

Stumbling Along

with the God who loves, forgives, and protects

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(1) PLAYED IN A BEAUTIFUL DEADLY DISPLAY OF ST ELMO'S FIRE

I was camping with some friends just above timber line on the shoulder of a fourteen thousand foot peak, on the continental divide. It was a heavily overcast day, but even in mid July there are patches of snow and even occasional snow flurries at those elevations.

Leaving our gear in camp, we were just approaching the summit when I noticed one of the girl's hair beginning to arise from her back and wisps and strands reaching upwards. Soon we were all milling around in a mystical wonderland with static-sculpted hairdos. We began to hear and feel crackling sounds as we waved our hands in the air. As the field intensified, faint streamers began to appear on the corners of boulders and off our fingertips. After a few more minutes of increasing intensity, even we were wise enough to head for lower elevations. By the time we were about halfway down to camp, we were graced by a light and scattered flurry of snow, as occasional powerful blasts of lightening began to pummel the peak where we had been standing. God's creation and power are awesome.

(2) IF YOU DON'T MAKE DECISIONS, DECISIONS ARE MADE FOR YOU

I had taken provision for granted, and even social opportunities had been incidental to the twelve years of mandatory education I had endured. But I was a little slower than most when it came to actually growing up. I had taken nothing seriously that was not opportunistic fun or exploration. I dealt with situations as they arose, and optimize them to my pleasure as best I could.

But now what? When I finally woke up, I had just three months of this game of childhood left, and I began to realize that there was this door standing wide open before me. But I did not see it as a door of opportunity; it was merely an unavoidable exit from my current lifestyle. How do you adapt to an open door with nothing visible on the other side?

I had seen enough by this time to understand that people often made things up that they wanted to believe, and then invested much on trying to believe they were true. I made a decision at that point, that I would rather be real and miserable, than happy and kidding myself. Surprise surprise: God has made it possible to be both real and happy!

(3) MEET COZY THE BEAR

I was living on a dude ranch when a friend and I thought it would be cute to terrorize a girl's work crew cabin by salting it with a few bats. The first fifteen yards or so of the cave we entered to mine for little terrorists, was about the size of a fireplace. My friend, armed with a dim and dying flashlight, led the way. As we just reached the place where we could stand up my friend said quietly but firmly "Let's get out of here!" I didn't argue, and in a few seconds we were outside.

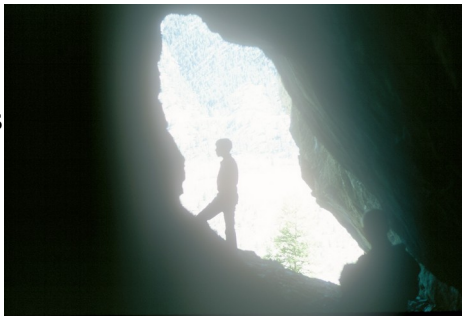
"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I don't like the bats. I could see the reflection in their eyes."

"Gimme that light!" and we dove back into the cave with him right behind me.

As we again reached the point where the cave enlarged, I was just doing a double-take: Reflections? In bat's eyes? Immediately we both clearly heard ponderous heavy footsteps of a large animal.

As we exploded from the cave and were diving over boulders and bushes to get away from whatever it was, we soon erupted into laughter.



(4) WE CAN AFFORD TO FACE REALITY

If there is no creator then there is no intrinsic purpose in life. If there *is* a creator, we still have to choose between serving him or ourselves.

I was facing this most basic decision humans have the power to make. So I tossed out a prayer to a God unknown: "...If you *do* exist and have a purpose for me, I want to serve you." The prayer was honest, and I figured that if God was real He would know my address and could get in touch with me if he wanted to – or even cared. In the stillness that followed, I received a sense that Jesus was indeed at the center, but I immediately rejected it, because I had already been exposed to that. But the fact that I had been exposed to Christianity did not preclude the involvement of Jesus in the cosmic plan. Beyond this, I had asked in honesty, and so far this was the only answer I had. In this very tenuous acceptance I resolved that I was not going to force anything to work. If it wasn't real, the sooner I found out and quit wasting my time the better.

I was not a nice person by this time. I would pretend to care about people so that they wouldn't hate me, but in fact I didn't really care about anyone. On the school bus the next morning some nerdy little Jr. High girl had gotten hurt or embarrassed. As I was sitting there feeling sorry for her it came to me as a shock what I was doing – I was feeling compassion! The day before I would have been laughing at her like everybody else! To me this was a beginning of tangible evidence that God was actually doing something in my heart.

This began a period of slow incremental growth. There were no questions I was afraid to ask (still aren't), and I feared no answers. Beyond this, I ceased to worry about what people thought of me. I was free to explore thoughts and actions with honesty and abandon – without dependence upon the affirmations of others.

What had appeared earlier as entering into a confined religious enclosure, had in fact become a liberating exit into a universe of exciting and unlimited possibilities.

(5) HOW TO SPIT A QUARTER OF A MILE

I was living at over nine thousand feet, on what some might call uneven terrain. In fact, about an hour and a half of hiking would take me to a place where I could hang my chin out over a precipice that dropped away for over a thousand feet.

By way of toying with this exhilarating vista I would take mixing-bowl sized rocks and drop them off -- just to watch them fall. They would rotate slowly as they fell freely for the first several hundred feet, until the face of the cliff would come out to meet them. They would then explode outwards, and the fragments would continue their journeys, until they too exploded in little puffs of dust in the talus over a thousand feet below.



My young philosophical mind actually mined a useful nugget from this scene. I had toyed with the question of whether or not right and wrong even existed, and as I watched yet another pet rock having a litter, I wondered what it would be like to: Horrors!

(6) MY CAREER AS A TERRORIST

The dude ranch I lived on was strictly a summer camp at the time, and during the fall, as I would perform various chores of construction or maintenance I would carry a 22 pistol. One afternoon I walked to a nearby ranch that was open all year round, to visit some friends.

They didn't notice me as I stepped out of the brush near the court where they were playing basketball. So I thought I'd say "hi" by firing six quick rounds into the bank of soft earth behind me. After a startled moment, they quickly adapted by doing beautiful dying acts all over the basketball court.

I then noticed that the recreation hall about seventy feet away in a slightly different direction, was filled with high school kids. These promptly dove for the floor as my gaze panned the windows – except for one who was too terrified to move at all.

About half a minute later as the corpses returned to life, laughter prevailed among those who were not already standing in lines for the bathrooms.

(7) BITTEN BY A RATTLESNAKE

You would think that someone who enjoyed the outdoors as much as I did would know what a rattlesnake looked like. It was almost two feet long, but had no rattles – so it must not be a rattlesnake. As I went to pick it up it left a pair of small cuts at the base of my thumb. But it didn't hurt much, so I didn't think it was poisonous. So I laid a sheet of paper over it and seized it right behind the head as it tried to get away.

I picked it up and released its head. I was puzzled that it didn't wrap its' tail around my hand or arm like other snakes I'd played with, but I found out later that rattlesnakes do not have prehensile tails. After toying with it for awhile, I released it.

I think that God might have been interviewing guardian angles who would later protect me from the more serious dangers.

(8) SAILED OVER AN ONCOMMING CAR

After a couple weeks on my first motorcycle (an unremarkable 250cc), I had far more confidence than I deserved. When I heard the engine speed up as the road dropped away on the downhill side of a railroad crossing, I wondered what it would be like to hit the crossing from the downhill side. From that side the crossing was so steep that you could not see the oncoming traffic on the narrow road.

I accelerated heavily. As I approached the tracks and glanced at the speedometer the instant before encountering the ramp, I read 55mph.

To this day there remains a photo in my mind of making eye contact with the oncoming driver. I was sailing over the driver side of the car, clearing it by about two feet, facing a slender young man with dark hair. He had his mouth open and his chin on the dashboard as he looked up in terror.

Upon miraculously landing safely within an adequate distance from the next oncoming car, I felt so sick that I just wanted to get off and push the bike home.

(10) ANOTHER CHANCE: While camping along the Colorado River, I thought it would be fun to swim to Arizona. Although flowing swiftly, the river appeared to be little more than a quarter of a mile wide.

The current was strong and I was putting effort into it so I wouldn't have so far to walk back to camp. As a result, I ran out of energy so suddenly that I couldn't have yelled loud enough, even if there had been a boat in the area.

I was disappointed that my life had been so short, and with just my face above the waves, I admitted to God that if He had anything else for me to do in life, it would be up to him, because there was nothing I could do. With the last syllables of that prayer my toe touched bottom, and in seconds I was relaxing on a sandbar. Use it wisely.

(11) MOBILE HOMELESS

While attending college and working to support myself, I was living in a Volkswagen van. I parked it in a space rented by my employer for their employees, and I had arranged with a cheap hotel to use a community shower. Things were a little cramped, but at least I never forgot anything when I went anywhere

One night a couple carloads of kids pulled up nearby and partied in the otherwise-empty lot. It was amusing the next morning when I discovered a seductive invitation to join them – in the form of a pantyhose tied to a door handle.

About three weeks later I was rudely awakened at about 3:00 am by my van being wildly rocked. This obnoxious invitation I would not ignore. I resolved that I would rather be the terrorist than the terreree, so I took my hunting knife and a deep breath, kicked the door open, and jumped out into the middle of them. No one argued, in fact, there was no one there to argue with.

Glancing under the van, there was only one pair of ankles on the other side. Next, my barefoot knife-wielding self was confronting a laughing friend, who was getting even with me for a prank I had pulled on him.

(12) SLEPT WITH A NUN? While preparing for work on a Friday morning a friend popped into my cottage and asked if I wanted to go to Guatemala on Tuesday. I promptly said sure, and then received the details. Some missionaries were driving down there, but they needed extra drivers to help with the vehicles that they would be taking along. A local church would be paying air fare home. When I asked my boss if I could take a few days off work, he said no, so I quit.

During the brief visit it seemed that my backgrounds could be of help, so I was invited to return and live there for awhile. After making a few arrangements I drove back down and entered a whole new culture full of surprises – delightful and otherwise. I was soon living in a small town at about 9,200 ft, and traveling around helping out with construction and enterprise in various parts of the country.

After about four months I ran out of money and earned my place to stay by teaching English in a school that had been abandoned by a peace corps kid. I was also earning money for food etc. by teaching English to adults two nights a week in a large town about fifteen miles away. Among these adult teachers were four Swedish girls and a Carmelite nun living in separate units on the fourth floor of an apartment building.

I think I was kinda dangerous to be around; I just didn't know how to behave. For one thing I didn't have the stand-offish dignity expected of school teachers, and I accepted an invitation from students to join them in a games of soccer (one of my first grade students was the same age I was). One category of danger I didn't know how to assess was a communist school teacher who began asking me whether I would be going to Viet Nam. When he asked where I might be going after that, I innocently used a crude Mexican idiom and said "wherever the United States wants to have sex."

More importantly, I should have known better than to sleep in the nun's apartment on evenings when it was too late for me to catch a bus home – interesting, but I never got into the habit. But she got accused of prostitution and was recalled to the United States. For my part, I had left the only jacket I had in her now securely locked apartment.

Fortunately, the balcony doors were not all that secure. So one night four floors above the cobblestones, I climbed out over the rail of the Swedish girls' apartment, worked my way across the outside of the building, and retrieved my jacket.

(13) SURROUNDED BY WILD DOGS

One evening I was stuck in a large town Guatemala after the busses had quit running, and was forced to take a cab the 15 miles to where I was staying. The final half mile would be unlit country. I had

negotiated poorly, and the cabbie was insisting on me paying another fifteen mile price for the final half mile into the forbidden darkness of the unlit road.

The staffs some locals carry when taking such roads are not because they have walking problems, but to protect themselves from the wild dogs – during the daytime. So here I was, with no light or weapon, heading off into the surreal blackness of the Guatemalan hill country.

When about a hundred and fifty yards from home, I began to hear low growls among barely discernible shadows that seemed to be circling and continually change position. When I would suddenly whirl around and stamp my foot towards a stealthy shadow approaching me from behind, there would be a brief snarl as it bounded back. Needless to say, I was praying furiously. As near as I can tell this is the most terrified I have ever been of anything in my life.

Suddenly, I heard myself emit a primal yell. The shadows disappeared, and all was quiet as I continued the final thirty yards or so to my doorstep.

I don't know just what I told those dogs, but God's protection takes many forms.

(14) THE BROTHER I'D NEVER MET

Those Guatemalan Indians were incredible. They had been carrying heavy burdens on their backs since they were small children, and as adults, many of the men would walk dozens of miles with burdens weighing over two hundred pounds.

On a stroll through the market place I spied an Indian who had carried a huge load of dried shrimp from the coast, across seventy miles of jungle, and then up to his home high in the mountains. He had come down hill to this 9,000 ft town that morning to market his burden.

The instant our eyes met we both began saying "Praise the Lord" in Spanish. Such was this instant recognition that it was as if I had known him all my life. We knew the same Jesus. Here was this long-legged gringo (about 6'2") 3,000 miles from home, and this four-foot something Indian for whom Spanish was likewise a second language. We stared at each other, shared comments on life and spiritual gifts, smiled, nodded, blessed each other, and departed.

As brief and simple as that encounter was, it instilled an important sense of the depth of God's sovereign work and of His global family.

(16) STALKED BY A MACHETE WIELDING WARLOCK (Brujo)

I dated a couple of the Swedish girls, and once upon returning to their apartment around midnight, a couple of friends were waiting for me. There was this volcano almost 13,000 feet high they wanted to climb that night, so that we could be on top of it by the time the sun came up.

This mountain was very sacred to the local warlocks, and that very evening a couple of these brujo were also on their way to the top to offer a blood sacrifice at sunrise. These two did not want us on their mountain, and tried to warn us off with fireworks on the trail, but we kept on climbing. We stood respectfully off to the side as they did their bloody thing, while enjoying the incredible scene.

This mountain dropped away in a single steep swoop to seventy miles of coastal jungle. As the sun came up behind us the



Shadow of the mountain. with Pacific Ocean visible near the very top

mountain cast a shadow that extended into the Pacific Ocean and disappeared over the curvature of the earth.

Since then, I have met two others who had encountered that mountain. One of was a nurse who climbed it with a couple of girlfriends. They had hired a couple of men with automatic rifles to accompany them. The other had approached it, but he admitted that when he saw a couple of brujo standing over a decapitated tourist, he ran off screaming.

As we reached the bottom that morning and were heading for the parking lot I saw a solemn powerfully built indian carrying a machete on a parallel path. When I suggested that we needed to get to the parking lot first, we all agreed.

(17) ALONE AND DEATHLY ILL

A deadly strain of hepatitis had been finding victims for a number of months in the area, and so far, a couple of my Swedish friends had spent two or three weeks each in a local hospital to recover from it. But as an infectious disease, it was not surprising that I had been exposed to it while hanging out with my friends. But my health was excellent and my life full of adventure, so it had not been my turn -- just yet.

On the morning after I had spent half the night on a date with one of them, and the other half climbing a mountain, I returned to their apartment to help my four friends move across town. They had been living on the fourth floor of an apartment building that had no elevator, so they were in need of a little help in moving their stuff.

By that evening after countless trips of carrying things down four flights of stairs, loading and unloading a vehicle into their new residence, I had been up for about 36 hours without a blink of sleep, having spent most of it in heavy physical exercise. I was ready for a nap.

Two days later I crawled under a blanket in a shed, and for the next three days I was unable to consume so much as a cup of water without vomiting.

I had a couple of visitors during that period. An American doctor briefly dropped by and confirmed that I did indeed have a very serious strain of hepatitis. He recommend that I get lots of rest. Thanks doc. A local wino medical person also dropped by and was alarmed at how slow my pulse rate had become. He was kind enough to gift me with a bottle of pills to make my heart beat faster.

Miraculously (and I do mean miraculously), by the middle of the third day I was thoroughly jaundiced, but I was able to consume an actual bite of food without vomiting. So I picked up my liver and drove a hundred and fifty kilometers to the capital, so I could sell my car for bus fare home.

(20) PLAYED CHICKEN WITH THE DEVIL

There are times in our lives when we encounter things that we will either conquer, or be conquered by. I had no previous experience to prepare me for this one: I had never seen an apparition before. It was a little before noon, I was well rested, had consumed no drugs or alcohol for months, and was alone in the house. I was heading for the front door to go out and buy a little food, when there it was; standing next to the hallway wall where the hallway opened out to include the kitchen.

It stood about four feet high, was black, but eerily and very slightly transparent. I had heard of these demonic beings but never seen one. I could feel a crawling on the back of my neck and the charged atmosphere of a satanic presence. Well, I wasn't about to mess with it, and had no clue how to deal with it. There was plenty of room to get around it in the kitchen part of the room, so I started to walk around it and hope it would be gone by the time I got back.

But no! This thing had entered *my* territory, and I knew that it would continue to shadow me in some form until it was dealt with. What it boiled down to was whether or not the God in me was greater than the power behind this thing. Sometimes there are more important issues in life, than life and death, and

since I knew I could not afford to ignore this trespass, I resolved to do the scariest thing I have ever intentionally done, and physically walk into it in the Name of Jesus!

I didn't know if I would explode into a ball of fire or find myself in a different location. I physically stepped into it, and as I did so, the thing disappeared. By the next step I was laughing at it.

(21) A TERRORIST BOMB DAMAGED A BUILDING I WAS IN

I was staying in the capitol of Guatemala trying to sell my car for bus fare home in 1965, when a powerful explosion caved in the kitchen window of the place I was staying. Soon the streets filled with people, and we found out that dynamite had been detonated to assassinate a government censor a quarter mile away. The rattle we had heard following the explosion had been machine gun fire.

During night I periodically heard racing cars and machine gun fire. For my part it was kind of fun – I'd never been in a revolution before. Guatemala had been freed from communist control in 1954, but communists remained active in propaganda and terrorism for a couple of decades thereafter.

It was interesting chatting with various individuals on the subject. Those who had experienced communism as teenagers loved me for being an American and freeing their country. Some of the current crop of college students I met however, were enamored by the lies and theories that have to this day proven to be extremely repressive and economically destructive.

As a personal benefit, I met a lovely young lady across the street, and when I took her to a movie, the mother and sister came along to make sure I behaved myself. I fell in love with all three of them.

(22) A TIME TO KILL

The Viet Nam war could no longer be ignored – at least it was no longer ignoring *me*. In February of 66 I boarded the U.S.S. Wiltsie, a destroyer that had been launched at the very end of WWII.

During the Viet Nam war I was about as ignorant as anyone, but as awareness of what was really going on began to sink in I happened to be on the wrong side of the ocean. About all I could say was “Thanks for the bullets American tax payers, I couldn’t be doing all these wonderful things without you.”

On my first trip, I remember my last night in the Philippines (Subic Bay). The next day we were to set out across the last 700 miles of water for Viet Nam, and I was considering deserting.

Somehow, it had not sunk in to me until this very evening that they had gone to all this expense and training so that they could deliver me across the ocean to kill people whom I neither knew, loved, nor hated. I had a decision to make.

I had read three books on world history while on the voyage across the Pacific, and had then read a massive tome in the ship's library on the history of warfare. The chilling awareness I had gained from all this was that the history of warfare *IS* the history of humanity. I realized by then that I should have put a little more thought into voting and other actions before getting to this point.

But now here I was on the breaking edge of what mankind has done since tribes have existed. The morality of the war had nothing to do with it; I was part of a current. I had nothing personally against the men I was to kill, and I had no resentment against those who would attempt to kill me.

Unquestionably, many will consider this a cop-out. I am not interested in the opinions of any who have not had to make a similar decision under such circumstances.

(24) FACING WAVES OVER 50 FEET HIGH

My first ship was a WW2 vintage destroyer, and there were about 400 men packed into this “tin can” as we steamed homeward across the North Pacific in November of '66. We had been in the Far East for six months and were in the company of the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Constellation. We were in an extremely intense typhoon, where we encountered waves over fifty feet high (fifty three feet was the *average* height of each seven-wave sequence).! We were five hundred miles north of Midway Island.

We were indeed in mortal danger, and our damage control team re-welded three ruptured seams under these conditions. I almost feel apologetic about this, but I was loving it. I

was at peace with God and I was enjoying seeing His awesome power put mankind into perspective.

These mammoth waves provided windows into the dark abyss that beckoned us from below. Muted shafts of light danced into the depths like an aurora borealis, gradually fading into the eternal blackness. There were almost two miles of water between us and the quiet mysterious bottom.

The awesome power of the waves was tossing us upwards and then dropping us in near weightlessness in regular cycles.

As a low level enlisted man at the time, one of my duties was to serve in the scullery (washing dishes). Yes, at least half of us were still enjoying delicious meals during all this.



A different ship among smaller waves

At one point the ship took a perilous lean. With a double sink full of suds and stainless steel trays before me in the narrow confines I reached to my left to prevent two racks of glasses from crashing to the deck. I braced my right foot against the thin slightly buckled hull between me and the endless darkness beneath.

Set your elbow on a level surface with your hand straight up, representing the mast of the ship; 90 degrees. Then lean the ship to 45 degrees (now remember, you're on this thing). OK, now 30. Are we seasick yet? I watched helplessly as the stainless steel trays and soapy water poured out of the sink, filled my boot and tumbled against the hull.

The lean gradually slowed to a pause at about seventeen degrees from horizontal for eternal seconds, as I awaited the verdict in fatalistic peace. The specifications of the ship would have turned us over at fifteen degrees. But life won, and the sea had to surrender its grip!

I refilled the sink and herded the escaped trays back into their bath as the furious sea resumed its battering cycles of dropping us in near weightlessness and driving us upwards in crushing gravity.

One of our crew broke an arm in all this, and when the storm had slightly abated, a helicopter managed to get a line on him and haul him over to the Constellation. He said that in the view from there our ship would drop completely out of sight for a long breath-hold, and then suddenly burst upwards bow-first, with water pouring off of everything. The ship would then tip forward, and the twin screws would briefly become exposed and pound on the surf as we again dove out of sight.

After four days on the carrier, a full captain (the equivalent of a colonel in the army) asked him if he was ready to go back to his ship. The little smart-ass looked up and said "Yeah, I've had enough of this shore duty."

(25) RESPECTFUL GANG BANGERS

The "local boys" were an assortment of Asian races who were generally into martial arts. There was probably no category of human they despised more than sailors – especially in uniform.

Late one night I was wandering alone through a park on my way back to the barracks, and I passed within hailing distance of a group of these locals who were enjoying a bachelor party for one of their number. "Hey sailor, want a beer?" One of the stupidest thing to do under these circumstances would be to not run, so I said "sure" and walked over to them.

"Do you like Primo?" said one of their number, smirking as he handed me a beer, and observing me carefully. Primo is their local beer, and for reasons I can't imagine, they are very proud of it.

"That's my favorite; Thanks." So we all stood around in awkward silence for couple of minutes – them wondering how even a sailor could be so stupid, and me playing the part while poised for instant flight or otherwise.

Finally one of them stepped forward and extended his hand, and said "My name is Mario, and I am getting married tomorrow. Take your beer, and go." I bowed slightly and blessed him as I cautiously backed away for a few paces, before turning my back on them, and briskly continuing my journey.

(26) BEING SHOT AT

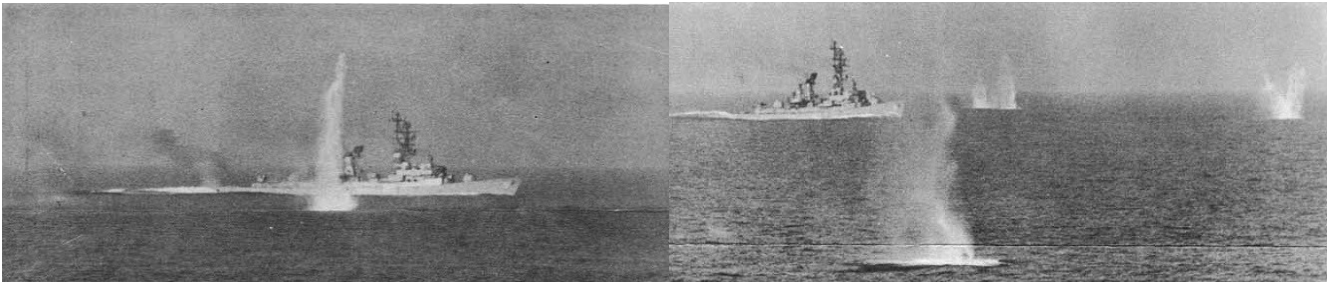
After a year on the Wiltsie – which included six months in the Far East, they were planning the next trip when they found I was scheduled to get out of the Navy two weeks before they would return. When they asked me if I would mind extending for a couple of weeks, I said "Heck yeah I'd mind." So they put me on another ship that was scheduled to return by then.

While cruising in the Tonkin Gulf aboard the Lynde Mc Cormic, we were aware of heavy gun emplacements that protected small boats carrying weapons and guerrillas south, from ships like ours. One afternoon the cruiser Newport News showed up, which was extremely rare. In fact, I had never heard of a cruiser *being* in the Tonkin Gulf before or since. As it turned out, they had a news reporter on board and they wanted to show off their big guns.

So “big stripes” on the cruiser ordered “little stripes” on the destroyer to go in close to shore so that the suspected gun emplacements on shore would reveal their locations by shooting at us. The game was that the cruiser would then blow them away with their newly automated big guns. This risk was totally unnecessary, since there were other ways of knowing exactly where they were.

Three gun emplacements suddenly opened up on us simultaneously, and a solid hit from any one of their shells would have sent us to the bottom. As we ducked and dodged through it all, and as fragments of these rounds tore at the wall behind me, the cruiser began firing, and couldn’t hit a thing. We managed to dump over twenty rounds from our own much smaller guns on one of their gun emplacements, and an aircraft launched from a carrier silenced the other two. About a week later, a friend sent me a newspaper clipping showing my ship fighting for its life with mammoth splashes of water all around it. So apparently, the damage, injury, and risk of four-hundred lives, was well worth it after all.

Understand of course, that the video footage available on the internet is accompanied by a very different commentary. It is my personal guess that conventional ship board big guns are an obsolete technology, and this was a last gasp failed attempt to prove otherwise by a highly-invested ship’s captain. Ironically, the U.S.S. Lynde McCormick carried guided missiles that likely could have wreaked accurate damage at a far greater range than the cruiser's guns.



I was aboard this ship while these pictures were being taken

(31) ME? AN L.A. COUNTY DEPUTY SHERIFF?

Almost immediately after I got out of the service I bought a chopper. The frame was pure custom with no fenders – or anything else that was not absolutely necessary. It was nothing but muscle and wheels. The first weekend I had it I put almost five hundred miles under it – the first of thousands over the ensuing months.

I had a few interesting adventures during this period. I remember clearly for instance, the afternoon that I learned that brakes don't work so well when both wheels are off the ground. I had both brakes locked up and the porch that was coming at me wasn't slowing down a bit!

One of the less believable adventures began as a calm Saturday afternoon. I was a little bored, so I took a trip to see a friend of mine. Bob was a local sheriff auxiliary and managed a conference grounds in the extreme northeast corner of L.A. County.

As I left the highway to follow the road up to the camp, there were bikers all over the place. The Monks, the Saints, the Devil's Disciples, and the Free Wheelers were having a joint outing (the pun works). That was before the helmet law, and Americans still had the right to look as cool as they thought they could.

As I drove through the gauntlet of gangs and continued on up the road I encountered Bob, standing squarely in the road. He had one hand on his 357 magnum, the other pointing at me, and a clear command to stop. When I took off my shades and spoke his name, he was shocked, but pleasantly surprised.

He had a must-do errand and needed to leave the ranch for awhile, so I was sworn in as a deputy, left with his 357 magnum, and – believe this or don't – his lovely sixteen year old daughter. What was this

guy thinking?!! This scene was straight out of a cheesy novel: “Our young hero stands alone to defend a lovely young maiden from four vicious outlaw biker gangs.”

Sixteen year old girls are neither ugly nor wise, and I began to feel that I would be a little safer if I hung out with the bikers, so I left Bob's gun on the dining room table, told the young lady to lock the house, and I took up a position in the road near where Bob had been (I had my own gun – legal or not).

Bob returned about an hour and a half later with two CHP units with two hombres apiece, and I was relieved of my duties. As I literally rode off into the sunset that afternoon, I was musing: “Gee, I’ve never been an L. A. County deputy sheriff before.”

(32) THE OTHER SIDE OF LOVE

Within a month of leaving the military I was buying a two bedroom house so I'd have something to come back to after continuing to travel the world.

God had sent people to love me, but I wouldn't let anyone get close. I could date girls that accepted me at a platonic level, but if a girl was stupid enough to say that she loved me, I never dated her again. God put up with this for about six months

I took this prophetic friend I'd known for a number of years to diner and had to borrow money from her to pay for it. “Sure I'll lend you the money,” she said, “but you're going to have to go with me to a church in Burbank.”

“Yeah, whatever – gimme the money...uh please?” We began attending on Wednesdays, but we didn't really meet anyone. We just came, listened, and left.

One night after church She told me that I had some trouble to go through, and that I was to yield to the chastening of the Lord, so that the time could be short. I instantly knew that it was to be a motorcycle accident and I was terrified, but there was no need to disturb *her* with what I saw – macho magnanimous me. On the other hand, I had no idea what this yield thing was about

After arguing with God for three weeks, I was off and running on a fourth-of-July weekend. The Burbank group was having a camp-out in a canyon between Tehachepi and Lake Isabella, and I planned to drop in for a few hours of sleep there and continue on. Shortly after I left the freeway, I finally quit arguing with God and told Him I would trust Him – even with a motorcycle accident.

About two minutes later, as a curve tightened I realized I would at least lose a leg against the guard rail if I tried to stay on the road so I picked an exit just before the guard rail. I was enjoying cartwheels through the air over a beautiful bank of boulders garnished by delightful sprigs of manzanita and scrub oak. I was so at peace with God that I wasn't even experiencing adrenaline, but I eventually became concerned that the longer I enjoyed the flight, the less I would enjoy the landing. Procrastination is overrated.

The entire surface was boulders, except for a point of grass that came a ways up into the bank, and sloped gently to the barbed wire fence at the bottom. My trajectory carried me precisely to this point. A foot and a half on either side, and my landing would have been very different.

A quick inventory revealed that I had a sprained shoulder but no broken bones. Extreme internal agony made me want to just lie there awhile before moving, but I knew that if I allowed that much I would go into shock and die – so I forced myself to stand.

My bike was inoperable so now I was forced to get help. This was annoying and I told God so, but on the way up to the road I found my battery and some of my tools. So I returned to the chopper and got it working. After an hour and a half of fiddling with it and lifting it one end at a time over the rocks I was able to get it back onto the road.

Unaware of the severity of my internal injuries, I figured I'd recover a little later on when I could trust myself with a nap. So I chose to continue my journey. I wasn't going to let a little motorcycle accident ruin a whole weekend.

God had placed a love for others in my heart, but I didn't want to depend on anybody loving me. This all translated into not allowing anyone to help me even when I desperately needed it. God was wanting

me to allow people to help me, but I just wasn't getting it. He had wanted me to get help when I had first crashed.

When I found the Burbank group they began to insist on taking me to a hospital, but of course I wasn't about to inconvenience total strangers with a 90-mile round trip. I promised them that I would be gone by sunrise and didn't want to impose on anybody.

Some beautiful lady gave me a gentle kiss on the forehead during the night, and I remember mouthing the words "An angel." This simple expression of love towards a stubborn, aloof and dust-covered stranger struck my soul like the first drop of rain on long parched land. In my heart I was indeed very thirsty for human touch.

By sunrise it took an effort to stand up. By late that afternoon I had gone about thirty six hours without the briefest of naps – or so much as an aspirin for pain. By then I knew I would soon die without help, and I finally had to asked for a ride to the hospital in Bakersfield – yielding at last. In less than two hours I was in surgery, and they had given me so much stuff for pain that I hallucinated in grand style for the next two days. I was a hundred and some miles from home, and had no one to argue with but God for the next eight days.

By the third day I was completely lucid, and God had a few words for me – including an even more terrifying challenge than the accident.

"Let people get near you."

"But God, I'll get hurt."

"Crucifixions hurt. I understand betrayal. I understand people claiming to love you and then clamoring for your death a couple of days later. You *will* get hurt, but trust *me* for your hurts. You thought you were tough, but your great fear of love shows how weak you really are."

"I'll try God."

I became vulnerable by choice, and the beauty I began to allow into my life has been far greater than the pain it had cost. It's good to be able to love, and I already understood that much, but there is a whole new level of beauty available to those who are willing to risk *being* loved.

(33) THE GIFT IN BURBANK

Through a catastrophic accident, about six months after completing my military, I began to receive deep inner healing. God had placed me among Jesus people who hugged on me and soon had me hugging in return. I had no idea how starved I had been for love and human touch.

After church about three weeks later, there was a lovely young lady I had never seen before sitting alone in the back seat of a car. So I opened the door and sat down beside her. She didn't scream, jump out the other side, or pull a weapon, and I felt so comfortable just sitting beside her. A few minutes later, three very uncomfortable guys whom I had also never seen before showed up on the sidewalk. These I acknowledged with a nod and a smirk as I departed – questions answered. She was soon engaged to one of them, and since I had probably fallen in love at first sight at least a hundred times by then, I didn't give the encounter further thought. I had no clue that I had just met my future wife. Her name was Charlene – she went by Char.

Her roommates were fun, and I was able to enjoy solid friendships without romantic complications. I found it interesting that the ability to hug and be hugged – though strictly platonic in this context – actually relieved sexual pressure as well. There was no arousal taking place here, but I have come to believe that much of what is attributed to sexual desire is actually the simple need of human touch.

I soon fell into an unofficial protective role of the sisters, and more than once dealt with guys for taking the opportunity to wallow into a girl's breasts in the pretense of a Christian hug. We called it sloppy agape.

(34) ARTSY LIVING

I had lived alone and treasured the solitude and control of my life for the first six months after the military. But about a month after this period, when another phase healing healing had begun, I started to share my life with others.

Shortly after stowing my bike for repairs a lady friend dropped by with two recently discharged marines in tow, who needed a place to stay. Both were musicians. Byron was an accomplished classical and flamenco guitarist who soon began tutoring others, and Bill C. was a drummer. I soon had four musicians as regulars, plus occasional guys or gals who needed emergency shelter for a night or few.

By way of passing interest, none of us (Viet Nam vets) bothered to bring up stories of where we had been – there was none of this “poor me” crap going on. We were all moving on and were healing (as needed) in our respective positive ways.

Sunday afternoons were a regular time of fellowship for single misfits in a relaxed and nurturing atmosphere. There was no conventional furniture in the house, but there was an abundance of pillows and futons. There were also borrowed slabs of marble mounted about a foot off the floor as tables to provide a congenial atmosphere.

Generally speaking, people knew nothing about me, and even my roommates didn't even know I *had* a motorcycle. It was quite a shock therefore when one Sunday afternoon I wandered out to my garage and fired it up. Driving up onto the covered porch, the rhythmic thuds soon brought an astonished Byron to the door. I nodded, drove into the living room and got it turned around. One of the young ladies smiled sweetly and climbed aboard, and we drove out of the living room, off the porch and into the neighborhood for a cruise.

(35) THE DEMON AT THE POTLUCK

Unknown to me, Bill C. had a serious spiritual issue buried deep within him. I had already heard stories of he and Byron growing up in a Midwestern town, in which Bill had taken on an entire football team unscathed. But such were urban legends.

We regularly attended the Wednesday evening potlucks at the Burbank church, and one evening this issue came to light.

As the meal was winding down and as one of the leaders prayed for Bill, he passed out on the floor, but soon began to writhe with increasing intensity. While still on the floor he picked up a chair by a single leg and began to wave it around with the ease of a flyswatter. As he worked himself into a crouch and began to stand up, there was a sense of growing power as in an incredible hulk or a Godzilla awakening. Before awaiting the what next, I physically grabbed him from behind in a classic wrestling move and pulled him over backwards. At this point he reached out a hand, seized the leg of a table bearing a significant portion of the remaining potluck, and twisted it off without visible effort. We were instantly pummeled by a falling table and a cascade of potluck. A brother far wiser than myself then stepped forward and in a firm voice (but not shouting) declared “Come out of him! In the name of Jesus!”

Suddenly all was at peace. Even the tornado damage of a shattered potluck and a few hysterical church people faded in importance as the clouds went away and the sunshine of peace pervaded the scene. Within a few months Bill and his girlfriend (formerly a serious witch who had become a Christian) became married and began to minister in deliverance (exorcism).

(36) THE FIRST DATE

Six months after having met Charlene (and scarcely having spoken a word to her since) we were approaching the most dangerous day of the year: Valentine's day. You don't want to express sentiments for fear the target won't take the same risk (or even care). You don't want to make somebody feel bad who dared to express sentiment by not having also expressed the same. It was much easier to just leave town for a few days.

Valentine's day was on a Friday, so we all decided to have a party that evening because – well because it was Valentine's day. It was all kind of a joke, and seemed safe enough. None of us were couples, and even Char had broken off her engagement and sworn off all relationships with guys two weeks before.

After the party Char and I and a couple of others drove to Palm Springs (a hundred and some miles away). We pulled off into the desert a dozen miles the other side of Palm Springs at about 3:00 am and began to stroll through the desert under a magnificent canopy of brilliant stars. Seriously, this date was beginning to scare me. Things were just too beautiful and my attempt at denial was a ridiculous failure. When the sun arose on our wanderings we had breakfast and took in a few hours of the Date Festival in Indio before heading home.

We sat together in church the next morning, along with a couple dozen others. On Monday night her ex made a scene at a Bible study and I took charge to protect Char and to deal with him. This was not out of character for me in my role of looking out for my friends – so no one was surprised. No one had any rational cause to suspect what was happening in my heart.

Supernatural spiritual gifts were routine in this group, and as I approached the door for the Wednesday night potluck an excited brother was waiting for me. “Bill! I'm so happy for you. The Lord has shown me the whole thing about you and Char.”

I tried to play ignorant – obviously no one had any way of knowing what had been going on in my heart, and I don't recall having even mentioned the date to anyone – let alone my feelings. He ignored me, and continued to express how happy he was about Char and I getting married. I then tried to change the subject to my genuine concern for her ex, whom I had “confronted” in response to his scene at the Bible study a couple of nights before.

“Forget about him. But Bill, this is so beautiful.”

I found a place in line, and Char soon joined me. When I related my encounter at the front door she shared that this sixteen year old kid (whom we'd gotten saved and reunited with his parents) had been waiting for her at another door – with a similar message. So we're standing in this potluck line planning a wedding.

I was totally clueless concerning anything about marriage – or the beautiful traditions and rituals of life in general. I hadn't given marriage any thought for at least a couple of years, and really hadn't a clue about what went on under the surface of the girls I enjoyed as friends.

As we sat down I had an important question to ask. I guess in the normal course of things it would be time for me to propose. As near as I can remember, the dialog went something like this:

“Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Uh, I guess so.”

“What is your last name?” I couldn't understand why she was so upset. Why shouldn't I know her last name? Was it the way I said it? What is going on here? The dialog continued to deteriorate:

“I'm not going to tell you!”

“Doesn't matter, I'm going to change it anyway. But I think your dad would be more impressed if I knew what your name was.”

“It's Copen!” she spat.

Bless her heart. She didn't get up and storm out. But a little later she explained:

“You didn't ask me to marry you.”

“You didn't ask me to marry you either.”

God has blessed me with an amazing woman who was able to forgive all this – well sort of anyway. But now she was faced with writing a letter to her family to explain that she had broken off her engagement to the other guy three weeks before – but was now engaged to Bill.

Nobody at Burbank knew any more about my past than that I had missed a curve over a bank of boulders a couple of hours before showing up at their camp-out six months before. We were total

strangers suddenly planning to get married, with lifetimes to share with each other as we went along. In God's beautiful way of doing things history didn't matter – only now and forever mattered.

Somebody must have chuckled however. Char had experienced a quasi-nomadic childhood and desired security. Even though God had shown her that He had been preparing her for her adult life, she was relieved to discover that God had changed His mind. Bill had Viet Nam behind him (an important concern in those days), and was buying a house in the town he was born in, and the town his *father* was born in. Security at last!

She had no clue that I had purchased the house because I was a flake and I knew it, and wanted something to live in when I got through exploring the rest of the world.

(37) EXPERIENCED OR WITNESSED A POWERFUL HEALING

Char had experienced a lifetime of back pain due to one leg being a little shorter than the other. By now, six months pregnant with our first child, her back pains were acute.

There was a woman evangelist preaching one night at the small mountain church we were attending in Big Bear Lake, and Char opted to stay home. After Church I asked the woman to pray for Char. She laughed and understood, when I explained that Char didn't like women preachers. So she prayed with me and told me what to do when I got home.

A few minutes later I had Char sit in a solid wooden chair with her pelvis solidly against the back, so she couldn't move it. I held her heels in my hands, and we could both clearly see the difference in the length of her legs. As we prayed, we both clearly saw her legs adjust to exactly the same length, and the back pains left forever.

(38) MORE SPIRITUAL GIFTS

When God calls us to do something He equips us with what we need to achieve what He says. This removes the impossibility factor from anything He directs us to do, and we are left with the simple choice of whether or not we are going to obey Him.

We had been attending a large church that had experienced a major split, and rather than engage in a power struggle my wife and I were among the several hundred who quietly left and began holding church in a park.

At the end of our first (or perhaps second) service in the park, the pastor felt we were to invite people to come forward to receive prayer for healing or whatever else they needed – but first, we needed a few people to do the praying.

As I was waiting to see what would happen next, I suddenly got volunteered. I had served in a couple of positions at the church so I was known, and now I was expected to pray for people and see them get healed. I didn't know how to do this, but felt I was supposed to go along with it anyway. The pastor and some of the congregation laid hands on us and prayed for us. I then found myself standing on the grass facing a line of people who were expecting me to perform some kind of miracles for them.

As each approached, God began to show me things about their individual lives, and guided me on how to pray for or counsel them. Some received healings, some encouragement, and some of them received insights into how to deal with whatever it was they were facing. God was giving me knowledge that I could not possibly have known otherwise. This served as the credential to them for the wisdom God was also offering on how to deal with their situations.

The point of all this is that the gifts needed to serve in this way did not appear until I obeyed and stepped out upon the water – so to speak. Understand also that none of this was at my initiative. I was not given some sort of power that I could exercise at will (although some seemed to think that way). I only had the power to do as I was being told at the moment, and no more.

It came as a pleasant surprise that shortly afterwards I could not remember what God had shown me about them. Their personal lives were really none of my business. God protected me and them by only

allowing me a brief insight as necessary to meet their needs, and would then close this window so I wouldn't have to carry their secrets.

These gifts have remained with me since – but again: Such must never be mistaken for some kind of power within me. It is the privilege – and indeed calling – of every believer to do and speak as God calls us to do and speak.