into Mexico took a bit longer than I had anticipated. We had to get temporary visas, filling out paperwork on the bus. But before long we were on our way, filling the gas tank, then heading to the bunkhouse. Jose's wife was already at the house, fixing supper for us, which was quite welcome after a long day's journey. Part of the finances that we had paid, included all our meals, as well as a stipend for Jose's family. The evening allowed us a time to unwind.

On Sunday we attended church service at Jose's church. It was Palm Sunday and there was a special presentation by the youth of the church. The church even allowed Ross and I to sing and play guitar for a couple of songs. After lunch, we walked around the bunkhouse neighborhood, venturing to a nearby park, where many people hung out. Everybody enjoyed the sunny atmosphere before the week of hard work.

The bunkhouse consisted of a large dining area, with a decent kitchen and side bathroom. The upper floor was

partitioned into two bunk rooms, each with one bath/shower. We were reminded that the “poopy” paper went into the waste basket, not into the toilet. That was not unusual for a poor, developing area with old infrastructure.

The bunkhouse was in a residential neighborhood. Our worksite, however, was several miles away, on the outskirts of the city, to the north and west, in a terribly poor area called Anapra. It almost looked like a squatter's city, built upon part of an old landfill. From there, one could look into Texas and New Mexico, simultaneously. Most of the “houses” in this neighborhood were only small shacks by any estimate – about the size of my living and dining rooms combined. One more luxury house was about to join the array of disjointed shanties of pallets and tar paper.

Jose had vetted the recipients of our planned work. The young couple was Jorge and Rosa, and their newborn son. We were about to build their house right next to the makeshift shack where they were living with Jorge's mother. The couple were only in their early 20s, and were timid, speaking little with us the entire workweek. We met Manny, our maestro, who spoke little English. Manny was fairly poor himself, with a wife and a couple of kids. He worked for Operacion Hogar when they had organized teams arriving. Otherwise, he worked construction jobs whenever he could find work. He plumbed the site and prepared it for the foundation. Then we finally got to work mixing concrete by hand. After one day, the walls were about three feet high.

Each day that we worked, we had some opportunities to speak or play with the neighbors or their kids. One day, at lunchtime, Jose brought us small toys, which we distributed to kids throughout the surrounding “streets”, trying to speak to them in the little Spanish that we knew. That venture also showed us the pirated electricity that was gained through many lines strewn along the sandy streets. It probably didn't matter how they got the electricity, since that utility was nationalized.

The haphazard connections to the official lines, however, were a safety hazard.

At the end of the second workday, we had the walls completed with two windows and a door in place, as Manny always kept a watchful eye on us construction rookies, verifying that work was completed correctly. That night, we had a special cake, bought by Edwin, to celebrate Megan's birthday, in order to make our 2<sup>nd</sup> outsider feel welcome on our team. Each evening after supper, we also set aside a time to reflect on our day's happenings, and to discuss some scriptures, which conversation was led by a different person each night.

The third day was the last day for mixing concrete. The floor of the house had to be poured thickly, and was leveled by Manny. During lunch, some of us hiked to the top of the large ridge adjacent to Anapra, close to the national border. From the top, one could clearly see the layout of Anapra, which just stretched from sprawling Juarez almost to the adjacent mountains to the southwest. It was definitely desert with only brown ground against a clear blue sky. On top of the ridge, we did find some unusual orange flowers on very tall stalks, surrounded by thorns, a beautiful splash of color amidst the drab and stark landscape. We finished the day with the roof rafters being put in place.

The last work day was mostly a fun day, playing and talking with the family and neighbors. A fire had been crackling when we arrived in preparation for melting tar. Some plywood was cut and nailed to the house rafters in quick fashion by Manny. Then some tar paper was rolled and tacked to the roof. Manny was then handed a new wet-mop. Someone hoisted a bucket of hot tar to him, and away he went, sealing the roof with only a thick layer of tar.

The youth in our group had prepared some skits for the family. They were performed with gusto, with the intention of explaining the gospel message via visual analogy. We prayed

for the family, thanking God for their new house, and encouraging them to seek God. We all enjoyed a meal together before leaving Anapra for the last time.

Since we had a free afternoon, we asked Jose Luigi to give us a tour of Ciudad Juarez. We drove all over the sprawling city, being shown the rich areas, the downtown area, and being told of the current state of crime in the region, which was at an all-time high, murder happening at an escalated rate. Jose Luigi re-assured us, however that if one stayed in the areas directed by him, that there was no need to fear the wickedness of criminals. We also enjoyed the afternoon at the local market, which was also a tourist trap. Food was tasted, trinkets and clothing were purchased, and a nice meal was procured, with an occasional song from the roaming mariachi band. (Of course, tips were expected for extra songs.) Overall, we had seen the good, the bad, the ugly, and the hopeful in a developing nation/city, just across the trickling river from the already-developed and sophisticated city in America. It was quite the contrast of infrastructure and lifestyle.

We actually crossed back into America on Friday afternoon and stayed overnight at a hotel before flying from El Paso. That Friday evening, we were recommended a family restaurant nearby called Elmaro's. Roxanne and I had the steak with peppers and onions, along with a trip to the salad bar. Several people had the same.

Later that evening, after having fallen asleep, Roxanne and I were both awakened with stomach pains, which were then followed by vomiting. So after a nearly sleepless night, Roxanne and I met our team for a foodless breakfast, still queasy in the early morning light. We took taxis to the airport, where we boarded around noon for our flight to Richmond. I was feeling mostly better, but Roxanne was feeling worse. Sitting in the airplane's window seat while waiting to taxi, Roxanne was feeling quite warm. She suddenly passed out, as

our team leader Donna yelled for a flight attendant.

The plane was kept at the jetway, as Roxanne was escorted off the plane. She was just feeling too sick to continue. As she exited the plane, she fell to the floor of the jetway, vomiting everywhere. Needless to say, some medical attention was called, and we were soon on our way to the local hospital, while the rest of the team continued on their way home.

Roxanne got some much needed fluids and rest at the hospital. By this time, I was feeling almost back to normal. After just a couple of hours, Roxanne was feeling much better. We found another nearby hotel, where we were going to spend the night. But after a couple more hours, Roxanne was feeling good enough to fly. So we tried to catch a later flight to Richmond, which happened to be available. We finally made it to Richmond around midnight, where my parents picked us up for the wee hours drive home. We just had to have some drama!

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The 2006 trip was deemed a success, so another trip was planned for the following year. About half the previous team joined several newcomers, including three of Eva's friends and a local contractor. A summer trip was planned for 2007, instead of one in the spring. It was sure to be hot in the desert. Jose Luigi was again our host. Manny was still work-site maestro, but he had two different assistants this time, one from El Salvador. The family for which we would be building consisted of Ismail and Janet, and their three young children, one less than a week old. They literally lived on the edge of Anapra. Their "back yard" was the uninhabited desert hills. They lived in makeshift pallet shacks, as seen before. However, Ismail owned a car in order to drive to work.

On this trip we learned that parts of Anapra were truly

built upon an old landfill. One could see compacted trash in a few of the hillsides next to residences. Yet, there was still physical beauty in the desert hills.

Ismail was barely present when the building was happening. That was okay because we knew that he was at work, which was a blessing to his poor family. On one of our work days, we asked him if he knew that he had a biblical name. He was not aware of such a thing. So someone showed him the chapters in the book of Genesis that recounts the lives of the brothers Ishmael and Isaac. We really do not know how Ismail's life has turned out.

A good deal of the time, while the men were doing physical labor, the college girls were playing with the kids. They would color in coloring books, and play games with the kids. Ismail and Janet's daughter was around nine years old. Her name was Jaire (Ya – eer - day), which was so hard for us foreigners to pronounce. However, I have a photograph of her with Eva, holding hands against the shadowed mid-day desert hills, which extended for miles. It is a photograph I cherish.

Prior to the trip, the team had collected personal hygiene items, toys, and snacks. We brought them in extra suitcases. During the next-to-last day, the kids of the neighborhood were told that we had free goodies for them. About noon, we distributed many care packs to the neighborhood kids. Of course, all the kids were glad to get something that they would probably not otherwise have.

After the work was finished on the last day, we had a short dedication ceremony for the family. Janet was still very sore and mostly bedridden from her delivery of the newborn baby. So, the ceremony was pretty short. We gave them a Bible, prayed for the family, and left them in God's hands.

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They say that three's a charm, so we decided to go back

to Juarez for a 3rd consecutive year. It was early August, 2008, and our team included several of the original gang, as well as five newbies, including my co-worker Abe and his teenaged son. Jose Luigi picked us up from the airport in El Paso, in a different old school bus. As we crossed the border into Juarez, the bus was stopped, and all had to complete temporary visas. Then it was business as usual.

Our worksite was in a different section of Anapra this year. But like the previous years, our bus route took us right past Yonke Jimmy's on our way to Anapra. Manny was once again our work maestro, but his helper this year was a young man named Jorge. We were going to build a small house for a couple who had four kids, ranging in age from eight to fifteen. The couples' names were Luciana and Santino. He worked in the city repairing computers, of which he had a few sitting on a dusty shelf in his open-air makeshift house. This piece of property actually had a large tree which allowed for much shade. A large piece of plywood beneath the tree turned into a table for daily vacation Bible school activities, led by Donna and the girls. This section of Anapra was also closer to the “entrance”, so nearby was a border fence.

The daily work was exactly the same as times before: mixing concrete, laying block, mixing more concrete, pouring the floor, mixing even more. Many of the neighborhood kids showed up each day for the fun, excitement, donuts, and VBS activities. Luciana's mother was also under the tree each day to watch the progress.

The previous two years, I had made a final speech on the last day with the new house family. This year, I asked if one of the youth would like to do the honors. An unlikely volunteer stepped up – Matt S. I had only known Matt for about a year, and I was unsure of his ability to speak something meaningful and spiritual to the family. However, twice he slipped away from the hubbub and hid on the bus, writing his thoughts. On Friday afternoon, Matt gave his

dedication speech, and everyone was very pleased at how thoughtful he was. A step of growth was taken! Manny then strung up a pinata that had been bought, and the kids tried their best to break that donkey. What a blast! Little did I know that this trip would be Roxanne's and my last trip to Mexico.



## Chapter 16

# Canadienne Impromptu

Meanwhile, my government job was swirling in a cesspool of stressful, poorly-managed modernization projects. My former team leads had left the team as well, some months before I did. That left me as the senior player on my Windows server team. When I had the chance, I finally left that team, with its regular Saturday night overtime – updating a huge modernization project that took hours to complete – leaving the office at 6AM on a Sunday morning. So, what wonderful adventure did I run to? An Oracle database team, whose members were not very willing to teach me anything. And I knew nothing of Oracle, databases, or the Unix platform upon which they sat. Besides that, my team did not have a manager, and I barely heard from the person who was barely filling in. I ended up secretly working on a Windows project for a former teammate – just for something to do during my long workday.

Before arriving at that team, however, I took a week off. The family and I decided to take a road trip to Nova Scotia. Eva had just finished her freshman year at college in 2007. Late spring sounded like a good time to visit the northeastern United States and Canada. At least it would get me to a few states that I had never been to. Roxanne and I were up for long hours of driving – Eva, not so much. I was excited, until the night of our first day, when we got stuck in traffic, trying to cross some bridge near New York City. I don't even remember what bridge it was, but we were not trying to get into the city, just around it.

We finally made it through the traffic, and after a few more hours, we arrived at a motel somewhere in Rhode Island

at midnight. It was chilly and rainy; the room was cheap. So cheap was it, that it only had a large heater fan for heat – no baseboard electric. After a lengthy warming of the room, though, we made it through the night with little difficulty.

The next day's driving was not quite as long. We made it to Maine, where we stopped at Acadia National Park, Bar Harbor, or as the locals say, Bah Hahbah. It was an overcast day, so the view from the parkway on Mount Desert Island was a little subdued. Nonetheless, it gave us a glimpse of the beauty of the rocky Atlantic coast, and its towering coastal Cadillac Mountain. At 1530 feet, it is the highest mountain on the east coast of the U.S., and the place where you can be the first person in the U.S. to see the morning's sunrise. Unfortunately, our ascent on Cadillac Mountain took us right into the fog. While the scenery was gorgeous, we could see nothing of the surrounding harbor or ocean or coast and countryside.

We had made plans to stay with some old friends from the Methodist Church, who were now living in the middle-of-nowhere Maine. They had a nice secluded place in the woods, but all I could imagine was being stuck there in winter for months on end – which is what they wanted, after all. More power to ya! We had a great visit, and headed up the coast the next day to make our way across the border.

Midday, it was a moderate wait at the border to get Eva's first glimpse of Canada. New Brunswick was my 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian province to visit. However, the drive to the Bay of Fundy was tedious, with not much to look at. The land on our path was nondescript, with only barely a hint of leaves trying to form on the cold trees. Roxanne and Eva were already tired of three days of driving. We finally arrived at our destination, just outside of Moncton, N.B. – the Hopewell Rocks on the Bay of Fundy. It was not the right time for walking on the floor of the bay. So we drove to our hotel for dinner and planning for the next day. The hotel's dining room was cozy.

However, it had a strange animal-head mounting on the wall. Not only did it contain one female deer head, but it also had a smaller head mounted on the same plaque to the left, as if someone shot mother and baby on the same hunt, and then was proud of it!

The wide bay between Nova Scotia and New Brunswick is known for the most extreme tide levels in the whole world. At some points along the bay, the difference between high tide and low tide is 50 feet. At Hopewell Rocks, the “ocean floor” gets uncovered twice a day. The rock pillars are close to the shore, so one can walk on the mud and touch the odd rock formations, some of which are fifty feet in height.

The morning was cloudy, but we got to see low tide, which is what we had hoped for. We walked all around and studied the rocks, taking pictures of seaweed that has grown on the rocks themselves, and which also gets uncovered at low tide. It was an awesome spectacle to imagine that just hours later, the rocks would be half covered by water. We could not stay and wait to see the opposite of what we experienced, as we had more ground to cover, and little time to do it.

We headed up the coast, through Moncton, and into Nova Scotia. Eva was driving with me in the back seat. Suddenly I told Eva to slow down and pull over. I had just seen my first bald eagle – not just in Canada – but ever!! I scrambled for my camera, exited the car, and managed to get four pictures, before the bird had flown the coup.

After that, it was a straight shot east, over some high country, whose road ditches still had some May snow, and finally into the capital of Halifax, where we had hotel reservations. Halifax had a beautiful bayfront downtown. The land sloped upward from the bay, so the city sprawled upward as well. The city also had an old grassy citadel atop the hill, overlooking the town. We did not have much daylight to sight-see; however, a stroll into a street with some older buildings revealed window-sized facial photos of ordinary

people with comical face postures. They were larger than life, and the funniest display that I have ever seen. You had to be there!

The next day would be a long driving day, as if any other day wasn't. We headed south, first, to Peggy's Cove, a nearby natural tourist attraction, just about 25 miles from Halifax. The weather was clear, but windy. The broad undulating granite shoreline proved itself to be a thing of beauty, and well worth the side trip. The photo opportunities were awesome, with a small white and red-capped lighthouse, built right on top of the granite. It was the kind of place where one could spend hours, just watching the ocean, if it had not been so cold, due to the east wind.

We then backtracked and headed north to the mountains. Had we known that we were so close to Oak Island, I would have stopped there for a fantastic history lesson about possible buried treasure. Instead, we traveled a circle around the perimeter of Cape Breton Island. It was a beautifully rugged coast line, even without any foliage. We stopped halfway to the northern coast, and took a whale-watching tour close to Inverness. We did not travel more than a mile from shore in a small vessel, which held less than 20 people. We did happen to catch a few minke whales barely break the surface of the water. The whale-watching was a disappointment, but the views from the boat of the landscape were gorgeous.

We followed the Cabot Trail around the island, stopping once for a short walk to some waterfalls. The lakes and streams were quite beautiful in the full sunlight. The views of the ocean through the mountain gaps made for fantastic photos. I just wished that May would have brought some leaves to maritime Canada.

The next day, we were off to our 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian province in a week's time. We took a morning ferry from Nova Scotia to Prince Edward Island. The ride took a couple

of hours, so I brought my guitar from the car to the upper indoor deck. There was hardly anyone in the seating area, so I had plenty of time to play, while not disturbing anyone. Upon arriving, we walked through Charlottetown, the capital, admiring the beautiful houses, gardens, and church buildings. The town is on the southern coast of the middle part of the island. We also visited a college campus, where there was a weird geometric brick landscaping design.

Of course, we had to rush to see other sights. We drove to the northern coast, where there was a beautiful sandy beach. The Gulf of St. Lawrence is a huge body of water, but its waves on the beach were ever so slight. On this coast is Cavendish, home to the house which inspired Lucy Maud Montgomery to write Anne of Green Gables in 1908. We had enjoyed the made-for-TV movie of the same name, so we wanted to experience the environment. The property was open to park and walk around, but the house was shut up. One could only peer through the windows. Of course, the two-story house was white with green gables. The property, situated in the country, had a huge barn of the same colors. It was an idyllic setting for a country boy like me. I could only imagine, though, that the winters were extremely long there and the summers all too short.

We made our three-quarter circular arc around the midsection of P.E.I. with plenty of sunshine left in the day. The trek over the Northumberland Strait again to get to New Brunswick was on a long causeway, which made our jaunt much shorter than the ferry ride.

The next day consisted of more driving, backtracking through New Brunswick into Maine again, on our way to Bar Harbor again. In one week's time, summer had arrived early to southern Maine. It was 90 degrees in late May. The trip up Cadillac mountain was much more beautiful with plenty of sunshine, and fantastic views of the Atlantic. We got to the small beach on the drive around Acadia National Park, where

we had stopped the previous time. This time, there were many people sun-bathing in the unusual heat. The ocean was still a chilly 50 degrees. The coast of Mount Desert Island is rugged, rocky, and gorgeous, ready-made by God for a million photographs. We were glad we stopped a second time to experience the place with no fog.

The next day, we headed for home with non-stop driving, arriving well after dark. Roxanne and Eva's first trip to Canada totaled about 3000 miles, much boredom in the car, a first bald eagle sighting, and memories for a lifetime.

## Chapter 17

# Spring Break and Work Woes

Ross, the UMC youth leader decided in 2007 that he wanted to find a service project for some middle school kids – a project that would not have to take them out of the country. He found an eclectic opportunity in Asheville, NC, working with some local charities, especially a few whose goal was to assist a growing Veteran population – one that was fairly poor and needy. Ross was able to get six teenage boys to commit to a trip over spring break in March 2008. Two mothers joined us in committing to taking a week from work to chaperone the boys. (Ross had invited me, since I had some DIY skills, in case we had some specialized labor to do.)

We took two vans for the ten of us and headed over the mountains toward western North Carolina. We actually never saw downtown Asheville. Instead we stayed in a Christian retreat lodge in Black Mountain, NC. It was a spacious building with a large fireplace. It had lodging for 100 people; we were the only ones staying this week. It was still winter after all. The caretaker made us breakfast every morning; we were on our own for lunch and supper.

We drove to several “ministries” in the suburbs of Asheville during the week, doing whatever work was needed. We organized and cleaned food pantries; cleaned parking lots, and prepared ground for landscaping; helped serve lunch at a couple of food kitchens; and we laid tile in one ministry's ground floor/basement office space. The ministry already had the tiles; they just needed someone to lay them. I had never done this work before, but we were able to purchase the right mortar and grout. It took two days, but the whole team

pitched in to mix mud and to grout the tiles, and clean up. Man, were my knees feeling it after the second day.

In the evenings back at the retreat lodge, we would spend a couple of hours, reflecting on the work done that day, if we saw God at work in the tasks at hand, or in the people we served. Of course, it was emphasized that a part of following Jesus is sacrificing one's own time to serve others. One of the evenings, we played a large, long game of hide-and-seek. The large building lent itself well to this long game. I ended up hiding in a smaller room, that had clothes piled on tables. Apparently they were to be taken to a thrift store at some point. I decided to hide under the clothes on the top of one table. I actually laid there for about an hour, even listening to the kids' conversations about me, as they were truly stumped in finding me. I didn't give in for one second. I never did reveal where I was hiding.

On the last day of the trip, we drove a little bit to the south to Chimney Rock State Park. The kids' desires were overridden by the adults. The highlight was a rock pinnacle that could be obtained via elevator and stairs. The surrounding views at 2200 feet were spectacular. Due east was Lake Lure, a “cross-shaped” man-made lake that was formed by damming the Broad River in 1927. Once we were on top of the rock, even the kids had a good time and were glad that we decided on this small adventure.

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Back at work at my government job, my stint on the Oracle team only lasted three months. A fortuitous opening on the local network team allowed me to transition there with no loss to the Oracle team whatsoever. It was just another example of terrible management and oversight. The team that I was joining, however, had a wonderful manager, who used to be part of the hands-on team. So, while I had no experience in

networking, I was excited to learn something completely new.

I was immediately put to work running cables under raised flooring, from node to network switch. I also documented cabling and cleaned up wiring in the various network closets. That was fine in itself, but I needed more than that to keep me occupied. So, I was given the task of organizing and storing IOS backups of the Cisco network switches. That did not even fill my time, so I asked to be a part of larger projects. However, the seniors on the team did not feel that I was ready for such. After a year on the team, I was feeling restless again, and still feeling like an outsider, instead of feeling like a team player.

It was that time that I approached my manager about a bold and extreme proposition, after discussing it with Roxanne and gaining her approval. I had tentatively arranged to go back to Thailand, not just for four or six weeks, but for the entire winter! I would have to take a leave of absence, without pay, for that amount of time. I had grown weary of the winters; I was looking for something meaningful and useful, since I felt neither on my current team. I had thought that God had opened a door for me to teach again in Thailand. It would allow me to keep my government job, avoid winter, and do something productive and good in an environment where I felt wanted and needed.

My manager actually approved and allowed me to proceed with the plan. To the government, it would be like taking a sabbatical. I had to use one day of annual leave per pay period, with the rest of the days unpaid, to keep my health insurance active. That would be a small price to pay in order to feel wanted and productive again. So, I booked my airfare for a November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008 departure.



## Chapter 18

### Thailand – Part 3

Roxanne drove me to the airport in the dark, as my flight was to leave at 10:45 PM. Was I really leaving my wife for four or five months? Did I really think I was going to evade winter, and enjoy the dry season in tropical Asia? I am not sure that I was thinking at all. For this trip, I flew the eastern route. After an eight-hour flight, and some decent sleep, I arrived in Doha, Qatar, that little appendix off the Arabian peninsula, jutting into the Persian Gulf. There was little time to even look out the windows, as I had to rush to meet my connecting flight. That flight turned out to be full of loud adults and crying children.

An ex-Catholic from England was my neighbor, and he talked my ear off for quite a while. He said that he was open to the idea of God, but his life other-wise showed that he really wasn't interested. I arrived in Bangkok early in the morning, full of jet lag. My luggage was waiting promptly. I found a taxi to take me to the Silver Gold Garden hotel. It was a fairly new hotel, so the driver had a difficult time finding it, even though it was only about four miles from the airport. I had a full day to relax and sleep before a long bus ride to Mae Sot. God had delivered me safely to Thailand again! I did call Min-Min that afternoon to let her know that I would be arriving in Mae Sot the next evening. What a surprise! She was not aware that I was coming at all. CLW headquarters had not informed her of my arrival, so no one at the school was prepared for a boarder. It did not matter; I think that they were used to things like this.

After a nap in the afternoon and a little sleep that night,

I awoke way too early. That just meant that I would not be late to arrive to the bus stop. The hotel had a shuttle that dropped me at the nearest bus stop. When I asked to buy a ticket to Mae Sot, the attendant thought that I said Mae Sai. I was surprised that I caught the difference in her enunciation, as I re-stated that my destination was Mae SOT! I was told that no buses from this station ran to Mae Sot. I needed to be at the city center bus station for a ride to Mae Sot. So, my hotel decision away from the city center turned out to be an unwise one. I took a bus from there to city center, and caught the last bus from there to Tak, which is a town about an hour east of Mae Sot. The last bus to Mae Sot had already left, and I missed it. I figured that I could find somewhere to sleep in Tak and take a bus the next morning over the mountains to Mae Sot.

By the time that the bus arrived in Tak, the sun was just setting. I had no idea if there were any hotels in town, as there were none that I noticed next to the open-air bus station. I called Min-Min and told her my situation; I asked if her brother Mar-kon could drive over the mountain to pick me up. She told me that Mar-kon would not want to do that, under so little notice. Needless to say, I was not a happy camper with the way things had turned out this day. I resigned myself to just sleeping with my luggage at the bus stop for the night; at least there was a restroom there.

All of a sudden, a local woman who spoke very good English approached me to ask if I needed a ride. I was quite surprised at this stroke of ....God. She negotiated an overpriced ride in a van to MaeSot with a male driver; so I jumped at the opportunity (the entire bus trip from Bangkok was only 272 baht; the short ride from Tak to MaeSot cost me 400 baht!). The driver did not wear a seat belt, and he took the mountain curves much too fast. But he knew the roads well, realizing when to get out of the lane of incoming traffic, before it materialized in a deep curve. I asked him to drop me off at

the Mae Sot Central Hotel, with its open-air foyer.

The front desk clerk thought that I was a guest, but I quickly stated that I just needed a seat to make a phone call. Min-Min had Mar-kon pick me up shortly thereafter, and it was fifteen minutes later that I was at the Huai Kalok school.

What a trip! That's what happens when one travels halfway around the world, to the middle of nowhere, thinking that he can make a difference, and that a difference can be made in him. The former is more easily done; the latter is another matter. God had made a way for me to get to my destination safely, with no need to sleep in the open, despite the obstacles and crazy emotions that I had experienced.

It must have been a surprise to my old friend Ebene, who was glad to see me and vice versa. I spoke with a few students, had Ser Won help me to get connected to the Internet, showered, and went to bed by 10 PM. My old room was unused, so I just moved in with no difficulty. However, as soon as I had shut the door for the night, a strange sensation came over me. I felt as if I was not supposed to be there, that I had made a hasty decision. Suddenly, I was not so enthusiastic about being there.

I awoke just after midnight. I was prepared for erratic sleep. I took a sleeping pill, as was to be my custom for many nights to come. I still awoke early on the Saturday morning. When it was time for the kids to wake up, I got ready and immediately started helping them with their morning chores. I wanted to show them that I was not there to be served, but to be an example as a servant. After a big breakfast, I spoke with Ebene for a long time, then started to learn the kids' names. I took a nap in the afternoon, then played with the kids that evening before their study time. The kids at the school were much younger than those who were there three years earlier. Only one student was present, who had been at the school in 2005 – Klu Pelay Paw. She remembered me, and I remembered her as the piano player from my former visit. She

was also the oldest student among the entire class. I believe that all of her classes were one-on-one, so I ended up teaching her solo, several times. The youngest boy was only eight, which I thought was quite young to be at a boarding school. He was actually from Burma, and not from one of the refugee camps. A few of the younger students could speak English fairly well, which surprised me, but only a few of the older students could speak decent English. Nonetheless, during my time at the school, I communicated well with most of the students, except for the youngest class, whose grasp of English was just beginning. The full-time cook was a man named Lha Thaug. He was about 40 years old and also from Burma. He spoke very little English, so we did not communicate much, but he was very cordial. I ended up leaving my sneakers with him, after he asked me for them.

The property seemed smaller to me than my last visit in 2005. The trees and new shrubs in the courtyard had grown quite large. The front of the building had been painted yellow instead of white. It almost looked like a tourist destination. A new sign had been installed over the front doors. It read “Growth and Opportunity Foundation”. It was a neutral name that allowed this Christian school to operate a little under the radar. After all, these students were not Thai citizens.

I awoke very early on my first Sunday, earlier than I wanted. So after a time of prayer and reading, I accessed one of the computers and used Skype to call home and talk with Roxanne. Since my last stay at the school, a satellite dish had been installed for Internet access. This would prove to be sporadic throughout my stay. (A couple of times I used the cell phone to call home, which was quite costly, but Roxanne was willing to pay for it.) Before the morning church service, I taught the kids how to sing “It’s Your Kindness” by Leslie Philips. It is one of my favorite sing-alongs, based upon Romans 2:4. I continued to sit with the kids, while they practiced their singing.

A sudden wave of depression tangibly came upon me – a weird sense of loneliness. This stay was quickly turning out to be a serious fight and/or test. Of course, when Ebene started the church service, he asked me to speak to the kids. I spoke about forgiving each other's grievances, and about God's love for us. I told them that I was at the school to help them.

Another American named Mike, a friend of Ebene's, showed up in the afternoon for an overnight stay. He told me that he was helping with two Karen Bible Colleges and another school in the area, teaching Bible, ESL, and Psychology. Mike was younger than me, single, and felt called by God to serve in Thailand. I never did come to discover his whole story regarding how he was funding his stay, or even where he was residing. In the evening, I got to speak with Mrs. Sungha, senior, who happened to be at the school with her adult son Lue-kee. They joined us for evening worship service.

There was a visiting teacher from America at the school. Her name was Victoria, an older woman, who had never married. She was somehow related to Tom and Janet, the older couple who were teaching at the school during my 2005 stay. Ebene, however, taught the daily Bible classes. So on Monday morning, he relinquished his duties to me, and away I went. In the afternoon, I had a one-on-one Bible class with Klu Pelay Paw. The sense of depression had lifted after I had a day of teaching. That evening (and subsequent evenings) was then spent in preparation for the daily Bible classes.

On Wednesday of that week, very early in the morning I heard God's spirit speak to me, reminding me of Mark 10:29-30. I had been feeling depressed again, so these verses encouraged me to press on, reminding me that those who left home and wife for the sake of the gospel would be rewarded in the end. Later in the day, I told the 10-12 year-old Bible class of this revelation; they seemed surprised that God would speak

in some specific fashion to a person.

After classes on Thursday, I went into town with Ebene to watch him play in a community soccer match. As darkness settled, I stood watching the match. I noticed a man not too far away, constantly watching me. As I moved away, he would follow me at a distance. He eventually left altogether, but it was unsettling. That night, I had a nightmare around 4AM.

Friday's Bible classes turned out to be the best of the week. However, I would not see Klu Pelay Paw again. She had gone back to the Karenni refugee camp to finish paperwork for her Thai ID card. I ended up taking a long walk in the country with Hla Thaug. When we got back to the school, who did I find, but Martin and Peter, two of the group with whom I spent the week in 2004 during our first trip to Thai-land. They were working in Chiang Mai with a training school, and were just visiting Mae Sot. It was a nice surprise to see another person returning to serve in Thailand.

My Saturdays were free days – free to go into town on the motorbike, get breakfast at the Central Hotel, then shop for supplies needed at the school, and even stop at an Internet cafe. Connectivity at the school was sporadic, so a stop to work on email for free was nice. Every day, though, I felt tired in the middle of the day. I'm sure that it was from lack of sleep every night. Till the day that I left Thailand, my sleep never normalized.

After a week, I sensed that the students were warming up to me. I played guitar with several of them, showing them some chords and techniques. Bible classes went well every day, except with the youngest class. However, I made the students read Bible verses in Karen instead of in English. I hoped that the Holy Spirit would speak to them from God's word in their own heart language. Then I would try to ascertain if they understood what they just read. I also worked with the boys in the afternoons or weekends to repair a few bicycles.

Some evenings I held guitar lessons with the boys; other evenings, I sat with the kids and helped them with school work; and yet, other evenings, I gave some of the girls lessons on the flutophone. If I couldn't sleep early at night, I would read or listen to music. During a few afternoons, all the students went to a nearby field to glean green beans. I joined them a few times, then helped them to sort them out on a large tarp. Ngo Reh found a baby corn one of the times; he considered it a treasure and just stuck it in his mouth. Some evenings, there was no running water; so I had to take a bucket bath with tepid water from the cistern. It was not pleasant, as evenings in the Thai countryside can get chilly.

Two and a half weeks since my arrival, one afternoon, that dreaded lonely feeling hit me again. That same afternoon, Mrs. Sungha's daughter Dep-Dep asked me to take over her mother's English conversation class, which I gladly did. For the next two weeks, I filled in for her, teaching the two older classes. The oldest class' understanding of English was decent so I really enjoyed working with them.

That following Sunday, I went into town to attend church service with Mike. It was a Baptist church, led by some Filipinos. Mike then led a Sunday school class. After a typical church service, I went to lunch with a group of Westerners, who were working in Mae Sot in various capacities. They reminded me that we were making a difference to the Karen people, helping to educate them, which would eventually empower them in the hope of securing their autonomy in eastern Burma. I was also reminded that one person can't solve all the local problems. We all just needed to do the task that God put before us, and to do it faithfully.

The next week I realized that my original dream of helping once again at the school was not fulfilling at all. Everything I did seemed like work – because it was. I suppose that I had visions of sugarplums in which all activity would be effortless and natural – a pure enjoyment every day. I was also

missing Roxanne and Eva. So I decided to cut short my winter stay-over; I had become disillusioned and disappointed. Six weeks was long enough. There was only one problem, however. Public protests in Bangkok over corruption in government spilled into the international airport; it was effectively shut down, with no flights leaving or arriving. There was no way for me to know when I could get a flight out of Bangkok, so I started to look for a flight out of Chiang Mai, which was a day's bus-ride north.

I awoke very early on Friday, November 28. (Are you feeling the sensation of *deja vu*?) So I decided to call home and talk to Roxanne. She was at my parent's house for their evening Thanksgiving dinner. No one in Thailand was celebrating. It was just another dry-season, beautiful day. I had a good Bible class with the oldest students, as we discussed the need for Jesus to open our eyes, like in Luke 24. I taught the middle class about the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> commandments, especially what the Sabbath meant to us living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The youngest class ended up being another baby-sitting session. After an unusual sweetbread lunch with Victoria, I was ready to teach the English classes. However, some unexpected guests showed up. It was some high school students from a missionary-kid boarding school, Grace International, from Chiang Mai. I never did find out why they were there, even though I spoke with their leaders at length that evening and the next morning. Obviously, someone had arranged the visit. Random things seemed to happen quite frequently, with no foreknowledge given to me, even when it affected me. The Grace kids played quite loudly that evening with the school kids.

A special service was also planned that night for Lue-Kee's daughter, since this was her birthday. At 5:30 PM, a local Karen elder started the service and spoke quite seriously, reading from the scriptures, while the bored daughter sat quietly up front, fidgeting just a little. I don't remember the

elder smiling at all. I ended up giving the little girl of seven or eight some candy. After that, I was given some foreknowledge about Saturday's plans. I was told that I was going to attend (yes, sir!) a Karen wedding at a church in Mae Sot with the Sunghas. I didn't mind the command, as it was going to lead to something different and special for a foreigner.

It was an early wedding on Saturday. We left the school at 8:30 for a 9:30 service start. A female leader from the Grace contingency joined us for the wedding. The concrete church building was well-lit and decorated with many different types of flowers. The Thai pastor of the church was the only one wearing a suit and tie. The young well-dressed couple were obviously from poor families. The bride's father wore jeans and a traditional Karen tunic. The bride was naturally beautiful, even with her makeup, wearing a somewhat traditionally-Western wedding dress. The groom wore a white shirt with a tie and Karen vest. The wedding ceremony itself was traditionally Western. As the bride and groom finished exchanging vows, they proceeded out of the building under an overhanging gauntlet of long palm fronds and flowers, which were held up by several children in attendance. It was a wonderful exit. The reception was outside the building under several large tents. Much food was prepared, and it was good to have an abundance of meat from which to choose.

We were headed back to the school before lunchtime. I declined to eat lunch with the kids, but instead helped them to do their cleaning chores. Activities throughout the day were again loud; the Grace kids spent the remaining day with the students, so I made my arrangements to depart Thailand, despite the unknown re-opening of the Bangkok airport.

Sunday morning I decided to Skype with my family in the computer room. Many of the female students saw my activity, so I invited them into my video conversation. They ended up singing for my family, which we all thoroughly enjoyed. The morning church service included the Grace

students splitting into small groups and praying for the Karen students.

After lunch, the Grace kids left; I then helped the students clean. After chores were finished, I played some card games with some of the students, until they got called away for some unknown task. (I have noticed that often when I am engaged in some activity with a student, that he/she often gets called away to do something – it is a strange perception and observation.)

At 4:30, we had the evening church service. I gave the message about one person, whose heart was pursuing God's heart, making a difference in the life of someone else. The students then spent time studying. The evening ended up being a late one. Sweet December was celebrated in a subdued fashion, inside, with candlelight. After midnight, a little sticky rice and cold dried meat was served, which was a special treat to the students. (Cold rice and cold meat is an acquired taste that I have not acquired. It is a continual observation!)

Classes the next day did not start until 9AM to allow the students a little extra time to sleep. All my classes were rough, though. No one seemed to want to learn or pay attention, but only sleep today. (On one occasion, I did let the class sleep, because I knew that they were overworked). Nonetheless, I still taught songs and concepts from the Bible, hoping that the English they knew would sink in.

I had been working on writing a song about Kawthoolei, the name that the Karen called their “homeland”. On Wednesday, I introduced it to the older class, then shared it with one of my guitar students that evening. Thi Nha Blue Htoo, was his name, and one of the better guitar players. He was very interested in learning how to play it. (The next January I recorded the song myself, using an electronic drum track, acoustic guitar, bass, and keyboards. A few years later, I was able to share it, via my website, with Thi Na, (who was then living in the U.S.).

The darkness comes early in the evenings in Thailand, as it is near the tropics. It is like constantly living in late February in West Virginia, only warmer. The warmth is the only consolation of early darkness. Playing guitar, helping with studies, reading, and talking with adults, were about the only things to do at the school, especially when the Internet connectivity was lacking. A combination of those activities was my custom during the evening of school days. I did not miss the ready availability of television. But I did wish I could spend more time outdoors in the evening. I don't mean that I couldn't go outside of the school building. I do mean that a walk into the countryside by myself was not wise. A brief walk into Huay Kalok was okay, as there were plenty of house lights along the way and in the village itself. A ride on the motorbike at night from Mae Sot was okay also, as well as a challenge to my nascent bike skills, which also included driving on the left side of the road.

On the days that Victoria was absent, I taught the Bible classes in the morning. With the older students, I mostly initiated discussions about biblical concepts, such as which enemy we were to fight – was it our spiritual enemy, Satan, or those mistreating the Karen people? The middle-aged students got a good dose of the Ten Commandments during my time at the school; the younger students got drier lessons, such as reading straight from the Karen Bible; as I have stated, our English communication was lacking. All classes got a treatment of various English songs at indiscriminate times.

On Thursday, December 4, I taught two Bible classes in the morning, then waited for Mar-kon to pick me up for a trip to Myawaddy, Burma. My visa was soon to expire, so I needed to cross into Myanmar and return in order to extend my Thai visa. Mar-kon dropped me off near the exit. I immediately crossed the river bridge and entered Burma for the fourth time. I was met by the same guide who had met me four years earlier – Cho Taung. I told him that I wanted to buy

a vase of teak or ceramic. He guided me along some back streets to a teak workshop, where we waited for about ten minutes, for the owner to unlock a door. I was uncomfortable, so I left, and went instead to find a flag. We took a bike rickshaw to a small store, where I purchased a Burmese flag with Thai money. I also traded some Thai money for a Burmese 500 Kyat bill, just for a keepsake. I probably lost money on the deal. My trip was short as I crossed again into Thailand. The officer working the immigration booth was none too friendly, issuing me a 15-day visa. I was really expecting another 30-day visa, but it mattered not. I would be leaving Thailand in less than two weeks.

The next day, I made another motorbike trip into town for some food and school supplies. I had coffee at the Oasis cafe, where I met the American owner named Diane, and a visitor named Mike A. (It seems that I met a lot of Mikes in Thailand!) They were both serving at her orphanage for legal Thai residents. (It was this Mike, whom I ended up supporting over the years as a full-time Christian worker in Mae Sot. He eventually married a local woman, who already had a young daughter, and they had two more children together.) I then found an Internet cafe, which was refreshing, as the Internet connection had not been working at the school the previous week.

Saturday, I made another run into town for hardware supplies (I am beginning to enjoy riding the motorbike!). After returning, Ngo Reh and Tu Reh helped me to wash clothes and to replace 50 window screen tabs. After supper, I helped the kids wash dishes, as often was my custom. We then watched one of the Lord of the Rings movies. Ebene and Hser Get decided to retire early, so I was alone with the kids. Around 9PM, they also got tired of watching the movie, so I sent them to bed. I went upstairs with them to lead them in their customary night prayer, which was an honor to me.

On Sunday, the whole student body and staff went

down the village lane to a nearby Karen church service. I had to help transport the kids via motorbike. Ebene spoke at the service at length. I was mostly bored, because not a word was spoken in English. I tried my best to pray through the boredom, as Mrs. Sungha had instructed me. After the service, for lunch, I served everyone apples with peanut butter, and crackers. It was an unusual meal for them. At 4:30 we had the youth service as usual; I spoke to them about the rewards from God for doing good, blessing the poor, et al.

Monday, Dec. 8 turned out to be a day of classes of my own making entirely. We started at 10 AM as one large class, and went over English for two hours. I gave them an hour for lunch break, then had them study for an hour. In the afternoon, Dep-Dep arrived and had some serious closed-door talks with some of the students. I heard some very serious words and saw several serious faces coming out of the room. There was a little laughter mixed in, as well. I never found out the reason for such. However, that evening, all the students went to town with Dep-Dep, Hser Get, and Hla Thaug. They gave me the keys to the locked school. So I decided to ride into town myself, to check out the Internet cafe, as well as to get chocolate milk from 7-Eleven! I was back at the school well before the kids arrived, and prayed with the boys before they retired.

Tuesday was also weird with classes starting late and being truncated. In the afternoon, we practiced Christmas songs for an evening service at the nearby Karen church. Some Bible students from Mae La refugee camp were there, singing songs, performing mime, and leading games. At 9:30 we sang the last song and returned to the school. Wednesday morning allowed me the opportunity to have real coffee that some American friends had mailed to me. No more of that nasty instant coffee!

The next day was yet another topsy-turvy school day, as the staff took the older class to First Church in Mae Sot for

more singing in the morning. I ended up teaching English to a mix of students. In the afternoon, I helped the students to draw flags of the countries to where they might like to emigrate. I also helped them to write thank you notes to their sponsors. After supper, Hser Get was in quite the mood to talk with me. She also asked me to teach the students two Christmas songs in English. So I hastily created a Word document in order to teach these songs the next day.

I awoke before 4 AM from a dream (which was not unusual). I got up and made coffee to prepare for my day. I printed the song lyrics, which I gave to the two older classes; we practiced those songs in their respective Bible classes. With the younger class, I had them read long passages of Scripture from the Karen Bible, until the students got out of hand (as was often the case); so we played games and looked at pictures from a school textbook.

In the afternoon, I had my last English class with the older students, helping a few of the girls with reading English aloud. I also talked with them about God's fairness (justice), and how we often cannot see it in our oppressed circumstances. By this time, the older students had really warmed up to me; this English class had been my favorite, so I took a special photo with the four girls and one boy – Kraa Daa Paw, Juke Raat, Ruthie, Na Mer Paw, and Shu-Dee. After class, who would appear but the mistress herself - Min-Min. She had just returned from her month-long trip to Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, visiting CLW headquarters and the local Karen population. We had a lengthy candid discussion of her trip, and what I had accomplished in my short time at the school.

Afterwards, I worked with the boys to tie up some loose maintenance ends. We addressed several items: we fixed the boy's bathroom door's creaking; we fixed the boy's downstairs toilet, and my shower glass; we also cleaned the front school sign. After dinner, it was the usual custom of

helping to clean dishes, and then to pack for my departure. At 9PM, a special good-bye service was held for me (which I expected and thus purposefully kept it non-melodramatic). The kids sang songs and said their thank-yous. During the second song, Ngo Reh gave me a small hand-made cross, and Na Mer Paw gave me a white cross necklace. I gave some parting thoughts regarding the need to work hard and to glorify God with their studies. Paw Kaw Yee, the youngest girl, was the only one to shed tears, and I noticed. All of the students gave me notes; we took pictures, and then said good-night.

On Friday morning, I did not eat breakfast with the students, but by myself, as I cleaned my room. I then waited at the front entrance for my ride to arrive. Na Mer Paw came to the door and stood with me. I asked her how she was doing. She said “So, so.” I then asked her if she understood that phrase. She affirmed that she did. It was then that I broke down and cried and hugged her. She did not cry, but she was sad. Mar-kon arrived in a few minutes, and we left just as quickly. Heartache is tough, but the kids will carry on and grow; we are all in God's hands.

The bus ride over the mountains to Tak was slow due to much fog. I then caught a bus to Chiang Mai and arrived there at 2PM. I took a taxi to the hotel, which was quite nice. I walked around the area, and found a lonely restaurant, where I had some Pad Thai. On my way back to the hotel, I saw a man with one leg, sitting on the sidewalk. He called to me in English, so I went over to talk with him. His name was Khin Saw. He was a Burmese from Rangoon. He had lost his leg to a land mine several years prior. He said that his wife had left him, with their son and daughter. I don't know how he got to Thailand, but he told me that he had become a Christian three years prior. He had taken English lessons from a California man; hence, his proficiency in the language. He was pleasant to talk with, and he was not even begging. I did buy him a chocolate ice cream and gave him 100 baht. Once again, a

chance meeting of a man whose life is in God's hands.

The next morning brought me a free but lukewarm breakfast, with tasty coffee, however. I caught the shuttle to the airport with no difficulty. It was a short flight to Phuket, the luxury beach town on Thailand's southwest shore. It was quite beautiful from the air. Then it was on to Singapore at night; then to South Korea, where I had to go through customs. So I decided to leave the airport proper, just to say I was on Korean soil. Then it was a short flight to Tokyo, and some last-minute shopping before the 12-hour flight to America. All the flights were fine with no incidents (except for two overweight baggage payments), and plenty of food (those Asians know how to feed a flier!). My friend Landon picked me up from the airport. It was good to be back home!

Well, so much for my idea of escaping a full season of winter and a dissatisfied job with the government! Now I had to call my supervisor and tell him that I was returning to work much earlier than I had planned. What was I going to tell my co-workers since I had previously told one of them that I thought God himself was leading me into this sabbatical? There is nothing like humble pie to make one feel as yet another failure. I felt like this was becoming a habit; and there was still more failure to come.

## Chapter 19

# Door-to-Door

From time to time throughout my adult life, I had felt prompted to take the gospel message to the general public. I started with something simple, but bold. I would sometimes take a handful of tracts that I thought were concise and relevant for the contemporary culture, and stand on the street corner of my hometown's square, in the summer on Saturday evenings. When a passerby would approach, I would offer him a small pamphlet to read. I encountered many people who were not interested, but a good many who actually stopped and talked with me, like Shannon, a young twenty-something who was seeking for something real. I hope that twenty years later, he took God seriously.

Then, there was Uncle Brother, who was a guitar player at the local bar on the same block. He was into some new age mysticism that I couldn't quite understand. There was often no one walking the street, so I would have to discipline myself to pray during the boredom of just standing. Sometimes, I would walk next door to the town park, just sit down with a loner on a park bench, and strike up a conversation. It was like a farmer planting seeds in a field.

After a lengthy hiatus from this activity, sometime around 2009, I felt the Holy Spirit “prompting” me to take the good news door-to-door. (I don't know how else to describe the sensation, if it was a “sensation”.) So I devised a plan to knock on every door east of my house, along my own county road, all the way to the next county, which was about 10 miles. Side roads that connected to other county roads were off-limits. Only dead-ends, driveways, and houses right on the

main county road were a part of the systematic plan. This way, I could easily keep track of where I had been, and where I needed to start again, the next time that I continued.

By this time, I had written and printed my own tracts, two different ones that I thought were even more relevant to a general population. The first one asked questions about one's feelings toward contemporary religion, then summarized the message of God's salvation for mankind. The second one greatly elaborated on the need for salvation, and on God's plan for implementing it.

On a bright summer Sunday morning at 10 AM, I took my backpack loaded with tracts and New Testaments, and started walking east, stopping at each house, to see if anyone was interested in having a conversation. If no one answered the door, I would try to find a crack or door jamb in which to insert my tracts. If someone actually answered the door, I would present my appearance with a small sign in front of me that read: "We are not Mormons or JW's". There was no "we". It was just me. Through my many days of this activity, I did have a few partners from time to time. I would continue till about noon-to-1 PM. Then I would re-trace my steps and walk back to my starting point. Every step along the road was accompanied by prayer. I wanted God to use this activity for his kingdom and to plant seeds for it.

A few persons actually invited me into their homes. When that happened, I spent as much time as possible talking with that person. I had no time limits; if my conversation took the whole morning, then so be it. I was not in a rush to meet my goal. This continued for most Sundays until mid-autumn. I then discontinued until late spring of the following year. I figured that no one wants to have a conversation with a stranger through an open door, when the weather outside was cold. I certainly would not want to do so. As I got further away from my house, I would drive my vehicle to a safe spot, then park, and start walking, then backtrack to the car. So this

continued for about seven years, until I finally came full circle on the other side of the highway, back to my own house. The following are a few noteworthy encounters.

Less than a mile from my house lay a mobile home community. But right before that, there was a small house which sat back a bit from the main highway. The Sunday that I happened to be at that house, the residents and some friends were nearer to the road, preparing to erect a small, above-ground swimming pool. As soon as the owner, a man probably in his 30s, saw my sign as I approached the small crowd, he immediately stopped my progress and said, "Go! Just go!" He had become immediately furious. So, as his young son watched, I headed off toward the trailer park.

It took several trips through the mobile home park. A few people invited me in, mostly older folks living alone who basically wanted someone to talk with. At the last home within the community, a fairly rough-looking structure, a man named Sam engaged in a lengthy conversation with me, at times peaceful and at times verging on the violent. However, when the conversation ended, I knew that I was welcome back – for several reasons. He had just been placed on parole for drunk driving. His driver's license had been suspended, and he needed from time to time to get to the grocery store. His sister-in-law lived nearby, and she was the one who drove him to work every day, to the local McDonald's.

Sam was mostly a recluse, due to him having a mild form of Turret's syndrome. He had a landline phone, but did not have any public TV service. He mostly just watched DVD and VHS movies in his spare time. And he was quite the chain smoker. I ordinarily did not like to be around people who smoke, but I put up with it. I always wore old work clothes when I went to see him, because I knew that I would reek of the stench when I got home.

Sam sometimes seemed interested in the God who loved him, and he would listen intently as I answered his

questions. At other times, I knew that I was just wasting my time being with him. So, I would just cut the visit short, especially if he was half-drunk. I would give him passages of the Bible to read between my visits, and then later asked him if he understood what he had read. I kept up this quasi-relationship for several years, until my short employment in North Carolina in 2015. Sometimes, I would prepare a big pot of chili, and take him some, which he thoroughly enjoyed. He was not the kind of guy who cooked for himself. Lunch meat and coffee were his staples – and of course beer.

I had given him my phone number, and over the years, Sam would call periodically, sometimes sober, and sometimes not. One evening in winter, he called in a frantic state, and desperately wanted me to come over. I obliged, but I immediately called a friend to go over with me. It was my friend's first time meeting Sam and being in his trailer. Sam was quite drunk, and was half talking out of his head about his despair of unbelief that he was in God's good graces. My companion later told me that he thought that was the night that he was going to die (not Sam, but my companion!) I had come to know Sam, and I did not feel the same fear as my companion did that night. But I could understand how one could feel quite uncomfortable.

Over the years, Sam pretty much stayed the same. He never came to the point where I could see that he had surrendered his life to the heavenly Father, even though I prayed for him regularly.

Throughout my journeys, I certainly saw many lanes that I never knew existed in my county. Down one of these hidden lanes, there was the Catholic who invited me to his porch for a cordial conversation, which was a breath of fresh air, after many days of people not wanting to talk. Occasionally I would meet a believer, who was encouraged to see someone doing what I was doing.

One summer day, Eva was visiting us from her now-

permanent college home away from home, and I asked her to join me on the day's evangelism walk. We were just past the old orchard, going down a lane that finally revealed two separate houses. They were among some large and dark trees. As we were walking, we spotted a man running from his screened porch into his house. He was only wearing underwear, and he knew that we were coming to visit. He actually allowed us to talk with him on his porch for a while. Just around the corner from his house, lived a middle-aged woman, who was still upset at God, decades after her mother had passed away, "prematurely". She was not in the mood to hear our words of truth. Just beyond her house, we caught a woman getting ready to leave for the day. She talked with us briefly, stating calmly that she had been battling cancer. She actually allowed us to pray for her in her driveway.

Another day, just beyond the previous house, a woman tentatively opened her split-level doorway, and inquired of my weird sign. She actually talked with me for about 15 minutes in the middle of her open doors, asking me questions about what I believed. She seemed rather perplexed as I left her with some tracts to read. Just beyond River Road, I stopped at a brick rancher. An older woman was on her covered porch. She did not reject me, but she also seemed rather perplexed at my message and approach. Then it was down a long dirt lane, in my truck. There was only one house on this lane, and it did not look inviting. There was a fence with a sign that read "Beware of Dog". There was a young woman on the porch when I pulled up. She was not interested in what I had to offer. Maybe she was afraid of a strange man coming all the way back to her house. I immediately left.

Just beyond that lane, not more than two-tenths of a mile, I had the privilege of talking with a man a little younger than me in his kitchen. His wife was not at home, and his kids were sleeping. My sign must have caught his attention, as he told me that he was a Mormon. I inquired how he had come to

follow the Mormon religion. He said that the local Mormon church in his previous hometown was the only one who actually showed him and his family any real love. He was looking for social acceptance, and they gave it to him. When I delved deeper, he wasn't really interested in knowing the depths of Mormon doctrine; he just wanted to have a loving social network. Truth did not matter to him.

The next time out, I made it to French's Hollow, a small network of poor redneck families, (some related to each other) back in a wooded area. I talked at length with a young 20-something, who listened intently while I explained the gospel to him. I talked with several families that day about Jesus. Despite the stereotypical bad rumors of this place, I came out unscathed.

My next trip was on a Saturday. I must have had other plans for my Sunday, so I went out on a Saturday morning. I ended up visiting a man that I knew from my pony league baseball days. He welcomed a visit on his back porch on this warm day. He told me that he was a believer, and that he attended a small nearby church. As we talked of faith in God, I came to realize that he believed that one could lose one's salvation at the drop of a hat. He was so afraid of coming to death with unrepentant sin in his life, as that would disqualify him from enjoying eternal life in bliss. So salvation for him was not a surety, but a paranoid watching-over of his behavior. I showed him the great verse in 1 John chapter 5, which states that we can know for a fact that we have eternal life. He wasn't convinced; we parted peacefully.

After several years of this, I finally made it to the end of the county. There was a small trailer park there, whose winding road went through the mobile homes and kept right on going into nothingness. I talked with one person who was outside washing his older pickup truck. It was in fantastic shape, and we both could tell that he loved it. I gave him a tract, and moved on. Well, I decided to keep walking the road

after I had visited all 10 of the mobile homes. It eventually came to a nice large house by itself. The road, however, kept on going. I had never seen a trailer park whose thoroughfare went beyond it. Down one long hill, and up another, I finally encountered two disheveled houses, one actually at the end of the road. Nobody answered the door at either one. But I at least left a tract in the doors, which was my goal – to reach every house on the main route, including the dead-end tributaries. However, that house in the middle of the thoroughfare I did not stop at. To this day, I have not stopped there. On my way back to the main highway, there was the same guy cleaning his precious truck. The journey that day was the halfway point in my systematic plan, as my next day of evangelism would be the beginning of the return home. It still took a couple more years to reach the houses on the other side of the county highway.

There were a few houses along the way, where I knew that Christians lived. I did not stop at their houses on purpose. However, there were a few houses that I visited, where, years later, I discovered that Christians lived. A few that I remember, the folks who answered the door were not interested in talking to me whatsoever. Maybe they were busy, or maybe I was just another Jehovah's Witness in their eyes. It gives me pause, however, to think how I need to react to those who will still be coming knocking on my door in the future.

Near one of the county's elementary schools, I started back a side lane one day with a young friend named J.K. One of the first houses that we knocked on that day, belonged to an elderly couple, who happened to invite us in that Sunday morning. Their 50-something daughter was visiting them as well that weekend. J.K. and I discovered that the older gentleman had been an Episcopalian all his life, faithfully serving in his church organization. When we presented the full gospel of Jesus to him, he wondered aloud if he was actually a Christian. His daughter also joined the conversation, stating that she had

become a Muslim, even after being raised in this Episcopal atmosphere. We never really got a good explanation from her about why a white middle-aged woman would convert to Islam. It seemed weird, except that she had become disillusioned with her nominal Christianity. Many people from that generation are in the same boat. We peacefully left that place, thankful to God for good conversation, watering seeds, and being able to plainly share the good news of salvation. Sometime later, on that same lane, I met a guy whom I knew from my government workplace. I never directly worked with him, but at times I had briefly spoken with him. He cordially invited me into his house, and allowed me to explain why I was walking his road. He respectfully allowed me to discourse, but only stated that he would think about what I had to say. To me, that was another positive encounter.

Not far from that previous lane, was another mobile home park, which I never knew existed. Near its dead-end, I encountered a young man and his wife, who became very belligerent as I explained my reason for walking across his tiny front yard. He told me that he believed in some new age philosophy, and that he was ready to physically fight if I wanted to argue about it. I left peacefully, and went further to the dead-end, which rounded sharply beyond the angry man's house. I talked with only one other person in that park, a young man who listened intently, and might have actually been looking for a friend/truth, but who already had some spiritual connections. I just encouraged him to keep seeking God, and to not give up.

Seven miles to home on many Sunday mornings entailed the remainder of the journey. I only actually spoke with a few people on that whole length of road from that point forward. One woman was gardening on a Sunday morning; she told me that she was a believer, and that she was impressed with my endeavor. On the road to the old Methodist retreat

center, I spoke at length with a young person who was teetering on the fence of following Jesus. Very close to my own house during the last summer, I encountered a group of people on the front porch; it was June, and the weather was fantastic. I approached them in my usual manner; I discovered that they were actually vacationing in my hometown and that they were also Christians. It was quite the pleasant conversation. I knocked on the doors of two more empty houses that day, and I had come full circle back to my house. This particular mission was over. This was just before I was to embark on yet another leap to failure.

Was this several years of reaching nearly every house with the gospel, a success or failure, or something in between? No one was ever born again in my presence. Did some experience that phenomenon later? Only God knows. Did the Holy Spirit actually prompt me to such activity? Maybe. At least I had a model verse to emulate: Acts 5:42 - "Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah." Another verse actually gave me the answer to my question. 1 Corinthians 3:5-7 states, "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." It is not my job to convert anyone; that is God's task.



## Chapter 20

# In El Salvador with College Kids as My Peers

In the spring of 2010, I had my chimney sweep come to my house to clean out my wood stove chimney. He was a believer, and we could talk freely about the faith. His name was Mike, and he was the fit, athletic type, who liked to run, and who did not look his age of 60. He knew that I liked to run as well. He also told me that he and a friend had started to do some rock climbing and rappelling. He invited me to give it a try one weekend with him.

We met at the base of the Devil's Nose, a natural outcropping on a smaller ridge between two close, intertwined mountains. He and his buddy had all the rappelling gear ready and tied to a tree at the top of the rock outcropping. Since all were novices, they used the ropes deftly with safety techniques to avoid any falls. They showed me how to find the crevices in the rock wall in order to get a hand- or foothold while climbing. It seemed fairly easy for them. It was then my turn to climb, which turned out to be easier than I had imagined. However, the descent was much harder, as one had to trust the belayer on the ground to keep one from a free fall while still allowing the rappeller the freedom to let himself slowly down. Keeping a quasi-90-degree angle to the rock was very difficult. Nonetheless, I thoroughly enjoyed it, and looked forward to the next outing.

At the end of the day, Mike had asked me to hike around to the top of the outcropping to untie the ropes from the tree. As I was walking up the natural rock steps, a high step with my left leg brought a very sharp pain in my knee

area. I made it back to the base just fine, but the pain appeared sporadically over the next few weeks. I could not squat without excruciating pain.

A visit to a specialist in Charleston after X-rays were taken, indicated that I had torn miniscus in my knee, which required surgery in order to alleviate the pain. A week later, I was under the knife for arthroscopic surgery. The doctor had to trim and/or excise half of the existing miniscus; a regimen of therapy then ensued.

In the previous winter, some of Eva's friends from college had planned a summer trip to El Salvador, to work with an Assemblies of God ministry called King's Castle. It was a youth-centered outfit that hosted summer retreats/camps for kids of all ages. When Eva told me of her plans to participate, I asked her if her college mates would allow me to tag along. I had wanted to visit the Central American countries, and this was a good place to start. The five young men and three young women welcomed me as part of their team. So I scheduled time off work in order to travel in July to a new place.

The trip did not start well for me. The men, and Eva, actually spent the night before the flight at our house, the men using the floor and sleeping bags, and the hot upper bedroom. I got very little sleep that night, if any. I was feeling anxiety about this trip for some reason. Feeling like a zombie, I asked one of the guys to drive my car to the airport, while I tried to catch a nap. That was also unfruitful. After an eight hour flight to San Salvador, the jet was still lagging in my head. A large van was waiting to take us another hour south to our destination.

King's Castle was situated adjacent to Lago de Coatepeque, an extinct volcano crater that was in the mountains about forty-five minutes northwest of the capital, and only a short distance from another large city, Santa Ana. The ministry had purchased land east of the lake, which

sloped upward toward the mountain. The upper section actually had a building that looked like a castle. It was used as a place of quiet prayer, and we participated in such, one day of the week that we worked. The campus had a large kitchen and several dorms, one of which we used for a couple of days. On Sunday, I asked to find a pharmacy in Santa Ana in order to get some sleeping pills. Forty hours with no significant sleep, was going to be a problem.

The main work for the week was going to be performing “spectacle evangelism”, in local schools and small neighborhoods scattered throughout the countryside, west of Santa Ana. Because of the work locations, we slept in an Assembly of God church building just west of Santa Ana. Sleeping bags and air mattresses were the only accommodations as all the males slept in one room, while the females slept in another. I remember seeing the full-time pastor, who lived on-premises. He was a fat man, who wore the sleeveless tanktop undershirts (it was just another observation); we did not have any communications with him, and only saw him in the mornings and at the Wednesday night church service.

On Sunday, another young man named Caleb joined our team for the week. He was from New Mexico. That day we learned and practiced the skits and dances which we were to perform, which accompanied the corresponding background music, and which was pumped through a small sound system that we lugged onto the regular-sized school bus during our workdays. One of our team also dressed up as a clown for the entire day – each day rotating a different person – giving out candy and balloon animals. Our teachers, chaperones, and leaders were three young men, two young women (all in their twenties), and one other woman whose age I could not quite tell. She was older than 30, maybe 40, and had never married. All worked for King's Castle as full-time self-supported Christian workers. I was a bit concerned that my recent knee

surgery and rehabilitation would affect my ability to fully participate, but I was able to manage for most of the trip with little difficulty. My sleep also slowly got more normal as the week progressed.

After breakfast and prayer each day, we made our way to several schools, which knew ahead of time of our arrival. These were public schools that were allowed to have the good news of Jesus Christ proclaimed to them. Our presentation of skits, dances, and a message by one of the young men took no more than an hour at each location. I understood the Spanish in the songs and skits that we performed, but could not really follow along during the message. Nonetheless, we got to hang out afterward for about an hour with the school kids, playing and talking with them. Because I was sporting my long goatee, one youngster at a large school called me Santa Claus. I didn't even come close to looking like Santa Claus, but I suppose that he never saw adults with any more facial hair than a mustache.

In the one skit that we performed to a background track, I played the role of a drunken husband, who abused his wife. The skit was about the redemption of persons, and the fact that God can and will forgive us, blotting out our sins in his sight. I remember at one particular school, that a few of the elementary-aged boys thought that I was a bad family man in real life!

On a few days, we had several hours between scheduled school visits, so we would stop in a rural neighborhood, ask a resident if we could use their electricity, and then slowly gather a small crowd of locals by word of mouth. When enough were sufficiently in view, we started our program again and offered the gospel message to the public.

At a couple of the venues, I did not participate in the dancing due to my knee bothering me. On one occasion, I sat in the audience with the school kids; one little mentally-handicapped boy came up to me and just sat in my lap for the

duration, which was fine with me. I ended up, however, having to wash my pants that evening, due to a serious urine stain.

We attended the Wednesday evening church service at the place where we slept. Our team was asked to participate by giving a report of our purpose for being in their neighborhood. Eva spoke as well as a few of the young men. I did not feel the need to speak. The young men were more than happy to do so.

One afternoon, as we arrived back at the church building after a full day of programs, our oldest chaperone Brian (who spoke fairly good English) got off the bus first. The bus had to park for the night close to the busy highway. Instead of telling us to be careful as we departed the bus, he stated “Watch your life!” It was a funny way of saying the same thing, and I have adopted it in lieu of the ordinary American warning of caution. That phrase also is part of 1 Timothy 4:16 in which Paul encourages Timothy to “watch your life and doctrine closely”. It is definitely a fitting phrase regardless of the context, whether it means physical caution or spiritual vigil.

One day our itinerary took us far west to a small village on top of a ridge, which overlooked the country of Guatemala. This was a poor village with a small church congregation that was associated with the Assemblies of God. Its leader was Jenny, a local woman, which seemed quite odd, seeing that she was living in a male-dominated culture. I suppose that if no one steps up to lead a bunch of sheep, that anyone with knowledge of God's word can do it. We performed our program in this small village, after gathering some onlookers. There was another reason for stopping in this location. It was to discuss the dire situation, that Jenny was about to lose the building used for church activities, due to not being able to pay her creditor for the ongoing purchase payments.

We left the village and headed to our next destination, but stopped alongside the road to have lunch. At this point, the leaders told us of this situation, and asked us to pray for a financial miracle for Jenny. On the spot, we had a time of prayer before taking our lunch. As we were praying, I kept thinking about an idea that I had mulled even before our team had started on this trip. I had previously set aside money for any possibility of providing it to meet a need in El Salvador. Well, one need had just presented itself. I approached Brian, with the idea of using an ATM in the nearest modern town to take a cash withdrawal on my credit card. At first presentation, the other chaperones were against this simple solution of me being the answer to their prayers for a financial miracle.

After a night's sleep, there was a change of heart. Sometimes a miracle from out of nowhere is not needed when the solution is right in front of one's face. God makes the provision either way and he should be glorified regardless of the origin of the provision. It was similar to the scene in the classic movie "It's a Wonderful Life", where George is trying to avoid a bank run by the Bailey Building and Loan customers, due to the regular bank's closing for a few days, after its own run. The Building and Loan doesn't have the cash to cover all the client's accounts, but Mary speaks up and offers her own honeymoon cash of \$2000 to satisfy the panicked clientele. It was a "no-brainer miracle".

It took three different ATM transactions to pull out \$1000 in cash, but it was finally done. I gave the money to Brian, who was able to get it delivered to Jenny. On the Friday of that week, Brian confirmed to me that Jenny had gotten the cash, and that all involved were happy to receive a blessing from God. I was putting my trust in God to meet someone's need, by simply offering a resource that I had in my possession.

We got to spend Friday at a beach on the southern

shore of El Salvador. It was a black-sand beach. The surf that day was a little rough, but the sea floor was even rougher to walk upon. Swimming was not pleasurable, but just hanging out, in a local resort hammock, was sufficient as I called my dad back in the USA to sympathize with the passing of his mother.

Overall, it was an enjoyable trip, despite the trial of lack of sleep. Besides the ability to help Jenny's financial situation, however, I did not take away any special personal revelation related to anything we did. I did my best to encourage the young men on our team to follow Jesus in the course of their lives.



## Chapter 21

# An Unexpected House Guest and A Separate Trial

Two years prior to the trip to El Salvador, another unsought opportunity presented itself to Roxanne and me. Another couple with three kids were attending the same Methodist church where we were connected. A couple of those kids were friends with a teenage girl, who lived not even a block from their house. Her name was Ariel. When she turned 18 in August, her parents kicked her out of the house, even though she had one more year of high school to complete. The problem wasn't just with the parents; there was definitely some family dysfunction, although the complete story was never ascertained. Nonetheless, the friend's parents down the street decided that Ariel could stay with them temporarily, despite having a small house and two teenage boys.

About a month later, Roxanne and I got a phone call about this situation. The new parent caretakers knew that we were empty-nesters. We were asked if Ariel could stay with us, at least through her Senior year of school. Roxanne and I thought it over, prayed about it, and sought godly wisdom about this situation. It was actually an easy decision to allow Ariel to stay with us. We welcomed the possibility of providing some stability and spiritual guidance. Her parents were also notified about where she was living. We wanted everything to be above-board and not secretive. I actually visited her parents during the fall of that year.

Ariel would occupy Eva's old bedroom. She had a

curfew for being in the house, but we allowed her broad independence in her bedroom. While Roxanne and I retired early in the evening due to early work the next day, Ariel was a night owl.

It took some time getting used to the new arrangement, but, over time, Ariel felt quite comfortable living with us and interacting with extended family, even with Eva. She participated at our local church. Christmas went well that year also, with Ariel's presence. Graduation in June (2009) was a joyous occasion. In the summer she even helped out with the Methodist Church's vacation Bible school and enjoyed it.

After graduation, Roxanne and I decided to allow Ariel to continue her stay with us, provided that a job or college was awaiting in the autumn. She decided that she wanted to go to college at West Liberty University, a West Virginia school in the back-country of the northern panhandle, just north of Wheeling. She ended up studying sports therapy, applying for loans and Pell grants to cover her tuition and room.

Roxanne and I helped her move in to her dorm that August, while staying overnight at a local hotel. When we said our good-byes that Sunday afternoon, I could tell that Ariel felt exactly like I did when my parents left me at college in Indiana, way back in 1982. We told her that we knew she felt overwhelmed and that the feeling was normal. Of course, she had a cell phone in 2009; so we were able to text and encourage her as much as she needed.

We transported Ariel back and forth from college for two years, as she did not have a car, nor even a driver's license. During the summer after her freshman year, I decided that she needed a license, and that I was going to teach her how to drive. So, just like my training from my parents, and just like Eva's training from me, we went to the local Senior center, which had a fully square wrap-around parking lot, that was right next to a county road. One could practice on the parking lot, while not even touching the public roads, unless one

wanted to. So we had many sessions on the weekends and evenings in my 2005 Honda Civic.

Ariel had taken the written test and passed with flying colors. The time had come to try the actual driving test. However, before even getting to the road, the proctor failed her due to her not completely knowing how to choose the high beam function of the lights. It was my fault as I had not explained the sometimes odd way to use the high beam. The forward movement of the lever turned on the high beam, but the backward movement of the lever simply flashed the high beam. This minor detail caught her off-guard, and the proctor was a stickler for details.

Well, a month later, we went to a different DMV office to avoid the “meanie” to attempt the driving test. Ariel did fine, and got her license, which is a big deal to any teenager. I allowed her to drive home on a busy four-lane highway. A thunderstorm arose on the way, and it was quite hard to see. As teens often do, Ariel was driving too fast for the conditions, and I vehemently told her to slow down, especially as we approached another vehicle in the pouring rain. I thought we were going to collide with that car, but it didn't happen. That would have been a nightmare.

Ariel, of course, told her friends that she had passed her driving test. The next day after I had gotten home from work, she wanted to go see her previous host family and tell them about her success. I told her that I was not going with her this time. She was going on her own! This surprised her, but it was simply the necessary step in allowing her to gain confidence in being a safe and responsible driver. Roxanne thought that it was premature to allow her this freedom. I disagreed, taking a chance on my precious little compact car. Ariel made it to her destination and back again with no issues. I was proud to have given her my vote of confidence.

Ariel got a job the next summer and earned enough money to buy her own hunk of junk. So, for her third year of

college, she drove her own Hyundai Sonata to school. She was also confident enough at this point, that she no longer needed a “home” with us, but that she was ready to leave the nest. The rest is her story.

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It did not take long to be stuck – I mean, hardly working – at my current networking job, never feeling like I really fit in with the team, and still never getting any challenging responsibilities. However, a promotion opportunity arose near the end of the year, with a Windows team that was just forming, being birthed from a higher division merger in my government agency. It was quite a stroke of fortune, and I jumped at it. I was told, however, by the program manager, that this new team would eventually not last, as the top level merger would eventually trickle down to a lower level merger with us new team members merging into yet other existing teams. He could not tell us if it would be months or years. So, I took a chance and rode the wave for longer than I should have. In retrospect, I should have been patient and bided my time on the network team.

It took three full years, but our new team was dissolved. I ended up with the worst involuntary (dis)placement I could imagine: being put on the server team with the worst projects in the establishment. The worst part about it was that it was a team that I had left seven years earlier on purpose, in order to escape the stress, bad management, overnight support hours – an ever-tightening noose.

Now, the atmosphere was untenable. A leader from that team was moving on, and I was to take his place. The problem was that he had wrecked everything in the process. Instead of a segmented tight ship that was directed by managers with backbones, this lead technician had taken on,

work, projects, and equipment, that belonged to other groups because he was an overachiever, who had fairly recently just joined the government. So, he had snookered his manager in allowing him to bite off more than he should have chewed, and dumped it right into my lap. There was no longer any delineation of team duties for these projects, as he had single-handedly taken on all the responsibility, showing himself to be the superman. So, I went from being in a soft position to being in a terrible position, crushed by the weight of expectation. Usually I don't shy away from a challenge to clean up a mess. However, I knew that this mess was bigger than I could handle, and the fight to set right the organizational responsibilities would be futile. I scrambled to look for job opportunities from some former team or manager, but none were to be found.

My team was in such disarray that the acting lead tech had to take the whole month of December off, just to use his annual leave that would have otherwise been lost due to a yearly carryover limit. This happened because his workload had been so heavy that he couldn't take time off during the rest of the year. He was still called into action for one week in December to bring me and another team lead up to speed with certain projects. And he was definitely not happy about it, or the predicament that he had gotten himself into, as the acting team lead. Our manager had also been on extended leave due to surgery, so I had no direction during my first couple of weeks officially on the new team. Of course, that was not his fault. But it was one big mess, and one big stress, that hit me like a sultry summer day in Georgia after leaving an air-conditioned house.

Sleep started to elude me, and made me physically weak and sick during my work week. A year-end project forced me to work on it on Christmas Day, just to stay ahead of the large amount of work piling up. It was not a pleasant Christmas that year. This turned into one of the largest trials

of my life – a trial that God had allowed, but one that I was not handling well. Then, a few days later, on a Saturday night, the house phone rang right before midnight, and woke up Roxanne. She got my attention and woke me up to answer it. The call was from work; the caller was wondering if I had forgotten the big “build” conference call and special midnight project update. It was a coordinator with whom I had worked several years earlier, and she was performing the same task, only on a much larger scale now. I had no clue about this project update, because my boss, who was by this time, back to a normal work schedule, had not informed me. I was livid, but I bit my tongue, and proceeded to join the call and perform my part of the update tasks, which happened to be only at the beginning of the build and at the end of the build at 6 AM. So, I stayed awake all night, deciding to work on the previously-mentioned year-end project, until it was my turn to end the day's update. There's nothing like coming full circle, back to an undesirable workload that I had escaped once before.

This time, however, was different – in one way. I had just surpassed the earmark of 25 years with this government agency – which meant that my retirement account that had been building all those years, was now firmly in place and not subject to disappearing. I was only 48 years old, with another eight to go before I actually could retire. However, eight more years of back-breaking stress was something that I did not want to endure. Three years earlier, Roxanne and I had paid off the house mortgage (in sixteen years), and we were – DEBT FREE!!!! That fact alone allowed me to do what many of my friends and co-workers called “brave”: resign from a great-paying job and move on to who-knows-what.

After consulting with Roxanne, I made the decision to leave my employment. When word of my impending resignation went through the management ranks, I started to get phone calls during work hours from managers that I had never even met, begging me not to leave. They weren't

begging because they wanted to encourage me to endure until retirement. They weren't concerned with my future financial status. They were worried about having to move their own people from their teams to fill the hole that I would be leaving behind. We were all following our selfish endeavors. However, I used to have a couple of sayings about work that I thought had some wisdom in them. First, Jesus told us to go the extra mile when compelled to do so, and to give to Caesar what belonged to him. I thought I had followed those commands rather well through the years. I was willing to give 102% all the time, but I was not willing to die for the company, because the company would certainly not die for me. Every one of us was dispensable in the government's mega-machine. If I did not look after myself, who else was going to do it (unless it was God)?

It was a very hard decision that did not come with a feeling of being carefree, even though the stress was gone. The tension with Roxanne was very high. It was mid-winter, the worst time of all for any big trials to come one's way. I had already been looking for other jobs for well over a month. None could be found that were desirable or worth applying for. Right before Valentine's Day, I agreed to work part-time at a local historic hotel in my town. It was basically a large Victorian house that had been built in 1932 in the downtown area, next to the town park. In the ensuing years, additions had been built onto it, expanding the number of guest rooms, and dining areas. My youngest brother had actually worked in the restaurant when he was in high school. Now I was coming to this old establishment as a front desk clerk, making minimum wage, when I used to make five times that much.

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Everything one does in life is a decision. So many of my decisions in life seemed as if I was running FROM

something, instead of running TO something. (This had become a huge observation!)

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I found that working with the public was fairly easy. I could make conversation with no problem, and making people feel welcome came easily as well. However, this gig was not to last very long. The owner had bitten off more than she could chew, and was going through a divorce. Bankruptcy had been looming for many months, and it finally brought the business to a standstill. I went to work the first Monday in May only to find the parking lot cordoned with yellow police tape. The bank across the street had assumed foreclosure ownership, and the door locks had been changed. My manager, however, met me as I attempted to open a side door not blocked by tape. She had an envelope waiting for me that was full of cash to cover my last bit of pay that was due me. Later on, I had heard rumors that certain people had not gotten paid, or had been paid with televisions. I did get paid for all of my hours worked; I had not been cheated of anything.

I made my first and only trip to the Unemployment office that month, to sign up for unintended benefits that were legally mine. During the next six months, I applied for many jobs, none of which came calling. I did odd jobs that summer, including helping a neighbor to mow grass for his lawn care business; small computer support; piano tuning; and other yard work. I also sat for a professional licensure test for computer support. I passed this test in July; my license was good for three years. I thought that this would increase my chances of obtaining a computer support job.

By the time that my unemployment benefits were about to expire in November, a new owner of the old hotel was ready to open, and he needed front desk clerks. The only problem for me was that I had sprained my knee just a few

weeks earlier, falling off a step-ladder as I was reaching to do some outdoor painting. So I started this part-time position with a pair of crutches.

The job exclusively entailed evening shifts and Sunday day shifts. I didn't like working the evening shifts, because I was a morning person. So by about 10 PM on my shifts, I was ready to fall asleep. I didn't mind working Sundays, as they were the main check-out day for guests; so those days were at least half busy. This job also gave me the perfect excuse for working Christmas Day, which to me had become a perfectly depressing day, due to constantly seeing so much money wasted on needless presents by my relatives, and feeling pressure to spend time with them. All I ever wanted for Christmas was to be in a warm climate, and to be left alone.

Another year passed with no other job offers, even though I had a few interviews. It seemed like I was just marking time. In the meantime, Roxanne and I continued our annual summer vacations at the Outer Banks of North Carolina with Roxanne's relatives. We really enjoyed being at the ocean, walking the beaches, enjoying the views of the sound, the history, the lack of commercialism, which was more prevalent in places like Virginia Beach and Ocean City. One could still find a place along the 100-mile stretch of national seashore, where no one else was, even in summer. There were certain parts of the beach that one could drive in a four-wheel drive vehicle, which concept was previously foreign to me. (I haven't gotten stuck yet.) While I am still not a fisherman, the predominance of a fishing atmosphere did not turn me off. (We all need more fish in our diets, anyway.)

Before this year, Roxanne and I had spent time at OBX during non-summer months. One February, before I had quit my government job, I had taken my work laptop and booked a hotel room for a week in Kill Devil Hills. I had no physical requirements to be at my government job site, even though I had policy restrictions. I worked that week from my hotel

room, using the official virtual private network; no one knew the difference. That week turned out to be a mild February week, good enough for biking. That temporary escape from winter was still a longing in my soul.

Roxanne and I had previously started to research inexpensive vacation houses for purchase, thinking that one day, we might like to retire in this island community. One summer we reached out to a local realtor while on vacation (partly because I got sick near the end of the week, and did not feel like trudging to the beach); we never did connect with the agent that week. However, we did eventually start working with her months later. We also spent half a day that week, peaking into windows of houses that were for sale, looking for layouts that we liked.

The following winter I made another trek to my favorite hotel in Kill Devil Hills, a 1950s motor lodge with a working fireplace, historic charm, a free breakfast, and evening cider and cookies – right on the oceanfront. I found that some of the houses on Hatteras Island were less expensive than those “up-beach”. So, Roxanne and I spent some time researching vacation houses south of the main beach towns.

In the winter of 2014, we found an investment that suited our budget, and offered to buy. However, after an inspection showed the need for many expensive repairs, we withdrew our offer, and kept looking. We found another, but smaller, house the next winter, and contracted for it. In April 2015, I picked up the legal documents from the lawyer's office in a nearby town, took them home for Roxanne and me to sign in the presence of a notary, and soon, the deal would be sealed.

## Chapter 22

# Guatemala, Part 1

In early 2010, a couple about my age had moved to Benchmark from eastern Ohio. Pete and Sylvia, along with their young son Brent, started to attend Sunday services at the Methodist church where Roxanne and I were involved. Pete was a government employee like me, working for the Division of Natural Resources. He had moved to Benchmark in a promotional position, in order to end his career with the most pay. We meshed right away, both having a love of the outdoors; shared, but separate, experience with work trips to Anapra in Northern Mexico; and a desire to serve God.

It had been a few years since any foreign work trips had been planned at the Methodist church. Pete stepped up and took the mantle to plan for a new trip to Guatemala in 2011. A new team was formed with some folks from previous trips, as well as a host of newcomers, including the local postmaster of Benchmark. Roxanne and Eva would accompany me on this trip as well. Pete knew of an organization that wore many hats in serving the poor in the area of Antigua, Guatemala. This trip would be another chance to serve God, visit a new country, and practice Spanish simultaneously.

Antigua was the old capital of Guatemala until an earthquake in 1773 destroyed most of the buildings. Situated at the foot of Volcan de Fuego, it is ironic that an earthquake and not a volcanic eruption destroyed the town, although there have been eruptions which have done local damage. Nonetheless, there is still a thriving middle-class population with a usual smattering of poor neighborhoods on the

outskirts.

In March 2011, the team flew once again from Richmond International Airport into San Salvador, then caught a puddle-jumper to Guatemala City, the current capital. We then took a coordinated bus ride over the mountains to Antigua, about one hour southwest. It is a beautiful old city, with a nice archway in the middle of town. There is also a nice park on a very high hill that overlooks the entire city as well as Volcan de Fuego, which prominently sticks out like a sore thumb, as it looms high on the southern horizon. Only it is not repulsive like a sore thumb, but rather large, ominous, beautiful and inviting at the same time.

We arrived the week before Easter and before the rainy season began. The celebration of Easter week in a quasi-Catholic tradition was just starting. We arrived mid-day and walked downtown just in time for an eerie parade, with much fanfare, brass bands, and floats with ugly effigies of Jesus, Mary, and some unknowns. The effigies are what made it creepy-looking.

We stayed at a very nice local hotel well away from the city center. This allowed for peaceful, quiet sleeping. Breakfast and dinner, which were included in our hotel stay, was fantastic. There was also a large meeting hall where we met every day for de-briefings, discussions, and testimonies of the day. The nights were cool, and the days were not too hot. There was a swimming pool at the hotel, but we did not find any time or weather to use it.

Our work week consisted of three different projects, which were not too far from each other, all on the outskirts of the city. We had two ministry leaders from Nashville, who boarded with us and joined us at each of the different sites throughout the week. The first site was called Casa Jackson, a tiny hospital for malnourished babies and infants. Part of our team worked a few days here, organizing supplies, cleaning the facilities, and simply holding and caring for the children.

The second project was at a small school called the Jeremiah Project. It was at the base of a poor community called El Hato; this school was for elementary-aged kids. Part of our team spent a day here, observing, cleaning, cooking, and playing with the kids.

The main project of the week was on top of the ridge in El Hato, constructing a kitchen/cooking shed for a few poor families, who lived on the plot in separate buildings. This included building the frame, enclosing with aluminum, and roofing it. It also included building a concrete cook stove and chimney pipe. One of the residents of this tiny plot of dirt had several children but an absent husband, if she was ever married. She looked twenty years older than she really was, and had health issues related to cooking with little to no ventilation in her concrete house. A new cook stove and chimney would be built for her as well.

Another work team of teenagers from the U.S. also were assigned to this project. Since we had so many workers, it was decided, after approval from the mother, that a brand new roof for her would also be put in place. So the team began demolition of the old leaky metal roof. Meanwhile, the females set to painting the blackened walls of her concrete structure, a bright yellow, which helped tremendously in the poorly-lit atmosphere. At one point, her entire house was open to the sunlight; there was no rain in sight for weeks, so it mattered not.

I forgot to mention that our four workdays started, not with work, but with Spanish classes at the Christian Spanish Academy in downtown Antigua. All of us had one-on-one tutors for three hours each morning. Some of our team embraced the opportunity to learn; we even had homework to do in the evenings. Some of the team were not interested in learning Spanish, at least not on this short trip, so they used this time to walk around the city with their tutors, maybe learning a touch of Spanish. Anyway, we had a quaint

“graduation” ceremony at the end of the week, where we were allowed to sing a few songs to the many folks in attendance. My faithful 1960s Yamaha travel guitar was our accompaniment yet again. The ceremony was in the courtyard of the academy with a great many beautiful flowers and plenty of sunlight. The language experience turned out to be a bittersweet one on average, although I relished any chance to improve my little proficiency.

Our work projects started after lunch. The kitchen/stove/roof projects were done in no time flat, with much time to play with the kids who lived there or just came by to see the progress. I also got a glimpse of poor rural plumbing repair. This plot on top of a hill had pressurized running water. However, a break in the piping on the ascent from the lower “road” prevented any water from getting to the top. A local repairman had acquired some PVC pipe and a few couplings, but no glue. No problem! He found the broken pipe and heated the ends from the cooking fire to melt the plastic just enough to connect to the couplings. Problem solved!

On the last work day, we, of course, had a formal gathering to give glory to God for the progress made, sing a few songs, and to give a short gospel presentation to those in attendance on top of El Hato. We prayed that God would be revealed to all those there. We all then walked down the steep hill to the neighborhood road, and walked to the end of the newly-constructed rock retaining wall. Instead of our bus coming to get us this time, a van was sent. We crammed 25 adults and local children into the van to take us to the base of the ridge. It was not a safe situation!

After supper each evening, we met together as a team to discuss the observations of the day, to talk about how God might have been moving among us. It was touching to hear about the teens' interactions with the children. However, our Nashville leader Kent would re-hash with some type of analogy for every testimony given, as if the mostly-clear

words of the participants were not clear enough. By the end of the week, the analogizing was fairly obvious to all, over-the-top, and annoying, yet funny at the same time, because it had been consistently annoying.

Our last full day in Guatemala entailed a comfortable hour-long ride to a nearby resort area called Atitlan, where there were three sister volcanoes and a wide lake. We stopped to visit a local market and tourist trap in the town of Solola. Of course, I picked up a small piece of pottery, as was my custom on my various trips around the world. It was so crowded in the market, that it was no surprise that our postmaster ended up with a missing wallet, which had been kept in his back pocket, instead of kept tightly in his front pockets. We covered his lunch. It was a *deja-vu* moment, reminiscent of that similar incident in Paris.

Our return flight home also had to stop in El Salvador. This time the inside of the airport was hot while waiting for our flight to the States. Then as we approached evening our flight was delayed and finally canceled due to some mechanical issues with the plane. The airline graciously shuttled us to a nearby modern hotel and put us up for the night – WITHOUT our luggage. This meant that we had to sleep in the clothes we were wearing and wear them just the same the next day. What could we do? We had to make the best of it. It was a stinky trip home, a day late.

A couple of months after the trip, we had a chance to give a presentation about our trip at our local church service. I had written a parody of Switchfoot's song "Dare You to Move", from the year 2000, having changed the lyrics to reflect our experiences in Guatemala. I sang the song solo, with the words projected overhead, even though some of the lyrics were inside jokes. Here are the words:

“I DARE YOU TO MOVE”

Welcome to Guatemala  
Welcome to Antigua  
Where the tourists go  
To spend all of their dough

High up on the mountain  
With scenery surrounding  
The short poor women live  
With many little kids

Jeremiah Project  
Then there's Casa Jackson  
Where starving little kids  
They get a chance to live

I dare you to move  
I dare you to prove  
I dare you to jump off that truck that got stuck  
I dare you to fly  
To a nation that's dry  
And give them some water  
Some real living water.

Welcome to Atitlan  
Lake of three volcanoes  
Where the Mayans live  
With their golden little teeth

Welcome to Solola  
You're welcome to my wallet  
Everyone's there  
In the market square

You get to tell your stories  
Analogizing's painful  
But spiritual tow trucks  
Will help you get unstuck

I dare you to sit  
In an airport that's hot  
And get your flight canceled  
You know it's a hassle

I dare you to move  
In a way never done  
Spread your wings and fly now  
To a place never tried now

Where do you go just to get out of school?  
To Spanish Academy where you are the fool.  
To soot-covered shacks with just dirt for a yard  
The kids are still happy when you give them time  
And swing them around and just carry them high  
We told them of Jesus, will he be their guide?  
We will never know  
We pray that it is so  
Salvation for them

I dare you to move  
I dare you to serve  
I dare you to lift up yourself off your butt  
I dare you to move  
I dare you to lose  
Your selfish little passions  
Your comfortable fashions

I dare you to serve  
The God who's testing your soul

Like today never happened  
It's all in the past now  
Your life isn't yours now  
So how will you live - from now on?

## Chapter 23

# The Outer Banks

The search for a westerly trade route to India or China led Christopher Columbus and others to the islands just off the coast of North America, starting in 1492. European sea exploration to the “new world” then exploded in the 1500s. While the Spanish mostly pursued Florida and lands to its south, the English looked for a more temperate climate for its colonization, since the de facto search for the trade route to India had either been abandoned, discovered to be non-existent or incorrectly characterized as Pamlico Sound being the Pacific Ocean, or considered a success, now that Hispaniola had been appropriated by the Spanish as being close enough to the concept of India (hence the modern-day moniker of the West Indies). (The huge breadth of the earth's girth from Europe westward to Asia was not realized until over 100 years later.)

Nonetheless, in 1587, a “permanent” English settlement was started on Roanoke Island in modern-day Virginia with over 100 persons. When English supply ships finally returned three years later, the colony was found to be fortified but completely abandoned, with no sign of the people's whereabouts or demise. This has come to be known as “The Lost Colony”, and the beginning of the American experiment.

Roanoke Island is actually west of the Outer Banks, the latter of which runs as a peninsula from the southern Virginia shoreline for over 100 miles. The peninsula has actually been broken into various isthmuses over the centuries due to storms that carved various outlets of the inner sounds through the thin sandbars, which are called the Outer Banks. Though many

people have lived on this thin stretch of “land” for centuries now, it wasn't until the turn of the 20th century that real notice had been taken of this place by the American population (notwithstanding much activity during the Civil War.)

The Wright Brothers kicked off the age of flight in December 1903 in Kitty Hawk, NC, in the area now known as Kill Devil Hills, just a mere tenth of a mile from the Atlantic Ocean. Since the first bridge from the mainland was built in the 1930s, the area has slowly become one of the east coast's main hubs for summer vacations, remaining fairly non-commercial and natural, unlike the beaches closer to metropolitan areas. Most of Hatteras Island, a storm-created isthmus, remains even more so, since the shoreline has been taken over by the National Park Service. It is this remote place, replete with recent colonial history, where the vacation/retirement house stands.

Roxanne and I had loved the Outer Banks for many years, although we had not spent much time on Hatteras Island. The main reason why we bought a house on the island, was that the asking prices were much lower than those of houses on the beaches closer to the mainland bridges. It has been sometimes said that people go to Hatteras Island to be “stuck on purpose”. The southern terminus can only be accessed by the north road of sixty miles, or by ferry from the south. Our house was only 26 miles from the northern popular beaches, which was a compromise between proximity and remoteness. I had imagined the possibility of retiring here one day. The climate seemed favorable to me – hot in the summer, but not too cold in the winter, with daily high and low temperatures rarely fluctuating more than 15 degrees. The historic hurricanes along the east coast also seemed to mostly skirt North Carolina, rather than directly hit. So, the cosmetic repairs began on this fairly new, small two-story, three-bedroom rental house.

Our home mortgage in West Virginia had been paid off

for five years, which allowed us then to start another mortgage, which we had hoped would be paid by the ongoing vacation rental income. The house was situated on the main road that runs the length of Hatteras Island; nonetheless it was just a 7-minute walk to the ocean, through a host of houses in a compact residential community, with the natural beauty of the island still intact and interspersed among the house lots.

An ironic thing happened that summer. I interviewed for two different Internet Technology jobs at OBX – one in Kitty Hawk, and one for the very company on Hatteras Island, which was managing our vacation home rental activities. I ended up receiving an offer for the latter, which suited me greatly. What an opportunity! To work in a place where I desired most to live, doing the tasks for which I had the most experience! It seemed too good to be true. There was only one setback. I would have to leave Roxanne and only see her periodically. Coming home on the weekends was out of the question, as it took a solid eight hours-drive. Well, I decided to give it a try. The initial glamour of being a beach resident/owner had overtaken me.

The job itself turned out to be challenging and fulfilling at the same time, except when winter came. Nonetheless, the weeks turned out to be lonely, despite having my bicycle, guitar, and a new music buddy/fellow employee, who also played guitar. The company had an apartment in Hatteras Village where I was able to stay for most of July and August, while my house was rented by vacationers. In September, Roxanne joined me for a long weekend at the house. Then it was back to normal work, week after week in this beautiful atmosphere.

One lonely Sunday in September, I stopped by the small LifeBoat church building for their morning service. It was affiliated with the Assemblies of God denomination. There were only about 10 people in attendance. The music consisted of singing along to a CD. Then one man did preach

for a while on a subject that made no impression upon me. What did impress me was the coldness of the few attendees toward me. It was nothing more than a boring religious experience. Needless to say, I never went back.

I finally found a non-denominational church that met weekly at the local elementary school. I had to drive 22 miles to get there, but it was an informal service with decent music and excellent expounding of the Word. I attended one mid-week meeting that was also at the school, which was also not bad. They had sporadic house meetings here and there on the island. The only one that I attended felt as if I was really not wanted there.

I also made friends with some folks at a re-branded Baptist Church in Nags Head. They also had home fellowship meetings, one in which I got involved. It was comprised of all older couples that met every week at the same house. I was actually welcomed and felt at home at this fellowship. The host couple were very personable and took an interest in my life. The only problem with showing up at this meeting, was that it was during the week. That meant another long trek "up-beach" beach and return trek in the dark. I really did appreciate the genuine care and interest that these folks showed.

I spent many hours after work on house projects to repair items or to spruce things up. I did not spend as much time at the beach as I thought I would. That is how it is for the majority of the working locals. I quickly developed a friendship with that guitar-playing co-worker, Devin. I spent some time at his house occasionally playing guitar. I was able to tell him my testimony of how I became a Christian. He didn't get it, but I continued to meet with him. He was quite likable, funny, and he had a great singing voice.

His mother, during this autumn, had to be placed in a local nursing home "up-beach", due to dementia taking its toll on her daily living. So, occasionally, I would go with Devin to the nursing home to see her. Even when I stopped working for

the rental management company, I would stop at the nursing home on my several yearly visits to OBX, to visit with Devin's mother. After she passed away a year later, I would still stop by the nursing home to visit her former roommate, who much appreciated any visit from a human.

In October I had to spend a week at the northernmost beach, as the parent company, Wyndham Vacation and Rental, had purchased a small vacation rental company in Corolla, near the beach road, where the wild horses live. I had to help a senior IT tech assess the assets and to start configuring the routers for a network conversion. Thereafter, I usually traveled to this business once a week to continue the transition process. By this time of year, darkness descended fairly early. So it was a long trip "home", sometimes in rainy, windy conditions. This was only a problem along the sixteen miles of road on Hatteras Island to the Tri-Villages. The first six miles are right next to the dunes that are constantly being rebuilt by heavy machinery. Wind would continuously blow sand onto the road; so, when it rains and blows, it can look like driving on snow-covered roads. I had to be very cautious in my little Honda Civic. Thank God that I did not have incidents along that stretch, but there were some tense times, driving with no one else on the road.

The autumn also revealed the phenomenon of flooding under my house. After heavy rains, there was simply no place for the water to run off. If the ground was already saturated, the water just pooled under the house, until the passage of time allowed the soil to drain the excess. During some years, a nearby hurricane would graze the OBX with fairly high winds, which would sometimes push the Pamlico Sound toward the ocean, which would also cause my area to flood, sometimes up to three feet in depth below my house. This isthmus is less than a tenth of a mile wide in some places, so it would not take much time to drive water from the sound inland. Sometimes it would take a week for decent drainage to happen.

December turned out to be quite mild and rainy. However, mid-month, there was a nice weekend with a special treat. The Cape Hatteras National Park was allowing a free lighthouse climb for the public. I had never climbed a lighthouse, so I jumped at the opportunity, for a bird's-eye view of the cape. It was breath-taking. There is also a short hiking path near the lighthouse, which I decided to walk. During this walk, I was startled to see my first snake slithering, not on the ground, but in the trees. I suppose that is not as rare as it seems, as I have seen several since that time.

The week before Christmas, I attended a neighbor's party, meeting several new local residents. I would occasionally talk with the neighbors, as they would spend each evening till sundown in their garage, listening to a ball game and drinking beer non-stop. At one visit, I explained the gospel to them and left them a gospel-themed music CD. The drunk man laughed as he thought I was trying to convert him. (Of course, he and his former-Catholic wife do need to be converted from paganism to belief.)

I was able to spend my Christmas week back home in West Virginia, but alas, it was short-lived. I remember driving through snow in eastern Virginia, heading back to OBX for a long winter. January turned out to be too cold or too windy to do any substantial work outside. So the weekends became quite lonely for someone who loves to be outdoors.

In February, I had to spend another week "up-beach" at the other company with another mothership tech, making the final network transitions to the new company. This tech was much nicer and more personable than the one who came in October. We put in long hours that week, while sleeping in a local rental house, managed by the new company. That week was unusually cold, and the house's heating did not work well. The last night we were there, we had a couple inches of snow. My teammate wasn't sure that he was going to make it home to southern North Carolina, because he had such slick tires on his

sports car. The Saturday morning indeed revealed snow on the beach, as the sun shone brightly, and eventually warmed up the day. I had no snow at home, and this snow up north was probably melted by the end of the day. It was an unusual weather event on the Outer Banks.

By the time March rolled around, I had asked if I could work a bit from my WV home, as I was getting pretty homesick at this point. That request was granted, but I soon realized that this working arrangement could not last, and that the Outer Banks was no place to live alone, when the wife was back in WV. In April, I resigned, got the house ready for the rental season, and drove back home to another unemployment season of my life. It was just another in a string of failures in my restless life. I decided to go back to the historic hotel part-time, as I could not find any IT jobs nearby. Between September 2014 and March 2019, I had applied for more than 240 IT-related jobs; I interviewed for only a handful, with only one offer – the job at OBX. I really felt like a failure.

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During the last five years of my life, that beach house became like our swimming pool that came with the WV house when we bought it in 1994. That pool turned out to be 95% work and 5% enjoyment. The house, however, turned out to be 99% work with a negligible 1% enjoyment. It became a money pit of regular repairs. Hey! What did I expect? Home ownership requires periodic repairs. The glamour of buying a beach house soon wore off, and reality set in.



## Chapter 24

### Guatemala – Part 2

In the spring of 2016, our nephew, who lived a half hour away, got married. He decided that as part of his honeymoon, he wanted family members to join him and his new wife in Guatemala for a work week. His mother had already been involved with a local family in Antigua, who oversaw a Christian school on the outskirts of town. So, the family arranged for some work projects to be done at the school and in a few neighborhoods for a few poor families. I jumped at the opportunity, but Roxanne decided to sit out this trip.

Instead of staying at the hotel where I had previously stayed, it was decided that everyone lodge at a hotel right downtown. The accommodations turned out to be just as nice – until one night after a few days into our trip. I ended up sharing a room with another husband, whose wife did not come either. He snored so loudly, that I had to go to sleep with music in my ear-piece headphones. Even then, it was difficult to get to sleep. The breakfast and dinner each day were fantastic, as we ate in an outside courtyard.

The work projects consisted of creating cement indoor stoves in houses on the property of a local coffee plantation. The workers were allowed to live on the property in primitive conditions. We mixed much mud by hand for stoves. We also had to move wheelbarrows of gravel from a site on the property that was not near the work site. Our team leader was a local. He insisted on using a small circular hand-saw himself for cutting a hole in the metal roof, needed for a stovepipe. The work turned out to be much easier than

expected. We had little interaction with the residents of the two houses – possibly because they were working during the day in the plantation, while we worked on the stoves.

I only got to visit the aforementioned school one afternoon. It looked like it was well-organized and well-staffed. We got to see a school presentation in their small auditorium. After the presentation, I sat on a bench with a young boy of about seven years, as he waited for his parents to pick him up. I tried my best to converse in my broken Spanish, but he was not interested. He almost fell asleep sitting beside me before his parents arrived. I am sure that the children are worked hard, in order to provide them with a decent education that could help them escape poverty.

One extended family unit had sponsored a child at the school for a few years, paying her annual school fees and communicating via letter with her and her family. The family members were not followers of Jesus and would make no bones about it. I wondered what motivated a non-Christian to care about some poor person half a world away. One reason could be that people know there is a God, and approach him with their own works of righteousness, instead of submitting to God's way of thinking. I see this type of thinking when people tell me that they are now attending weekly church services after I have shared the good news with them, while not mentioning church attendance whatsoever. They have preconceived ideas about what God expects from them, which are not based in any truth at all.

Our work week spanned the entire weekend, so that our last day there was on a Wednesday. I got to sleep Friday evening only to be rudely awakened around midnight to very loud music coming from the street in front of the hotel. Apparently, late Friday night was the party time for the entire town. It was quite obnoxious, as my room was right on the outer wall of the hotel, facing the street. I ended up leaving the room, going further back in the hallway away from the

front of the hotel. I took my music player and slept on a couch in the hallway by the steps, if I slept at all. My snoring roommate never heard a thing.

Sunday arrived, and we were taken to the “local church” of the schoolmaster and our host. It was in an air-conditioned building. The “service” consisted of music and teaching via remote video. The local folks onsite only provided emcee duties. I don't think the video was broadcast live, but was a recording made somewhere in Guatemala City by a church group that had money. I could tell because the preacher wore a nice suit, and his white shirt had cuff links. The dichotomy of two distinct economic lifestyles lived side-by-side during our trip, seemed confusing. We worked among the poorest of the country, hosted by a middle-class family, while associated with a rich church. At least that was my perception. It was probably based upon some semblance of truth, but it really was not my place to judge the situation based upon a one-time visit. I never have liked cuff links, as they smack of rich snobbery, in my opinion. It is as if average shirts with buttoned cuffs are not good enough for some of God's children. (It was another interesting observation based upon a negative connotation.) It made me think of Romans 12:16 which says “....do not be haughty in mind, but associate with men of low estate. Be not wise in your own estimation.”

Our last full day was a free day with no work projects. Most of the team wanted to take a horse-riding tour of another coffee plantation. I declined, because I did not want to spend the money. However, someone backed out at the last minute after paying; so I ended up taking that person's place. Riding a horse is a challenge if one does not do it regularly. On the tour, I got to see a glimpse of El Hato, where I had worked the last time that I was in Guatemala. I wondered how those we served were living.

The beauty of the country was noted again, as we left Volcan de Agua and Antigua, over the breathtaking mountains

to Guatemala City. We had another short flight into El Salvador, then back to the states – no unplanned stay-overs in El Salvador this time.

## Chapter 25

# Grandkids

In June 2012, Eva and fiancée Kelvin got married in Huntington, WV. They had met at Marshall University. Roxanne and I took a long weekend to help prepare the wedding venue. I had just purchased my first new suit in my entire life. The June day turned out to be quite hot as we had to sit in the sun during the service in long sleeves. I had been calm the entire day of the wedding, even joking with all the kids in attendance. But, as I waited at the top of the hill to walk Eva down the “aisle”, I lost it, as I saw Eva leave the preparation house, headed toward me. It was quite an emotional day.

Now, 4 1/2 years later, Eva was having her first baby in Nashville Tennessee. In 2019, a second boy was born. There would be several trips to Nashville over the next couple of years to visit the family and new grand-kids. I had just started a computer desktop support job with a different state agency, hoping, that five years hence, I could start relying on my old frozen pension. I had been blessed to have had good clerical and computer jobs through the years with government agencies. This was especially true, since I was a college dropout with no specialized skills or formal college training.

I couldn't fly to Nashville with Roxanne in August for the second grandson's birth, as I had just started my job a month earlier. Things went well with the birth, and Roxanne flew home two weeks later. Tommy, who was 3 ½, now had a proud little brother. At least twice a year, I took the time to travel to Nashville to visit Eva and Kelvin, and to love on the boys. Over the next few years, we especially enjoyed playing

games, taking walks, doing art projects, and reading many books – over and over. Both boys learned to read earlier than their time in kindergarten. That can be a blessing or a curse, as reading books to the kids diminished a bit, because they liked to read the books themselves.

Over the last five years, it was always a blessing to be able to teach the kids about God, and how to get to know him and his ways. Explaining the meaning of passages of the Bible was a wonderful way to spend time. The same went for praying and giving credit to God at all times of our daily lives. One specific teaching opportunity entailed the idea that we should love God with all our hearts by performing our work, learning, playing, and interacting with others in a way that pleases God. Focusing on God is not meant to be a small compartment in the larger house of our lives.

After one particular week of helping out the parents in Nashville, by helping to chauffeur the kids to and from school, I was back to work during an unusually cool spring. The job was not stressful in the least, as I had much freedom to work on my own projects, while handling the fires that arose on the Information Technology front. I usually started work before most of the staff started their shifts, so that I could work on problems, while the users were not using their computers.

It was a Thursday; traffic on the way to work was lighter than normal, due to the local high school graduation being the previous night. I had just stopped at the nearest convenience store to pick up a breakfast sandwich. I entered the workplace as normal, and got right to work. While reading emails around 8AM, I started feeling nauseous. I figured that the problem might have been some bad components with the sandwich I had just eaten. Suddenly, I started to feel dizzy as well. The last thing that I remember was that light was slowly fading into darkness.

## Chapter 26

# The Eulogy

At the funeral, a friend read a prepared eulogy, written in advance by Russell himself: “I realize that I will be missed and mourned by friends and family. Time has a way, though, of smoothing out the hurt, and dissipating it. Don't forget! There will be a reunion of friends in heaven and/or eternity – not a reunion of family members, which, I believe, is to what Jesus referred in his explanation of resurrection in Luke 20. Life goes on without those we love, in sadness and/or in happiness. In eternity, that sadness will be gone forever, as our God has prepared a place for unending happiness.<sup>7</sup> Grief will be turned to joy, though we must wait a long time for it.

At the very least, it was my desire to know God and to please him since I received eternal life at age 14. At the very most, I have nothing to say, since God reserves the ultimate judgment, and I am most unworthy of any accolades that could be given, as I deserve none. I was second only to Paul in being the chief of sinners (I will not override his statement in the sacred writings, as he, after all, was an apostle, and I was nothing similar). I was as selfish as the next guy, and “prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love”, as the old hymn states.<sup>8</sup> I feel like my faith in God actually shrunk in size, instead of growing, over the years. Paul did mention that everyone was given a measure of faith. On the other hand, Jesus stated that one could move a mountain with faith the size of a mustard seed.

I felt like faith was ambiguous in some respect, yet tied to the ability to hear/heed God's voice. After all, Jesus only did and spoke what he saw and heard the Father doing

and speaking.<sup>9</sup> However, there is one verse that is encouraging in the midst of a lack of clear direction: 2 Thessalonians 1:11 in the NIV states “...we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling and that by His power, he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith”. In this context, I believe that the word “faith” is used in the general sense of being “in God” – of being “in the faith” - of being in God's family. Romans 7:24, 25 also come to mind as the “rescue” verses: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Master!”

My other favorites passages of the Bible were the following: First, Acts 17:24-31, which succinctly paints the big picture for the entire human race, detailing in over-arching fashion God's requirements and ability to be found. Secondly, a similar passage in Micah, 6:8, condenses the same thought into one verse: “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does Yahweh require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God”. Finally, Romans 8, the entire chapter, goes into lengthy detail about God's amazing love for his adopted children. It is the ultimate chapter of encouragement.

One of the long-lasting disappointments in my life had to do with the enjoyment of music. I never could find a close friend to thoroughly share the joy of just listening to the music of my favorite artists and genres, although there were a few short-lived exceptions. As far as lyrical music went, I was of the opinion that “the world” had very little insight to offer in terms of combining creative music with God's truth and worldview. Therefore, I eschewed most lyrical music created by non-Christians. My thinking was: “there is only so much time to be spent on music; therefore I better choose wisely”. As you will soon hear, my favorite song is entitled “The Other Side”, by a relatively obscure artist named David Zaffiro.

After all, I am on the other side now, awaiting all of you to join me. Otherwise, I enjoyed a wide variety of musical styles, the least enjoyable being stereotypically labeled “black gospel” and the most enjoyable being labeled “progressive rock” and that of the dramatic flair, such as the rock opera and some Broadway musical songs. The most underrated project in recent times was the Christian rock opera Hero, which also had a short run on the live stage. It was a well-produced two hour story of the life of Jesus, as if he were born in 20th century Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. You should look it up; it will be well-worth the searching. Neal Morse and Dream Theater were two of my favorites who produced dramatic music in the rock opera vein. A most pertinent song from the spiritually-infused Broadway musical “Wicked” is titled “Defying Gravity”. With its double entendre, a close listen should bring to mind several victorious themes from the overcoming Christian life.

A special thanks goes to Jaime Nicholas, who was mutually enthralled with the spiritual overtones in the recorded live performance of the now-defunct band “Dead Can Dance”. A special thanks also goes to Phil Petrocelli, for introducing me to “King's X”. Over my head, I hear music in the air. I think it is coming from the throne of God. Hopefully, I will get to meet Sister Rosetta soon.

A big thank you is given to my friend Landon Archibald, for sticking with me all these years, being a faithful brother. The proverb is correct in stating that there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. I also hope to meet our mutual brother Jameson soon.

To my wife Roxanne – I tried to love you, but I am sure that I only hurt you and restricted your freedom. My desire for you was never lessened through all our years. I wish we had been on the same page more often. Eva and Kelvin, teach your kids to follow Jesus; I want to see you all in the future.

No life exists without the concept of regret. There are many things that I did in life, which I regretted. None are worth dwelling upon; regret only looks backward toward the history that cannot be changed. Pressing on toward a better tomorrow, building upon that history of consequences, is the only way to move forward. To everyone, life is a journey, not the destination. God is the destination, and what he has in store in the next age. After all, new heavens and a new earth are coming. Don't ever believe that stupid 1987 Belinda Carlisle song, "Heaven is a Place on Earth", where heaven is what you make of your life on earth. How depressing for half of the world living in poverty and war, with no hope in this life. There has to be hope for a better life after death. Or else, this life is just a cruel joke – a muddle, as they say in England. What a word – muddle. I think it means something that just doesn't make sense. The big picture painted in the Bible makes quite enough sense, if you are willing to spend the time searching for it, and for Him. God has chosen to hide himself in plain sight.<sup>10</sup> He has promised that those who look for him will find him, if they seek him with all their hearts.<sup>11</sup>"



## “THE HOPE CYCLE” SONG LYRICS

When I was a boy, I just took things for granted  
Never really wondered if God even existed  
Then someone thought I needed structure in my life  
Catechized at 12 in methodical religion  
Protestant truth was an American tradition

An ordinary life in an ordinary county  
Many youth my age were walking down the road  
    beside me  
Life was still a game, and I loved the game of  
    baseball  
Music came alive and embraced me with its magic  
Girls began to bloom, and they soon became attractive

At fourteen, innocence was gone,  
and my knowledge was increasing  
People freaking out at late-night Charismatic meetings  
At Charlie Stoke's house on the eighth of November  
My dad turned 32; it was a night I would remember  
Jesus met us there, and I willingly surrendered.

The Bible was so new that it was instantly exciting  
Then I realized that churches were not so inviting  
Ritual was boring, so I learned to be unorthodox  
Became a Jesus freak with the rapture as my soapbox  
An arrogant kid in God's heart – what a paradox

Buried in a muddy pond four years later  
Serious about the one who came to be my savior  
Dove into college like a fish out of water  
Spent my parents money on the old alma mater  
Thought a missionary had to take four years of  
lecture.

Quickly disillusioned as the oldest baby boomer  
Mind full of questions, but without a solid answer  
Marriage came along, then soon a little baby  
Things were looking up – gonna raise a happy family  
Spirit opening my eyes – teaching me reality.

Walking with my Lord, I have come to know some  
trials  
And the friends that I've been given  
help me pass through the fire  
Taking day by day, now I'm praying for some wisdom  
Looking through a glass dimly at a distant kingdom  
Closer than I think, yes, it's hiding deep within me.

Now I feel all alone like I'm in a foreign country  
Stranger in this world, looking for some lasting glory  
Yes, I found the truth, but I still need some direction  
Keeping to the path, I'm blinded by my own reflection  
Pressing t'ward the light and the ultimate connection



## Afterword

As of the publication of this tome, Russell Wicklow has actually made it to the age of 60. However, as intimated in the Preface, no one gets out of this life alive. And, no one knows the day of one's death, unless, of course, one is on death row with a scheduled expiration date. That is one reason why Jesus Christ told us to "keep watch". We need to be ready for the bridegroom to return to his house for the wedding, no matter how unexpected or late his arrival will be.

Please check out Psalm 30, which is also a Hope Cycle of sorts, written by King David, summarizing some of his roller coaster ride, while still maintaining his faith in the goodness of God.

## End notes

- 1 - Chapter 1 – From the movie “The Princess Bride”, 1987
- 2 - Chapter 1 – I Peter 4:8
- 3 - Chapter 1 – Ecclesiastes 7:2
- 4 - Chapter 4 – I Peter 2:24
- 5 - Chapter 8 – Ducher 1988, *Caracteristiques des Styles*, pp.46-62.
- 6 - Chapter 12 – <http://khrhg.org/1997/03/khrhg9705/attacks-karen-refugee-camps>
- 7 - Chapter 26 – John 14:1f
- 8 - Chapter 26 – lyrics from the hymn “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing”, public domain
- 9 - Chapter 26 – John 8:28 et al
- 10 - Chapter 26 – Isaiah 45:15; Romans 1:20
- 11 - Chapter 26 – Jeremiah 29:12