

## Healing

Within a week of being released from the military I purchased a powerful custom motorcycle, and the following weekend put almost five hundred miles under it. For the first part of this journey I gave a queer friend a lift to a place he needed to be. As we headed off into the traffic at night, he soon made an ass of himself, and my reflex was to drive my elbow into his sternum. This was an instant thoughtless reaction – I wasn't actually trying to kill him.

As he flailed for balance I hit the brakes, but decided that I would not even slow down if he fell into traffic to be mauled or killed. This was not for a lack of caring, but simply because there would be nothing I could do to help him at that point. Besides, I still had over a hundred and fifty miles to drive that night. This sort of reasoning and pragmatic heartless decisiveness was typical of my response to catastrophes as they unfolded during that time. But he did barely manage grab the back of my collar, and to keep his mouth shut for the rest of his ride.

Having spent six months in Guatemala prior to active duty, plus a year total of operations in the far east during my two years of navy, I had developed a taste for travel. My intent was to join the merchant marine, and continue traveling the globe. But by then I had met a few aging rolling stones who would finally like to settle down, but they still owned nothing. So within a month I was buying a house, so I would have something to come back to if I ever chose to do so. The catch was that with a veteran's loan, I would have to live in it for at least a year to qualify.

I found out later that buying a house gave people the impression that I was settling down and becoming stable – whereas I was in fact was buying a house because I was a flake and knew it. I never did develop a talent for being understood.

Being involved with other people did not come easily to some of us, and I had a particularly difficult struggle with this. The love I had for others was something God had put into my heart a number of years before. But receiving love – let alone needing love – was far too dangerous. After what I had seen, where I had been, and what I had experienced, I would have to be a fool to allow the vulnerability of needing love in my life.

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 – for real. I genuinely cared about my friends, and therefore felt I was doing girls a favor by not allowing them to love me. What was actually going on was that God was sending people to love me, but I wasn't willing to risk being loved or even helped by anyone. About six months later I was to learn that when God speaks quietly pay attention! You won't like it if He has to shout!

Yet another facet of this malady was that about a year and a half earlier I had told God that if or who I married would be none of my business; I'd mind his business, and he could mind mine. Seems I'd forgotten all about that by this time.

While living alone and enjoying it, I typically spent two or three solitary nights a week just cruising the freeways for a few hours. For my part, I was at peace, and believed I was perfectly normal – but then, they hadn't invented a silly term like PTSD yet. And besides, I was still having interesting adventures – some a little harder to believe than others.

I had this friend for instance, who managed a dude ranch just over the mountains in the extreme northeast corner of L.A. county. He was also an auxiliary deputy sheriff who could be called upon to manage emergencies until support could arrive. I was a little bored one Saturday afternoon so I decided to go check up on my friend Bob. There was a public lake just below his property (Jackson Lake), and as I left the highway and followed the road to his property I found myself driving through a massive encampment of outlaw bikers – they with their custom choppers, and me on mine. The Monks, the Saints, the Free Wheelers, and the Devil's Disciples were all having a joint outing.

The uneasy difference was that my denim jacket bore no gang insignia. This put me into the category of either a “nomad” who had respectfully aged out of gang life but still loved to travel, or some punk wannabe posing as a badass, who deserved to have the crap beat out of him. My obvious youth did not bode well for this situation.

A little past them, Bob was standing squarely in the road with his right hand on his 357 magnum pistol, his left hand pointing at me, and a very convincing command to “stop” from somewhere in between. When we got up to his house he explained: He and his wife had a must-do errand, and would I stand guard for a little while until it could be achieved?

So I was sworn in as an L.A. County deputy sheriff, and left in his dining room with a ranch, a home, and his lovely sixteen year old daughter to defend. Now sixteen year old girls are neither ugly nor wise, and I soon felt that I would be safer if I moved closer to the outlaw bikers. I carried my own gun – legal or no – so I left Bob’s gun on the dining room table and took up a position next to the road. This was about as cheezy as a scene could get: “Our young hero is left standing alone to defend a fair young maiden from four vicious outlaw biker gangs.”

After about an hour and a half Bob returned with two CHP units with two hombres apiece to relieve me of my duties. So I was sworn out (or cussed out perhaps) when I threw the tarp off my clearly customized motorcycle and the cops found out who I “really” was. This time I avoided all eye contact as I threaded my way through the gauntlet of bikers on my way to the highway, while planning my strategy for evading a line of whooping outlaws in pursuit. But something about the situation had apparently made them uneasy as well, because I passed without incident.

As I was literally riding off into the sunset that afternoon, I found myself musing: “Gee, I’ve never been an L.A. County deputy sheriff before.”

### *Awakened love*

There are things that should never happen to a young man – one of which is taking a friend to diner and having to borrow money from her to pay for it. Eleanore was a trusted friend whom I had grown up with in the same church. But we were renegades of a sort, because we had experienced spiritual gifts, while attending churches that didn’t believe they still existed.

“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...uh please?”

The Burbank church had a potluck on Wednesday evenings, followed by a service. We began attending on Wednesdays for the service only. We didn’t really meet anyone. We just came, sat in the back, and left.

After a service a few weeks later she told me: “Bill; God has something to tell you.” I was well aware of my friend’s prophetic gifts, and had seen them in action before; this was serious. She shared 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 clue what this yielding thing was all about. Apparently I could have some affect upon the severity of the outcome, if I would just yield to something I was yet to identify.

I began by leaving my bike in the garage for a couple of days, until the conviction matured that I was here to live life and not hide from it. I spent the next three weeks explaining to God how stupid and unreasonable he was being, but I was gradually wearing down while not hearing a single blip from the other side.

Finally 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, continue on to visit some friends camping up on the Kern river, and then join friends from work for some desert riding near Phelan – such were my plans for the weekend.

On the final descent from the San Gabriel Mountains, heading for Mojave, my bike eased up to about 100 mph, even as I continued to argue with God. Soon I was passing everything. I came upon one sports fan who wanted to make a game of it. He sat stoically pedaling along at about 120 mph as his wife sat beside him screaming in his ear. Why didn't he just park the damn thing if he couldn't do any better than that?

It's kind of hard to describe what 150 mph passing under a machine of about 350 pounds feels like: Picture the white dashes in the middle of the road passing as a flickering blur about three and a half feet beneath your nose. How about telephone poles whizzing past at less than two second intervals? Close your eyes and start counting seconds, with a "whoosh" between every other one. I actually did the calculations on that one. All this was going on while contemplating the laughs and sorrows of my life and complaining to God about how unreasonable it would be for me to have an accident.

And God finally spoke: "Slow down or I'm getting off this thing;" instant terror, along with compliance of course.

About twenty minutes later, after departing the freeway, I was a few miles up a winding canyon road. I finally lost my argument with God and was at peace enough to tell Him I would trust Him – even with a motorcycle accident. God had taken me beyond the limits of my fear and rationality.

A couple of 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 had a series of very important decisions to make within a very few seconds. I picked a target between a couple of posts just before the guard rail. As I then evaluated the berm on the side of road before the shallow valley below I decided it would be wise to get off the bike before I was catapulted up into the air with the machinery, so I dove downward just as it struck the curb-level berm. I should have planned ahead a little sooner, because my dismount was incomplete and the impact of the bike imparted a vigorous rotation. But it had been an exceptionally busy two or three seconds.

The accident was beautiful – at least until it came time to land. I was enjoying cartwheels through the air over a beautiful bank of boulders garnished by delightful sprigs of manzanita and scrub oak. And by now I was so at peace with God that I wasn't even experiencing adrenaline. But I did eventually become concerned that the longer I enjoyed the flight, the less I would enjoy the landing. Procrastination is sometimes 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 on either side or about three feet sooner, and my landing would have been on rocks. Only a fool would suggest that this was only a coincidence.

I was soon flat on my face in dry grass about 6' from a barbed wire fence. The bike soon shared this only patch of bank that was devoid of boulders. 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 was (and am) convinced that if I allowed that much I would have gone into shock and died – so I forced myself to stand. I had once seen friend of mine dying, as he was slipping into unconsciousness during extreme pain.

My bike was inoperable, so now I was forced to get help. I was upset with God for having to get help from a total stranger, but on my way up to the road I found my battery and some of my tools. So I returned to the chopper and made some essential repairs. Convinced by this time that I could maintain consciousness long enough to achieve what was necessary, I saw no further reason to crawl up to the road for help.

I just wasn't getting it. God had placed a love for others in my heart, but I didn't want to count on anybody loving me. God wanted me to allow people to get close enough to help me, even as he had wanted me to respond to the love of the others he had sent before. But since I still wasn't yielding, he was gracious enough to turn up the heat a little and to allow me a bit more time to bake.

Between a couple of game trails and occasionally lifting the bike one end at a time up through the rocks obstacles I finally got it back up to the road, and I had a decision to make: I could turn left and in about 35 miles be in Bakersfield for the repairs to my body, or continue my journey. 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 not to head for a hospital. As silly as this may seem now, I remember telling myself that I wasn't going to let a little motorcycle accident ruin a whole weekend.

Within a minute or two of travel when I congratulated myself on how tough I was, the Lord removed his hand, and the sensory overload began forcing my body to shut down. As it began to convulse in defiance of my efforts to control it, I remember shouting in my mind "I didn't give you permission to do that!" even as I again was losing control of the bike. My body was surrendering, but my will was not – and neither was the road about to straighten out for me to prevent another accident.

When I briefly saw myself on the motorcycle from above, my prayer was simple: "OK God, I could use a little help – but no human beings please." Things instantly stabilized. This made it clear that I really wasn't all that tough after all, but graciously, God had taken me beyond the limits of my physical strength. It was HE who granted me the strength that I needed to survive. I was being given opportunity to volunteer for spiritual growth, rather than being forced to comply. The lesson would still have to continue however, because I was still not ready to yield to what God was wanting to tell me. If He had told me what He was after three weeks before, I would have simply refused and stopped growing. But He loves us enough to be very persuasive when He needs to be.

About ten miles up the canyon, I found the Burbank group in a two-roomed school house, and asked to spend the night on their floor. They began to insist on taking me to a hospital, but 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 told them I didn't want to impose on anybody. Well, they at least wanted me to lie down and let them pray for me, and that would be OK.

During the praying, some beautiful lady had the audacity to give me a gentle kiss on the forehead, and I remember mouthing the words "An angel." This simple expression of love towards an aloof and dust-covered stranger struck my soul like the first drops of rain on long parched land. In my heart I was indeed very thirsty for human touch. Years later, in an attempt to recall the sensation, I described this gift in the words:

But: A sweet kiss on the forehead  
as he lay there that night  
began to unravel his cold lonely fight.  
To a dust-covered bum  
here's a token of love  
in care of a human  
from heaven above.

By sunrise I found it difficult to stand up. By late that afternoon my strength and stamina had been used up, and believing I would soon die without help, I finally had to asked them take me to the hospital. Not yielding at the beginning as my prophetic friend had instructed me, cost me thirty six hours without a blink of sleep, twenty four hours of intense pain without so much as an aspirin, two

days of hallucination from pain drugs, two units of blood from internal bleeding, and then eight days in a hospital a hundred and some miles from home. I had no one to argue with but God, but it wasn't until the third day when I was completely lucid, that God had a few words for me. He then presented me with an even more terrifying challenge than the accident.

The name-it-and-blame-it professionals use psycho-babble to hide from reality in situations like this, but on the third day God finally spoke to me.

"Let people get near you."

"But God, I'll get hurt."

"I was hurt; Crucifixions hurt. I understand betrayal. I understand people claiming to love you one day and calling for your death the next."

"But..."

"Of course you'll 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."

God, who had called me to trust Him beyond the limits of my rationality, and then enabled me to go beyond the limits of my physical strength a few days before, was now calling me to trust Him to go beyond the limits of my protective emotional barriers as well.

Being "tough" had been easy for me; all I had to do was quit caring. But now God was calling me to become vulnerable by choice, and it would take a lot more of a man to do *that*, than to simply hide. I was to allow myself to care and to become emotionally involved. Beyond this, my God-given assignment of manhood would require me to return calm and love to those around me in the face of panic and railing anger.

The beauty I began to allow into my life has been far greater than the pain it has 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.

When they decided I was strong enough to walk to the parking lot, I was discharged and delivered to the front door in a wheelchair. After a walk across Bakersfield in mid July, a bus ride into L.A., and a lift from a friend, I arrived at the Burbank church that evening in time for their Wednesday night service. That was when I learned that some of them had spent the day driving to Bakersfield to pick me up at the hospital I had already left – and then driven on to the camp site to pick up my chopper.

Some very important changes had taken place in my life in the past four weeks. I had received levels of love from total strangers that inspired me to trust them, and I found myself fulfilled and blessed by joining them in sharing this love with others.

I had not generally allowed people to touch me back then, but in a conscious effort to walk in what God had begun teaching me, I began to allow people to hug me. I had no idea that somewhere buried deep within me I had this craving for human touch. This breath of love began to bring life to my shriveled soul. To my aloof and emotionally retarded self, I had mistaken being hugged by women as having a sexual connotation (as it did in the dozens of overseas bars I had experienced during the military years). But now I could see that human touch was a basic need, for which I was indeed starving.

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.

God had placed me among a group of affectionate Jesus people, among whom handshakes had been replaced by hugs, and the times between employment and scheduled meetings were filled by friends hanging out, sharing meals, and sharing Jesus at love-ins and other events. It was a period deep healing for me in which years of aloofness and emotional starvation were being gently massaged back to life.

Upon leaving a church service three weeks after blending with the Burbank group, I spotted a lovely young lady sitting alone in the back seat of a car parked in front of my chopper. When I opened the door and sat down beside her she didn't have the good sense to scream, jump out the other side or brandish a weapon. I felt so comfortable just sitting beside her, discussing the usual oblique topics to find out what I actually wanted to know. Soon three protective guys appeared on the sidewalk whom I had also never seen before. 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. I would have six months to become emotionally housebroke before God would allow me to get anywhere near her.

A week or two later a friend dropped by my house (about ten miles from Burbank) with two recently discharged marines in tow. These were in immediate need of a place to stay. Byron was an accomplished classical and flamenco guitarist who soon began tutoring others, and Bill was a drummer. I soon had four musicians as regular roommates, plus occasional guys or gals who needed emergency shelter for a night or few.

A week before I accepted roommates I had parked my bike in the garage and began using my car. My roommates, knew nothing of my past, and didn't even know I *had* a chopper. 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.

My solitude was no longer needed, and in addition to the Burbank group a culture of artsy single orphans began to enjoy the twenty-four-seven atmosphere of my house. A window into this culture is given by a brief vignette that took place one Sunday afternoon when I had a house full of guests.

I wandered out to the garage, fired up the chopper, and drove it up onto the covered porch. The rhythmic thuds soon brought an astonished Byron to the door, whereupon I drove on into the living room, and turned it 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 brief cruise.

### *Spiritual gifts*

Supernatural spiritual gifts were active within the Burbank group. Unlike in some fellowships where such things were revered and brought status, these were incidental to life and the various needs that arose. A good example of that was when a prophetic friend shared supernatural knowledge concerning my then future motorcycle accident, along with guidance that brought reassurance of God's sovereignty during the actual event. We saw healings, exorcisms, warnings and spiritual insights that could not have been discerned through rationality. Later, two very bold and specific prophecies would be required to connect a pair of baffled and stubborn people into a relationship that has lasted for over fifty years.

Back in Burbank, Char's roommates were fun, and I was able to enjoy solid friendships without romantic complications.

One rainy afternoon one of Char's roommates and I were relaxing on the rug in front of a fire – a romantic setting perhaps, but we were just friends. I began speaking to her in a relaxed conversational tone for about twenty minutes – in a language I didn't know. When I had finished, she asked me if I had understood what I had said, and I assured her that I had not. She was very relieved. She on the other

hand, had understood every word. God was using me to explain numerous and very personal things to her, and had protected us both by doing it this way.

### *Exorcism*

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 one of the leaders prayed for Bill and he passed out on the floor – but he 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, seized the leg of a table bearing a significant portion of the remaining potluck, and simply twisted it off with inhuman strength. 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 of a shattered potluck and 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 (a former witch who had also become a Christian) became married and lived in one of my bedrooms for awhile. As they matured in their Christian faith and in experience with spiritual gifts, they eventually began to minister in deliverance (exorcism).

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 with the other guy 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 (about a hundred miles away). We then 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 to deny my feelings was a ridiculous failure. When the sun rose we had breakfast and took in a few hours of the Date Festival in Indio before heading home.

We sat next to each other 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 totally in 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 our hearts.

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. Furthermore, I don't believe I'd told anyone that we'd even *had* a date – let alone my feelings. He ignored me, and continued to express how happy he was about Char and I getting married. When I 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 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 suddenly so upset. Why shouldn't I know her last name? Was she hiding something? 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.

A little later she explained:

"You didn't ask me to marry you."

"You didn't ask me to marry you either."

After this awkward and tenuous start, she was faced with writing a letter to her family to explain that she had broken off her engagement to so-and-so 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.