

The Journey

The Further Adventures of a Pilgrim

By

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Introduction

It was just a little over two years ago that I finished writing the Pilgrimage series for Along the Way. The series was well received and I enjoyed writing it. I wanted to continue with the series about a year ago and began writing a continuation of the series, which I entitled, "The Journey". I wrote a fair amount of the second series before I got hit with writer's block. I had a fairly clear idea of where I wanted to go with the second series but I was missing critical elements of the story and was not getting where I wanted to be with the story. Not long ago the elements I needed fell into place and I have been able to move ahead with the project.

The Journey picks up exactly where the Pilgrimage left off. The characters are the same, except I have given the narrator a name, Theo Douglas. Like the earlier work, this story is written in the "first person" and elements of it are autobiographical, though it is essentially a work of fiction. It is fiction with a purpose, however. The story is a vehicle for reflection on living the Christian life and seeking one's ultimate meaning and purpose.

The timeframe is still the early seventies. However, the discussions between Theo and his mentors will draw on works in psychology and spirituality both before and after that time frame. My goal in presenting this information is not historical accuracy as much as it is in providing the reader the benefit of both contemporary thought in spirituality and the classics.

As portions of the story are published in the North Star, I will archive them on my website so that they can be accessed by anyone who missed an issue of the North Star. The web site can be reached via a link at the Diocesan website www.cnmicatholic.org or directly at www.lycos.com/atwstories .

Chapter One

We entered the cloud bank a half hour earlier. There was still no break in the white soup through which we were flying. The plane was headed into the Heathrow Airport in London. The solid mass of fog that surrounded much of London frightened me. I love flying and generally trust the skill of the pilot, after all his life is on the line as well. Though I figure that he has half a chance of he is able to see more than ten feet in front of his face. In this fog I knew that he couldn't see five feet in front of his face. I assumed was about the distance between his face and the aircraft's windshield.

I was more than a little worried that I would end the biggest adventure of my life—my pilgrimage to the Holy Land—in the side of a fog shrouded building in a London suburb. Despite my worries the plane continued its descent. Suddenly we felt a gentle thud and the engines went into reverse. We were on the ground and in one piece. In fact, the landing in London was considerably better than the landing in New York City where Barti and I began our pilgrimage three weeks earlier.

Barti DelCalle was a high school teacher and a former Trappist brother. We met a year earlier when we were both trying to help one of the most dysfunctional families either of us had ever encountered. In the months that followed, Barti became my mentor. He was a good friend but also someone I admired. It was Barti who suggested that I go on pilgrimage as a way of getting a better sense of what I wanted to do with my life. Since Barti lived in Israel for over five years, I invited him along on the pilgrimage. I figured that he could provide me spiritual direction on the pilgrimage and knew the area well enough to be a tour guide as well.

After three weeks together, we temporarily parted ways in TelAviv, as we each had different itineraries for our return home. He was going to visit a few days more with his mentor Professor Tabitha Marie Glowaki, who lived in Tel Aviv. Afterwards, he planned to visit Paris for a week of visiting with friends. I went on to London alone. I scheduled a week in England and planned to visit with a girl I knew from college who was living in Ipswich. I was to spend a couple days in London and then take a bus to Ipswich. We would visit over the weekend and then I would return to London for a day or so and my flight to New York.

Going through British customs was not too much of a project. They wanted to know if I had any money I could use to support myself while in England. Once I was able to produce a

reasonable number of traveler's checks they were happy and passed me through. No one bothered to check my luggage, which was filled mostly with dirty clothes and a few trinkets.

Once I was in the open terminal I looked for the Traveler's Aid booth for instructions to get to Earl Court. My travel agent had booked a room in a *bed and breakfast* there for my London stay over. The Traveler's Aid agent was most helpful and within a few minutes I had a map of London and detailed instructions on how to get from the airport to Earl Court. I got to ride a red double-decker bus from the airport to the nearest Underground Station. After changing trains only once, I was in Earl Court, which was a London district. It didn't take me too long to get instructions to the *bed and breakfast* and find my way there.

The hostel was a brick house from the previous century. When it was new some well off British banker or merchant probably owned it and lived in comfort with at least two or three servants to help maintain the place. By the time I showed up on the doorstep, it had seen better days. There had been extensive renovations to convert it to a hostel and much of the Victorian charm was lost in the process. Yet, it only required a little imagination to get a sense of what the house was like back in its glory days. The desk clerk took my money, showed me to a small room and told me that breakfast would be served between 7:00 and 9:00 the next morning. It was part of my room payment and already paid for so I might as well take advantage of it. Then she was gone.

The room was small. It barely had enough space for a single bed and a small table. However, that was all I had paid for and that was all I could expect. If I wanted luxury I could always go to one of the tourist hotels and pay ten times what I was paying for this room. The room was more than adequate and I was not going to complain.

It was around 3:00pm when I settled into my room in the Earl Court *bed and breakfast*. I had been up since early the previous day. I was tired and hungry. The first thing I did was spend a little time in prayer. Then around 4:00pm I went to bed with the idea that I would get up in a couple of hours and head out for a bite to eat. That was the idea but I was too tired. The next thing I knew it was morning. After a very pleasant breakfast of white tea, toast and wheatbix, I was off on a London adventure.

I avoided the major tourist traps, preferring to wander around the city on a little adventure of discovery. I got to Victoria Station, Oxford University and a quaint little public library not far from Oxford. The library had the most fascinating collection of books.

I discovered an ancient cemetery in North London which exhibited the most impressive set of headstones and monuments I had ever seen. A tourist pamphlet near the administration building announced that several writers I remembered from Victorian Literature in college were buried there. So, I set out to discover their graves. I was rewarded for my efforts by finding at least one of the graves, though I can't remember the name of the poet.

Though viewing the graves of dead poets was not my primary reason for visiting the cemetery. Before I left Tel Aviv, Tabitha encouraged me to visit the cemetery if I had time while in London. Her mentor Fr. Casmir Zaetewa S.J. had been transferred to London just before the German invasion of Poland and lived out the years there. He died in 1956 and was buried in this cemetery, as a small portion of it served as burial ground for London Jesuits going back many years. My curiosity about this man who so influenced Tabitha placed the visit high on my priority list.

The grave was simple and not too difficult to locate, once I discovered where the Jesuits were buried. The headstone only listed his name, dates of birth and death, and the initials AMGD. I learned later that these initials are shorthand for "*ad majoram gloria Dei*" or "to the greater glory of God", which is the Jesuit motto. A small cross was carved on the headstone as well.

I prayed quietly for a while, thanking God for the grace that had been given to the world in the gentle man who lay buried there and for the impact that his teaching was still having in the lives of people like Tabitha Glowaki and those of us who are guided in turn by her. I also asked God for the guidance and grace to fulfill the purpose for which I was created and to be of service. I particularly asked for help with my spiritual journey in the months and years ahead.

Around the time I finished my visit to Fr. Zaetewa's grave and was heading out of the cemetery, the fog began to break and patches of sunshine illumined both my surroundings and my spirit. I am not a big fan of fog or gray skys and find such weather a bit depressing. I took the sunshine as a sign of God's grace, a divine smile in response to my prayers.

I stopped at a green grocer near the cemetery for apples and wandered many of the small shops that could be found in every London neighborhood.

By the time the sun set I found myself in a fish and chips shop in Earl Court not far from the bed and breakfast. My feet were sore from walking all day but I wasn't ready for bed. So, eating fish and chips and drinking massive amounts of tea was a pleasant alternative. This was

really the first time I had relaxed since leaving Israel and now that I wasn't keeping myself busy with the task of survival in a new environment, memories of my weeks in Israel flooded into my mind.

I had been to the depths and to the heights my soul could reach within days. The pilgrimage had been an emotional and spiritual roller coaster that disoriented me and I wasn't sure what to do with the experience. Especially confusing was the evening before I returned to Tel Aviv for my flight to London. I was staying over in Ramleh with Barti at the Trappist Monastery of Latroun. The stop over was not planned but Barti was able to arrange it as an opportunity to visit with old friends. While there, I had the strangest experience.

I was attending Mass and savoring the experience, as the elderly monk who was presiding at Mass was so deeply immersed in the Eucharistic prayer that he drew everyone in the chapel into that prayer. As I looked at the Sacred Host the boundaries that separated me from it and from everything else seemed to melt away. The Host was bright with light, yet the light didn't hurt my eyes. The light filled my vision. It was one, yet in the light it was three. I didn't try to understand what was happening or even observe that anything special was happening. I simply knelt in mute adoration experiencing such intense joy and peace that there is nothing in my life either before or after to which I can compare it. There were no words, only a knowing.

I knew that God had a purpose for me. I knew that I could trust in God and rely on God even in the darkest and most frightening times. I knew this because I experienced the flaming, burning fire of God's passionate love for me—for everyone of us. That love knit together every fiber of my being and held me in existence. To live...simply to be...was to be held in God's loving embrace.

It seemed as if I was caught up in the light for hours...eternities of wordless joy...but it was only moments. The priest held up the Sacred Host and Precious Blood, inviting the congregation to proclaim the Great Amen at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer. I realized then that the boundaries were once again in place between the rest of creation and me. The light that bathed my mind, heart, soul, and body was no longer visible to my mortal eyes. The only remnant of the experience was the peace and joy in which I continued to rest like an infant in its mother's arms.

Now, days later, I still had a crystal clear memory of the experience but the peace that sustained me that day and the next was beginning to fade.

My primary reason for making the pilgrimage was to gain a better understanding of God's purpose for my life. For all the blessings I experienced on the pilgrimage, I was still frustrated. It seemed I was no closer to my goal than when I began. Tabitha tried to calm my anxiety by reminding me that a seed had been planted on that pilgrimage that would come to fruition in due course. I needed to trust and to wait. The problem was that it was not easy to wait and I was just learning how to really trust.

"Snow is a rare occurrence in Israel," she said. "It is one of the few things that I truly miss from Poland. It is magical how the tiny crystalline flakes form in the clouds and gently float to the earth. Each is different. Each is beautiful. As a child I would run and catch the flakes, so that I could admire the different shapes and patterns. No sooner had I grasped the flakes in my hand, than they began to melt and disappear. It would frustrate me so much. Laughing at my frustration, my older brother taught me not to catch the flakes in my hand but to use gloves or some other object that insulated the flake from my body heat. It worked.

"God is a mystery. We also are mysteries for we are the image and likeness of the greatest Mystery. You can not grasp a mystery to examine it or to say it is this or that. When we attempt to grasp it, the mystery disappears and our fingers are empty. Perhaps it is the heat of our longing that makes the mystery melt away? Perhaps it is that we are attached to certain images of what the mystery should look like. Thus, when we look at a mystery we fail to see what we expected and do not recognize it even while looking directly at it. Who knows?

"It has been my experience that God leads us according to His will for us. He doesn't hand out detailed road maps with all the turns and twists clearly marked, along with rest stops and the best hotels identified. God opens doors for us and calls us to enter. If we listen carefully enough we will hear the call. However, the call may not be what we expect or given to us in the manner we anticipate. If we grasp our expectations or desires too strongly, we will miss the call and fail to follow Christ through the door.

"Often I am left with only my intuition and a bit of reasoning to mark the path. I follow the path and eventually it becomes apparent that this is where God was leading me. A strong attachment to one path or another would have blinded me to the call. Expectations that the call will take a particular form or expression would have caused me to look in vain for something that would never come. I would have missed the true call.

"Christ comes as a "Thief in the night". If we have expectations that he will come

through a particular door or at a particular hour, he will not show up. Christ comes to us when we least expect it. We can not will the Lord to respond to our demands and our timetable. We can only wait upon the Lord willingly, open to His grace.

“Often we encounter Christ in the most mundane circumstances. Remember the story of the disciples who spoke with Christ on the road to Emmaus and did not recognize him. It was not until the stranger blessed and broke the bread at supper that the disciples realized that the stranger was Christ. Their failure to recognize Christ did not change the fact that Christ taught and guided them along the road to Emmaus.

“Their ultimate recognition of the stranger as Christ was a particular blessing for them, though it also brought about the loss of Christ’s visible presence in their midst. It is not required that we perceive Christ instructing us. It is only required that we be responsive to His instruction, as were the disciples. If we are given the grace of recognizing the Lord in His instruction, good for us! If we fail to recognize Christ but are responsive to His instruction, we have done what is required of us.

“Be patient. This pilgrimage has planted the seeds of transformation in you. Christ has answered your prayers and continues to do so. You already have the answers you seek but time may be required before you are able to perceive the answers. Be patient. Be attentive. Do not grasp at the answers. If you do, your expectations and desires may be what you find in your hand rather than the Lord’s will for you.”

Chapter Two

I was waiting for Barti at the coffee shop where we usually had our cold weather conversations. Late March winds were still bitter enough that a walk in the park was not on the agenda. I was on my lunch break, having returned to work three weeks earlier. Barti returned from Paris the week before and went right to work, as his accumulated annual leave was exhausted. This was the first opportunity we had to get together and talk since leaving Israel.

It was good to be back home. There is a certain pleasure in sleeping in your own bed after weeks of hotel beds or friends' guest rooms. It was fun to see Hannah Schoff at work and tell her of my crazy adventure with Ari, as he drove Barti and I through the streets of Tel Aviv at breakneck speed. She laughed until tears were running down her cheeks. According to her that kind of mad adventure was just like Ari. He was a dear according to Hannah but sometimes he didn't have the sense of a kitten. She promised to scold him the next time she wrote.

Work was crazy. I had a pile of new cases that kept me incredibly busy and all of my regular probationers began coming in to see me as scheduled. I figured that it would be at least a month before my head was above water.

Aside from the outrageous tales that I told Hannah, I really hadn't spoken about the pilgrimage to anyone since returning to Rochester. There was so much, so many memories and emotions, that I didn't know where to begin. Then there wasn't anyone with whom I could share the memories, at least so that it conveyed any meaning. I tried to talk with my parents about the pilgrimage. They are dear people but they didn't get past the externals of the trip. The spiritual struggles I couldn't begin to share with them. So, lunch with Barti was a chance to talk about the pilgrimage and try to make some sense of it.

I heard the bell ring and Barti came into the coffee shop, stomped the snow from his boots and joined me at the table I reserved. He seemed in good spirits and well rested from the rigors of our adventure. He ordered his usual soup and salad and then turned his attention to our conversation.

"How was your visit in England?" Barti began by asking.

"The time in London was great. I saw the sights and found a couple of really good book shops. The taste of British culture was interesting as well. I'm not sure how I would do on a steady diet of it but for a short stay it was wonderful."

Barti sensed that I was evading his real question, so he asked me directly. “What about your young lady friend? I thought you were visiting her to see if there was any chance of rekindling old flames.”

“Oh, you mean Melissa Soricco? Nothing came of it. We had a nice visit. I enjoyed Ipswich and she was a perfect hostess. There was a little electricity between us but nothing strong enough to jump start a relationship that ran its course. She is a good friend and that’s all. I really didn’t expect much else.”

“If that is all my young friend, “ Barti said, “why do you look so glum?”

“I honestly don’t know. If I were to describe the feeling, I’d say it was spiritual indigestion. There is so much from the pilgrimage that I’m trying to understand. I really can’t put my finger on one thing. I thought I’d be all serene and happy from the pilgrimage. I feel more torn up than ever.”

Barti gave me his *now you’re getting it* smile and responded. “You were on a pilgrimage my young friend, not on tranquilizers. When we are too complacent, God has to stir up the waters. If you are more frustrated than ever, that is a good sign. God is trying to break through your thick skull. At least now God is beginning to get your attention. Let me tell you a story.

“Back in the Garden of Eden there were two trees in the center of the garden. One was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The other was the tree of life. So God told Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for it was poisonous and they would surely die. God didn’t say anything about not eating of the tree of life, so they ate its fruit. The fruit of the tree of life was delicious. It had a haunting, delicate quality that nourished and refreshed. One was strengthened by eating its fruit. Indeed, eating of the fruit of the tree of life became the greatest pleasure for Adam and Eve, aside from their evening walks with God.

“As we know, the serpent came on the scene and before long Adam and Eve were chewing on fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and discovering that they were naked. God showed up for his evening walk with Adam and Eve and couldn’t find them.

“‘Adam, Eve, where are you?’ God called out to his favorite creatures.

“‘Over here in the bushes.’ They replied from their hiding place. “We’re naked!”

“‘*Oy vey*, don’t tell me’ God responded. ‘You’ve eaten the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.’

“They were astounded that he knew what they had done. God knew what they were thinking, so he explained.

“You said that you were naked. Naked is meaningless unless you know the opposite of naked. Once you know that you can be clothed or naked you know duality. Duality is the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.’

“Worried, they asked God. ‘Are you going to send us out of the Garden of Eden?’

“God sighed. ‘No, you’ve done that yourself. To live in the Garden of Eden is to live in the perfection of My will, to be one with My vision of why you were created, to be one with My purpose for you. Once you eat the fruit of duality then you have begun to choose your will over My will. You are not living in the perfection of My will any longer, so you are not living in Eden.’

“So, Adam and Eve found themselves in a strange land. Eden was gone. Yet, they could still taste the fruit of the tree of life, at least in their memories. It was a taste that haunted them and reminded them of the wonders that God had given them. They believed that one day they would again taste the fruit. Wonder of wonders their children carried the memory of the delicious and delicate taste of the fruit of the tree of life and they hungered for that rare fruit. And so it has been from generation to generation.

“Your frustration is grace, my young friend. It is the ancestral memory of the wondrous taste of the fruit of the tree of life. It may unsettle you but the hunger you feel draws you toward the fruit of the tree of life. It will help guide you to Eden and the fruit you desire with such intensity.

“Spirituality is a journey towards more freely and deeply choosing to surrender to God, which is the essence of living in the Garden of Eden. It is a journey on which anything can happen because the Holy Spirit is always at work. It is a journey in which suffering is often just as graced as joy for both can bring us closer to a free and deep surrender to God.”

The tale was beautiful. What’s more, it seemed to describe exactly what I was feeling. I asked him the source of the story. He explained that it was a tale from the Jewish Hasidic tradition, common in Russia and Eastern Europe. He admitted that Tabitha was the one who taught him the story. It sounded like a story she might tell. For a moment I had the sense that she was with us, at least in spirit, and that she was the voice behind the story...even if Barti was the speaker. I missed her.

Barti continued. “This idea runs throughout scripture, especially in the Psalms. Read psalm 63 or Psalm 42 ‘*Like the deer that yearns for running streams, so my soul is yearning for you, my God. My soul is thirsting for God, the God of my life; when can I enter and see the face of God?*’ The image is thirst in these psalms but the emotions are the same, the yearning is the same. When will I once again eat of the fruit of the Tree of Life? When we are aware of our deeper hunger and thirst, it is only then that we can begin to seek the *Water of Life* which can satisfy it.”

It was a beautiful image but a little too abstract as well. So, I asked Barti.

“What is it that will satisfy my hunger for the fruit of the Tree of Life? How can I find this fruit?”

“Seek the fruit of the Tree of Life in Eden.”

I’m sure he could tell the extent of my consternation from the expression on my face. So, he went on to explain.

“The Garden of Eden is living in the perfection of God’s will. To do God’s will is to be in the Garden of Eden and that is where you can find the fruit of the Tree of Life. So the best course of action for you is to pursue God’s will for your life. What purpose did God place you here to achieve?”

“Now, I’ll let you in on a little secret. I don’t know for sure why God put me here and you probably won’t know for sure until you stand before the judgment throne on your arrival in the next world. The thing is that we don’t need to know for sure in order to taste the fruit of the Tree of Life. What is expected of us is that we pursue that fruit. That we allow the yearning to lead us along the path God has set out for us is what we must do.

I felt a little bit like a roast. Both Barti and Tabitha seemed to be saying that I was cooking nicely. I should be patient and allow the process to follow its natural course. Easy enough for my friends to say but it was not so easy to live through.

I needed to understand what Barti and Tabitha had been trying to teach me in a more organized fashion. The brief stories and occasional conversations were helpful but I wanted to understand what they were telling me in a more organized way.

“Barti, teach me about spirituality. Teach me about living as a Christian.” I asked my friend.

“Theo, you already know a great deal about living as a Christian. I’m not sure if there is

anything I could tell you that you don't already know inside out and upside down. However, if you insist, we could spend some time reviewing the basics.”

“I do insist,” was my immediate response. “Barti, this is important to me. If I understand what's going on with me, I can deal with it better.”

Daniel Cohen was assigned to me shortly after my return from Israel. He was a thirteen year old boy who was really hurting. Originally from Boston, his father was a successful engineer. His mother had recently died. The boy was unable to deal with his mother's death very well and was acting out through vandalism and petty theft. His father was unwilling or unable to deal with the boy. Daniel was a very bright young man and much was expected of him. He couldn't handle the expectations or his father's detached and unemotional way of dealing with the crises that were tearing apart the boy's life.

Daniel had an older brother who was studying Zen Buddhism at the Zen Meditation Center in Rochester. The Boston probation office realized that this boy needed stability and hoped that the brother might be able to provide it. His brother was living a monastic lifestyle at the time and was unable to take on responsibility for Daniel. However, there was a married couple associated with the Center who were willing to take on their friend's younger brother. So, after all the arrangements had been made by the Boston Probation Office, the case was turned over to me. I only needed to monitor the situation and lend occasional support.

While Zen Buddhism gained a significant degree of popular appeal in the United States in the fifties and sixties through the writings of D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts and others, it still had the reputation of being a Southern California-hippie-phenomenon. One wondered about the legitimacy of some meditation centers or the qualifications of their leaders.

The Zen Meditation Center in Rochester was under the leadership of Philip Kapleau. After World War II Kapleau served as a court reporter for the War Crimes trials and went through a spiritual crisis as a result. He ended up in Japan studying under respected Zen masters and becoming a Zen monk in the process. Eventually he was recognized as a *roshi* or teacher of Zen. At this point he returned to the States teaching meditation and living the life of a Zen monk. By the time I came in contact with the Zen Meditation Center it was one of the most highly

respected centers of Zen practice and learning in the United States. Kapleau was the author of several classic works interpreting the Zen Buddhist tradition for modern Americans.

I met Daniel about a week later at the home of his foster parents, Jim and Pat Bucher. Daniel was a personable young man, who spoke freely and was quite intelligent. Though he also seemed unsure of himself at times and there was a sadness in his eyes that tugged at your heart. I enjoyed the opportunity to speak with him and thought that it would be a pleasure to work with him. What I enjoyed even more was the opportunity to get to know Jim and Pat Bucher. These two people were the kindest, gentlest people I had ever met. They were so peaceful and accepting. They seemed to be just what the doctor ordered for Daniel. He needed stability, emotional support, acceptance and a lot of attention. This couple could provide all of that and more. As the weeks passed Daniel underwent a visible transformation, as he became more self-assured. The sadness in his eyes changed into a sparkle of happiness. I met with him weekly at my office or at the Bucher home and we had wonderful conversations. The problems in his life were being dealt with and he was happy for the first time in much too long.

Under the influence of my new friends, the Buchers, I began reading up on Zen Buddhism and attended a few introductory meetings on Zen meditation. I found it incredibly interesting and attractive. So, I decided that it was time to talk with Barti about my interest and see what he had to say.

Barti was familiar with Philip Kapleau and the Zen Meditation Center in Rochester and had nothing but praise for both. He pointed out that Zen is the Japanese version of one of the major schools of Buddhism. It is not some hippie group but a leading denomination of one of the major World Religions. Kapleau is a legitimate Zen teacher. In fact, he's one of the leading representatives of Zen Buddhism in the West. He went on.

“Under Thomas Merton's influence, Zen gained a certain respectability in Catholic circles. More than a few Trappist monks studied Zen meditation and found it helpful. In fact, they found it very similar to the Christian practice of apophatic meditation. Much of the Christian meditative tradition makes use of discursive meditation. That is, the focus of one's thoughts is on Scripture or some other inspiring source. Apophatic meditation is the emptying of thought and simple openness to what is. Zen meditation is sometimes described as sitting meditation. One simply sits, which is essentially openness to what is.

“Another form of this apophatic meditative tradition is found in the orthodox practice of

ejaculatory prayer. The meditator uses a short prayer such 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.' The prayer is repeated over and over until it permeates the person's thoughts and actions. It takes on a life of its own. This is a Christian version of mantra type prayer used in the East. It is highly respected and has a long Christian history.

"We all yearn for the fruit of the Tree of Life. We see that throughout the world. It's part of being human. If a religious tradition is going to be meaningful, it must find a way to connect us with God. When we examine most religious traditions we find that the methods used to transcend the ordinary and taste the fruit of Eden are similar. Thus, a Trappist monk and a Buddhist monk can share a great deal in their common experiences and methods. Read Merton's *The Asian Journey*. It offers some wonderful reflections on this, especially in discussing his visit with the Dalai Lama.

"So, I encourage you to learn as much as you can about Zen Buddhism. It can enrich your spiritual life. Let me also remind you of something else from a Merton book. In his first book, *The Seven Story Mountain*, Merton describes his first fascination with the East as a young man about your age. He went to see a Hindu mystical teacher who was making the rounds in the States. The teacher advised Merton that it is usually wisest to remain with the tradition in which he grew up. He then suggested reading St. Augustine, St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross as excellent sources of sound mystical teaching.

"While it is a good idea to become familiar with Zen Buddhism, it is an even better idea to become familiar with the tremendous spiritual riches that are available to us within Christianity. Before anyone ever considers heading off to the East in search of enlightenment or spiritual sophistication, he or she should read St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross at a minimum. They won't find anything better in any other religious tradition. Also, with Christianity is not just a matter of a school of thought or a long tradition of religious practice, it is the person of Jesus Christ, Son of God, to whom we are attracted and committed."

"Even your young friend and his brother might be surprised to find that there are some excellent resources on mysticism and meditative disciplines within the Jewish tradition. Rabbi Nachman of Bratislava is one of the great Hasidic masters. He was a great teacher of the importance of "sitting" as a way to holiness. The sitting Rabbi Nachman writes of in one of his greatest works is of the same type one does in Zen.

"The more I think of it, the more I'm convinced that the issue is not which method or

tradition one brings to prayer but that all too often we simply don't come to prayer.

“When two of John's disciples were curious about Jesus and wanted to learn about him, Jesus invited them to “come and see”. They followed Jesus at that point not because they were convinced that he was the messiah but because they wanted to see what Jesus was about. What did they see when they followed Jesus? They saw Jesus to be a storyteller—with his many parables. They saw Jesus to be a teacher as he preached and shared the Good News of salvation. They saw Jesus to be a healer and miracle worker. Most of all, they saw Jesus to be a man of prayer.

“Jesus was always raising his eyes to heaven and offering a blessing. Jesus was always going off by himself to pray. After a long day of prayer and working miracles Jesus sent his disciples back home, across the Sea of Galilee in a boat. The disciples are not surprised that Jesus wants to stay on the far side of the lake to spend the evening in prayer. The reason he went to the far side of the Sea of Galilee in the first place was to have time alone for quiet prayer. Most days Jesus would be the the first one up in the morning. He did this so that he could go off by himself to pray before everyone else was up and the day's activities were underway.

“Jesus is the Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Christ, yet he found it necessary and desirable to spend a great deal of time in prayer. While Jesus regularly attended synagogue and Temple services, we often see him alone in prayer. When the disciples asked Jesus how they should pray he gave them different answers. One time he taught them the Our Father as an example of prayer. Another time he told them to go into their rooms and lock the door when they pray. If prayer was so important in the life of Jesus, can it not be of great importance to us?

“Imagine a family where none of the members talked with each other; where conversation was limited to “Good morning”, “good night” and “pass the salt”. Imagine a family where there were never any heart to heart conversations. Imagine a family where the members knew almost nothing about each other because the members never talked with each other about what was important to each of them. Imagine a family where no one ever said “thank you” or “I love you”. Imagine a family where a member's heart is breaking and that pain is not shared with the other members. Imagine a family where the members are distant strangers to one another with their only real point of similarity being that they share the same address. Any counselor would describe such a family as profoundly troubled and dysfunctional.

Each of us is on Earth with the God-given purpose of becoming a saint. To be a saint is to be in right relationship with God. Relationship demands communication. Relationship demands time spent with each other sharing our feelings, hopes, dreams, fears and worries. Relationship demands that we support one another and help bring hope and healing to each other's worst pain. If we see a relationship like the one just described, the initial reaction is to suggest that the family get some serious counseling. Yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that our relationship with God is probably closer to the description of the dysfunctional family than it is to the description of Jesus' frequent retreat into prayer. If God is the center of our lives, shouldn't God be the one with whom we speak the most? I'm not talking just about formal prayer, such as Mass or even reading from scripture, though they are important. I'm talking about quiet time with God and open sharing of our hearts with the Lord. I'm talking about time alone with the Lord quietly listening to what He is trying to say to us.

In the gospels Jesus speaks to us of the absolute importance of prayer, not through any preaching but through the example of his life. Prayer was absolutely essential for him and inimitably linked to the central reality of his life—God the Father. If prayer was essential to the life and ministry of Jesus, can it be any less essential for us?"

Barti didn't tell me anything that I didn't already realize. I enjoyed the contact with the Buchers and kept them as friends. Daniel continued to make excellent progress and after six months I recommended that he be taken off probation. I continued to read about Zen Buddhism as the opportunity presented itself over the years. I also found sitting Zen an excellent method of meditation and used it off and on over the years. Though I never became involved with the Zen Meditation Center. I found the tradition in which I was raised more than enough of a challenge for me.

Chapter Three

It was an exceptionally nice spring and excellent walking weather by late April. So, Barti and I began to have our conversation on walks through the park. We could both use the exercise and the fresh air was much more pleasant than the coffee shop.

I was more excited than usual because this was the time that Barti was supposed to begin my instruction in the ways of Christian spirituality. I read some of the classic works on spirituality over the years, so I figured I wouldn't be totally ignorant of the topic.

St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross seemed difficult to get through. Either I didn't relate to their style of spirituality or the distance in centuries was too great for me but getting through their writings was a struggle. In the end I didn't feel very enlightened.

St. Francis deSales was different. He wrote about the same time as the others but he wrote in French for a Swiss audience. This was quite different from the dark Spanish mysticism of Teresa and John. Having background in psychology, I was struck by the solid and positive approach that marked St. Francis deSales. His writings were four hundred years old but they read like the best of contemporary psychology. There seemed to be a great similarity between the Rational Emotive therapy of Albert Ellis and the workings of the human spirit as described by the saint.

My experience with Daniel Cohen and the Zen Center also increased my yearning to have a better understanding of Christian spirituality. I wanted to know the tradition in which I was raised and to begin applying it to my life.

Barti was waiting for me on a park bench near the parking lot. He had just finished tying his walking shoes and was ready to go. I joined him and we began to walk along the Genesee River.

"Theo, can you tell me what spirituality is?"

My confidence of moments earlier disappeared and I struggled for some response. "Well, prayer comes to mind and being of service. Religious devotions and worship are probably part of spirituality. Am I close?"

Barti flashed a big smile. "Yes and no. Prayer, service, devotions and worship are all expressions of spirituality but are not spirituality *per se*. Actually, I threw you a curve ball with that question. There is little agreement on a specific definition of spirituality, though most people

have some sense of what it is we talk about when we use the word. For example, some authors describe it as an innate quality of human existence. It is something we are born with and seeks expression in human living. This something we are born with is described as an orientation toward the ultimate. It is also described as a drive for self-transcendence.

“Back in the third century when Christians went into the desert or up on mountains to get away from corrupt Roman society and focus on their relationship with God, they pursued what we might consider spirituality. From their perspective, they simply focused on what we need to know and practice in order to become what we are meant to be. They were concerned with how the human soul works. This is still a primary concern of spirituality today and we will go into the topic in some detail later.

"We have to be careful not to mix apples and oranges when we are talking about spirituality. In one sense it is appropriate to speak of spirituality as an inner drive, as something inherent in human nature or as an orientation to the ultimate or to self-transcendence. When we speak of spirituality in this sense we are speaking of a basic human quality. There is something about human nature that orients it to questions of meaning and our relationship to the ultimate. We can speak of this fundamental orientation being active in a person whether the person is Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Native American or even adopts New Age spirituality. In each case we are essentially speaking of the same reality.

“However, spirituality can refer to a much more specific range of meaning as well. For example, Karl Rahner says that ‘...the *spiritual life* is life with God and toward God. We are leading this life when we forget ourselves for God, when we love him, praise him, thank him.’ Buddhist spirituality may have little if anything to do with God. Christian spirituality, as is Jewish and Islamic spirituality, is highly focused on God.

“How we understand God is also important. Platonic philosophy has had a strong influence on Christian theology over the years, especially through Plotinus and later St. Augustine. The basic idea is that the essence and source of reality is to be found in the mind of God. From this one source flows ideal forms.”

I vaguely remembered what he was talking but was not sure, so I asked Barti to clarify. He stopped for a moment and then went on.

“Plato argued that true reality is at the level of the divine mind, where one finds ideal forms. Plato looked around him and saw a lot of animals that were called dog. They were quite

different in many respects, yet there was still some “dogness” about the creatures that allowed him to identify them as dogs. His idea was that all of these fleshy dogs were an expression of the ideal dog. The ideal dog was the thought form of dog that resided in the divine mind. The goal of Platonic spirituality was to perceive the ideal reality behind the messy and varied phenomena of physical existence. What we perceive as the physical reality in which we operate and live out our lives is only a shadowy expression of the fundamental reality. This understanding emphasizes a disembodied spirituality of abstract thought and contemplation. Physical reality is seen as being an imperfect reflection of true reality and thus of considerably lesser value. The body is seen as an obstacle to spirituality, something to be tightly controlled or ignored on the path to spiritual realities.

“This was a common approach among Christians educated in classic Roman philosophy, as was Augustine. Through Augustine, this approach has had a strong influence on many Christians in subsequent centuries. However, this was not the only approach. The Eastern part of the Roman Empire was blessed with a number of great theologians and teachers. Among them were several men known as the Cappadocians. This included St. Basil and St. Gregory Nazianzen. They emphasized a Trinitarian understanding of God rooted in Scripture. The Trinity can be over intellectualized but it can also be very down to Earth, especially as it was understood by the Cappadocians.

“Following their lead, we might ask, ‘What is this “ultimate” toward which we are drawn?’

“‘God’ is the term we use to designate this ‘ultimate’, this ‘mystery’. This word is not a proper name. ‘God’ functions as a variable, like “x” in an algebraic equation. It is shorthand for the absolute mystery which grounds and supports all that exists. What then does this variable stand for?

“We are symbol-making, symbol-manipulating creatures. We interact with the world and one another through the medium of symbols. These symbols do not stand in isolation they are joined with other symbols into basic concepts that are in turned joined together into metaphors and stories. Indeed, we are story making creatures who instinctively organize our experience in narrative form. Thus, if we are to come to some sense of what this ultimate is to which we are drawn, we must turn to story.

We encounter the stories of our faith tradition in Scripture. These stories tell of the

encounter of others with the ultimate. From these stories, arising from both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, we encounter the ultimate in three Persons; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As those who have followed the same faith tradition as ourselves have struggled to describe the ultimate, beyond the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the least inadequate description they have been able to put into words is *agape* (1 John 4:8). God is *agape*; self-giving, faithful, trustworthy love. While the ultimate is unfathomable mystery, the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit emerge in relationship to one another and us. Trinity speaks of the profoundly relational character of the ultimate. This relationship is best understood as *agape*...that is, love.

Who we are as persons can be defined only in terms of our relation to God. The opening chapters of Genesis describe humanity as being made in the image of God. In a sense, humanity is a unique setting of God's self-disclosure. If God is *agape* revealed in relationship, that is Trinity, then the self-disclosure of God in humanity is best found in self-giving love relationships between persons. We are most human, the richest image of God we are capable of when we participate fully in the relations of interpersonal love, both human and divine. At that moment we are in communion with the living God.

This is an important point. If we focus on God as the Divine Mind then we are in communion with God in the act of infused contemplation. That is, when we experience an intuitive grasp of divine realities we are most in communion with God. In a sense, we have united with God and grasped the eternal ideal forms that are the content of the divine mind.

“A Trinitarian understanding of God, as suggested by the Cappadocians, focuses on relationship and love as the divine characteristic in which we most completely express the image of God. We are in communion with God when we love one another. Why? Because the Trinitarian nature of God means that the fundamental Trinitarian nature of God is relationship. Perfect relationship is perfect love. While a Platonic spirituality sends us off to the mountain top to contemplate the eternal verities, a Trinitarian spirituality brings us into relationship with one another. The human person exists by being ever more fully toward and for others through continually deepening participation in communion of persons, human and divine.

“If God is understood as Father, Son, Spirit toward us, for us, with us, and in us, then holiness will be found in becoming persons conformed to the image of God in us. As God is Being toward and for others, we we are being toward and for another, for others and for God.

Christian spiritual life means being animated by the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ.

These are two different approaches to understanding God, both of which have deep roots in Christian history. Each has had a profound influence on Christian spirituality. Each results in a fairly different experience of Christian spirituality.

“But I am jumping too far ahead...the point I want to make is that our orientation toward the ultimate is also strongly influenced by our understanding of the Ultimate. Thus, there are significant differences in how Christian, Buddhist, and Islamic spirituality is expressed, simply because each conceives of the Ultimate in different ways. Even within a particular religious tradition, such as Christianity, there are even more focused spiritualities. They are probably more rightly called schools of spirituality. Your recent reading of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross reflect some of these different approaches to spirituality within the Christian tradition. Other major schools of spirituality in the Catholic-Christian tradition include Ignatian, Cistercian, and Benedictine. It has even been suggested that the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin point to a cosmic Chardinian spirituality. Eventually we will take a closer look at each of these schools of spirituality but first there is more ground work to be done.”

By this time my head was buzzing as I tried to make sense of what Barti had explained. I was familiar with some of what he told me, as I had some exposure to Plato in my undergraduate philosophy course. His discussion of the Cappadocian Fathers and the Trinitarian approach to spirituality was new to me. The focus on relationship excited me because it was down to Earth and made sense in light of the Gospels. It was an approach to spirituality to which I could relate.

We completed our usual tour of the park and were back at our cars in the parking lot. Barti promised that we would continue our conversation next week, as he slid into his car. Moments later he had backed out of his parking space and was on his way back to work.

Over the next few months as we proceed through this tale I will occasionally offer suggested reading at the end of the article. Barti's explanation of the theology and background concepts presented in the article is quite simplified and brief. To have a better grasp of the topic it would help to read some additional material. An excellent discussion of Trinitarian spirituality is offered by Michael Downey in his book "Altogether Gift: A Trinitarian Spirituality". This book is published by Orbis Books. For an even more detailed consideration of the Cappadocian

understanding of the Trinity, which underlies the idea of Trinitarian spirituality, it would be well worth reading “God for us” by C.W. LaCugna.

Chapter Four

That spring I was taking a graduate course in group counseling at the state university. We met two evening a week for two hours each. All the students were teachers or social service professionals, with at least some work experience outside of college. The class was structured both as a group process and a class, which was difficult at times keeping the roles straight. There was a fair amount of reading for the course. In addition to a text on group dynamics, there was a text on Rational Emotive therapy, Rogerian therapy and Gestalt Therapy. Even though there was a great deal of work required for the course, it was a great course. It was particularly helpful because around the time I signed up for the course I was assigned as a co-leader for a group of juvenile probationers. The course helped me make sense of what was going on in our group and provided useful insight for improving our group.

It was an experiment. We were trying to find a more effective way to get through to some of the kids and felt that a group might reach them where a probation officer would be turned off. The kids seemed to like the group and I found it a new challenge.

I needed new challenges. I felt like I was spinning my wheels in the probation office, running kids through the system and hoping that now and then I would have a success like Daniel Cohen. The course and the group challenged me with new ideas and new ways of trying to have some positive impact on the world. Interest in my job was slipping away day by day.

My commitments in Rochester were becoming more tenuous than ever. I was dating a girl on a regular basis that spring. Though I knew that by summer the relationship would be history, as the relationship lacked spark. I was living in Brockport with a buddy from college. I saw my parents regularly but I was clearly on my own by that point.

In the back of my mind the idea of leaving the area was beginning to hatch. It was no more than a vague sense that my time in the Rochester area was rapidly coming to a close. Where the next stop in my journey would be was unknown. I just felt that I needed to leave.

I thought about discussing it with Barti but made no specific decision. I would just see if the opportunity presented itself.

“April showers bring may flowers” or so the saying goes. It was April 30th when we had our next get together. It was one of those gray spring days that remind you that the weather isn’t

under control yet. There were still unwelcome downpours but even in the rain, the temperature was comfortable and the winds were little more than a gentle breeze. Given the rain, we decided to meet at the coffee shop instead of attempting a walk in the park.

Barti seemed unusually focused that day and as soon as we ordered our coffee and scones he jumped right into the lesson. I got the impression that he did some serious preparation for our get together and he wanted to present the results.

“For the time being, our working definition of spirituality is that it is a person’s orientation to the ultimate. The last time we exercised our conversation focused on the “ultimate” and how different understandings of the ultimate produces different approaches to spirituality. Today let’s take a brief look at ourselves. Don’t be surprised if different understandings of human nature result in different approaches to spirituality as well.

“I mentioned a gentleman by the name of Plotinus on our last excursion. He lived in the second century. Born in Egypt, he lived most of his life in Rome. It is fair to speak of him as the last of the great thinkers of classic antiquity. Christianity was around during his time but had not yet had a significant impact on the way most people viewed the world. Plotinus was strongly influenced by Plato in his thinking, though his ideas show some influence of Aristotle and other major philosophers of ancient Rome. He is interesting to our discussion because in his works he distills an understanding of human nature representative of the best of pre-Christian thought. His work also had a significant influence on Augustine. This is important because St. Augustine influenced Western Christian spirituality more than any other Church Father.

“Plotinus saw reality as something of a continuum. The material existence in which we live, love and work is the least real of all existence. How can something be real if it is subject to change? See that woman over there walking her dog? It is a puppy now. A year or so from now it will be an adult dog and ten years later it will be an elderly dog. Which is the real dog? Is there some unchanging essence of dogness about the creature that allows us to call it a dog? Being a disciple of Plato he would say yes. The creature is an expression of the ideal dog form. So, the true reality, the ‘true self’ of the dog isn’t the creature with the waggly tail we see but the ideal dog form that exists beyond physical reality.

“Imagine a single point of light floating in darkness. This point of light is exceptionally bright. Encasing the point of light is a crystalline sphere etched with the most beautiful intricate

designs. Further out is another sphere. This sphere is a mosaic of patterns that are cast on it by the light shining through the inner sphere. These patterns seem to have life of their own. These patterns make up faces which are directed toward the outer darkness.

“This is essentially Plotinus’ model of reality. The single point of light Plotinus referred to as the “One” or the “Divine Mind”. This is the source of being, of all reality. The sphere seeming to encase the “One” really emanates from the “One”. He refers to this sphere as Intellect. This is the realm of the ideal forms. The outer sphere is Soul. Soul is at the boundary between the realm of the spirit and the realm of the material. Soul is essentially spirit, so it has characteristics of spirit, in that it is eternal. However, since it exists at the boarder with changing, material reality it is strongly influenced by the material realm. It can be caught up in temporal worries and concerns. Emotions can cloud its understanding.

“The mosaic of little faces that make up this sphere are our faces. We are soul. As we look out into the darkness of physical experience we become caught up in the illusion of temporal experience. As part of the illusion we imagine that we are isolated individuals. For Plotinus and many ancient thinkers, the truth was that our individuality was an illusion. The light of the One shining through the sphere of ideal forms created the changing variety of individual faces on the sphere of Soul. In our individual experience we could continue to face into the darkness and go our about our illusory lives or we could turn inward and face the One. This turning inward in contemplation was a form of spirituality that Plotinus advocated. As one turned inward, literally away from the outer darkness and in toward the light of reality, it was possible to experience the light of reality as it shown through the ideal forms of the intellect. This was an experience of intuitive understanding and intense joy. In facing the light we could begin to comprehend our essential nature. Individual reality was an illusion. We were really one Soul. Further, as Soul and Intellect (the inner sphere), we flowed from the One. Which means that in essence we were the One.

“In this model spirituality was the attempt to discover our true self by turning inward. The primary tool used was contemplation. We don’t hear much of this model today but a lot of our literature and references to spirituality are colored by this approach. The idea of “inner light” or the “light of reality” or “enlightenment” all reflect this model. This approach is highly “spiritualized”. It emphasizes the spiritual and in the process devalues the physical. It doubts if any real value is to be found in external human experience, including human emotion. It does

value the human intellect, as that is related to spiritual realm of the Divine Mind.

“Remember the TV series Star Trek and the Vulcan First Officer of the Starship Enterprise, Mr. Spock? He is a perfect example of this spirituality put into action. Intellect is paramount. Emotions are rejected. He spends his free time deep in contemplation.”

Barti was on a roll. He clearly enjoyed the topic and I didn't want to break his like of thought. However, I did have a question. So, I spoke up.

“What about mysticism? I always thought that mysticism was related to spirituality in some way. What you are saying about how Plotinus viewed reality seems to open the door to mysticism. Am I right?”

“Yes and no, Theo. Mysticism is a category of religious experience and not an understanding of how the world works. Though the idea of spiritual reality offered by Plotinus and later modified by Augustine is certainly open to mystical experience. Traditionally, mystical experience is of four types intellectual, visionary, unitive and affective. Intellectual mystical experience would be the intuitive grasping of some abstract concept. Visionary mystical experience would be the sensory perception of some spiritual reality. For example, medieval mystics often had visual experiences of Christ or the Blessed Mother. Unitive mystical experience is being caught up in the Holy Spirit and seeming to be joined in some way with the diving Other. The idea of sympathetic vibration, as with a 12 string guitar or harpsichord comes to mind. Affective mystical experience is similar to unitive mystical experience, except that it is one's emotions that are swept up in the sympathetic vibration with the divine Other.

“While we are most familiar with mysticism in this more “spiritualized” approach to spirituality, there are other approaches to spirituality and mysticism is at home there as well. We will see this later when we consider different approaches to spirituality.

“Jewish spirituality took a fundamentally different approach from the Greeks and Romans of classic antiquity. Jewish spirituality was much more down to earth and focused on relationship. The primary relationship was the covenant between the People of Israel and God. Indeed, if you read the Hebrew scriptures as a story the two main characters would be Israel and God.

“One honored the covenant relationship by keeping God's law. This influenced everything in the life of a Jew from what and how he ate to when and where he walked on certain days of the week. This was not simply a legalistic focus on law. People were aware of the

relational nature of the covenant and strove to maintain just relationships with their neighbors. In fact, the same word in Hebrew that is translated as righteous, “being in right relationship with God”, is also translated as justice, “being in right relationship with your neighbor”. Relationships between individuals were important, as they reflected the spirit with which one honored the covenant. Little thought was given to abstract concepts such as the nature of reality, the soul, afterlife or human nature. Their thinking on these issues reflected that of the broader society in which they found themselves. The primary thrust of Jewish spirituality was ethics, as is evident from the great prophets of Israel.

While there was a clear distinction between body and soul in Greek thought, with the true person being the soul, Jewish thought integrated body and spirit. Without body you were not a person. This ties in to the relational focus of Jewish spirituality at the time, as relationship occurs between two persons. It is embodied experience.

“Christianity came out of first century Judaism and its spirituality in those early years was strongly influenced by its Jewish roots. This is most apparent in the letters of St. Paul. His primary concern is relational, our relationship to the Father through Jesus the Christ and risen Lord. He spills a great deal of ink trying to keep the early Christians in loving relationship with one another. He is also greatly concerned with those Christians highly influenced by the Platonic spirituality I described a few minutes ago. They grasp the more theological and philosophical elements of the faith but seem to be unable to comprehend the relational demands of Christian faith. As time passed Christian spirituality was influenced more and more by Greek and Roman styles of thinking.

This is most apparent in 1 Corinthians 15 where St. Paul argues against those who questioned bodily resurrection. Commentators suggest that Paul was opposing those who believed that there was some type of existence as a spirit after death. Such a spirit based afterlife eliminated the need for the resurrection of our bodies. Paul argued not for an afterlife but for resurrection from the dead. This was rooted in his understanding that Jesus had been raised from the dead and that the resurrection was the definitive proof that the Kingdom of God had begun in Jesus and that God would bring it to fulfillment. Part of the fulfillment of the Kingdom would be the resurrection of the dead. If the soul was an eternal being naturally, as suggested in Platonic philosophy then there was no need for salvation we had eternal life by our spiritual nature. However, if we are truly dead when our bodies die, then Christ’s resurrection is important as it

gives us hope that we too will rise from the dead. It also requires that we trust God will not forget us and will raise us up on the last day. As I said, even though Paul's argument is part of scripture, it didn't last as the common understanding of what happens when we die among Christians for more than a generation or two. The Platonic idea of spirit as separate from body became the popular understanding and colored much of subsequent Christian spirituality in the process.

“St. Augustine was the single most important influence on Christian spirituality once we move past the apostolic era. Augustine was the son of a pagan official and his Christian wife. The boy admired his father and tried to emulate him, rejecting the simple-minded and pietistic version of Christianity he got in his rural home town. He was a bright lad and attended schools in Carthage, Milan and Rome. In the process he obtained a thorough knowledge of Roman and Greek philosophy. He went through a long process of spiritual development and conversion before he returned to Christianity as a believing adult. In trying to explain about Christian spirituality he drew upon ideas from both classic Greek and Roman philosophy, as well as from Christian and Hebrew scriptures.

“He argued from Christian scriptures that we were created to know and to love God. The way to do this was to turn inward. While this certainly reflects an influence of Plotinus' model of reality, Augustine made significant changes. Turning inward was a more subjective experience for Augustine than for Plotinus. He wanted the believer to focus on his or her will as a human faculty. By consciously using our will to fan the fires of an ever greater love of God, we are drawn into an ever deepening relationship with God. Of course, love is not something one wills into existence. It is a response to a person. Augustine explained that God's grace is the spark of love that ignites our passion for the divine Beloved, so that the exercise of exercising our will to fan the flames of love for God became our response to God's grace and our participation in the love relationship. The supreme good after which the believer sought was the Beatific Vision. In earthly life one might obtain a brief flash of the Beatific Vision in a moment of deep contemplation. After death the Beatific Vision would be eternal.

Augustinian spirituality emphasized the importance of the spiritual and drew upon disciplines such as contemplation, which turned one's focus inward. While he valued the spiritual more, he never rejected the material world, as scripture says that God created the world and called it good. Structurally Augustine's model and Plotinus' model are identical, though they

differ in labels. In Augustine the “One” becomes God and the sphere of the intellect becomes the Beatific Vision. Augustine doesn’t equate the material world to the outer darkness and illusion. Nor does he view the sphere of the soul as one entity lost in the illusion of multiplicity. For him we are individual souls. The danger in the outer world is not being lost in the illusion, as it would be for Plotinus, but falling in love with anything other than God. Any other Beloved apart from God is subject to death and change. As such it is sure to disappoint eventually. Only the love of God promises a relationship that transcends even death.

The Augustinian model was the basis for spirituality throughout the middle ages and well into recent centuries. Other models have arisen over the past century that pay greater attention to the social and physical nature of humans. These models draw primarily on the developing social sciences and contemporary philosophy, as well as the older Hebrew strand in the Christian tradition. Recent developments in the physical sciences have also influenced thought on the spiritual nature of humans.

“Since the Enlightenment speculation on the nature of humanity has turned away from the supernatural and toward the material. For example, philosophy now tends to focus on how humans construct meaning through language. Psychology focuses on the study of human behavior and even the more theoretical aspects of the discipline need not appeal to spiritual realms.

“Christian Spirituality seems to have had two basic reactions to these developments in philosophy and the sciences. The tradition rooted in the Augustinian turn inward has continued on pretty much the same, riding the crest and trough of popularity from one generation to the next. A second approach has been to inform spirituality with the insights of philosophy, social justice and the behavior sciences. This has resulted in greater respect for the bodily nature of the human condition and the role of bodily existence in spiritual development.

“Thomas Merton is a good example of greater attention to the human condition. When he joined the Trappist order his focus was on retreat from a sinful world through monastic living and contemplative prayer. This was the classic turn inward. As his experience and prayer life deepened Merton could relax a bit and let go of the roles he was playing, as a monk and a writer for example, and be himself. What he discovered was that the people in downtown Louisville were just as loved by God and as important as the monks at the Abbey. The “world” was not to be run away from but to be embraced. He didn’t leave the order but he did begin to take an active

role in the civil rights movement and later the anti-war movement.

“I think it is fair to say that there has always been a certain tension in Christianity between the highly “spiritualized” personal approach and communal elements of the faith. This is apparent even at the beginning of the Church when Paul was trying to hold in check those who were using the faith as a way to gain some special spiritual knowledge that others lacked or imagined themselves to possess such knowledge and were thus freed from the petty rules that bound everyone else. They were seeking personal status and special religious experience. In the process they were viewing Christianity through the same lens as might be appropriate to pagan religion. They devalued material reality and fleshy existence. However, in the process they were threatening the stability of the Christian community.

“Paul’s approach was to encourage spirituality that edified the community and reject spirituality that was overly individual. This is very clear with his treatment of ‘speaking in tongues’ in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. Earlier in the same letter he argues with some believers who are trying to bring the Platonic view of spirituality into the Christian community in Corinth. That approach saw good only in the spiritual and rejected the value of our physical nature. This created problems in acceptable moral behavior as well as dissension in the community because this group considered themselves better than the rest of the community. Paul rejected their ideas and continually emphasized the goodness of our physical nature and our need to take it into consideration in our actions.

“The monastic movement played an important role in the history of Christianity but it promoted an individualistic, turning-inward approach to spirituality. Much of Western monasticism was influenced by Augustine, who emphasized the turn-inward. As I noted earlier, Augustine in turn had been influenced by Plotinus and the Greco-Roman culture in which he was educated. There were groups who stressed a more outer-directed spirituality, as we see with St. Francis and later with St. Ignatius Loyola, but the inner directed approaches have been dominant throughout the middle ages and into recent centuries.

“A driving influence in the growth of a more embodied spirituality has been concern for social justice. Three centuries of economic, political and social disruption have forced people to question if a “me and Jesus” spirituality is meaningful. Is it a false spirituality that allows me to sit in my room contemplating the passion of Jesus in a deep contemplative state, while ignoring the beggar at my gate or the unemployed family man down the street? Contemporary spirituality

seems to be picking up the relational strand of the Christian spiritual tradition. Individual prayer and the contemplative disciplines are not rejected but held accountable.

“Along similar lines the increased knowledge and insights provided by psychology are being applied to an ever greater degree. One of the dictums of Aquinas is that grace builds upon nature. That being true, Christian spirituality must build upon the psychological and social nature of the human being. Within this context the Trinitarian spirituality I spoke of earlier makes perfect sense. Humans are relational creatures and our orientation to the ultimate must reflect this reality.

“One of the most productive approaches to understanding spirituality through the lens of the behavior sciences has been in the realm of developmental psychology. Are there typical patterns of faith and moral development. How does this relate to other patterns of psychological and emotional development in people? There has been a fair amount of excellent work done on these topics. However, we have covered more than enough ground for today. I’ll pick up with the developmental approaches to spirituality on our next visit.”

The “Confessions” of St. Augustine is a combination of the saint’s autobiography and his reflections on God and human nature. Anyone interested in Christian spirituality should read this book. While written over a millenia and a half ago, it is still timely and an enjoyable book to read. Though a good translation is important. If price is an issue, you can download a copy of the Confessions for free in Adobe PDF format from www.etheriallibrary.com.

The best of Thomas Merton’s books to illustrate his insight into the importance of social justice and a relational spirituality is found in “Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander”. It was published in 1964. A good example of the relational turn in contemporary approaches to spirituality is found in “We drink from our own wells” by Gustavo Gutierrez. The more recent books of Henri Nouwen are also good.

Chapter Five

Rather than finding a sense of peace after returning from Pilgrimage, I had been more on edge than ever. I felt out of place. My judgment seemed less reliable, especially regarding the kids on probation whom I supervised.

One young man had been doing exceptionally well. I told him that if he could keep it up for another six months I would recommend an early release from probation. For the next six months he was an angel, so I kept my promise. Within two months he was back in court again, totally reverted to his old ways.

There was a native American youngster assigned to me. He was a bright young man and had parents who loved him and tried to do right by him even though they had little money and struggled with their own problems. He loved to talk and kept me up to date on the details of his life and friends each week. However, He liked to sniff glue, spray cans and gasoline. He wasn't a danger to society, as he broke no criminal laws. He was a danger to himself though. A psychiatrist we worked with explained that the chemicals which kids liked to sniff wrecked havoc on the brain and blood. After a while I felt like I was watching this kid and a lot of other probationers slowly kill themselves and I was powerless to do anything about it.

By early May I realized that something had to happen soon. I was beginning to slip into the cynical, bureaucratic mode of many of my more senior coworkers. It seemed the natural result of disillusionment and frustration, of realizing that you weren't God and couldn't make everything right!

"Barti, I've come to a decision." I began. "You know how unsettled I've been since returning from Pilgrimage. Well, I've thought and prayed about it and then thought about it some more. It seems to me that God is trying to tell me that it's time to make a move. I'm sure that my time with the Probation Office is nearing its end. My future lies elsewhere and its time to start moving in that direction!"

Barti smiled at my pronouncement. "And just where to you plan on marching off to?"

"I don't know," was my response. "I've been thinking about joining Peace Corps. A bunch of my friends from college joined Peace Corps and went down to Central America. I studied Spanish in college. With that language background, Peace Corps will probably send me

down south for a couple of years. At least it will get me out of here. Right now I feel like I'm in a rut. I have to do something! I have to take a first step. I have to choose a path and start walking along that path. Otherwise, I'll never do anything other than stay here and rot. I know, I'm making a big deal out of nothing but I have to do something. I have to give my dreams some flesh and this is my way of doing it."

"You won't get an argument from me," Barti said. "Our dreams need flesh to become real and we give them flesh with every little step we take toward making them a reality. Let me tell you a story. It's about Rabbi Nachman of Bratislava and comes from the Hasidic tradition of Judaism.

"There was once was a small Russian town with its usual collection of characters. It was small enough and far enough away from Moscow that no one every paid it much attention. Now this had its benefits and its drawbacks. A real benefit of its isolation was that the Russian Army rarely paid a visit to the town to conscript young Christian men into the military or to have a pogrom (government sponsored persecution) against the Jewish community. The drawback was that there was little supervision from Moscow over the local power brokers and they had a free hand for the most part. Now, the most demanding of all the power brokers in the town was Ivan Ivanovich. He was both the Chief of Police and the tax collector. He was well respected throughout the community and didn't bother the Jewish community any more than was reasonable.

"Now, Ivan was married to a beautiful woman, Petroka, who was a good wife...except that she had ambitions beyond her station in life. She wanted to be grand matron of the town, the center of its social life. This meant that she was always throwing parties, buying expensive gowns, and putting on airs. Ivan didn't mind it that much, if it kept his wife happy. However, her spending habits were a considerable burden on the man. Even with two jobs he found it difficult to make ends meet.

"One day when creditors were giving him a hard time over some debt his wife incurred, he took some of the tax money he recently collected and gave it to the creditor. No one paid much attention to his tax reports and collections. He figured that he would not get into trouble if he skimmed just a little bit from the tax revenues. So, Ivan began to supplement his salary by dipping into the tax revenues.

"This wasn't the only way he made a little extra money on the side. Since he was Chief

of Police, when his debts were particularly pressing he would go to the Jewish ghetto and arrest the son of one of the merchants or another well off family for disorderly conduct. The young man would sit in jail until his family came up with three or four hundred rubles to pay as bail. Of course, Ivan would pocket the bail money and drop the charges. He always went to the Jewish ghetto to pull off this scam because the Jewish families always bailed out their children. Also, no one in the Jewish ghetto would complain to the judge or higher authorities, since they knew the rules of the game. They cut Ivan some slack on the bail money and he kept off their backs the rest of the time.

“It happened that a bright young man fresh from University was assigned to the tax office in Moscow. He went in there like a whirlwind, dedicated to modernizing the tax office and collecting every ruble that was owed. As a result of the young man’s efforts it was discovered that Ivan Ivanovich’s tax records and his revenues submitted did not add up. The young man sent Ivan a courteous letter informing him of the discrepancy. Ivan was to submit 5,000 rubles to Moscow within one month or to explain how the tax office was in error in figuring the extent of his debt.

“Poor, Ivan! He knew that the tax officials were correct. They were being kind in letting him make good the missing funds instead of sending soldiers to take him into custody. Yet, how was he going to make up the 5,000 rubles needed? The only option he could think of was to fall back on his old scam. So, that evening Ivan headed for the Jewish ghetto.

“As he walked in the shadows, Ivan heard the sound of laughter and singing coming from a well to do home. He smiled, figuring that all he needed to do was lie in wait and before long he would have his victim. So, he slunk deeper into the shadows and waited.

“Before long the door opened and two young men came out laughing and singing, as they headed off into the night. As they turned the corner, Ivan jumped out and grabbed the one closest to him. The other was able to escape while Ivan struggled with his chosen victim. The next day it was announced that the bail for the young man would be 5,000 rubles!

“The Jewish community was in shock. Normally, they could come up with the three or four hundred rubles Ivan wanted with little effort. This time Ivan wanted 5,000 rubles! No one in the ghetto had that kind of money! Certainly, the young man didn’t have access to that kind of money. He was an orphan who had lived on the kindness of the Jewish community since his parents died from influenza many years earlier. The community was particularly upset over the

arrest, as the boy was leaving a party hosted by the family of the girl he was engaged to marry very soon. They were celebrating the impending marriage when he was arrested. All the villagers contributed what they could, even to the point of real sacrifice. Yet, they were able to collect only 2,500 rubles.

“The leaders took this problem to Rabbi Nachman pleading for his help. The rabbi listened, thought quietly for a few moments and then explained.

“I may be able to help you. Come with me. We are going to the next town. There is a wealthy man who lives there and he may be able to help us. However, when we visit this man say nothing, let me do the talking.’

“They all agreed and set off with the rabbi to the next town. When they reached their goal they saw a well constructed home that was not very well maintained. The rabbi knocked on the door and after a few minutes the door opened an old man asked them why they were knocking on his door. The rabbi explained about the young man needing help and the difficult situation they were in, so far short of the amount needed to bail him out of jail. The old man was visibly moved by the Rabbi’s story and exclaimed that he wanted to help the young man. He reached into his pocket and took out a coin which he put into Rabbi Nachman’s hand. The rabbi looked at the coin. It was worth only one ruble! Even worse, it was a filthy old coin. Several of the men accompanying the rabbi were about to express their anger at the old miser, when the rabbi gave them withering looks to remind them of their promise to say nothing.

“The rabbi then began to pray to God for a multitude of blessings on the old man for his gift of the one ruble coin. After offering dozens of blessings for the old man, the rabbi thanked him once more and turned to leave. As the rabbi was walking away, the old man called out to the rabbi and asked him to return.

“I have not given enough. Please accept this also.” The old man placed another coin in the rabbi’s hand. It was another ruble coin. Again, the rabbi rejoiced at the kindness of the man and began to pray blessing after blessing for the old man. Again, the rabbi turned and walked away, when the old man cried out. “No, do not leave yet. There is still more that I can give. This time the old man gave two coins. And so it went for the rest of the day. Each time the rabbi was about to leave the old man invited him back and offered more money. By the final offering the old man was giving hundreds of rubles.

“The rabbi took the money to the Chief of Police and got the young man released from

jail. The community leaders decided to have the wedding that night before anything else came up to prevent the wedding. The Chief of Police was invited to the wedding in respect of his official position. He came in his best clothes with the money bag containing the 5,000 rubles tied to this belt.

“While the young man and his bride were celebrating with their neighbors, Ivan decided that since he had the 5,000 rubles he would be better off if he simply took the money and left town. The money would last him a long time. The government officials would probably forget about everything after a brief search for him. He could start all over again. He might even send for his wife...someday. So, he left the party early, got on his horse and rode away. However, he did not get far.

“Ivan liked to drink. He especially liked to drink vodka. There was an ample amount of vodka at the wedding celebration and by the time Ivan left the party he was roaring drunk. Indeed, the abundance of alcohol in his bloodstream was probably a significant factor in his decision to take the money and run. As we all know, you should not drink and drive. That is the case today and it was no different in the time of Rabbi Nachman. Ivan only got a few yards before he fell from his horse, struck his head on the paving stones and died.

“The community leader who had asked for Rabbi Nachman’s assistance walked over to the dead man, unfastened the money bag from his belt and gave it to the wealthy donor who had also been invited to attend the wedding feast. The old man fingered the money bag for a few moments and then returned it to the elder. He gave instructions that the money should be given to the young man he ransomed from jail and his new bride. They would need it to begin their little family.

“The elder was awe struck by what he witnessed and visited Rabbi Nachman the next day with his questions.

“Rabbi, I know the old man you visited. He is notorious as a terrible miser. When I saw the one dirty old ruble that he gave you yesterday, I knew that we would get little help from him. When you prayed blessing after blessing for that miser I felt that you were going way overboard. One ruble does not justify all of the blessings you heaped on that man. Yet, by the end of our visit he had given all that was required. Then last night, when he could have justly pocketed the money, he did not. Instead, he gave it as a gift to the young couple! How could that happen?”

“When I saw the dirty old ruble that he placed in my hand I knew that he was making a

real sacrifice. That ruble was so dirty because it had been in his pocket for so many years and been handled by him time and again. It was never far from him. Then in response to our need he made a true sacrifice and gave us his ruble. Perhaps others had come asking for help and then left insulted when he offered his ruble. If he could only offer a ruble in his miserliness then I would accept that offering and ask for blessing after blessing upon him to strengthen him.

“God did strengthen him. He was able to offer another ruble. So, I prayed again that he would be strengthened and so he was. With each coin that he gave, he took another step away from the prison of his own miserliness. As he gave each coin, the generous hearted man that God created grew stronger.

“So, my young friend,” Barti concluded his tale, “one of the morals of this story is that it is important to take the first step. Pray about it and do not stop. However, as you take step after step and each step strengthens your resolve and bears positive fruit in your life, then you have a pretty good indication that you are on the right path.

“Which reminds me, we were supposed to talk about development today—psychological and spiritual. Since I’ve already gone on for quite a while with my tale of Rabbi Nachman, I’ll keep my comments on development brief.

“Do you know what it means to develop?”

“I guess it means to grow.” I responded.

“That’s right, Theo, but do you know what is involved in growing?”

I could have made an educated guess but figured that it was best to let Barti get to the point of his lecture. So, I sat there with a dumb expression on my face and shook my head slightly to let him know that I had no idea.

“Growth is a type of change. It’s not just any change. It involves giving up a current way of life for a new one. This can be painful because we might be comfortable in the way we are living at present. However, change is going on around us and in us and this creates a pressure within us to change as well, to adapt to new conditions. Not only that, the Holy Spirit is active in us drawing us to be more than we are at present, to transcend our present limitations and become more Christlike.

“For example, a young child enjoys being at home with his mother. She cares for his every need and he feels safe when he is with her. However, it is time for him to start pre-school. His parents talk about how much fun pre-school will be and they get him new clothes for school.

On television Captain Kangaroo explains how wonderful pre-school is and the youngster is tempted. Many of the neighbor children his age are talking about pre-school as well. In addition to all this social pressure, his mental and physical growth foster a desire for him to extend his skills and life experience. He understands that pre-school is in his future and desires that future. His developing capacities make him feel cramped within present limitations and pre-school offers a wider field of activity and opportunity. However, he is also afraid that the security and comfort that he enjoys will be lost. He is caught in a struggle of what to do.

“Eventually, the big day comes. He cries a little when his mother leaves him off at school the first day but he very quickly realizes that pre-school is fun. He makes new friends and enjoys wonderful adventures. The next day he is up early and dressed, trying to get his mother to move faster so he can get off to pre-school.

“Growth involves an inherent need to be more than we are at present. Both psychologists and spiritual directors refer to this as the urge to self-transcendence. From the perspective of spirituality, this urge is the work of the Holy Spirit within us, an attraction to be what God created us to be. It is part of the mix making up our personality, along with our bodies, social relationship and cultural heritage.

“We are attracted by some possibility that is opening up in our lives, yet if we pursue that possibility we will have to give up the relative security of our current situation. This causes discomfort, fear, tension and pain. If we decide to make the leap and pursue the possibility that attracts us the pain will continue and even grow worse for a while, as change is difficult. However, before long we become used to doing things in the new way. What we experienced as pain disappears for the most part. We discover that our horizons are broadened. We also discover that what we feared losing is not gone. It is still present in our lives only in a new way. For example, the pre-schooler didn't lose his mother. She is still there for him but in the process of going to pre-school he discovered his teacher and a group of new friends. In a sense he became more than he was.

“There is a motion to growth. It involves the movement of separation from what is and a reintegration at a new level with what had only been a possibility. It is a process of letting go of the past and being open to new possibilities.

“The pain that accompanies growth is not necessarily a bad thing, even if it is unpleasant. Pain is a natural response telling us that something is wrong. The pain of a shoe that is too tight

is not bad. It is simply letting us know that it's time to get a larger size pair of shoes. If you experience a psychological discomfort, a sense of frustration, it may be that your unconscious is letting your conscious mind know that change is needed. Or from another perspective, the self-transcendent aspect of yourself is urging you on to further growth.

“I can't judge whether your desire to move on is wise or foolish. That discernment is up to you and you will have to live with the consequences. However, it does have the earmarks of the need to grow and change from your present situation. Just be sure that you are not running from anything but moving toward new possibilities.”

An application to Peace Corps had been lying on my desk for several weeks. A few days later I filled it in and put it in the mail.

The story about Rabbi Nachman comes from an audio book entitled, “The Tree of Life: Meditations, Prayers and Practices of Mystical Judaism” by Rabbi David Zeller. However, such stories are also found in books by Ellie Weisel and Noah Ben Shea, among other.

Further material on the process of self-transcendence and spiritual growth, as discussed above by Barti, are available in books by Walter Conn, Robert Kagan, and Fr. Adrian Van Kaam.

Chapter Six

I maintained a steady caseload of about thirty probationers, with about half of them receiving intensive supervision. That is, there was some contact between myself and the probationer at least once a week, more for some kids. I got along with all the youngsters fairly well. Each was different, with his own troubled background and problems to overcome. They were good kids for the most part. Most were acting out to get attention. If you paid attention to the youngster and gave him plenty of structure, the youngster tended to do fairly well. It helped if you liked the kid. They could sense if you were just going through the motions. You had to be real. I liked all the kids with whom I worked. The problem was that while you could do the most good if you opened your heart to the kids, it was also easy to get discouraged or hurt when things went bad for the kid—which often happened.

I met Doug after a juvenile hearing where he pleaded guilty to several crimes including assault and battery, disturbing the peace, and possession of a controlled substance. I was assigned to do the pre-sentence investigation and report to the court within a month on what would be the best sentence for his rehabilitation.

He was a lanky, tousle-haired 15 year old. An officer told me that Doug was a strong boy and it took two police officers to get him under control when they picked him up. He was something of a mascot to one of the gangs in his neighborhood, allowed to wear their colors and run errands but excluded from more dangerous activities. The gang funded their activities by dealing in uppers and downers. Apparently, Doug was handling a small transaction with a customer when he was jumped by friends of the customer who proceeded to beat him up and steal both the uppers he brought to trade and the cash. They did a number on him at first but hadn't realized how tough this boy was. Before long the tables had turned and he was in the process of pounding one of his assailants into the pavement of the parking lot where they were doing the deal, when a police cruiser drove by. The others ran off into the night abandoning their accomplice to Doug, since they already had the money and the drugs.

The bruises were still splotchy and his right eye a bit puffy when I met Doug. He was friendly enough, though not very talkative. With a little encouragement from me, I was able to get a few words from the boy and slowly piece together his story. He had been abandoned by his parents, who were both alcoholics, and was being raised by an aunt who could care less. Life on

the streets was his specialty and he was an expert. School was a non-issue for him, as he had stopped going two years earlier. His life revolved around the gang. They seemed to care for him. The customers who ripped off and tried to beat Doug were in the hospital with several broken bones and a concussion, a sign of solidarity from Doug's *compadres*.

Sitting in the office talking with this pleasant young man, it was difficult to comprehend that the story he was telling me was true. Yet, I knew from the police records that the bulk of what he told me was absolute truth. I had seen plenty of homes destroyed by alcohol. The drug reducing parents to little more than animals who neglected to care for their children or who beat them. I had seen alcohol turn parents into sexual abusers. I had seen parents so incapacitated by alcohol that they couldn't begin to care for a child, even if they wanted to. The kids struggled to get by in such situations. Sometimes they did well in life but always they carried the scars of their parents' alcoholism. Even as adults they struggled with the hurt and anger generated while children in an alcoholic household. That experience influenced their choice of spouses, what they did with their lives, and their future professional success.

Doug's aunt didn't want him anymore. She claimed that he was too hard to control. Doug claimed that he hadn't lived with his aunt for more than three months, spending most of his time with other gang members on the street. We kept him at the Juvenile Detention Center until we could locate a more long term living arrangement for the boy. He wasn't very pleased but we had no other option. It was either the detention center or being put on the street. The judge was not about to put a juvenile under his authority on the streets.

I met with Doug a few more times in the next week and made the rounds trying to piece together a clearer picture of his situation. Up until the fourth grade Doug had excellent grades in school, was popular, and seemed to get along well with everyone. He was ten years old that year. That was also the year his parents divorced. His father was gone the day of the breakup and was never seen or heard from again. His mother tried to get by for a couple of years but there was no child support. She worked when she could find a job but her alcoholism made it difficult for her to keep a job. Between jobs she was always in a foul mood, mostly angry at herself but she took it out on Doug. The cute fourth grader slowly turned into a morose and frightened fifth grader. By the time he was in middle school he was more angry than morose and was beginning to act out. It was at this time that his mother gave up on him. She disappeared one day and was never heard from again. His aunt lived a few blocks away from the apartment where Doug and

his mother had been staying. With his mother gone, he didn't have any place to stay. So, his aunt offered a place to sleep and eat until other arrangements could be made. Before long it was clear that Doug had outgrown his welcome, especially when he started getting in trouble with the law.

I also learned that Doug had been doing drugs for at least the past year. He mostly did the uppers and downers with which the gang dealt. He supported his worsening habit by handling the more routine transactions for the gang, involvement in petty theft, and in recent months he even admitted to male prostitution.

Doug was placed in a group home run by the city. I recommended it. This would provide him with a place to stay with a structured and supportive environment. They could also provide him counseling and treatment for his drug problem. The judge agreed with the recommendation.

He did well for about six months. It wasn't long after his sixteenth birthday that Doug ran away from the group home. He didn't go far. He was picked up that night with some gang members at the scene of a battle with another neighborhood gang. He was pretty banged up but there was no serious damage. However, he was high as a kite on uppers.

Doug was in the Detention Center again when I saw him. One of the rules of the group home was no drugs. You could run away and they might take you back but if you wanted to stay in the group home you had to stay clean.

It seems that Doug heard about the battle coming down between the two gangs and he wanted to be a warrior. He was sixteen and there was no reason for him to sit on the sidelines any more. He had been clean for over six months and didn't run away to get drugs. However, they were available and it didn't take much for him to give in to the urge.

We were able to arrange for Doug to be placed in a group home out of town. That removed him from news about the gang, his source of drugs, and gave him a clean start.

The last time I saw Doug was at the detention center a couple of days before he was to be transferred to the new group home. He seemed more depressed than I had ever seen him. He wanted to think that everything was going to work out in the new group home but he seemed to have lost hope. If he hadn't been able to make it in the last group home, how was this one going to be any different? I tried to encourage him but he didn't seem open to encouragement. About a month later I heard that Doug ran away from the second group home. It was a week before he was located this time. They found him in a hospital emergency room overdosed on drugs. Surprisingly he survived. This time he was remanded to the adult justice system and sent to a

rehabilitation center. I lost contact with Doug once he was part of the adult system. Given the way his life was headed, I would have been surprised if he was able to survive anymore than a year or two.

I had lunch with Barti shortly after receiving news of Doug's near fatal overdose. I was frustrated with Doug and my inability to have much of an impact on his life. For that matter, I was frustrated with the job and my lack of impact on most of the kids I supervised. After telling Barti about Doug's background and my efforts to help the boy, I vented my frustration. He listened carefully, as he always does. He surprised me at first by his response.

“Are you God? Can you turn water into wine or part the Red Sea?”

“All you can do with any of the young people you are serving is do your best. If you haven't shortchanged a kid by just going through the motions, you have no cause to be angry at yourself or to be particularly angry at the youngster who doesn't do what you want—even if it is in his best interest.

“There is evil in the world. We try to deny it but we are fools if we believe our denials. His parents addiction to alcohol is evil. What they did to Doug is evil. The boy's addiction to uppers is evil. Evil is destructive. It takes what ever good it finds and does its best to pollute and pervert the good. It is a virulent disease that destroys its host as well as wrecking havoc for those who may be around. It is the utter lack of good in a situation. Since God created us good, evil involves a choice to reject the good that is present in our life. It is a refusal of grace. We can try to contain and control manifestations of evil with counseling, rehabilitation, group homes and even jails but that is a losing battle. Evil is a supernatural reality and ultimately must be battled on a supernatural level.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” I asked.

“Your two main weapons are prayer and compassion. Do you pray for Doug or the other youngsters?”

“I usually include them in my night prayers, at least as a group.”

“That might be enough for some of your probationers but Doug needs regular, serious, focused intercession. Evil is destroying his life. All of his sensibilities have been so damaged by his experience in the past five or six years that he can't even perceive grace in his life. That is why he seems so depressed, he has lost hope. All he can see is the hopeless, dark evil that poisons's his mind and heart. On your own, you are not going to get past the barrier he has built

up to protect himself. On your own, you are not going to be heard over the din of raging evil that has kidnapped his heart. Prayer is your main weapon. It is the only way you or anyone is going to break through at this point.

“I realize that telling you to pray for Doug sounds like a pious cop out. It’s not! Back when I was still at the Abbey of the Genesee before going to Israel I fell off the tractor on the farm and cracked a couple of ribs and got a concussion. While I was laid up in the infirmary the community prayed for me regularly. I felt the power of their prayer. There was very little pain and I healed faster than the physician had ever seen before. There is real power in prayer and Doug need all the prayer he can get.

Intercessory prayer does double duty, as it unites us more closely with God in prayer, as well as focuses our intention and God’s grace where it is most needed. It isn’t that God needs us to tell Him where to put His grace. Rather, intercessory prayer brings us into the healing process, making our faith part of that process. Think of the many examples of intercessory prayer we find in the Gospels. A parent comes and ask Jesus to heal his child. Consistently Jesus tells the person that his or her faith has worked the miracle, the child is healed. When the crowds need fed, the disciples come to Jesus and ask for help. Jesus takes the simple fishes and loaves that the disciples have with them and uses them to feed the thousands of people in need. God brings us into the mix through intercessory prayer, allowing our growth in holiness while doing what needs to be done for the object of our prayers.

The other primary weapon against evil is compassion. Anger is an easy response to Doug’s situation but who or what is the object of our anger? His father and mother were terribly irresponsible and selfish, as a result Doug was wounded—perhaps mortally. Alcoholism is a disease that tends to flow through the generations. My guess is that both his parents came from alcoholic families. It is a common pattern for children of alcoholics to grow up to be alcoholics. It is also a common pattern for children of alcoholics to marry other children of alcoholics. The pattern continues on to the next generation. Both of Doug’s parents were addicts, so Doug becomes an addict. Do we get angry at Doug’s parents for their alcoholism? How about his grandparents or their parents? Doug made some very stupid and self-destructive decisions. Do we get angry at Doug because he is maintaining the cycle? What good does the anger do?

This is where compassion comes in. Rather than an inappropriate and unfocused anger our response to the people caught in this cycle of self-destruction must be compassion.

“One of my favorite authors is Abraham Heschel, a rabbi and Bible scholar whose primary interest was the Hebrew prophets. He describes the prophetic vision as a direct sharing in God’s passionate reaction to human suffering. Having been overwhelmed and transformed by the power of God’s passion, the prophet is driven to give voice to that passion. He can not be quiet. He can not hold it in. It is through the voice of this human being driven by the prophetic sharing in God’s passion for suffering humanity that God speaks to us and demands justice.

“Compassion is to respond to another human being with passion. I’m not saying that we allow our emotions to run wild. What I’m trying to say is that we attempt to see this person through the eyes of God and to feel God’s passion for this individual. Our immediate desire is only what is good for this person. This is not a self-righteous pity that looks down on the person. We feel their pain. Because we know it, we more earnestly want to relieve them of the pain they are suffering. We are moved to seek healing for this person. Compassion arises out of a sense of our fundamental unity. If one suffers, all suffer. This realization moves us to act to bring an end to the suffering. By themselves our efforts are a waste of time but united with faith and the power of prayer miracles are possible.”

Barti suggested that we begin by spending some time in silent prayer for Doug. So, for the next fifteen minutes both Barti and I were engaged in serious and focused intercessory prayer for Doug. Before we left Barti gave me some homework. I was to pray for Doug for at least fifteen minutes every evening for the next two weeks. I was also to write down a synopsis of at least one case that turned out well. My only restriction was not to repeat the tale of Daniel Cohen, which he already heard from me.

The assignment was much more demanding than I ever anticipated. It took a great deal of discipline to sit down for prayer fifteen minutes every day. It wasn’t that bad the first week but by the middle of the second week I was going crazy trying to keep up with the discipline and lost any sense of real prayer. I tried to dismiss the distractions and focus on Doug and his needs. It was not easy.

It was much easier to think of a case that went well and left me with a positive feeling. Jeff immediately came to mind. Like Doug, Jeff’s father abandoned the family, leaving Jeff’s mom with Jeff and his sister to support and raise. Jeff had gotten into a cycle of acting out at school and in the neighborhood. He seemed to be on the same track toward self-destruction as Doug. The only thing he had going for him at that point was that he wasn’t doing drugs yet and

his mother and sister loved him.

Not long after Jeff was assigned to me for supervision, I was informed of a part-time job program that was sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce and open to troubled kids. I signed him up for the program, with his permission, thinking it would be a good source of legal pocket change for Jeff and take some financial pressure off his mom. I figured that the job would be at some auto repair shop or as a bagger in a grocery store. A month later I received a copy of a letter sent to Jeff informing him that he had been accepted into the program and he should show up at the University of Rochester Physics Lab on a certain date. I was happy for him and noted the good news in his case file.

The next time I saw him he was bubbling over with excitement. He went to the University as instructed and found out that he was assigned as a “go-fer” for the laser lab. The University Physics lab was involved in some basic research on the use of laser beams. This was at a time when lasers were little more than science fiction ray guns in the minds of most people. He was happy just to be able to sweep the lab and listen to some of the top physicists in the nation talk about their futuristic research. He was even allowed to be present for some of their more dramatic experiments.

As time passed I was getting reports from the school how Jeff was a new person. He was studying and doing exceptionally well in school. His mother was overjoyed at how responsible he had become. He was even helping out around the house without being ordered. There was no sign of trouble from Jeff, as one of the program rules was that all participants had to stay out of trouble with the law and be drug free. He wanted nothing to interfere with his part time job at the university. The program ended a year later and on his last day at the university the faculty and lab staff with whom he worked threw him a big farewell party.

At the time I wrote about Jeff as my homework assignment for Barti, I knew that miracles happened with this boy and I thanked God for the transformation in this boy. However, at that time I didn't know all that would follow.

Several years later while in Rochester visiting my parents I went for a walk in the neighborhood. Not too far from home I ran into a young man who seemed vaguely familiar. When he saw me he called my name and with a broad smile came over wanting to shake my hands. As soon as he spoke I realized that it was Jeff. He was now a graduate student in engineering at the university. He was on scholarship and doing well.

He claimed that his life turned around when I got the job for him at the university. It gave him a sense of the possibilities open to him. The idea of being involved in cutting edge research was an adventure almost beyond the comprehension of most high school students, especially one that was a loser and in trouble with the law. Yet, he had been there. He shared that adventure and felt the excitement of new ideas and discoveries. He saw the importance of subjects he had barely tolerated in school and became driven to excel in just those subjects. His family was too poor to pay his way through college so his only real hope was scholarships. He worked harder than he ever did in his life. He was challenged to improve his grades by the physicists with whom he worked, some of whom saw his potential and tutored him. He was a sophomore when I had him as a probationer. By the time he graduated high school he was second in his class and had been accepted into the the engineering program at the university.

While his thanks were profuse, I realized that I was only one link in the chain of grace that that helped work miracles in this young man's life. However, back when I was doing my homework assignment for Barti, I knew already that Jeff was doing well and that with God's grace he would continue to improve. I thanked God for the opportunity I had been given to be part of Jeff's life and play a small part in his transformation. Yet, I still wondered if I couldn't have done more to help Doug. I wanted happy endings for all of the kids I worked with and it was difficult to accept that not all of the stories would have happy endings.

Chapter Seven

I hadn't heard from Peace Corps by August and was getting very frustrated. My sense of being out of place at the Probation Office grew more pressing every day. I wanted to get on with my life but nothing seemed to be developing. I wasn't depending only on Peace Corps. I had taken other steps as well.

My savings were fairly small, I had student loans to pay back and car payments. So, I needed to make money where ever I ended up going. Resumes and job inquires had been sent out. I enlisted friends from all over to help me in the job search. I even explored the possibility of going back to school, perhaps in Europe—maybe England or Portugal.

My friend from college, whom I visited in Ipswich on my way back from Pilgrimage, was back home in San Jose, California. Her reports on job possibilities in California were the most promising. Semi-conductor plants were hiring, as she recently got a job with one. She sent me job announcements for the Santa Clara County Probation Office and had friends who had job leads as well. San Francisco was only an hour away from San Jose. I figured that if nothing worked out in San Jose, there had to be a job in San Francisco.

Finally, I decided that I would submit my resignation at the Probation Office by the end of August, whether anything worked out or not. That would give the Probation Office a month's notice. If there was still nothing on the horizon by my last day of work I would pack up my things, get in the car and head out to San Jose.

That was my plan but before I did anything rash I wanted to discuss it with Barti.

We were supposed to go for a walk through the park but it was raining, so we opted for the coffee shop. After we ate lunch, I would go back to work. Barti was heading down to the Abbey of the Genesee that afternoon to begin a week long retreat. One of the benefits of being a teacher was that summers were free. He used the time to catch up on his reading, traveling and spiritual disciplines. He scheduled the retreat at his old monastery almost as soon as we returned from Israel and was looking forward to it.

After a few sips of iced tea, I got right to the point. "Barti, I have to do something. Time is passing and nothing has developed. I have the feeling that nothing will develop if I sit around here in comfort and security. I need to make a move and force the fates into action...or at least force myself into action. I've decided to submit my resignation next week, effective the end of

September. If nothing develops by then, I'll head out to California and stay with friends while I look for work. The economy out here is booming. There has to be job opportunities in California!"

Barti didn't say anything for much longer than usual. Then he began slowly, as if he was trying to feel his way.

"How do you feel about this decision?"

I thought for a moment. "There is some anxiety. After all, I have financial obligations and this is a gamble. Mostly however, I feel a sense of peace...like I've made the right decision. I'm taking a big step but if I don't take this step I'm afraid that I never will. If I don't act, years from now I'll still be a probation officer in Rochester knowing that I had another destiny in life but was too fearful or too stodgy to pursue that destiny."

"How have your prayers influenced this decision?" was Barti's next question.

"I've been praying about this ever since Pilgrimage. I assume that this is the fruit of prayer."

I could tell that my response didn't address his real question. He asked the question again in a different way.

"How did you pray? Was it closer to 'Lord, open a door for me!' or was it more 'Lord, your will be done in my life. Please help me to know your will!'"

That was a much more difficult question. I thought about it and then answered.

"Both ways. Certainly, I've been praying to know God's will for me in this matter and to do God's will. I've also been praying that God will open a few doors for me."

Barti was silent for a few moments. Again, he was trying to find the right thing to say.

"I have the feeling that you want me to bless your decision, tell you it is the right thing to do. I can't do that because I don't know whether it is right or wrong. That's something you have to discern.

"God wants only what is best for you. If you are rooted in doing God's will in any circumstance, then ultimately you are doing what is best for you. It doesn't mean that the course you follow will be easy or without risks. There will be plenty of risks and more difficulty than you ever anticipated. There will be pain, frustration, doubts and uncertainty, even if you are doing God's will. Yet, if it is God's will, there will be abundant fruit.

"In a decision like this all I can do is urge you to discern what God wants for you to the

best of your ability. Such a decision needs to be the fruit of prayer, prayer rooted in God's will. There should be a sense of peace or rightness regarding the decision. Of necessity, you must consider the consequences of your decision and what impact it can have for good or ill. This must not be a rash decision or one motivated by frustration. Ultimately, the only way to judge the decision is by the fruit that it bears in your life.

“In the past I've encouraged you to take steps toward realizing your dreams. I continue to do so. However, when it comes to just what steps you take, the responsibility must rest with you. It must be the fruit of your careful discernment. You are the one who will live with the result of a path taken or not taken. The decision must be with you and you alone.”

He was right. Though I did want his blessing on the path I was planning to follow, maybe even a nudge to get me more firmly on that path. Instead, what I did do was go back to square one. I refocused my prayers on doing God's will, rather than what I wanted God's will to be. I considered all the benefits and drawbacks of the path I was leaning toward. I carefully considered all of the options that seemed to be available. Eventually, I settled with my original decision and felt a sense of peace that this was the best way to go at present. I might still be wrong. I might be acting from my frustration. Yet, it was my decision and I was willing to live with it. A week later I gave the Director of the Probation Office notice that I would be leaving in a month.

Chapter Eight

The next three weeks passed quickly. I was busy due to the extra time I was putting in trying to get my cases in order before I left the Probation Office. My boss was a little surprised that I was quitting. Though, she and some of my co-workers knew that I applied to join Peace Corps, so everyone assumed that my departure was Peace Corps related. They wished me well and were supportive of my decision to leave. I kept up the pretense that I was leaving because of Peace Corps, yet I had heard nothing from Peace Corps at that point. It was easier to leave things the way they were, than to explain the truth to them. I felt that I had to leave even with my future in the air. I feared that if I stayed I would be trapped there for the rest of my life!

Barti was looking rested and more light-hearted than I had seen him in months when we got together in mid-August for a lunch time walk through the park. He asked me how I was doing and then listened attentively to my tale of decisions made and acted upon. He congratulated me for making a decision and acting on it. He also promised to pray that I be assisted in dealing with the consequences of my decision.

We walked along in silence for a bit, while I swallowed hard at the gentle reminder that the next few months might include a fair share of difficulties. I had enough savings to help me get by for a while but I would need a job before too long. Oh, well! I wanted an adventure, now I would have it.!

Barti began telling me about the great retreat he had at the Abbey. He went on about how wonderful it was to experience the monastic routine again and how warm his old friends were. Then, as I was expecting him to bring his report on the retreat to a close, he surprised me. No, it would be more accurate to say that he shocked me.

“I’m thinking about going back to stay early next year.”

Barti said this as if it were no big deal.

“You’re doing what?” I said, barely able to keep my voice from coming out as a yell.

“The past few years I seriously doubted the wisdom of leaving the order. I was happy as a monk. I think my doubts came along when I was assigned to Biblical Studies in Jerusalem. I enjoyed the studies but I’m no scholar. The deeper I got involved in the life of a Biblical scholar, the further I got away from my first love. As a result I began to doubt my vocation, failing to distinguish my career as a scholar from my vocation as a monk.

“I spoke with Tabitha a great deal about my doubts and confusion during our recent pilgrimage. She encouraged me to discuss the matter with the abbot at my old monastery. When I was in France, I stopped to visit another old friend from my days at the Genesee Abbey, who is now prior at the Abbey of *Notre Dame de la Trappe*. He listened to my musings and in the end encouraged me to discuss the matter with the Abbot at Genesee. We’ve had an on-going discussion since I returned from Israel. The retreat was an opportunity to spend some focused time discerning my path of action. As it stands, I’m welcome to come back for a three year experimental period. If all goes well, at the end of the three year period I can renew my solemn profession. The only reason I haven’t returned already is that I don’t want to make another mistake. If and when I return, the Abbey will be home for the rest of my days. I want to be sure that I’m following God’s will and not mine.”

I didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t difficult to sense that something had been on Barti’s mind ever since the pilgrimage but I had no idea that he was thinking about taking up a monk’s habit again. He had always been Barti to me. Even though I knew that he had been a monk for a fair number of years, I hadn’t know him back then. I knew him only as a teacher and a friend. I didn’t want to loose my friend.

“Barti, what about your classes?”

“I’ve already given notice to the principal at St. Alered and explained why I was leaving the school. He was sorry to see me go but understood my motivation and wished me well. I have few expenses and was able to save a fair amount of money in the past few years. I can afford to be without a job for a few months. If I decide to return to the Abbey I’ll donate the balance of my funds to the Abbey.”

“What about our conversations?” I was finally able to voice my real concern.

“They will continue, though it may be a little more difficult to talk during walks through the park. You are more than welcome at the Abbey. Anyway, with you planning on joining Peace Corps or heading out to the West Coast, our conversations would have become correspondence anyway. We can still maintain our correspondence.”

I wasn’t sure what to say next. I didn’t want to loose my friend, even though he was talking about only going to a monastery that was thirty miles away from where we stood at that moment.

“So, what are your plans for the next few months?” I asked.

Barti smiled. “Tabitha is going to be in San Francisco the last week in October for some meeting. I think it has something to do with her work for Bishop Biltritti. I’ve been hoping that since you plan on heading in that direction around that time I might be able to hitch a ride with you. Of course, I’ll pay my share of the expenses.”

My spirits soared. A few moments ago I feared that Barti was moving out of my life and now he is asking to make the journey West with me!

“Of course, you are most welcome to travel with me. It will be great having you along. I finish up work on the 28th of September and plan on leaving this area around October 4th. If we push it, it takes about five or six days of driving to reach the west coast. However, I was thinking about taking my time and seeing some of the sights. I’ve never been west of Chicago and figure that this is the best opportunity so far to see the rest of the country. If you need to get there sooner, I’m open to change. It’s a flexible schedule. I just set specific dates so I’d have a target. Otherwise, I might find endless excuses to delay the trip. Is the 4th ok with you?”

“The fourth is excellent. That gives us three weeks to make it across the country. The last time we went on a three week trip our lives changed. Only God knows what wonders might be worked in our lives on this three week adventure!”



A few days later I was surprised to receive a letter with Israeli postage. It was from Tabitha. I will copy the letter here.

My Dear Theo,

Barti tells me that some of the spiritual seeds planted on your Pilgrimage are beginning to sprout. The ministry with the young people which you enjoyed so much only a few years ago has now become arid and bitter. Your dissatisfaction with being a probation officer was evident when you were in Israel. Clearly, the experience taught you valuable lessons but it is not your primary calling. You needed to reach that decision on your own and so you have.

Disappointment, dissatisfaction and frustration have many important lessons to teach us. They let us know when we have travel far enough down a particular path. They let us know when it is time to move on. This is an important insight but it is only half of what we must know. We may know that we can no longer walk a particular path but where are we to go if we do not know which path God has set out for us?

God uses these experiences of loss to empty us of our preconceptions and to gain our attention. When we have fewer distractions it is easier to hear God's call. Yet, even here we must know what to look for. Often God will send a new experience into our lives, perhaps a new friend, who opens our eyes to never before perceived possibilities. An old book may glow with previously missed insight. A teacher or friend may say something that sparks wondrous ideas. However it happens, there is a sudden spark that ignites a conflagration of excitement and possibilities. What seemed invisible only moments ago is now obviously the road to travel. Certainly there will be potholes on the road but at least now you can see the road.

In Barti's last letter to me he said that he was going to speak with you about his plans, so I don't think I am breaking his confidence by sharing a few thoughts with you. As you must know by now, Barti is struggling with the decision of whether to return to the monastery or not. While he is further along the spiritual journey than you, in many respects he faces the same challenge. Should he take this fork in the road or that? Where does his destiny lie? The decision may be even more difficult for him, as he has more baggage to cloud his judgment and the stakes are higher. As a young man you can try many different paths until you find the right one. You are at the beginning of your time of great adventures and conquests. You will sharpen your skills and achieve great things in the years ahead of you.

Barti, on the other hand, is in the middle years of life and his dreams of great accomplishments are few. Mortality is a present reality in his life, as it is in anyone in their middle years. The stakes he bets are his happiness in the remaining years of his life. He lived for many years as a Trappist monk and was a good monk, if I am any judge of character. Eventually he struggled with doubts about the wisdom of his life's choice and came to believe that his calling was not to the monastery. Now, years after leaving the monastery he doubts the wisdom of having left the monastery. None of this is a matter of success or failure. Rather, the Holy Spirit is at work in his life, calling him to greater transcendence whether he follows the path leading back to the monastery or follows another path. Apparently, the issues which prompted his initial decision to leave the monastery are not settled. They may have come back to haunt him...or to call him back to the path where the Lord wants him.

I am writing to ask you a favor. I know that Barti will suggest that the two of you travel together across the United States. I encourage you to agree to the plan. You will benefit by the companionship and Barti's good humor and true wisdom. Barti will benefit from your friendship,

support and listening ear. As he guides and instructs you, he may also learn from his own words.

No doubt he has also informed you of my plans to travel next month. I am off to San Francisco to speak on behalf of the Palestinian Refugees and the Christian Church in Israel. I have been invited to lecture at the Berkeley Graduate School of Theology as well. I look forward to seeing both you and Barti in San Francisco. I have special affection for both of you.

Please keep Barti in your prayers.

Your friend,

Tabitha

Chapter Nine

It was cool the Monday morning Barti and I left Rochester. The chill that October morning was a hint of the fall season that began officially only days before. There was dew on the grass and an almost cloudless blue sky with the bright morning sunlight that promised a much warmer day in a few hours.

Last Friday the staff at the probation office threw a farewell party for me at lunch. It was cake, punch and finger food. A bit thin for lunch but just fine for the occasion, as the focus was on saying goodbye to everyone. I would miss many of my co-workers who had become good friends. Saying goodbye to Hannah was particularly difficult as she had become like an older sister to me. I even enjoyed outings with her kids on occasion. Toward the end the Probation Office Director even took me aside and complemented me on the quality of my work and wished me well on my adventures. Then, after cleaning out my cubicle and desk, I turned my badge and identification card into my supervisor and left my first real job out of college.

The evening before I visited with my parents and made my farewells with them. I stayed the night with an old friend who lived in Brockport, the town where I did my undergraduate studies. We talked and drank coffee much later than we should have. We had fun. Though, I would pay for it in lost driving time. After additional farewells with more friends who dropped by just as I was getting ready to leave, I was able to hit the road. It was only 8:00 am and the air was still cool.

I turned East on 490 and headed into Rochester. By 8:30 am I pulled up at Barti's apartment on Culver Road. He was subleasing the apartment to the teacher who was substituting for him at St. Alered High School. He had put his personal effects in storage the day before, so when I pulled up at the apartment he had a fairly large duffel bag with him for the trip and nothing else. The young man leasing the apartment from him was with him at the curb and helped place the bag in the trunk of my car. After a few brief farewells we were on the road and headed West.

It took me about five minutes before I was on I-90. This is one of the great superhighways that runs across the country. It was our plan to follow I-90 until just outside of Cleveland when it merged with I-80. We could take I-80 all the way across country until we hit Sacramento, California. At that point we would turn southwest on _____ and head toward San

Francisco. Melissa lived in San Jose, which was about an hour South of San Francisco on Route 17.

About two and a half hours out of Rochester, we got off I-90. We had reached Erie, PA. This was a pleasant mid-sized city that sat on the shore of Lake Erie in that North Western wedge of Pennsylvania that forced itself between New York and Ohio. We were not in any rush to get cross country but planned to have a leisurely stroll across the nation, making our journey as pleasant as possible. Erie was our first planned stop. We stopped for two reasons.

First, we wanted to see Presque Isle. This was really a peninsula that formed a bay and the best natural harbor on Lake Erie. The peninsula was a state park. Not only was it beautiful but the place was filled with history. During the War of 1812 the young American Navy had its heroic battle with the British in which he lost his ship but won the battle.

Second, Barti wanted to visit with Bill Rutkowski, a friend of his from the monastery. Bill was a novice about the same time as Barti but left at the end of his novitiate. The abbot and Bill agreed that he didn't have a vocation to the Trappists. The young man returned home and entered the seminary, it was there that he discovered his vocation as a parish priest. Bill graduated from Gannon University with an undergraduate degree in philosophy and headed on to Christ the King Seminary in Buffalo where he put in four years of theological study. He was ordained while Barti was in Israel.

We met at the Wharf, which was a seafood restaurant on the bay near a marina and landing for small craft. It was popular with the fishermen and the sea gulls, as well. The restaurant provided an excellent view without the irritation of a chilly breeze off the lake or a dive bomber attack from a sea gull trying to score lunch or relieve himself of it. I soon discovered that the food at the restaurant was even better than the view.

After introductions and polite chit-chat I became little more than a fly on the wall listening in on the conversation of two old friends. Fr. Bill already knew of the events leading to Barti's departure from the Abbey but was ill informed of his recent adventures and his current consideration of a return to the Abbey and monastic life. The priest listened quietly to my friends adventures and his inner struggles but said little. He did encourage Barti to make the most of the trip cross country and his visit with Tabitha.

When it was Fr. Bill's turn to bring Barti up to date, he spoke of several parish assignments. He particularly enjoyed his work at Holy Trinity Parish on Reed Street. The area

was an old Polish neighborhood that still preserved a great deal of its heritage but was showing signs of aging. He found it challenging to mediate between with the various ethnic groups in the community and keep everyone in mind of their basic relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ. Even though the neighborhood was beginning to feel the pressure of economic deterioration, the parish community was strong. It was alive and Fr. Bill loved it.

Barti shared some of his experiences as St. Alered High School, both the successes and failures. He spoke of the Scarlotti boys and the pain he felt over Mark's suicide, as well as the satisfaction of seeing that family eventually pull together and create a much more loving environment for Matthew, their surviving son. He spoke of several youngsters about whom I knew nothing but who seemed to have meant a great deal to Barti in the sense that he felt he had a positive impact on their lives. As Barti spoke it seemed clear to me that he still felt very strongly about his ministry as a teacher. It helped me to understand his need to discern a while longer whether his destiny was in the monastery or at St. Alered's.

Originally, our plan had been to have lunch with Fr. Bill and then hit the road again, however the conversation went on much longer than anticipated. When we finally realized that the restaurant was empty of the lunch crowd it was almost three in the afternoon and any attempt at serious travel that day was pointless. So, we were invited to stay at Holy Trinity rectory that evening and relax. The next morning we could push on.

Holy Trinity Church and rectory were dedicated in 1903. Originally, it was meant as a Polish parish during the height of the turn of the century wave of European migration to the United States. Pennsylvania was one of the centers of Polish immigration because of the coal mines and the timber industry. The climate and geography of Poland was almost identical to that of Pennsylvania, so it was an excellent place for corporations to recruit skilled workers. Until then the Catholic Church in Erie had been largely Irish and German. This wave of immigration added a large number of Polish and Italian families to the local Church in Erie. The practice at the time was to place parishes in ethnic neighborhoods to serve those immigrant communities in their own language. Thus, Holy Trinity became one of the Polish parishes.

As time passed the neighborhood changed and so did the parish. The largely first generation of Polish speaking immigrants changed into a second generation of young English speaking and largely assimilated Polish-American parishioners. This generation was struggling with the depression of the 1930's. While still a predominately Polish ethnic parish, Masses were

now said in English, a parish school had been opened to help educate and assimilate the parish children, and the pastor was a second generation Polish-American himself.

Community and parish life changed little during the next few decades, until the mid-fifties. The strong post-war economy allowed second and third generation Polish-American parishioners to pursue the dream of a middle class, suburban lifestyle. During the mid-fifties there was a steady out migration of parishioners from the old neighborhood to the suburbs in Millcreek and surrounding towns. By the time Barti and I showed up, in the mid-seventies, the Polish community was a minority in the parish. There was a larger Italian contingent, as well as Hispanic Catholics. The neighborhood was less distinctly ethnic and more distinctly struggling economically. Even though Fr. Bill was of Polish ancestry, his ability to preach and function in the language was minimal. This was a slight problem for a few of the older parishioners but for the most part it was irrelevant.

The church building had a Romanesque flavor popular at the time it was constructed but was also practical. It's facade was sandstone. The rectory rooms were large, solid and suggested a quiet elegance, as did the church building. Though the elegance was tempered by obvious signs of wear.

Over dinner Fr. Bill admitted that while he loved the neighborhood and its mixed ethnic communities it could be very frustrating. He described an incident in which the family of a girl beat her and physically restrained her from being with a boy she loved and who loved her. The girl's family was Polish and the boy's family was Italian. Their dislike for their neighbor who lived only a few city blocks away was so intense that they felt it necessary to abuse their daughter to keep them apart. They would have been less upset if she had been in love with a chimpanzee. Ultimately their hateful attitude ripped the family apart because the daughter left home and married the boy anyway. This was a family that sent their children to the parish school and were regular attendees at Sunday Mass. In one sense they were model Catholics, yet when it came to living the Gospel they had no idea of what it meant to be a Christian. He admitted that it was good for Catholics to take an active part in the life of the parish community but if it had no positive impact on the way they lived their lives then what good was it?

Even within the Polish community there were factions. One group ran the Friday night Fish Fry which served delicious fried fish and pierogis (a potato dumpling). The Fish Fry was a regular event each week throughout the summer months and almost half the parish spent their

friday evening eating fish and socializing. It was also a major money maker for the parish. The problem was that the Fish Fry committee was a small group of people who exercised almost total control of this ministry and kept out anyone who might be interested in getting involved unless they met the approval of this group. This committee seemed to be a core group that disproportionately influenced other aspects of parish life as well. They had a loud voice on the liturgy committee and the altar society, as well as the parish council. If Fr. Bill did things their way then they were strong supporters. Problems arose when he wanted to exercise his own judgment or when he seemed to show support for other groups in the parish.

The ushers society not only provided ushering for Sunday Mass but they also coordinated the monthly card party and annual carnival. Both events were also money makers for the parish. They provided the most active competition for the Fish Fry crowd. Neither group was very supportive of the other's events and both got testy when Fr. Bill showed attention to the other group. The tension between these two factions would erupt over the most trivial issues. An argument over when to schedule the parish mission or the annual picnic would blow up and effectively ruin the likelihood of having either event. He could deal with it but the factional fighting was draining both on his energy and the life of the Church.

If anyone is going to take the Church seriously they must see love and reconciliation among its members. Factionalism and ethnic prejudice are poison in the Body of Christ. They are sin in its most pernicious form: self-righteousness. Under the influence of these spiritual diseases one becomes blind to the presence of Christ in others, especially those who are of different ethnic backgrounds or affiliated with a rival group.

Barti suggested to Fr. Bill that his frustration was not new in the Church. St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is almost entirely focused on issues that different groups in the Corinthian Christian community were fighting over. Paul was firm with the factions constantly reminding them that the witness they were to give was unity and mutual concern. They were not to argue over non-essentials. He said this because they were arguing over non-essentials and trying to lord it over each other. Certainly, if Paul found the situation frustrating, so would Bill Rutkowski. All he could do was attempt to reconcile the people and help them grow beyond the factionalism and petty jealousy and move on to a more fitting witness of their Christian faith.

The next morning we attended 7:00am Mass in the church at which Fr. Bill presided. He was an excellent presider, speaking clearly and offering real insight into the readings during his

brief homily. His attitude and presentation at Mass helped make it a very prayerful experience. It was clear that the Mass was a meaningful prayer for him and his prayerfulness drew in everyone else to the same sense of the sacred. After Mass we had an excellent breakfast at the rectory, wished Fr. Bill many blessings, and hit the road.

About an hour and a half later, just past Cleveland the highway merged with I-80 and continued on across country until it reached Sacramento, California. Whenever we reached that point in our travels, we would turn southwest and head toward San Francisco and then San Jose. This was the summer route cross-country, with easy, fast, and scenic driving. I was a little concerned however, because we were already into October. Snow could make this route difficult, especially in the Rocky Mountains. If we took too long in our travels or there was an early snow storm, we could be facing problems up ahead.

We considered stopping at St. Mary Seminary in Cleveland to visit with Msgr. Michael Murphy. Mike. Murphy was a towering Irishman with a tremendous gift of gab. He was a great speaker and story teller, as well as being a systematic theologian and rector of the seminary. Barti went to the seminary for a year not long after he left the Trappists. He was considering the Diocesan priesthood and was in their theology program. He only stayed a year but became friendly with the rector, who he also had for one class. By the end of the year both Barti and Murphy agreed that he didn't have a vocation to the diocesan priesthood. Even though Barti left the seminary, he and Murphy continued to correspond and would visit on occasion if one was near the other's community. It had only been a few months since Barti last visited with Msgr. Murphy and we had gotten behind in our schedule, for what it was worth, so he decided that we would go on without a Cleveland stop. Our goal was to reach Chicago by evening and we had a good six or seven hours of driving ahead of us if we were going to stay on schedule.

Chapter Ten

We could have made better time but there were several stops along the way for meals or coffee breaks that went on for longer than expected. For example, we made a stop near Sandusky, Ohio for coffee and got into a conversation with a retired couple who were making their way westward, just as we were. They gave us advice on places to visit along the way and

how to save on lodging expenses. They were a wonderful couple but we ended up almost two hours behind schedule by the time we were on the road again.

We drove through Gary, Indiana around ten in the evening. It was a strange sight. Dozens of smokestacks stood in the darkness with fire belching from their mouths. It was like driving through a valley of dragons or being given a vision of Hell. The smell of sulfur was overpowering. The smog burnt our eyes. The quality of the air may have improved over the years but back in the seventies the pollution was terrible.

Before we realized it the smog began to disperse, driven by a breeze off Lake Michigan, and we were in Chicago. We turned off the highway and found Lake Shore Drive. This offered us a fairly scenic view of Chicago, with its massive buildings and beautiful shore line. While the view today is magnificent and worthy of the great city, even back in the seventies the drive along Lake Shore Boulevard was impressive, if somewhat subdued compared to today.

We continued on through the city, finally arriving in Evanston, a wealthy suburb that was one third professional offices, one third elegant homes, and one third university campus. My old college friend, Tom Waldron, was a doctoral student in linguistics at Northwestern University. We had been best friends all through college and still maintained a solid friendship. When I knew that I would be within shouting distance of Evanston, I called him and let him know I would be coming. He had an off campus apartment and offered to put us up for the night. I accepted the offer but was hopelessly lost. Finally, around midnight I called him from a gas station and he came to find us and lead us back to his place.

Tom married his college sweetheart, Becky Vicars, two months after graduating from college. I was his best man. The wedding was in an elegant old Victorian house of some historic value to the community. The house was owned by the Historical Society and rented out for weddings, wakes, garden parties and other activities in need of the elegant atmosphere provided by the building. They met in high school and began to date in their senior year. The relationship carried over into college. I followed the ups and downs of their relationship and even helped them through one or two disagreements. When I saw them commit themselves to one another that Saturday afternoon, it felt right. It was the perfect end of their long and educational courtship, as well as the right beginning to the years of marriage that followed.

Becky was a nurse and was employed the day after graduation. Tom was a fledgling linguist and there wasn't much call for linguists at the time. He worked for two years trying to

teach the computer illiterate how to relate to the machines that were just beginning to become a common part of every day life, at least in the corporate world. After two years of suffering through such yeoman work, he was accepted into Northwestern's graduate linguistics program. He was in the first year of his doctoral studies when we visited, having completed a master's degree the prior spring. Becky was working as an intensive care unit nurse at the university hospital and making enough money to support the both of them at a modest level. Her income was supplemented with a teaching assistantship that Tom was given by the department chair once he finished his master's degree.

Evanston was populated with thousands of large, beautiful Victorian and early 20th century homes, reflecting the elegant and relaxed suburban lifestyle of Evanston prior to World War II. After the War there was an economic boom with which Chicago was particularly blessed, expanding the size and wealth of the city. In the process, former suburbs were drawn into the city and outlying towns became the new suburbs. Once a suburb, Evanston was now an upscale neighborhood in the expanded Chicago, even though it maintained its own separate legal identity. Many of the old homes were too much to maintain in proper condition on an average middle class wage. So locals subdivided the homes into apartments and rented them out to University faculty and married graduate students. So when Tom pulled up in the driveway of a very impressive three story Victorian complete with copula, I was in awe. It took me a few minutes to realize that Tom and Becky only had access to a small apartment fashioned out of what had been the servant's quarters many years earlier. Even their little apartment was impressive, with the hardwood floors and the wood paneling all over the place.

Becky gave me a big hug and then I introduced Barti to both her and Tom. Even though it was late, Becky had a simple but substantial meal laid out for us and insisted that we sit down and eat something before we do anything. It had been quite a while since we ate anything, so I was hungry and honored her instructions by sitting down immediately and following orders. Barti followed me with almost equal zeal.

Our late diner went on for almost an hour over pleasant conversation, most of which was catching up on each other's adventures since we last visited, as well as reliving old times. I was chided for not being any closer to marriage than when we graduated, four years earlier. I accepted the chide with good humor, as it was true. Women had come and gone through my life but none of the relationships had the spark that radiated from Tom and Becky so brightly. By the

time we went to bed, around 1:30am, it was agreed that we would stay in Evanston for a day to visit and rest up and then continue on our journey the following day. Minutes later I was sound asleep.

I woke up around 9:00am, showered and eventually made my way into the kitchen where Tom and Barti were talking away. Becky had already left for work. Tom had the day free, except for one class at three in the afternoon. The plan was for Tom to take us on a little tour of the sights. By 10:00am we headed down town and wandered the streets, stopping at sights of note, such as Picasso's midtown *object de art* and then eventually headed for the Drake. The Drake is one of the oldest and most elegant of hotels in downtown Chicago. At the time it was a bit down in the mouth but it still offered excellent food in a pleasant setting. It was also one of our favorite haunts back in our college days, when Tom and I would jump into a car and drive out to Chicago on a whim. So we stopped there for lunch. As expected, the food was delicious.

As is obvious from the location for many of our conversations, Barti and I like to talk while eating. Tom is the same way. In fact, many of our best conversations in college were over pizza or sandwiches at a local coffee house. Our conversation that afternoon began with an updating of our adventures in the past year or so. Tom was particularly interested in the trip to Israel and the spiritual stirrings that I had been struggling with the past year or so.

Tom grew up in a strong Catholic family and attended church schools through 12th grade. He had even considered seminary briefly in 8th grade. In college we were roommates freshman year and became good friends. We seemed to be going through the same struggles. When my childhood faith was being shattered by exposure to new ideas which conflicted to my childhood belief, Tom suffered through the same pain and doubt himself. The primary difference was that I eventually found some way to integrate many of the new ideas with a more adult view of Catholicism. Tom had a more difficult time reaching a similar reconciliation. I doubt if he ever found Catholicism a comfortable home again. When he and Becky got serious he drifted toward Protestant views, since Becky was Methodist. They were married in a Methodist ceremony. Tom never became a church-going Methodist. Spiritually he just continued to drift. He was curious about everything spiritual and suspicious about everything religious.

“It seems to me,” Tom picked up after I told him of my experience in Israel and my current journey across the continent, “that you and I are pretty much in the same boat. You are searching for meaning in your life and so do I. You may carry around your Catholic identity as

extra baggage while you search but it is still just a search. I don't see where your faith helps you all that much on the journey."

This was just the sort of opening line that Tom would drop on me to spark a friendly argument. So, I rose to the bait. "There is a difference. I have a community of fellow travelers who walk the same road. There is a tradition handed down from those who have made the same journey in the past. This, at least, provides guidance on the way. Of course, there is still some degree of struggle. The struggle is necessary to forge the inner transformation that the journey requires, if I am to reach the goal. You embrace the journey and the struggle but refuse the wisdom of the tradition and the companionship of your fellow travelers."

"It isn't that I refuse the wisdom or companionship of my fellow travelers, I'm just unwilling to trust my life to it. Look around you. The world is messed up. The government just got itself out of Vietnam, where it shouldn't have been in the first place, by abandoning the South Vietnamese people to the communists. Becky and I are a rarity. Most couples our age simply live together and forget about the commitment of marriage. Businesses lie, cheat and steal from their stockholders and the community so a few executives can make a big profit. The rest of the world can go fly a kite as far as they are concerned. Even the Church is up to its neck in some terrible scandal every couple of years. Society doesn't seem to have any moral or spiritual base and the Church, which is supposed to provide that base is as bad off as the rest of us. Who can claim to be my guide in this moral and spiritual darkness we call the 20th century? Is there any honest person out there?" Tom smiled, awaiting my response.

"Christ is still out there and He is honest. Scripture still has wisdom that is well tested and has proven reliable to those who have used it as their guide these past twenty centuries. Society is messed up but should we blame it on Christ, when much of the damage is being done by those whose lives are an obvious rejection of Christ? Just because they do through the motions on Sunday doesn't mean one is following Christ. Church leaders are no different. They are human beings and can make a mess of their lives and their ministry as easily as anyone else, if they forget Christ. They might preach beautiful sermons and enjoy the respect of thousands, if not millions of people because of their public charities or books or lectures. Yet, if they forget Christ in their private lives, if they are not deeply rooted in that source of spiritual truth then they are no different from the corrupt businessmen. Ultimately, their spiritual failures will undermine them and they will be destroyed. None of this however, calls into question the truth and extreme value

of Christ and Scripture. In fact, it bolsters their truth by showing what happens when we reject the truth, if not in our words but in our actions.”

“Admittedly, the great moral failures that I bemoan can be viewed as a failure of people to follow Christ’s teachings. Yet, I can’t accept the simple following of a set of rules as anything great. We are reduced to a bunch of cattle moved this way and that at the will of some cowboy, or a flock of sheep following the bell of a shepherd. I’m a human being, not a cow or lamb. I have reason, I want to use it.”

“So, use it! Faith doesn’t demand blind obedience. God has given us the gift of reason and expects us to use it. This doesn’t deny the truth of Scripture or the reality of Christ. Reason is absolutely necessary. How is one going to apply the general principles of Scripture to daily life if reason isn’t used?

“As far as moral courage, who is the more courageous? A young married couple discover that the child the woman is carrying in her womb suffers from severe birth defects. The husband wants the child aborted. The wife wants to carry the child to term. Ultimately the husband walks out of the marriage. The woman raises the child pretty much on her own for ten years, until the child dies from the effect of the birth defects. Who is the morally courageous person? Who is the cow who doesn’t want its self-centered contentment disturbed? It seems that the wife who valued the life of her unborn child is the truly heroic person in this story. She had a choice. She chose life and all the hardships that came with that choice. Was her choice informed by her faith? Sure but it was also informed by her careful discernment of what was right and important to her. She was probably scared silly in making the decision to bring the child to term and raise the child without a father present in the home but she chose life. Both the woman and the man faced the same decision about their child. They came from similar backgrounds and both knew what the Church said about the value of life, yet they came to different decisions; one courageous and the other cowardly. Do we blame the truth of Scripture or the moral teachings of the Church for the mess humanity has made of the world or our failure to have the courage to live up to the truth?

“I know back in school Nietzsche and other philosophers argued that God is dead. As a result we are floating at sea without any bearings. This is the condition in which contemporary humanity finds itself. He didn’t argue that anything goes as a result but sought instead to justify morality in our search for meaning.

“I argue that God is still very much alive but our understanding of God must be formed

through the filter of our experience today. If we want the great Vending Machine in the Sky—insert prayer and remove favor—they we will not be very happy because our understanding of God is so far from reality that we insult God and set ourselves up for problems. If saying ‘God is dead’ refers to the rejection of that understanding of God, then we have made some progress. But abandoning God entirely because some distorted understanding of God has finally been perceived and rejected misses the point entirely. Now is the time to return to Scripture and to discover the God of the Good Samaritan...to take seriously Christ’s words ‘what you do for the least of these, you do for me’.”

Tom put his hands up in mock surrender. “Good points! Christianity has to be judged by Jesus, not by our pathetic efforts to follow Jesus. Yet, it is human nature to judge a faith by those who claim to follow it or represent it.”

I responded. “Which is something that every Christian has to remember. If we profess to be a Christian, to be a Catholic then we are no longer free to act like animals. We have joined ourselves to Christ!”

“So, how are your struggles with faith coming?” Tom asked.

“It isn’t a matter of struggle with faith. The faith is there and a central element of my life. My struggles are what to do with that faith? What is it that God want’s of me? If the foundation of faith wasn’t there, I wouldn’t be trying to deal with these particular questions. As far as how this struggle is going, not well.”

I went on for a few moments bringing him up to date on the direction I’ve been going since the pilgrimage and then drifted on into a distracted silence not knowing what else to say.

It was past two o’clock by the time we finished lunch. Tom had a class at three, so he dropped us back at his place and headed on to school.

Becky was already home when we arrived and had a delicious smelling roast in the oven. I decided to get some sleep, since I’d be driving most of the next day. Barti wanted to pray and go for a walk. So for the remainder of the afternoon we each relaxed in our own way. Two hours later, we were eating the best roast I had tasted in ages; the only roast I had tasted in ages. I complimented the cook frequently and earnestly, in the hope that some of the leftovers would make it into a snack for the road.

As we ate Tom explained that the following summer he and Becky would be in West Africa for field work. He would be assigned to Logos, Nigeria and spend the summer months in

a small town about ten miles from the city. He was going to use the fieldwork there to find study links between West African languages and Haitian Creole. I was excited for him and the time he would spend in Africa, though the nature of his work was a bit beyond informed appreciation on my part.

We went to bed early, as Barti and I had a long drive the next day. We were hoping to make Omaha, Nebraska by evening.

Chapter Eleven

Within an hour of leaving Chicago the next morning the scenery began to change as we headed East across Illinois on I-80. Gone were the gently forested hills of the Great Lakes region. The Great Plains lay before us in all their flat glory. From one end of the horizon to the other, there was nothing but fields of grain. I tried listening to radio stations but all I could find were listings of pork and beef futures, a major concern in this part of the country.

Turning the radio out I drove in silence for a long time. It was peaceful.

As I drove, Barti read a book. We had gone through most of the chit-chat one dredges up to pass time during the first day of our trip. This was the beginning of our third day and we were comfortable with silence. Or, should I say that I was learning to be comfortable with silence, as Barti's years as a Trappist made silence a close friend.

Eventually, Barti closed his book and tossed it into the backseat. He suggested that we might stop soon for coffee, a restroom break, and a chance to stretch. I had seen a sign a few minutes earlier saying that the next town was about twenty miles further down the road. By now we had to be within ten or fifteen miles of the town, so I suggested that we could stop there. He agreed and we drove in silence for a few more minutes. Then he spoke up again.

"I was impressed yesterday with your responses to Tom. I don't agree with playing intellectual games but it was clear that the conversation was no game for either of you. Tom is trying to work through to some way of faith that makes sense to him. I think your conversation with him was helpful."

I was silent for a few moments and then slowly responded.

"I was speaking from my heart. There are times though...when my faith isn't that great. I question everything then. Is eternal life real, or just a delusion based on my fear of death? Why and how could God, the creator of the immense universe care one wit about life on this speck of dust in the outer arm of a minor galaxy? Are we all just deluding ourselves?"

"Welcome to adult faith! Faith is not sure knowledge. Back in the late 19th century a young pastor, Søren Kierkegaard was very frustrated by the attempts of theologians of the period to construct brilliant proofs for the existence of God. They didn't have television or even the movies back then, so a major form of entertainment was going to hear lectures. Many a seminary professor make a handsome supplemental income giving lectures at church socials or summer

camps. He was also very frustrated by the type of preacher who argued that all you had to do to be saved was to make a profession of faith. So, young Sören began a writing career—because he didn't want to be another lecturer—in which he argued that faith was not some easy thing that could be had for the price of admission to a lecture or by just saying “I believe”. He used the image of faith as a leap into the unknown. Such a leap acknowledges the reality of doubts, of our limited intelligence and perceptions. Yet, we make the leap of faith and do so quite aware of the cost that may be asked of us. Sören often used the example of Abraham whose faith brought him to the point where he believed that he had to sacrifice his son. Not only was he sacrificing his son but his only hope of descendants and fulfillment of the promises made to him by God, yet he was willing to pay the price his faith demanded of him.

Sören had a young lady to whom he was engaged. He was quite fond of her. However, she was conventional in her faith and her expectations of married life. Eventually, Sören realized that she would not be happy with a young pastor who, like Jacob, wrestled with God. He called off the engagement for the sake of the young woman. It was part of the cost of his faith. He had taken a leap of faith. Fidelity to that faith required that he give up his fiancée. She could not be happy with a young man whose ideas about religion were so fundamentally different from hers. Even after giving up the love of this good woman, he still had to live with the fear that he was wrong; that the leap of faith was not into the arms of God but simply into an emptiness and that he would soon land on the jagged rocks below.

“Look at the apostles...they saw Jesus. They witnessed his miracles. They heard him say, ‘Before Abraham was, I am.’ If anyone had enough information to be convinced that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God and the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, it was the apostles. They had all the elements necessary for sure knowledge but it wasn't enough. They were afraid to make the leap of faith. It was only after Jesus rose from the dead that they were ready for that leap. Jesus said, ‘Blessed are they who have not seen, yet believe.’ They are blessed because they are able to believe through faith. They are willing to make the leap and pay the price without sure knowledge.

“Knowledge doesn't require anything of us, other than to use our senses and to reach a logical conclusion about sense data. Faith requires virtue on our part—trust in God, hope in God. It demands that we be willing to pay the price of our faith, even if that price is only the willingness to walk on in faith despite our doubts and questions. This is not a blind faith that

some con artist can use to take advantage of us. This faith requires the full engagement of our mind and spirit. It is a faith that seeks to uncover and expose falsehood. Yet it is also a faith that knows when to stand in awe and trembling before the awesome mystery of God.”

I tried to put into perspective what Barti was saying.

“So, you’re saying that my doubts are not a serious problem?”

Barti continued.

“They are part of a questioning, adult mind. Is there such a thing as eternal life? The only way we will know that for sure is after we die. Before that eventuality, all we can do is have faith. To have doubts is only to acknowledge the reality of our faith, as faith—not knowledge. To a certain extent doubts are a sign of a healthy faith that is open to maturing and deepening.

About a generation after Sören Kierkegaard another young pastor came along by the name of Dietrich Bonhoffer. He was strongly influenced by Kierkegaard. He taught that though grace is freely given to us by God, it is not cheap. He was not speaking of money when he said that grace is not cheap. He was trying to convey the same idea as Kierkegaard, that faith makes demands on our lives. It is in responding to those demands that we pay the price of the grace we have been given.

“Bonhoffer is an excellent example of this. In the late 1920’s and early 1930’s, Bonhoffer was a rising star in European Protestant circles. He was a recognized theologian and a member of several international ecumenical commissions. As Hitler came to power, he became more vocal in his opposition to Hitler’s policies, as he felt these policies were a direct affront to the Gospel. When pressure was applied by the government on the leaders of the Lutheran governing body in Germany they capitulated and removed people like Bonhoffer from teaching positions and any authority in the Lutheran National Church in Germany. Thus, part of the cost Bonhoffer paid for his unwavering faith in Christ and the Gospels, was his career. Eventually, price paid was even greater, as he continued to oppose the hateful policies promoted by Hitler. He got involved in running a clandestine Lutheran seminary. He helped Jewish families escape the coming holocaust. He assisted an opposition group that was trying to undermine Hitler’s claim to power and attempt to overthrow him. When an attempt to assassinate Hitler by members of this group failed, Bonhoffer was arrested along with other members of the group. Bonhoffer was not part of the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. In fact, he was recovering from a serious illness in the mountains at the time that the attempt on Hitler was planned and carried out. However, that made

little difference to the authorities. Bonhoeffer spent the next two years in prison and in concentration camps before he was convicted as a member of the conspiracy and executed. When faced with a choice between the demands of the Gospel and the pressures of submitting to the demands of evil, Bonhoeffer paid the price of his faith. The grace that God poured into his life so liberally had a cost—his life.

“Now, as a young pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent several years ministering at a church in Harlem, New York, while he was doing additional studies under a post-doctoral fellowship at a nearby university. He was charmed by his parishioners and the African-American culture of the neighborhood. He was angered by the bigotry that was common in America. He also had to work through doubts that this experienced raised about the faithfulness of the Christian churches, as they were not taking a very vocal stand against such injustice. As a result of this period of questioning and doubt, his preaching and writing took on a new direction emphasizing the importance of social justice and the equality of all people. This was 30 years before the US Civil Rights Movement, when the US churches took Bonhoeffer’s message to heart under the influence of another great man of God—Martin Luther King.

“Bonhoeffer’s doubts forced him to look at the failings in the church in his era and to discover the direction that faith and ministry would take him for the rest of his life. If we allow our faith to be the guiding principle in our lives, which is the essential purpose of faith, then wrestling with doubts is important. It forces us to re-examine our beliefs and how our faith is lived out. As we respond to those doubts and failings, we open ourselves to a new, deeper and more demanding understanding. We are able to find greater direction and meaning in our lives. Of course, that deeper understanding also requires that we take our faith seriously—even when it comes into conflict with those who reject the Gospel and oppose what is now evident to us, as with Bonhoeffer.”

By this time I had gotten off I-80 at a small town in western Illinois. We filled the gas tank, grabbed two large economy size cups of coffee, hit the rest room, stretched a bit, and were back on the road within twenty minutes. We figured that in about two hours we would reach DesMoines, Iowa, where we could stop for lunch. Barti drove this time, while I napped for much of the two hour trip to DesMoines. It was around 1:30 in the afternoon by the time Barti pulled into a shopping plaza just off I-80 and stopped in front of a chain restaurant. An hour later we had eaten, topped off the gas tank and were back on the road.

I was rested and well fed, so I drove the next leg of the trip. Our plan was to sleep in Omaha, Nebraska that night. DesMoines is about a third of the way across Iowa on I-80 and Omaha is not too far west of the boarder between Nebraska and Iowa. We had a bit over 150 more miles to go before reaching Omaha. I figured it would take about another three or so hours before we reached Omaha.

Today I-80 is expressway driving from one coast to the other. However, in the mid-70's there were still large stretches of that route that were normal highway driving. Not long after leaving DesMoines the expressway turned into highway and we had to slow down a bit. The major improvement in the scenery more than balanced out the loss of speed, however. As we drove through a small town on the route, I noticed a young college-age woman trying to hitch a ride. I asked Barti if he minded. He left the decision up to me, so I pulled over and asked the girl where she was headed. She said "Omaha." So, I invited her to get in. She opened the rear door, tossed in her back pack, and climbed in beside it. As we pulled back into traffic headed for Omaha, she introduced herself as Melody and explained that she was on her way to her aunt's place. She seemed a pleasant person and was interesting company the rest of the afternoon. She was talkative and once she felt comfortable with us very quickly shared much of her life story with us.

Her father died in a farm accident when she was five years old. Two years later her mother married again, as much from the need for financial security as from affection. Melody and her step-father maintained a working truce over much of the time that followed but to say that they were not the best of friends would be putting it mildly. When Melody was in her senior year of high school she decided that she wanted to go to college. Her step-father felt that since she was female a college education would be wasted on her. This judgment only added to her animosity toward her step-father. Being a resourceful person and a brilliant student, Melody applied for every scholarship she could find. In the end she was able to fund a full scholarship for her college education and meet her basic living expenses through summer jobs. She attended the University of Nebraska campus at Omaha and was working on a degree in primary education. This year she was living off-campus with her aunt.

Melody visited home every few months when she could get a ride or the weather seemed good enough to try hitchhiking. She really wasn't scheduled to come home so soon after beginning the new term but her mother was in the hospital with pneumonia. The weekend

became most of the week out of concern for her mother. Since she had been released from the hospital the day before, Melody felt that her mother was well enough for her step-father and younger brother to care for and she headed back to school before she ran into serious problems with her professors.

In turn, Melody asked us where we were headed and why. To keep the conversation going I told her we were headed to the West Coast and gave her a brief outline of our reasons for making the trip. This sparked a real interest in Melody. She was fascinated that Barti had been a monk and was thinking about going back. This sparked tales of her own spiritual journey, the centerpiece of which was a near death experience. This was back in the days prior to the research and great interest in near death experiences. Yet, looking back it is clear that what she described was a classic near death experience. She explained how she had been hit by a car during her freshman year of high school. During the operation to repair her injuries she had heart failure. She experienced being out of her body and watching the doctors and nurses trying to get her heart started again with a bulky defibrillator of the period. The white light and tunnel experience followed. She described meeting her father and grandparents, as well as her guardian angel who told her to go back. She still had many more years before it was time to move on. Melody became very animated as she described the experience. It was obviously the most meaningful experience in her life and she sparkled with excitement as she related her meeting with her father. In the end she explained that she had no doubts about heaven or eternal life. She had been there. She experienced it and knew it to be real.

Time passed quickly as we spoke with Melody and before long we were pulling off of I-80 at Omaha. Barti and I had reservations at the Holiday Inn. However, before heading to our hotel, we made a brief side trip and dropped Melody at her aunt's house

After checking into the hotel we discovered that they had an excellent exercise facility, with sauna, hot tubs and a good size swimming pool. After sitting in a car much of the day, both Barti and I needed a workout. We spent the next hour swimming, riding stationary bicycles, running on a treadmill, stretching and lifting weights. Once our muscles were sufficiently sore we headed for the sauna to relax. While relaxing in the heat of the sauna I realized that Melody's near death experience seemed to be an exception to Barti's argument that faith was largely a leap into the unknown and unknowable. I asked Barti for his thoughts on Melody's experience.

"Melody's tale was not the first time I've heard of such experiences. Back when I was in

the monastery and would be asked to counsel retreatants, occasionally individuals would share similar experiences. Most of them found the experience very comforting. As to whether Melody and the others actually had a glimpse into the next world, I don't know. Under severe stress the mind can do strange things. There are similarities in the stories I heard, that suggest there are common elements to the experience. If there are common elements to the experiences, they can not be pure imagination. Something has to account for the common elements. Either their source is access to a common reality or the experience is rooted in some biological process. I honestly don't know. My feeling is that if people find comfort and encouragement in these experiences then good for them. However, they don't change the nature of faith. There is no guarantee that the experiences are a real visit to heaven. Whether you have such an experience or not, you still have to make a leap of faith. What if research eventually discovers that the experiences are the result of the shut-down of some gland or neuron mass in the brain under severe stress. Does this discovery destroy our faith? No, because ultimately our faith was never built only upon the foundation of this experience, even if it contributed to the foundation.

“It's like the Shroud of Turin. Many people believe that the shroud is the burial cloth in which Jesus was wrapped. It is impressive. I've seen it on a visit to Turin. There are very logical arguments that attest to the reality of the shroud as the burial cloth of Jesus. If it is real, the shroud provides direct evidence of Jesus, allows us to see what Jesus looked like, and even suggests something of the power of the resurrection to produce a photographic negative image of Christ in the shroud. But what if one of these research groups that regularly try to get permission to analyze the shroud actually got permission to conduct their tests and discovered that the Shroud was only a thousand years old? Does this destroy our faith? No, because our faith was not build upon the foundation of the shroud but upon the foundation of the Gospels.”

After the sauna and a quick dip in the pool to cool off, I was so relaxed that my muscles felt like rubber. I was debating whether to go up to the room and take a nap or just go down to dinner in the hotel restaurant. Barti voted for dinner, so I went along. After a great meal we watched television for awhile and then went to bed early, as we were both exhausted and wanted an early start in the morning for the next leg of our journey.

Chapter Twelve

The next morning we had an early breakfast and hit the road before seven. We wasted a few minutes trying to find our way back to I-80 but eventually found the on-ramp and were headed West.

It was a glorious morning, perfect for driving. The sky was a brilliant blue with only specks of high altitude clouds. The sun shown brightly but as it was already October there was enough of a chill in the air to temper the heat of the sun. The land wasn't as flat as it had been much of the previous day. We could see gently rolling hills covered in emerald grass. There were distant rivers that cut a blue swath through the land. Some of the trees in the distance were beginning to change color, so there were spots of red and gold among the splashes of green on the horizon. As I drove, each of us were lost in our thoughts, taking in the beautiful scenery. Eventually, I could contain myself no longer.

“This land is gorgeous! Every turn in the road reveal a scene more beautiful than before!”

Barti leaned back and pulled his breviary from the backseat of the car. Flipping it open to Sunday morning, Week I, he began to recite.

“Let the earth bless the Lord. Praise and exalt him above all forever. Mountains and hills, bless the Lord. Everything growing from the Earth, bless the Lord. You springs, bless the Lord. Seas and rivers, bless the Lord. You dolphins and all water creatures, bless the Lord. All you birds of the air, bless the lord. All you beasts, wild and tame, bless the Lord.”

After a few moments of quiet reflection, Barti added.

“My back-side is sore from the driving but scenes like this make everything worth it. Just the ability to enjoy such beauty makes life wonderful.”

We drove on commenting on the beauty every now and then. There was one rest stop just before reaching Kearney, Nebraska where I had to visit the rest room. We both got large cups of strong coffee and then pushed on. Barti took over driving and I relaxed with a brief nap and then a couple of chapters from a paperback I brought on the trip.

Near Lexington, Nebraska Barti suggested that we stop for lunch. We covered a bit over two hundred miles so far that morning. We both figured that a hamburger and piece of pie would go down well with our next infusion of coffee. Barti pulled into a truck stop restaurant. They weren't the fanciest places on Earth but the food was usually good and the portions large, so we

tried to take our lunch breaks at truck stops along I-80.

We were enjoying two of the biggest and juiciest super-deluxe hamburger specials that either of us had ever attempted to eat, when Barti looked up looked up and almost choked on a mouthful of French fries. He mumbled something like “excuse me” through the fries and ketchup, as he jumped out of his chair. A moment later he was on the other side of the restaurant caught up in a bear hug with a trucker who seemed just as happily shocked as was Barti. They talked for a few moments and then Barti seemed to invite the man to join us, as they picked up his plate and cup from the counter and started walking toward our table.

“Theo, I want you to meet Norman ‘Grey Fox’ Washakie. Norm, this is my friend and traveling companion, Theo Douglas.”

Norm was a six foot three, two hundred and seventy pound Native American truck driver who was one of the friendliest and kindest people I ever met. After we got organized and sat down to continue with our food, Barti explained that Norm had been a novice at the Abbey years ago, before Barti’s sojourn in Israel. They became good friends at the Abbey. However, Norman’s grandfather had a stroke and he seemed to be the only one who could provide the care needed by the older man. Since Norm had been wrestling with doubts about his vocation anyway, the need to care for his grandfather became a way to leave the abbey with minimal embarrassment.

Norm’s grandfather lingered on for the next three years, while this gentle giant cared for the man’s needs. When his father died, Norman got a job as a truck driver through some friends who owned a trucking company. A year or so later he got married. They had two children, a boy and a girl about two years apart. During the birth of their second child, Norm’s wife suffered some complication related to her heart. A short time later she died. Norm never remarried. He raised the children, with the help of his mother. Norms kids were 15 and 13 at the time and were top students in school. Obviously, Norm deeply loved his children and was proud of their accomplishments.

Cheyenne was Norm’s destination that day. He had a load of supplies to drop at a warehouse late that afternoon. He would be off for a day and then be ready for another run East. Home for Norm was the Wind River reservation. He had a house in Ethete, Wyoming which was part of the reservation. It was a good hour and a half north west of Cheyenne. Norm offered us the hospitality of his home, if we were willing to go that far from I-80. I knew Barti really

wanted to catch up on old times and I was open to any adventure that might come our way, so I readily agreed to the side trip.

Norm gave us directions to the warehouse in Cheyenne. We would meet him there. If there were any problems we could call and leave a message. After we finished eating, we wished each other well until later that afternoon.

Not long after we left Lexington the green hills began to give way to a more rugged cut of the landscape. The grasslands of Nebraska gave way to the brown scrub of Wyoming. The hills took on a more craggy appearance. Mountains could be seen on the western horizon. The driving tended to be more uphill. Increasingly the scenery reminded me of western movies, pioneers and wagon trains. We made good time and kept our rest stops to a minimum, usually just to fill the car's gas tank.

We pulled into Cheyenne around 5:30 that afternoon and went directly to the warehouse. Norm was waiting for us at the front gate. We pulled over and let him get into the car. Norm explained that he usually caught a ride home with friends. Today he would come with us and navigate—be our native scout!

The road out of Cheyenne was a normal four lane road that wound through the hill country around Cheyenne. It was great to be driving on normal roads and traveling at a more relaxed speed. As we drove Norm gave us the basic tourist talk about the Wind River Reservation.

“The reservation is one of the largest in the United States at about 1.7 million acres. It is now home for both the Shoshone and Arapaho tribes. Originally, the reservation was designated for only the Shoshone. However, under pressure of migrating tribes, the Sioux resistance to reservation life and related Indian Wars, the U.S. government wanted to settle the Arapaho on the Wind River reservation as well. The two tribes were traditional enemies but to their credit they learned to live together on the land.

“I am Shoshone and a descendent of Chief Washakie, the last of the traditional Shoshone chiefs. The reservation is also home to the grave of Sacajawea, the Shoshone guide for the Lewis and Clark expedition that mapped much of the West at the beginning of the 19th century. Sacajawea was honored by the Shoshone as a brave and accomplished woman, if somewhat eccentric. She was influential, because of the matrilineal Shoshone culture, in seeing that Washakie was made the paramount Shoshone chief in 1840. He continued as paramount chief for

the next forty years and negotiated the various treaties with the U.S. government that prevented the obliteration of the Shoshone and established the Wind River tribal lands. During the conflicts of the 1870's he and his Shoshone warriors worked with the U.S. government to get the Sioux to return to their negotiated tribal lands. He also warned General George Custer against attempting a battle at Little Big Horn. Chief Washakie died in 1900. He was just over 100 years old at the time.

“During the final years of his life the leadership of the Shoshone and Arapaho took on the form it has at present, with tribal counsels and all the trappings of normal civil government. I'm not sure it is an improvement. In some ways we had greater freedom under the leadership of tribal chiefs. They were leaders because they proved themselves in battle and in serving the welfare of the community. Nowadays I fear that a nice smile and a smooth line of buffalo dung will get you into office more readily than real concern for the tribe.”

“Norm,” I asked, “how do your people make a living?”

“Pretty much the same as any other community in Wyoming. We have teachers and preachers, politicians, police and beauticians. We have doctors and nurses and all of the political hangers-on one finds in any community. Some of us work on the tribal ranch and farm. We raise beef and milk cattle as well as a small herd of buffalo. The farm produces cattle feed grains, as well as corn, wheat, potatoes and other vegetables that are sold in the local markets. There is excellent fishing and the tribal counsel even operates a fishery to service commercial markets. Some of the tribal lands are leased to drilling companies to tap into our natural gas reserves. That provides employment for our people and income for the tribal government, which pays for the teachers, hanger-ons and medical personnel. Some of us, like myself, hold jobs in Lander, Cheyenne or one of the other towns near Wind River.”

As Norm spoke we made several turns and found ourselves in a pleasant rural community with a few dozen ranch style homes set in large yards. It was not difficult to see the sheds and animal pens in the back, as well as large piles of firewood neatly stacked. There were a few grocery and hardware supply stores. As we drove a cafe and a beautiful little church with Shoshone symbols painted on the front came into view.

“Welcome to Ethete. That is an Arapaho word for ‘good’. Ethete is a good community. Many of the people here are Arapaho. My wife and I ended up living here because she was Arapaho. My family is actually from Ft. Washaki...down the road about ten miles and from

Crowheart which is north west of here. That church is St. Michael's. It is the Episcopalian mission in Wind River. St. Joseph Church is a stone's throw to the east and is the Catholic parish for Ethete."

A few moments later we pulled up next to one of the ranch style houses at the edge of town and parked the car. As we got out, a beautiful girl about thirteen or fourteen years old came running out of the house and threw her arms around Norman.

"Barti...Theo, I want you to meet my daughter, Cathy"

We smiled at the girl who politely shook our hands. Just then a young man a few years older than Cathy came around from the back of the house and hugged his father as well.

"This is my son, William."

He invited us into the house where we met his mother-in-law, Linda Soldier Wolf. Before long we were enjoying coffee at the kitchen table while the sun was setting and filling the sky with glorious shades of orange, purple, blue, yellow and red. Linda was cooking steak, potatoes and fresh vegetables for us to enjoy shortly. When the conversation settled down, I asked Norm why he joined the Trappists. He smiled at my question. It was something a Shoshone would never ask...too personal.

"I was raised as a Catholic. My parents even sent me to St. Stephen's mission school. So, Christ, the Church and everything that is part of growing up Catholic has always been a big part of my life. But it isn't just that I grew up Catholic. Many Shoshone grew up Catholic and not very many tried to become Trappist monks.

"My grandfather was a wise man. I looked up to him as a child and a young man. His name was Blue Wolf...if you translate Shoshone into English. He was a healer. He knew how to make medicines for almost every ailment you can think of. He was wise in the way of the Spirit as well. He taught me that nothing exists which is not given life and existence by the Spirit. He taught me to respect all life...not just my own people but all people. He taught me to respect the animals and plants. He taught me to respect the river, hills, stones and water. He taught me to see the whole world as alive, as a gift of the Spirit, as an act of love. Wind River is so beautiful and my grandfather's teachings made sense in the midst of such wonder and beauty. Of course, the world is alive. Of course, it is a gift to be cherished, honored and protected.

"When I was a student at St. Stephen's I read about St. Francis and prayed his canticle to Brother Sun and Sister Moon. He sounded just like Blue Wolf.

“...Praised be You, my Lord, with all your creatures, especially Sir Brother Sun, who is the day and through whom You give us light. And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor; and bears a likeness of You, Most High One. Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars, in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful. Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind, and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather through which You give sustenance to Your creatures. Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water, which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste. Praised be You, my Lord through Brother Fire, through whom you light the night and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong. Praised be You, my Lord through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs...”

“As I grew so did the power of the Spirit in my life. My grandfather taught me the ways of my people. When I was about the age of my son I had a powerful experience which made it clear to my grandfather that I was to follow him as a healer. Over the next few years he intensified my training and taught me not only the discipline of herbal medicines but also the way of the Spirit. He taught me to battle spirits of disease and evil. He taught me...many things.

“At the same time, I was trying to make sense of the Catholic teaching I received and to make a place for myself in the world of work, education, cars, girls and...prejudice.

“I graduated from high school and joined the Army. Grandfather was not pleased. He wanted to complete my education as a healer and give me time to practice my skills under his supervision. This was a critical time in my preparation as a healer and I was heading off to the Army. Korea was over by the time I joined, so there was little in the way of real danger. However, it gave me a chance to see the rest of the world and experience a bit of life away from home. While I was in the service I began reading Thomas Merton and was taken by what he had to say. He seemed to sound a chord in me that vibrated sweetly whether I listened with my Catholic or my Shoshone ear.

“Under his influence...and the stress of military life, I got the idea that I was being called to the Trappists. So, when I got out of the service, I pursued my supposed vocation to the Cistercians. That lasted about two years. I loved the simple lifestyle of the monks, their closeness to nature, and their deep faith. I also realized that I was Shoshone and that my natural spirituality was Shoshone spirituality. I was looking for a way to save face and return home when I got word about Blue Wolf suffering a stroke. It was just the push I needed. When I returned home I

realized that he did suffer a stroke but it was very mild, with almost no discernable impact. Being home I was able to finish my studies with grandfather before he died. I was about this time that I got serious with Annette Soldier Wolf and we were married. Then grandfather had another stroke and died. Within a short period of time I found myself a family man and a Shoshone healer.”

Norm’s mother-in-law served a delicious meal as we listened to Norm tell the story of his life. As I listened I wondered if Norm ever felt any conflict between his Shoshone traditions and Christian faith. They seemed too different to me. So, I asked Norm about it. He thought for a moment and then explained.

“I see no conflict. The Shoshone believe in the Spirit which holds all in existence and gives life to all. Is this not the belief of the Christians? The Shoshone believe that the Spirit gives each of us gifts to be used on behalf of the people. Is this not the belief of the Christians? The Shoshone believe that the Spirit created the world and because it is created by the Spirit is it sacred. Is it not Christian belief that God’s creation is sacred? Is this not the basis of the idea of sacraments, that God reveals himself through the material...through creation? So where is the conflict?”

“Well,” I began, “what about Jesus?”

“What about Jesus? As a Christian I learned about Jesus and the Kingdom of God and believe. Yet, there is nothing in the Gospel teaching that contradicts Shoshone belief. When the early Christians went out of the Middle East and throughout the world, they didn’t demand that everyone become a practicing Jew in order to believe in Christ. When the missionaries traveled to Germany and brought the Gospel the people there continued to be Germans—to live and believe as Germans. When they celebrated Christian feasts they incorporated German traditions into their Christian celebration. This same process has gone on everywhere. Missionaries bring the Gospel to the people. Every people takes the Gospel making it their own. If the Gospel does not speak in Shoshone to the heart of the Shoshone, it is only some outside belief being imposed on the Shoshone people. The Gospel speaks in Shoshone to my heart and I listen.

“The Gospel reveals a timeless message for all people. No one culture can lay claim to have exclusive understanding of that message. The Europeans emphasized certain parts of the Gospels and ignored much of it as it has served their purposes. The Europeans, including many Americans, ignore nature and the power of God revealed in nature. The Shoshone are close to Sister Mother Earth. Jesus speaks to us of birds of the air or lilies of the field and we understand.

Jesus speaks to us of caring for the least among us and we know that he is Shoshone, for he thinks like Shoshone.”

Not long after we finished eating, a pickup pulled into Norm’s yard and a young man jumped out. Running for Norm he called out that there had been an accident about two miles up the road and he was needed. Norm grabbed a large leather bag from inside the door of the house and then ran to the pickup. He invited us to come along. Barti and I climbed into the bed of the pickup and held on for our lives as the truck bounded along the road at what seemed a break-neck speed. A few minutes later we skidded to a stop. Another pickup truck had gone off the road and flipped. Two young men in their mid-twenties had been in the truck. One was dead, even my untrained eye could tell that. The other lay on the ground. He had a broken leg at least, a mess of bruises, and possibly more serious internal damage. Norm took a two-way radio out of his bag and began to talk with the hospital. He described the situation and called for an ambulance. He then went about putting the young man’s leg in a splint and examining him for other possible injury. By the time Norm had the young man comfortable the ambulance finally arrived. He helped them get the youth into the ambulance and then provided a detailed report over the radio to the physician at the hospital.

The ride back to his house was much slower and more enjoyable than the frightening ride out to the accident scene. Once we were back at his house, Norm responded to my question before I could get it out.

“I’m a Shoshone healer, as well as a certified paramedic. The reservation hospital is in Fort Washakie, a good ten miles away. It is either that or a hospital from one of the towns near the reservation. In an emergency the quickest thing is usually to have a paramedic in each of the villages, who can respond quickly and evaluate the situation. If the paramedic can handle the situation, then that saves an unnecessary ambulance run. If the situation is serious, as it was tonight, then the paramedic can provide immediate first, as well as call for the ambulance and hospital staff know what to be ready for when the patient arrives.

“Those boys are Arapaho...distant cousins of my wife. Both those boys were drunk, so drunk they couldn’t even keep control of their old pickup. Those boys were brothers. The older one...the one killed in the crash finished college last year. He studied engineering and got himself a job with the natural gas company that works the reservation. He was a good boy. His parents were proud of him. We all were. The one that survived, Lukas, he was more of an

outdoors person than his brother. He's been working on the reservation ranch. He is good with horses. What a waste of life! Those boys didn't have to die. The alcohol causes too many deaths, especially among our young men. What a waste!"

Barti and I were both exhausted, as we didn't get back from the accident until well after midnight. So Norm showed us to a guest room where we were able to spread out our bedrolls and get some sleep. Within minutes of laying down I was sound asleep.

That night I had a weird dream. I only remember bits and pieces of it. I remember seeing the young man who died in the car accident, only it was Mark Scarlotti—the young man I had as a probationer who killed himself the year before. I remember seeing a fox and a wolf—one grey and one blue. They stood next to Mark Scarlotti. They began to glow with a brilliant light and the light enveloped Mark. Now he was alive. He got up, as if he were dazed. A white buffalo calf was standing nearby. Mark began to follow the calf and they both disappeared. Then a hawk flew in and settled next to me. The bird spoke to me, telling me to watch and then follow him. I saw the bird flap his wings and soar up from near me into the sky. I was a bird, a hawk as well, and I flew with him. We flew toward the setting sun. It was wonderful to feel the wind beneath my wings and to float on the up-drafts. Even though I was very high in the sky, I could see detail of objects on the ground. We kept flying, eventually reaching the coast and continuing out over the ocean. At that point, I woke up.

It was after seven so I got up and found Norm sitting in the kitchen eating bread and drinking coffee. Barti was still asleep. Norm asked if I slept well and I mumbled something about being reasonable. He smiled and said that he felt about the same. We talked for a few minutes about our plans for the day, which were largely indefinite at that point. I mentioned my dream to Norm and he found it interesting. He explained that many times dreams are nothing but wish fulfillment or communication from our unconscious to our conscious mind. Sometimes though dreams are communication from the spirit world. Norm suggested that my dream was from the spirit world because of the symbols used. Obviously, the first part of the dream referred to the accident the previous night. It showed Norm and his grandfather ministering to the young man who died. They helped him to travel from this world to the next; Norm on this side and his grandfather on the other. That the young man reminded me of Mark Scarlotti pointed to a need for healing in my heart but it also let me know that Mark has gone beyond the pain of this world. I need to let go of the pain in my own heart caused by his death. The white buffalo is a symbol of

the divine presence. It is God who took the young man and brought him into heaven. It is God who took Mark and accompanied him into heaven.

The second part of the dream has a different message. It was probably even a different dream that got conjoined in my memory. The hawk is a powerful spirit. It sees far distances, flies at great heights and is a powerful warrior. The hawk is my spirit guide. The hawk reveals my true nature to me in the dream. The hawk makes me realize that I too am a hawk. I can soar. Even at great heights I can perceive detail to which others are blind. I can soar great distances. The dream challenges me to reach for the heights and to use my intellect and intuition both—to be far seeing in this material world and in the spirit world. The dream speaks of great distances to be covered. Perhaps, it is referring to this journey that you are on.

Norm's interpretation of my dream made sense. It felt right. I also assumed that this was an area of expertise for him.

Before long Barti joined us at the table. By that time Norm was explaining that he would need to visit a few of his patients shortly. We were invited to stay as long as we wanted. If we chose to stay he would be happy to take us to view some of the sights in the area. We were surrounded by history, as well as some of the most beautiful natural scenery in the world. It was our choice and he was willing to be our guide, as soon as he returned from his visits.

We weren't on an inflexible schedule. One or two days wouldn't throw us way off schedule. So, we took Norm up on his offer. We would stay one more day and see some of the sights. Then early the next morning we would hit the road again.

Norm invited us to accompany him on his visits. Curious as to how a Shoshone healer worked, we took him up on the offer.

The first home belonged to an elderly woman at the other end of Ethete. Norm knocked on her door and was invited in. He introduced us as friends of his and began to explain that the woman suffered from diabetes and had a difficult time with infections. He examined her legs and feet to check the circulation. He then blended a tea for the woman to drink. While she was drinking the tea he put an ointment on the woman's legs. He then stopped and offered a prayer for the woman. After a few pleasantries we left.

Norm explained that the infections were a result of the diabetes. Any little nick or insect bite could easily get infected and was difficult to heal. The woman had antibiotics from the hospital. He checked to make sure that she was taking the antibiotics; she was. The tea he made

for her was a mix of local herbs and flowers. It was rich in vitamins and would help her immune system fight the infections. The ointment was a natural topical antibiotic that fought the infection. It also prevented her skin from becoming too dry and brittle. The tea and ointment were both traditional remedies but with proven medical value in the world of contemporary medicine. The prayer was to bring the Spirit into the situation to help with the woman's healing.

At the next house Norm introduced us to an elderly gentleman who seemed lost in his memories. Norm took his leather bag from the car and checked the man's heart with his stethoscope. For the next few minutes Norm visited with the man, speaking in an encouraging voice. There was no visible response from the man. Eventually, Norm closed his eyes and began to pray. He prayed in what sounded like a Shoshone chant for quite a while and then stopped. After that we left.

Norm explained that this man's problem was largely spiritual. His wife died about five years earlier and his son was living in Cheyenne and rarely visited. Much of the time he just sat absorbed, trapped in his pain and self-pity. The man was in good health for his age but needed to be drawn out of his isolation and self-pity. Norm's intervention in this case was visits to monitor the man's health; an excuse to visit the man and try to engage him in conversation. Prayer was an important part of Norm's intervention as well. Norm used a traditional Shoshone prayer form to help remind the man of the Shoshone values of strength and perseverance in difficulty. Again, Norm also was asking for the intervention of the Spirit with the old man, as Norm was frustrated with the relative lack of progress.

There were three more homes to be visited. At each stop there was a mix of interventions both medical and traditional depending on the needs of the patient.

At the last home we visited a child was feverish and complaining of severe headaches. He seemed more concerned with this patient than the others and even called in to the hospital on his radio. After discussing the child's vital signs and symptoms, Norm made arrangements for the family to bring the child in to the hospital immediately. The family had a car, so it was better to have the family take the child in to the hospital rather than to tie up the ambulance. Though, if there was no car, the ambulance would have been sent. In this case both Norm and the doctor was concerned about meningitis. They would need to run tests but better be safe than sorry. We didn't leave until the boy was on the way to the hospital and then we took time for prayer.

It was almost noon by the time we were done. We offered to buy Norm lunch at the diner in Ethete and he accepted, so we headed over to the little cafe. The place only had about six tables but the walls were covered in Shoshone and Arapaho artwork—both traditional and modern. It was quite beautiful.

The food was decent as well. We each had a large bowl of homemade stew with biscuits. It was delicious, warm and filling. Big mugs of hot coffee with milk and sugar were also placed before us. There was just enough of a nip in the air that the hot stew and coffee were most welcome.

Barti and Norm spent much of lunch talking about the monastery and Barti's possible return. Norm didn't offer him any advice either way. Rather, he gave Barti a look at his understanding of living the Christian life, allowing Barti to draw what ever he wanted from it.

"I am neither Norman Washakie nor Grey Fox, though I am called by both names. I am spirit and flesh. I am experience and memory. I am Shoshone with many brothers and sisters and a memory that reaches back into the deep past. I do not separate my life into work, home, spirituality and a dozen other little boxes all separate from one another. I am who I am and every part of me is mixed with and influences every other part of me.

"When I was in the monastery I found it a good experience. The monks tried to live a life consistent with the Gospel and to respect the integrity of their lives. Yet, it seemed artificial because it was cut off from the rough and tumble of life.

"One of the definitions of spirituality that I was taught was that it is the response of the whole person—body, mind, feelings and relationships—to the presence of the holy in the here and now. Spirituality doesn't deal with just certain parts of life and ignore the rest. It involves the whole of reality just as it is. I am a Christian when I am visiting my patients, chopping wood and sitting here eating lunch with you. I am at prayer when I do each of these things as well. Prayer is the undercurrent of my life. I was raised this way and Blue Wolf deepened this within me. This is the ideal of the monks, I know. However, I am most faithful to this ideal as I live now, in the midst of my people. Perhaps, others need the monastery to live in this manner.

"In the monastery I was taught that the Christian life has three broad movements; koinonia, kenosis and diakonia.

"Koinonia is the Greek word for community. A Christian lives in community. He is concerned about his neighbor. She finds the presence of Christ in the least of her brothers and

sisters. He finds joy in relationship with others

“Kenosis refers to self-emptying. If a cup is filled with stones it has no room to be filled with the water of life. Kenosis refers to our efforts to empty ourselves of our own importance and desires. In a sense, it is our attempt to open our eyes to the reality of life, for we can not understand reality until we can see and accept what is.

“Diakonia is service. The Christian who is emptied of self-importance and desire, who finds Christ in the person of his or her neighbor, gives expression to this in service for others. Christ did not cling to divinity or authority but became one of us, that He might minister to our needs and bring healing to us through His death and resurrection. If we are to be other Christs, then we must minister to one another. We must be willing to die for one another.

“What part of this can be done only in the monastery? What part can be done best in a monastery? Perhaps for some the monastery is best. As for me, this land and community is my monastery.”

After lunch Norman was able to get us the use of three horses. I had never been much of a rider, so I was concerned about riding a horse through the wilderness of Wyoming. However, the mount that Norm gave me was gentle and did most of the work. About all I had to do was hang on and follow Norm. Even with this, the horse had the good sense to follow Norm and his mount, so really—all I had to do was hang on. About a mile out of town the path we were on headed into the woods. There was a bit more chill in the air, as we were shaded from the sun by the branches but this was balanced by shelter from the steady breeze that chilled us before entering the forest.

After riding for about a half hour, we dismounted and tied our horses to a tree. Not far from where we stood was a cliff that rose up beyond the tree cover. Norm went first and Barti followed. I was in the rear. The climbing was an effort but not overly difficult. There were plenty of hand holds and foot holds. There were even stretches where we could walk a few feet before needing to climb again. About two-thirds from the top we reached a waterfall that formed a pool, which then flowed along a little stream before continuing on down the cliff face. We stopped near the waterfall to drink from the stream and rest a bit before continuing on up the cliff. The water was delicious and cold, just what I needed after climbing for close to an hour. Refreshed, we continued on. Except for the very top, the rest of the climb was not that bad. Within about fifteen minutes we were sitting at the top of the cliff on a butte that looked out over a forest

valley surrounded by rugged hills on every side and cut by a blue and white river that bisected the valley. Against the blue sky and the fleecy clouds that floated past the sight was awesome.

Norm broke the silence.

“This is where I come when I want time alone. This is my chapel, my place of meditation. I come here and am refreshed.”

As I sat there I noticed far below near the river a family of deer drinking from the river, as the buck stood watch intently for any predators. Eventually, they moved off, back into the forest. The river itself was beautiful as it reflected the sunlight. In places it seemed to be a river of diamonds, as the light sparkled off its surface. While there was a steady breeze that was a bit chilling, the sunlight was warm. In the end they balanced each other and left us feeling quite comfortable.

A hawk must have nested not far from where we were sitting because suddenly the hawk appeared from nowhere about thirty feet away and began to fly in a wide, lazy circle. I was fascinated by the bird, as it rode the winds. I hadn't been able to observe such a beautiful creature from flying height before and I was entranced. A few others appeared eventually. I remembered Norm's suggestion that morning that the hawk was my spirit guide and felt a special kinship as I watched the birds.

I noticed that the trees seemed different looking down on them rather than looking up from below. What once seemed dark and threatening, now looked small. The trees were like tall grass, blowing gently in the afternoon breeze.

Before long I noticed that Norm was standing, stretching and getting ready to head back down. I glanced at my watch and was surprised to find that we sat in silence at the top of the hill for over an hour and a half. I felt so peaceful and quiet that I really didn't want to leave the heights. However, we had just about enough time to get down the cliff and out of the forest by sunset. While it would probably be only a minor inconvenience for Norm, I had no desire to spend the night in the forest unprepared for a camping expedition. So, I followed Norm's example and prepared to head down.

By the time we got back to Norm's house and cared for the horses the sun was down and supper was on the table. After that exercise, we all ate heartily. The large mugs of coffee were the perfect touch to a wonderful day. I still felt the peace of the afternoon meditation time glow in me as I relaxed in a chair on Norm's front porch, as the stars began to shine in the cloudless

sky.

We didn't speak much as we sat on the porch. It was pleasant enough just be silent and enjoy the beauty around us; the sparkle of the stars and the chorus of the crickets. There was the sent of burning wood floating in from one of the neighbors with a wood burning stove, which added a nice touch to the experience.

I noticed a man walking up the road. He stopped at the neighbor's place for a while and then continued on toward Norm's house. A few minutes later Norm went down to greet him. They spoke for a few minutes, shook hands and then the man continued on. Norm joined us on the porch again.

"They don't ever seem to give up! Out East a few tribes have been able to make money by turning their homes into casinos. A few have made money at it and used the casino income to pay for government services. Most have found casinos a waste of money, time and effort. In the worst cases the casinos have made a few people rich and brought many more to poverty. Some people want to get casinos going on the Wind River reservation. They never seem to give up. The tribal counsel votes down the resolution every time it is brought up. Every plebiscite that we've held on the issue has rejected casinos. Yet, every few years someone tries to push casinos down our throats again. They won't be happy until they destroy our community.

Not long afterward I went to bed. We planned on an early start in the morning. Our first stop was to drop Norm off at the trucking company in Cheyenne and then continue on. Our goal for the next day was Salt Lake City.

Chapter Thirteen

We passed the Continental Divide around lunch time. This is the point on the North American Continent where rain falling on the eastern side of the divide will flow down toward the Mississippi River and eventually empty into the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. Rain falling on the western side of the divide flows down toward the Pacific Ocean. We celebrated this significant milestone in our journey by opening a couple of cans of cola Norm had given to us for our day's travels.

Norm got to the trucking company around eight-thirty that morning, after an hour and a half drive in from Ethete. Dropping him at work, we stopped at a nearby diner. After all the riding and hiking the previous day, we were in need of a substantial breakfast and did not want to eat Norm and his family out of house and home. I didn't eat breakfast steaks very often but that morning I had a breakfast stake, eggs, home fried potatoes and several cups of coffee. I-80 runs almost through Cheyenne, so it didn't take much effort to find our way back on the highway and press onward.

While I didn't mention it earlier, one of the most impressive and disconcerting sights since not long after leaving Omaha was the sight of the Rocky Mountains. At first they were just an irregularity on the horizon. However, they steadily grew larger. Later that day I was close enough to the Rocky Mountains to see the towering peaks in the distance. As I continued along I-80 heading west at a quick pace for hours on end, the size of the mountains began to dawn on me. Being raised on the East Coast, my only exposure to mountains was with the ancient Appalachian Range, which was little more than a series of hills compared to the Rocky Mountains. The sheer mass of the mountains is disconcerting! It is difficult to conceive of anything so large! They were also terribly beautiful with their snow covered peaks that reached up like a wall to heaven.

We made good time that morning, as the road was wide and straight most of the time. Though it was also at an angle that brought us steadily to higher and higher altitudes. This was broken on occasion as we drove through broad passes cut in the mountains. The road would curve and the view would shift to the green and gold of the autumnal mountain valley's trough which we drove. Occasionally, we would be rewarded with a breath-taking view of distant

mountains or the retreating foothills far below us for a stretch of road before the mountains again encased us and we traveled on.

After lunch the occasional breath-taking view of distant lands ceased all-together and the road narrowed as we worked our way through more and more mountain passes. We passed quaint towns such as Rock Springs and Green River, nestled in mountain valleys. Toward the end of the afternoon, we passed from Wyoming into Utah. There was no real change in the scenery at first. However, around 5:30pm we were driving along a good stretch of I-80, we came around a broad, gentle curve and were treated to the sight of a broad, high desert valley. It was brown and dry, with little of the greenery that seemed characteristic of the eastern side of the Divide. Yet, it sparkled with lights and the reflection of the sun from the roofs of hundred's, if not thousands, of roofs below us. Further off in the distance we could catch the sight of a great body of water whose shores were brilliantly golden-white in the setting sun. We had finally reached the great Salt Lake and the city of the same name.

It wasn't difficult to find a room at a reasonable price at the Great Western Hotel about five blocks from I-80. Though I was tired enough from driving that even a dump would have seemed inviting.

While Barti didn't have any old friends in Salt Lake City, this was one of the points in the trip that we had long planned on staying over at least one day. We wanted to see the Mormon compound in the heart of the city and also spend a little time visiting the Great Salt Lake.

There was a modest but pleasant looking little diner just down the street from the hotel. We spotted it as we pulled into the hotel. So, after checking in, showering and changing our clothes, we headed off to the diner for a relaxed evening meal. Given the heavy breakfast, we skipped lunch. So, we were hungry by the time we sat down in the diner. After ordering our meals, I asked Barti what he could tell me about Mormonism and Salt Lake City.

"Well, Mormonism got its start in our backyard. Have you ever driven down to Palmyra, New York? It's only about thirty miles Southeast of Rochester. That's where it began. Sometime around 1840 a young Palmyra farmer by the name of Joseph Smith was struggling with his faith.

"This was not uncommon, nor is it uncommon today. Many young men and women struggle to find a personal faith that is meaningful to them as an adult. It is part of coming to spiritual maturity. However, this was an unusual time for the entire nation as well. Following the War for Independence, religion itself seemed to be struggling to find a particularly American

identity. This was about the time of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Thoreau, with their efforts to discover transcendence by a consideration of nature and our place in it. Millerites and others were establishing experimental communities to live as New Testament Christians while awaiting the end of the world. The Fox sisters were hearing ghosts and serving as trance mediums, popularizing the idea of spiritualism. Many traditional churches were supporting abolition efforts. It was a time of incredible religious, spiritual, and social ferment. The setting for much of this ferment was upstate New York, particularly Western New York. You know how we make fun of Southern California as the “kook kapital” of America? Well, a hundred years ago or so, that honor belonged to our dear home town and its surrounding environs.

“One evening as Joseph Smith was walking, he had a vision of an angel. The angel introduced himself as Moroni and proceeded to tell the young man to dig in the ground where he discovered a book with golden pages and written in some strange and ancient script. He was given the task of translating the golden book with divine help.

“The tale that emerged from the mystical book told of an ancient Hebrew patriarch who stumbled upon ancient America, settled here and gave rise to a great civilization. The book told how after ascending into heaven at the conclusion of his ministry in Israel, Jesus ministered to people in the Americas. America became a great Christian nation as the result of Christ’s own efforts in the Americas, long before Europeans brought their versions of Christianity to these shores, according to the story. Eventually there was a great civil war that left the civilization in shambles. The decisive battle of that war was fought around the Palmyra area. One of the last leaders in that civilization, a man by the name of Mormon, wrote down the tale in a book of golden pages for future generations. He then buried the book on Hill Cumorah near Palmyra, where Smith dug it up centuries later.

“Not long after completing the translation, Joseph Smith showed his translation and the original golden book to interested neighbors. Eventually, Moroni took back the golden original and all that was left was Smith’s translation and the attestations of many that they had actually seen the originals.

“The community of believers grew. They tried to capture the experience and type of Christian belief described in what was now called the Book of Mormon. While Upstate New York was home to many a cult and religious experiment, the people had trouble being tolerant when it came to Mormonism. A major irritant was the Mormon belief in polygamy. This ran

counter not only to dominant Christian values but also to the European based culture common to the young American nation. So, under pressure from their neighbors the young Mormon community moved West and settled in Missouri. Before long the local neighbors there found the Mormon community too extreme in their beliefs and practices. Joseph Smith was arrested but before he could be tried he became victim to a lynch mob.

“Following the death of Joseph Smith there was a split in the community over leadership. One faction stayed in Missouri, lead by one of Joseph Smith’s sons, and the other, lead by Brigham Young, one of Smith’s disciples, lead his faction further West. He hoped to get so far away from civilization that his followers could establish a Mormon community free of outside influences and threats. His goal was the valley of the Great Salt Lake. After a long and harrowing journey across America they finally arrived here and built their community. Around the turn of the 20th century, when Utah was trying to gain formal entry into the United States with full status as a state the Mormon community finally rejected polygamy as a practice unsuitable for today. This smoothed the way for their entry into the Union.”

Barti told the tale with apparent sympathy for Smith, so I asked him what he thought of Smith and the strange tale. He responded.

“I’m still Catholic, not Mormon, so I haven’t found the tale entirely convincing. Though I respect the courage and faith of Joseph Smith in the face of the terrible social pressure brought against him, as well as his willingness to die for his belief. In general his followers appear to be good people, committed to charity, their families, and a practical spirituality.

“As to the tale of ancient civilizations in America based upon Middle-Eastern immigrants, it is highly doubtful. There is archaeological evidence for Europeans, North Africans, and even ancient Phoenicians reaching American shores over the millennia. It is most likely that these occasional immigrants were either wiped out or absorbed by the native American population over time. While there were great Native American civilizations, such as the Aztecs, Mayans and Incas, there is no evidence of significant outside influence in bringing about these civilizations. They all seem to be homegrown. Even great political experiments, such as the Iroquois Confederacy seem to be homegrown as well. There doesn’t appear to be any clear basis in Native American traditions to support the idea that Jesus Christ had a successful mission in the Americas. The civilization described in the Book of Mormon should have produced significant sites in the North East. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, nothing has been uncovered

in North American archaeology that would suggest there was much truth to Smith's claims. Perhaps someone might interpret various Native American societies as expressions of the civilization described in the Book of Mormon but those Native American communities can be just as easily understood without any reference to Mormonism.

“As to Salt Lake City, the faction that followed Brigham Young eventually made it to Utah and established their Mormon community out here. The Mormon's faced many difficulties but overall seemed to thrive. The population of Utah is mostly Mormon, with a mix of other religions—even Catholic. Among the Mormons there is also a range of belief and practice, from the very observant to what is called “jack” Mormons. The “jack” Mormons are non-observant.”

As Barti seemed to have reached the end of his lecture, I offered a comment.

“I kind of admire Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. It is not that I have any faith in their religious beliefs—I'm not even sure what they taught. What I admire is their vision of what might be and their willingness to charge into the unknown to help make their vision a reality.”

Barti seemed serious in his response.

“Those are fine sentiments for a young man in a quest to find himself but actually charging off into the unknown requires a good deal of discernment. While there are innocent visionaries, there are also predators who use and abuse young idealists as yourself. Even the innocent visionaries can be dangerous when their dreams dreams are not balanced by wisdom.”

I didn't think much about Barti's observation that evening, other than noting his words of caution. However, several years later they came back to me with great force when I heard news of Jim Jones and the mass suicide/murder of his Guyana based followers. The wisdom of Barti's words of caution have come back again and again over the years as word of the Waco deaths and then Heaven's Gate more recently emphasize the danger of pursuing visions that are more grounded in a leader's insanity than in truth. Not all dreams should become reality.

We talked some more that evening about other concerns. The car seemed a bit sluggish earlier in the day and we discussed the possibility of having it looked at before leaving Salt Lake City. In addition, Dr. Glowaki should have reached San Francisco by now. We considered calling her to say “hello” and confirm our arrival within the next few days.

Later that evening I called home to let my mother know that we reached Salt Lake City. I had promised my parents that I would call occasionally on the trip. Judging from their reaction, they assumed that I would call more often than I had so far. After my apologies, I told them of

some of the adventures we enjoyed since the beginning of the trip. I went into particular detail about our stay with Norm at Wind River, as that was the highlight of the trip for me so far. They seemed pleased that I was enjoying the trip and that we were almost to California. I was also informed of the engagement of one of my cousins and the separation of another cousin from her husband. My parents also received a brief letter from another cousin who was a Carmelite nun. She was doing well and kept all of us in her prayers. A little later I hung up after promising to let them know when we arrived in San Francisco.

We figured that another two days of driving approximately four hundred miles each day would bring us to San Francisco. Our goal for the next day of travel was Reno, Nevada. Reno was at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains. After a day of traveling it would probably be best to get a good night's sleep before pushing on. We would reach Sacramento around noon, if we got an early start. Then, the trip from Sacramento to San Francisco would be fairly easy and have us to the bay by late afternoon.

We slept late the next morning. We got down to breakfast around 9:00am. and then only because Barti called my room. I guess the pace of the trip was finally catching up with me. Driving across the United States is exhausting, even if you have a friend who shares the driving.

At breakfast Barti informed me that he had been able to call Tabitha. She was staying at the Westin Hotel in San Francisco and was looking forward to seeing us later in the week. Her work on behalf of the Christian Palestinians and refugees in the Holy Land was progressing well. She would probably be finished with the meetings by the time we arrived.

The drive to the Mormon buildings was not far, as they comprise a city block in the center of Salt Lake City. There was a large church building which was limited only to Mormons. However, all of the other buildings were open to tourists. This included a building with informative exhibits on the history and beliefs of the Mormons and a Tabernacle building which was used as an auditorium for services open to the public and for concerts by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

The Choir was really quite good, appearing on national television every now and then—at least back in the 60's and early 70's. The acoustics in the Tabernacle building were almost perfect, as the tour guide illustrated for us, which probably added to the quality of the Choir's sound.

The exhibit hall provided diorama presentations and short films that illustrated the history

of Mormonism, pretty much as Barti had explained it the previous evening. I particularly enjoyed the exhibit on the development of Salt Lake City after Brigham Young and his fellow travelers arrived. My curiosity was satisfied, though I was not particularly attracted to their beliefs. It was an interesting morning. By lunch time and I was glad that we had taken time to play tourist for awhile.

Chapter Fourteen

After seeing the sights that morning, neither Barti nor I were interested in sticking around Salt Lake City any longer. It was Friday afternoon and after driving all week we were anxious to be through with the trip. So, we decided to head west after lunch.

Our first stop was for lunch at a tourist trap on the salt flats outside of the city near the Great Salt Lake. The food was nothing special but it was fascinating to realize that all the white sand was really salt from lake evaporation. The lake itself looked a bit grayer than the Great Lakes but other than that it was just a big body of water on the edge of a desert. What was much stranger was that after leaving the Salt Lake area the road was perfectly flat and straight for at least 50 miles as we crossed the salt flats.

I remembered that somewhere in the area was an Air Force base used to test experimental planes. A few years later that same base would be designated as an emergency landing field for the space shuttle which was then on the drawing board. I mentioned something about the shuttle to Barti and this got us into a discussion about the space program. I didn't know what to expect, as I never thought of Barti in terms of outer space. He proved to be a real advocate of the space program.

“Remember a few years ago when Apollo Thirteen ran into trouble on the way to the moon? There were complaints that too much money was being spent on space research, that the benefits were minimal and that it was too dangerous. Such moaning and groaning is so short-sighted that it is more dangerous than space research. Using that kind of logic then we must put a stop to air travel and automobiles, as well as impound everyone's shoes. As more people die each year in accidents in planes, cars and even on foot than in space craft.

“What made America great in the past was its vision. We dreamed of new possibilities and goals to strive toward as a nation. We achieved the most demanding goal ever assumed by human beings, we reached the moon. Now were giving up. No more dreams for us. Let's just turn in on ourselves and enjoy. If there is nothing of enduring value to strive toward, then we'll settle for a new car, a bigger house and the latest sound system.

“The greatest contribution of President Kennedy was to share his vision of space travel with the American people. That vision set our sights on the future and opened up endless possibilities. By the 21st century we could have a base on the moon and even Mars. Industry

could be in space, making extremely precise machinery in zero gravity. Minerals could be mined on the moon or Mars. First generation communities could be setting their roots in soil other than Earth for the first time in history. We could be moving toward an era of interstellar travel. If only we have the courage and vision to pursue the great start we have already made.

“The U.S. has become an extraordinarily powerful nation, probably the most powerful in world history given the resources we control. We are not the first powerful nation however. Nations that have had a great impact on the course of human history were nations with vision and a willingness to work toward the fulfillment of that vision. When powerful nations turn to self-indulgence and offer no overarching vision of what humanity could be, such nations slip into decadence and decline. For me the space program is a good index of our vision as a nation, though striving for human rights or overcoming world poverty or even seeking international justice and world peace would be just as worthy visions. It's what we strive to be that makes us great not the power of the bombs we can unleash on others. If we lose sight of visions worth striving toward and settle for self-indulgence, we will lose our chance at greatness.

“Vision isn't just something important to nations but it is a basic principle of individual spiritual development as well. Our vision of what we are and can become defines the horizon of our mental and spiritual world. If the range of our vision is narrow and short then our focus must be only on the immediate situation. We are unable to perceive meaningfully the past or the possibilities before us. A broad vision respects the past and allows it to teach us today. A broad vision takes seriously the possibilities before us. We are able to weave all of this together into a broad tapestry of meaning that unites us with our roots in history and the possibilities set before us.

“To grow spiritually is to transcend what you are now, to go beyond your present limitations. Growth is a matter of expanding your horizons and this is done by broadening your vision. Of course, you build upon previous lessons and growth.

“A year or two ago you were working as a probation officer. You did a fine job with the young people but you were frustrated. Your horizon was the work-a-day world of juvenile court and your friends after work. Your frustration was a signal from within that you needed to grow beyond the constraints of your limited horizon. In response to that signal you began to seek out ways to expand your horizon. You went on pilgrimage. You explored the Buddhist practice of one of your clients. You applied to Peace Corps. You continued in our little conversations.

Eventually, you quit your job and are now moving out west. Each action was an attempt to expand your horizons, to find a broader and more encompassing meaning to your life. Each attempt to grow reflected a vision of what could be that was a bit further out from your starting point. Not only were you expanding your horizons but as you made the effort to move forward toward the broader vision your entire horizon shifted forward. It shifted because you were no longer standing on the same ground. You moved forward in pursuit of your vision, so the reach of your vision moved forward and with it your horizon of meaning. You became more than you were. In a sense, you transcended yourself. You grew.

“The reach of our vision is the measure of what we can become. The qualities that are called forth in us to realize that vision—courage, perseverance, wisdom, patience, understanding, compassion, and so forth—are the measure of our character. As we approach the goals that were once at the far reaches of our vision, we discover that our horizons have expanded and the reach of our vision is even further out than before. The virtues of character that were developed and strengthened in getting us to our initial goals become the foundation for even further growth as new goals are attempted and our growth continues on.

“A nation that has little sense of what it can become and constricted horizons will never become much of anything, even though it may have had the potential for greatness. An individual who has little sense of whom he or she can become and constricted horizons will never become much of anything, even though he or she may have potential for greatness. Self-satisfaction and self-absorption are poison to nations and to individuals because they restrict vision. Fear and anything else that restricts our vision is deadly to us. They subvert signals from within which tell us that we need to grow.”

Before long we left Utah behind and crossed into Nevada. The salt flats disappeared and gave way to the Nevada state flower... sagebrush. This was classic cowboy country.

There are three mountain ranges in the state, like a series of claws running almost the length of the state. I-80 skirts the mountains running north of them through desert country before it runs into the Humboldt River and goes parallel with it for many miles. Then just before the California boarder it turns South and runs almost the length of the state before reaching Reno. While the mountains are rugged, there are trees, rivers, forests and plenty of vegetation. In a way the mountains are hospitable, even awesome.

We were driving through desert. It too had a certain beauty but it wasn't very hospitable.

It was rugged with the only signs of life being sagebrush.

We reached Elko around 5:30pm and filled the gas tank. Since it would be awhile before we reached Battle Mountain, we decided to stop for supper. Elko was a classic old West town, the only accommodation to modernity being a paved main street and brick buildings instead of wood. The biggest buildings were the downtown movie theatre and a grocery store at the edge of town. Today, almost thirty years later, you would probably find a Wal-mart as well. Instead of horses tied to hitching posts, there was a line of beat up pickups next to the curb. We parked our car near the cafe and went in.

There wasn't much of a crowd as yet. The afternoon coffee crowd was gone and the supper crowd would not be there until closer to the evening showing at the Royale theater next door. We ordered bowls of chili and cornbread, a staple of life in that part of the country. A slice of blueberry pie was the perfect finishing touch for supper. A bottomless cup of coffee came with the meal. We paid extra and had the waitress fill a thermos with coffee as well.

The coffee was necessary, as we decided to continue on to Reno before stopping for the night. With any luck we would get into Reno around midnight. This had been our plan ever since leaving Salt Lake City earlier but after a few hours behind the wheel our commitment to the plan wavered. The heat of the desert sun also contributed to our wavering commitment. Then, not long before we pulled into Elko, the temperature began to drop. Realizing that it would be a much easier drive across the Nevada desert in the cool of the night rather than under the mid-day sun, we decided to push on.

Leaving Elko Barti was behind the wheel and I relaxed in the backseat after driving all afternoon. There wasn't much room but I could stretch out a bit more in the back than riding shotgun.

Trying to make conversation with Barti, I asked him if Tabitha had anything to say last night aside from her anticipation of seeing us in a few days. Barti mentioned that he brought her up to date on our travels. She had also been curious if either Barti or I felt any more settled about our direction in life as a result of the journey so far. Barti reported that he was enjoying the trip but that he was as unsure as ever about what to do. He couldn't answer for me, so he didn't.

I remember suggesting that if having a vision was so important, given his earlier sermon on space flight, then he needed to get his own vision in order. He laughed and agreed with my point, mumbling something about the student teaching the teacher.

After a few moments of silence I mentioned that Barti had been much more vocal on our trip to the Holy Land last year than he was on the current cross-country drive.

“I suppose so,” was his response. “...But I knew more about Israel than I do about the lore of I-80. I took you to my old haunts in Israel. I am as much a neophyte as you are when it comes to the open spaces of America. I imagine that if we stopped at the small towns we pass on I-80 without a second thought there would be plenty of stories. Think of it...we ran into a native American truck driver at a rest stop in Nebraska and had a great adventure. Think of all the other stories that are out there. You probably remember Route 66. It was a television series about ten years ago. In the show two guys drove across America in a corvette. I was in the monastery when it was first out but I’ve caught it in syndication and I love it. They stopped in all the small towns and actually learned the stories. It was a great series. I wish we actually had time to do that.”

I thought about it for a bit and then offered.

“Well, there isn’t that much of a rush. My only real constraint is the limited amount of money I have to live on. We could take our time. Though we’re so close to San Francisco we might as well visit Tabitha and then think about further travels.”

Barti smiled, as he did often.

“You called my bluff. While I fantasize about wandering around America on an adventure, it’s no more than fantasy. My real struggle is whether I should head back to the monastery or not. Last night when I was talking with Tabitha she asked me what I was looking for in the monastery. I’ve been thinking about that question all day. I’m afraid that maybe I’m seeking a fantasy, maybe like my nostalgia for that old television series. I should know better than to fantasize. I’ve been in the monastery and know what it is like.

“A friend of mine who works on the diocesan Tribunal in Rochester once observed that most of the attempted marriages that he sees are built on fantasy. The man or woman has some romantic vision of what the boyfriend or girlfriend is like. They choose the fantasy over reality, even if the faults of the other person are painfully obvious. He says that he lost count of the number of women who were beat up by their intended during the courtship or were aware that his drinking habit was so bad that he was certifiably alcoholic, yet they went ahead with the wedding. They felt that marriage would change the other person or they simply believed their fantasy over the reality that literally hit them in the face. Even worse, they would marry the guy and have a terrible marriage for five or ten years. Finally, after working up the courage to get out

of that experience of hell, they end up going through a divorce and annulment and finally see the terrible mistake they made. Then not long afterward, they get involved in another relationship that is even more perverse and damaging than the first. They seem to seek out bad relationships.

“I wonder if I am being like those people who live in a fantasy world, even though they know better based on experience. I left the monastery for reasons that I believed were compelling. Was I wrong in my discernment? Is my desire now simply to live out a fantasy that I know in my heart is only a fantasy? Or, is my real vocation reasserting itself after being abandoned?

“Tabitha suggested that another way of looking at my dilemma was possible. She reminded me that people grow and change. My decision to leave may have been the right decision for me when I made it. However, I’m a few years older and my life experience has made me a different person. The monastery may be the right decision for me today, even if it was a wrong decision back when I first entered. She reminded me that I can’t have a guarantee on any decision I make. I have to discern the situation as best I can and then when I’m reasonably comfortable with my discernment, make a commitment for better or worse to my decision.

“The other thing she reminded me was that whether I’m in the monastery or dedicated to serve God through some secular pursuit—it’s still God’s world. I should lighten up and enjoy God’s creation where ever I am. She’s right!”

Once we got a few miles out of Elko the traffic got quite thin. There would be another car from the opposite direction maybe every ten or fifteen minutes or so. As it got darker the oncoming traffic became even less frequent. Anybody with a modicum of sense was home in bed or curled up in front of their television. The sky was cloudless and filled with stars. We were moving along in the dark at a good clip and the night was cool. It was actually quite pleasant. I was glad we decided to push on.

I drifted off to sleep by the time we passed Battle Mountain. For quite awhile I was in the half-world between consciousness and sleep, glad that Barti was driving. I remember seeing headlights in the distance and not paying much attention. As they got closer I had a vague feeling that something was wrong but couldn’t quite place what it was. Then it struck me—the oncoming car was in our lane! I called out and Barti seemed startled, as if his attention had wandered off.. The other car realized they were heading right at us and swerved. This was an over reaction and the driver lost control of the car. We seemed to go into slow motion as the car skidded toward us

sideways at a high rate of speed. The other car slid into our front right side, crumpling the metal. The impact sent our car jerking out of control to the left. I remember seeing the other car take to the air and then flip end over end after making contact with us. Meanwhile, we shot off the road and were airborne. I felt a terrible thud and then everything went black. I don't know what happened after that.

The next thing I remember is experiencing terrible pain. It felt like my arms and legs were broken. My head felt like it had been shattered. My face was wet, probably in my own blood. The pain was so intense that I passed out again. I don't remember if I was inside the car or not at that point. All I remember is the pain.

Eventually consciousness returned. The searing pain seemed to have let up, as long as I didn't try to move much. I wasn't making much sense of things at the time. I had the impression that there was a police car or an ambulance in the area because there were blinking lights and the sound of people talking. I thought I heard Barti but before I could make out whether it was him or not I passed out again.

“Theo, can you hear me?”

That was Barti's voice. It was as clear as a bell this time, though I couldn't see him. I couldn't see much of anything.

“Is that you, Barti? I don't feel very good. I think we got into an accident.”

“I'm sorry, Theo. I tried to avoid that car. It was pure chance that the other car went out of control close enough to hit our car and sent it flying.”

The pain seemed to have subsided for a moment, though I didn't dare move. The last time I did that the pain got so bad I passed out. I had to stay conscious so I could talk with Barti.

“Don't worry about who is responsible. It was their fault, if anyone. I don't hold any hard feelings. I need help though. It feels like I've broken every major bone in my body, as well as a few dozen minor ones for good measure.”

“You're in an ambulance on the way to the hospital in Lovelock. They'll patch you up as best they can, though you probably beyond their capacity. I assume that they'll probably transfer you on to University Hospital in Las Vegas. You're pretty banged up, though I'll wager that you'll survive the experience. You should have been wearing the seat belt. There would have been far less damage to you.”

I knew he was right. I sacrificed safety for comfort and now...

“How about the people in the other car? Did they survive?”

“No, Theo. They all died. If any had survived the multiple end-over-end flips, the gas tank explosion finished them off. They were locals according to the sheriff, with a long history of drunken driving. The sheriff speculates that this was the final episode in that history.”

“How about you? Are you ok?”

“I’m fine, I guess. The paramedics took care of me back at the scene of the accident.. Don’t worry about me. I’ll do all right. Just listen while I have the chance to talk with you.”

“Go ahead, Barti. I’ll just listen. It’s about all I have the strength for anyway.”

“Don’t loose heart and don’t give up on finding your destiny, It’s within reach. It’s always been within reach. You might even discover that your destiny is somewhere or something you haven’t even considered. This accident has certainly made my decision making process easier. It seems to be leading me in a direction I hadn’t considered.

“By the way, if you see Tabitha before I do, please tell her that I appreciate everything she has done for me more than words can express. Tell her that I love her. Also, listen to her. She has things right.”

“Ok, Barti, I’ll give her the message but you’ll probably see her before I do. It sounds like you’re in much better shape than I am.”

The ambulance hit a dip in the road and for a second I was weightless. Then reality came crashing in and I was afire in searing pain. Somewhere in all that pain I felt a needle. A short while later the pain subsided but so did my conscious awareness.

I was in and out of conscio us awareness a number of times. Each time it was a bit less confusing. Each time I could grasp more of where I was and what had happened. I knew it was serious when I opened my eyes one time and saw my mother and father sitting near the bed. I left them back in Rochester and now they were with me in Nevada. At least, that’s where I thought I was. I remember that they were overjoyed that I was conscious and we visited a bit before I slipped back into the drug induced fog of pain killers that marked the first few days after the accident.

The first day that I seemed to be functioning at a normal level of awareness, without the need to struggle to communicate, was about a week after the accident. At least that’s what my dad told me when he visited. I had been out of it for the first three days or so after the accident. Then after that the doctors kept me on pain killers. The previous day or so they cut back to levels

that I seemed to tolerate fairly well and which allowed me to function closer to normal. I still slept a lot, what else could I do with all the rigging to which I was attached? Though, at least I was awake, could think straight and carry on a conversation.

When I awoke from a nap that afternoon I was surprised to see Tabitha sitting on a chair near my bed. She was as spry looking as ever, though there was also stress apparent in her eyes.

“Well, my young friend, I see that you have joined us in the land of the living. I’m probably asking the obvious, but how do you feel? Would it be too much for you if I visited for a little while?”

“Not at all, the pain is dull at the moment, so it’s not an issue. It would be good to visit with you.”

She asked if I remembered much of the accident. I told her what I could remember, which was little more than the other car drifting into our lane and then going out of control. Everything else was mixed up. As I explained what happened, I remembered that Barti was in the car with me and asked her how Barti was doing. I assumed that he was probably in another room in the hospital. I wanted to visit with him as soon as I was able.

“Theo, Barti didn’t survive the accident. He is dead.”

I was confused by her words, as the one clear thing I remember out of the fog of the past few days was my conversation with Barti in the ambulance. Though there was also a gnawing fear that Barti was dead. Tabitha always told the truth. I tried to explain to her that I spoke with Barti after the accident in the ambulance. I even gave her the message Barti had asked me to pass on to her. This brought tears to her eyes. However, she still insisted that Barti died in the accident.

Chapter Fifteen

They operated on me the morning after the accident, as soon as I arrived at University Hospital. I wasn't aware of the operation. However, thanks to several ID cards in my wallet, they were able to contact my parents and get permission over the phone. Later in the week there was a second operation. My parents were present for that one, though I was still pretty foggy at the time. It was at least a week before I was sufficiently functional to understand what was going on and able to make decisions about my own medical care, though the doctors continued to run any decisions I made by my parents as well.

According to my primary care physician, Dr. Salzman, I suffered fractures in both legs, at least three cracked ribs, a concussion, and a variety of bruises all over my body. My brother commented that I looked like a guy had gone up against Mohammed Ali and lost by a knock out. There were no broken internal organs or spinal parts but they were watching me closely.

It took me a while to find out about how Barti died. Since, he was dead on arrival at the Lovelock Community Hospital, his body never made it to University hospital. However, Dr. Salzman was a good guy and realized that it was important for me to know what happened to Barti. So, he made a few phone calls. According to what he was told, Barti suffered a fractured skull, which is what killed him. There were other fractures, as well as a ruptured spleen.

Barti had a few relatives, a sister and some cousins, in Rochester, so that is where they shipped the body. Father Superior at the Abbey of the Genesee offered a plot in the Abbey graveyard for Barti. This was unusual, since he left the order. Though in light of his many years as a member of the community and his "plans" on re-entering the order, the offer was made. His sister knew how much he loved the Abbey, so she accepted the offer. A burial at the Abbey has always been a simple affair; the Mass of the Resurrection, followed by a procession out front to the graveyard, and the internment. All of this happens within a day or so of death. So when Barti's body arrived, there was a vigil that night and the funeral the following morning.

Over the years I've visited his grave often. The only marker is a simple cross with the words "Br. Bartholomew Del Calle, OCSO". For all his struggles over returning to the Abbey to stay, it appears that fate made the decision for him.

By the time I learned of his death, Barti had already been buried several days.

I was numb. When Mark Scarlotti killed himself I was an emotional mess. When Barti

died, someone who was a close friend and mentor, I just felt numb. There were emotions floating around somewhere deep inside but they didn't come to the surface. I realize now that they probably had me on anti-depressants as well as pain killers. Being on an emotional roller coaster would not have been very helpful to my recovery from the accident. The downside of the anti-depressants and pain killers was that I couldn't grieve over Barti's death at the time.

Barti had Tabitha's address and phone number in his wallet when he died, since he had just been on the phone to her the night before. So, within an hour or so of his arrival at the hospital, the medical personnel in Lovelock were able to contact Tabitha and inform her of Barti's death. She told them about Barti's sister in Rochester, so they could obtain any permissions they needed. Then she got on a plane and flew to Reno. From there she hired a cab to bring her to Lovelock. It was Tabitha who identified the body and accompanied it back to Rochester for burial at the Abbey. By the time she arrived in Lovelock, they had already stabilized me as best they could and sent me on to University Hospital in Las Vegas. On her way back to San Francisco to finish up the meetings she postponed when she received word of Barti's death, she stopped in Las Vegas to check on my progress. It was then that she informed me of Barti's death. She also promised visit me once more before returning to Israel.

It was almost a month before I got out of the hospital. The ribs were feeling much better. The bruises were just about healed. The concussion seems to have receded into history with no serious consequences. However, my legs were in casts and it would be a few months before I could walk. I would probably have to spend some time with a physical therapist, as well, to get my legs functioning again.

After traveling so far, I didn't want to go back Rochester in a stretcher. I still wanted to spend some time on the West Coast. My sister, her son and husband lived in Portland, Oregon. They were kind enough to invite me to stay with them for a while during my recovery. So, I accepted their invitation. On being released from the hospital, my parents flew with me up to Portland and stayed for a few days to help get me settled in to my sister's home.

Portland is a beautiful city. It is a green city, surrounded by a mountain range. The weather rarely gets too cold, though it is quite damp and during the winter that dampness can get into your bones and hurt. Before the accident I visited Portland a couple times. I loved to wander along its streets and check out all of the shops. It is a good size city with a casual charm that few larger cities are able to maintain. The downtown shops carry just about everything imaginable,

from rare comic books to the latest music. This time I was stuck at home but I put up with that restriction, as I was happy to be out of the hospital. I was really tired of the endless blood tests and the IV needle stuck in the back of my hand. Even confinement in a wheel chair at my sister's house was better than being in the hospital.

One of the first nights I was at my sister's place I had a dream.

It was a glorious autumn day, pleasantly warm with golden sunlight that tinted the color of everything a golden yellow. The light reflected like diamonds off the river flowing only a few feet away. The cool air, the warmth of the sunlight on my face, the sound of the river and the sight of so much beauty filled me. It seemed as if everything was transformed for a moment and the spiritual reality of my surroundings became the reality which I perceived. It was a brief moment of grace and inner vision but it left me with the understanding that "all will be well, all manner of things will be well", as the English mystic Julian of Norwich was famous for saying.

Barti sat on a park bench nearby and motioned for me to join him. He was eating a tuna submarine sandwich and offered me a portion of it. The sandwich was a little bit sloppy, maybe too much mayonnaise but it tasted good. I was hungry.

I remember Barti's smile. It was classic Barti—joyous with just a touch of irony. Having finished his half of the sandwich, he just sat on the bench and smiled.

I woke up then.

The dream was different from my usual dreams. It had more substance than a normal dream. Even after I was awake I could still taste the tuna sandwich, it had been so real. When I woke up I had the feeling that Barti was trying to communicate with me. There wasn't much conversation in the dream. Even the sense that all will be well was an intuition rather than a statement.

While the dream obviously seemed meant to reassure me, I was down after having the dream. It finally struck me that Barti was actually gone. I felt the loss of my dear friend and it hurt. It didn't seem to make any sense to me. Barti had so much to offer people. He was a good friend and a wise mentor. He had been a great teacher for his high school students and would likely have been a great monk once again, if that had been the path he decided upon. He was needed. His death didn't make any sense.

I was angry at the drunk driver for killing Barti and putting me in the hospital. I was

angry at them for destroying our plans for a West Coast adventure. I was angry at Barti for dying. I was angry at God for allowing all of this to happen. I was angry at myself for being angry at the others. I was angry at myself for being alive when Barti was dead.

The dream seemed to pop the balloon of my emotions and everything flowed out. I wasn't numb anymore. In my anger, sorrow and general pain, I almost preferred the numbness to the emotional roller coaster I was now riding. I felt sorry for my sister and her family, as I was not pleasant to be around. I couldn't do much to control my moods through. The emotion had to get out. I had to grieve for Barti.

It was about a week before Thanksgiving when I got a call from Melissa Soricco. She offered condolences both at the loss of my good friend and the pain I had to endure with my own injuries. We talked for awhile regarding the "what if's" should the trip had gone as planned. It was great to hear from her. While I was beginning to leave the depths of my grief, her call went a long way toward raising my spirits. After checking with my sister, I invited Melissa to come to Portland for Thanksgiving. Having traveled this far, I at least wanted to see her face to face.

Melissa was the product of a broken home. Her parents divorced when she was around twelve. Since college, she lived with her father in the San Jose suburb of Campbell. This was convenient for her, as she had a job in one of the small semi-conductor plants that made computer circuit boards and microchips.

There was a growing semi-conductor industry in this area. Over the next few years this unexceptional example of spreading urban sprawl would become known as "Silicon Valley" and the center of the computer revolution. However, at the moment, the leaders of that technological revolution were busy doing their homework, constructing home-made computers in their garages, and worrying about who they were going to take to the prom.

Back in college Melissa and I dated for a few months but the relationship never got off the ground. We ended up as good friends and occasionally enjoyed lunch together. I briefly entertained fantasies of our relationship generating some heat when I visited her in Ipswich after Pilgrimage. Though, once we were together again, we fell back into our well established pattern and were no more than two friends on holiday.

Thus, when she offered hospitality while I got settled in San Jose, I took it at face value. There was no reason to take it any other way. My reason for heading West was to look for work,

see more of the world, and have an adventure. There was no hope or desire for a relationship between Melissa and I any more complicated than friendship. Yet, I valued our friendship.

Melissa hugged me when she walked into the kitchen of my sister's home. I was in my wheel chair at the time, as that was more comfortable for both myself and any visitors than the rented hospital bed I used. She then welcomed me to the West Coast. We talked for a while about my trip out, the accident and what each of us had been doing since we last saw each other in Ipswich.

A short time later my sister prepared a light lunch for us—salad and ice tea. We talked some more. Somewhere in the middle of the conversation Melissa let me know that she had driven up with a friend. She also asked if it would be possible if the two of them could make use of some floor space that evening. They would return to San Jose tomorrow. Again, I checked with my sister and she welcomed them, with a little rearranging she could even provide beds for the two of them. The friend was downtown for the day to allow the two of us some time together to talk. The friend's name was Ian Dennison.

I wasn't particularly pleased to realize that her friend was a male but I remembered that we were friends...no more than that. I couldn't be possessive of her. So, I tried to lighten up. When Ian finally showed up, I found him to be a very nice person. Would Melissa ever date anyone who wasn't?

Ian Dennison was a 21 year old psychology major in his senior year at Santa Clara University. He lived at home with his parents. He was relatively short, about three inches shorter than me. His hair was blond and fairly long, though tied back with a rubber band. He wore a small ear stud, which would not become a popular fashion for men for at least another ten years. Being an East Coast guy, I found it strange. Though it didn't take very long to learn that it was becoming an accepted West Coast fashion even then.

That evening my sister put Sean, her son, in the master bedroom with her and her husband. Melissa got Sean's room to herself. I had been sleeping on a hospital bed in the living room, so Ian got to sleep in the living room with me. My sister pulled out a day bed for him that had been hiding in a closet.

After supper we all sat around the kitchen table drinking large amounts of coffee as we got to know each other. Ian and I got talking about psychology, as we shared that academic background, and I ended up telling him a bunch of war stories from my just ended probation

officer days. Surprisingly, I discovered that my sister, Jack, her husband, and Melissa had a common interest in New Age topics. They went on at length about reincarnation, auras, spirits, karma, bio-energy, natural foods, vegetarianism, and everything else that would be considered flaky back home. This was a whole new side of my sister and Melissa that I had never seen before in either of them.

The next morning Melissa and Ian began their return trip back to the San Francisco Bay area. I promised to spend some time with Melissa in California once I was able to get around on my own two feet. I also felt confirmed that Melissa would always be a good friend but that we just didn't have the right chemistry to be anything more to one another.

Chapter Sixteen

Later that morning I got a call from Tabitha. Her business in San Francisco was finished and she was returning to Israel in a couple of days. She asked if she could visit with me in Portland before she headed home. I was overjoyed that she wanted to visit and offered her my sister's hospitality and my earnest desire that she stop by before leaving. I checked with my sister as soon as I got off the phone and she offered Sean's bedroom, should Tabitha need a place to stay the night.

Around five o'clock that afternoon the doorbell rang. It was Tabitha. I was impressed by the speed with which she got up to Portland. We had been on the phone only a few hours earlier. I was also impressed at how spry she looked for a woman in her early eighties and I told her so. She thanked me for the compliment, noting that it had been a few years since anyone had offered her a compliment because of her physical attributes, even if that attribute was being spry!

We talked in generalities at first.

She told me a little bit about her work in San Francisco and the funding she had lined up for the refugee camps in Israel. She was worried that if Israel or the world didn't begin to take the people living in the camps more seriously in the near future a great deal of violence would erupt from the people confined there.

I told her of the recent visit from Melissa and Ian, as well as my surprise at the interest of my sister and Melissa in things *New Age*. Tabitha patted me on the arm, like I was a simple school boy, which I probably was, and shared her thoughts on the topic.

"As to all the talk of a *New Age*, my dear Theo, I wouldn't be too put off by it. Their interest has its roots in the same source as Psalm 27. '*O Lord, hear my voice when I call; have mercy and answer. Of you my heart has spoken: 'Seek his face.' It is your face, O Lord, that I seek; hide not your face.*'"

"There is a natural yearning in every human being for God. We are empty and incomplete without God. We can do nothing without God. We are drawn to God by our inherent nature. While many of us find our path to God along more conventional and well worn paths, some follow their hearts along less conventional roads.

"This *New Age* that your friend talks about is the same New Age that Christ spoke of when he instructed his disciples to pray that, "...*Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done!*" They are

trying to respond to the voice of God crying in their hearts: “Seek his face.” That is much better than being spiritually complacent, satisfied with keeping the letter of the law and missing entirely the spirit of the Gospel message.

“The interest in reincarnation, auras and so on can be seen in a similar way. They are an attempt to develop a sense of how the world works beyond the level of material phenomena. Christian metaphysics is our attempt to do the same thing. Though concepts like reincarnation don’t exactly fit into the Christian world view. We have to be careful not to uncritically swallow every idea that comes our way. After all, it was once the common understanding that the world was flat and that cigarettes were good for you. I respect the spiritual dynamic that is behind much of what is referred to as New Age. Whether there are ghosts or auras is irrelevant, as far as I’m concerned. I won’t argue such issues with anyone. What I will do however, is encourage those who are interested to follow the call within and seek the face of God. I encourage them not to be satisfied with falsehoods or wishful thinking. I would say the same thing to a Christian to whom I was giving spiritual direction.”

I agreed that seeing their interest as the voice of God calling them to an ever deeper and richer understanding of their nature and their relationship to Him was probably the best way to relate to their interest in things New Age. If they continued to follow the call they would eventually move beyond the initial promptings that peaked their interest in things that were spiritual in general and move toward the truly divine.

She asked if I felt any more spiritually settled than I had in Israel on my pilgrimage. At that time I was struggling with what direction my life would take and seeking guidance from God. She already knew that the trip to the West Coast was part of my attempt to deal with that struggle. So I explained that I didn’t feel very much further along the path to understanding than I had back in Israel. While the trip West had been a lot of fun, there had been no flash of light or any deep insight as to my destiny or purpose in life.

When I would say something very earnestly that revealed how much of a simpleton I really was, Barti would always smile his warm but ironic smile before explaining how I was missing the key issue that was right in front of my face. I noticed that Tabitha had a similar habit, only instead of smiling she would pat me on the arm. So, before she said anything in response to my frustrated response, she patted me on the arm.

“Occasionally God will hit us over the head to get our attention and inform us of why we

are here on planet Earth. I wouldn't wait on any flashes of light though. God gave us minds and expects us to use them 99.999% of the time. We must learn to discern God's will for us. It becomes apparent enough as we make our journey through life, if we are able to discern what is in our hearts. It is in our hearts that God most readily reveals Himself to us.

“Have you been regular in your prayers?”

I admitted to Tabitha that since the accident I had not been very regular in prayer.

“When you are under stress, my dear Theo, it is easy to use it as an excuse to let down your resolve and grow lax in the spiritual disciplines. No matter what, be sure to make time for prayer and meditating in silence every day. Being laid up from the accident, you have an abundance of time for prayer and meditation. Make good use of this time. Don't let anything interfere with your spiritual discipline. Holiness is God's grace at work in our lives and God is the primary actor. However, being regular in spiritual disciplines makes us more completely available to the Lord. It better disposes us to God's action in our lives. It helps get us in motion.

If I remember correctly, you tried to pray the Divine Office as a spiritual discipline but had trouble staying with it—everything tended to become one big blur. Has that improved any?”

I admitted that my struggles with the Divine Office had not improved, if anything they had grown worse.

Tabitha nodded her head and continued.

“I don't deny that the Psalms can be very boring and some psalms can be very difficult to relate to when talk turns to smashing heads and seeking revenge. There are many days when I have trouble with the Office myself.

A while back when I was visiting with the Patriarch in Jerusalem, I got into a discussion with a certain rabbi. We were discussing the Genesis story of Noah and the ark. The rabbi explained that among the classes of creatures Noah was instructed to bring on board the name of one of the creatures had the equivalent meaning for the Hebrew word is light. A common method of interpretation of Scripture among rabbis, even the early Church Fathers, is to look for the spiritual meaning of words used in Scripture. So there has been a long debate on what God meant by telling Noah to bring light aboard the ark. A common interpretation has been that God wanted them to bring the light of Torah—that is, the light of Wisdom—aboard the ark so that Noah and the creatures would not be in spiritual darkness.

One of the great Hasidic rabbis, Baal Shem-Tov, taught that the Hebrew word for ark has

two meanings: ark and word. So, the passage about bringing light into the ark, really means that God wanted Noah to bring the light of God into his words—that is, into his prayer.

“If we read Scripture as we would the newspaper, we can’t expect much from it. Our mind will wander and getting through the Office will be our focus and worse...it will be a burden. However, if we approach the Office as an ark provided for our salvation and we bring the light of God into that ark, through our attention and the conscious turning of our hearts to God, perhaps we may discover some illumination from our prayer. Again, we must not attempt to make anything happen through our actions or the force of our will. We only are properly disposing ourselves to God’s grace by quieting ourselves before beginning prayer and consciously turning our attention to God’s presence.”

I told Tabitha of my recent dream, thinking that perhaps God was using that as a means of communicating with me. She responded.

“Dreams are a way that God communicates with us. Though we must be careful how we interpret the dream. Any interpretation can be colored by our desire and not reveal the truth that is buried under our false interpretation. Have you been able to grieve over Barti’s death?”

“Not at first,” was my response. “I didn’t even know that he was dead until you told me. I thought that Barti survived the accident. I remember very clearly talking with Barti in the ambulance as they were bringing me into the hospital. In fact, the conversation with Barti is the only thing that I clearly remember from that first week after the accident. Everything else is a blur. That conversation is as clear as a bell.”

Tabitha commented. “Well then, perhaps he did take time to visit with you before he moved on. If so, then you were blessed with that last spirit to spirit contact.”

I continued with my explanation. “Ever since that dream, I’ve been in a terrible mood. I think the fact that Barti is gone is finally hitting me.”

“Good,” she began. “I don’t mean it is good that you are suffering. Even so, it is normal to experience some pain at the loss of a person who was important to you. If you don’t experience much grief, it usually means that you have yet to face the reality of his death.

“Continue to be open to your feelings about Barti and his passing. Acknowledge those feelings and give vent to them. Emotion is part of being human. As a result, it is also part of being spiritual. To be truly spiritual is to be fully human”

Around this time my sister came in and pushed my wheel chair to the dining room table

and invited Tabitha to join us for dinner. My sister served pot roast, much to my surprise. The food was delicious and the table talk was charming. Tabitha entertained everyone with her tales of World War II intrigue and contemporary struggles in Israel. She also retold the story of her meeting Barti, as well as some of the more comical aspects of my pilgrimage adventure the year before as viewed from her perspective. Many times we laughed so hard that tears came to our eyes. She was a master storyteller that evening and we were enthralled.

Tabitha accepted my sister's invitation to use Sean's bedroom. So, after dinner we had time for more conversation. I began the conversation by giving vent to some of the frustration I was feeling.

"Barti is dead and I'm laid up for the next six months or so, yet I feel no closer to knowing what my purpose is. My relationship with God seems more strained now than it did back on the pilgrimage. What's going on with me? Am I off on some wild goose chase that cost Barti's life?"

"You are not on any wild goose chase! Remember, my dear young friend, spirituality is not about obtaining anything or reaching any goal. It is not about achievement. It is about death and resurrection. It is about the death of our present way of living and being, that we might become a new person. It is a process of self-transcendence. It is a process of moving beyond the limits of who we are today to become what God means us to be. It is a process of evolution. It is a process that involves the whole person—body, mind and spirit.

"The desert fathers called this process conversion of heart. Such conversion is not a one time process but is a constant process involving many experiences of conversion, each experience opening us to God's grace a little further. This conversion takes place in the middle of the chaos in our lives, the chaos may even help the process along. The chaos demands that we face challenges and grow from the encounter. If we don't grow then we stagnate.

"All of the pain, confusion, trauma and strangeness you are experiencing right now is an opportunity to grow. The growth comes as our struggles help us to see our experience in a different perspective. For example, you can focus on your sense of loss and frustration and ultimately be trapped there. The pain and loss may be painful but some people find comfort in the familiar, even if it is pain. You can also focus on what lessons the pain and loss has for you, on how it is challenging you to become more than you are at present. One outcome might be that you come to realize the important role that Barti has played for you over the past couple of years,

you perceive the value of mentoring and commit yourself to it as a mentor –in a way appropriate to your age. In such a situation you will have grown beyond a Theo caught in self-pity and pain to a Theo who is a support and grace to others. Your horizons will have expanded.

“So the question to ask yourself when wondering about the state of your spiritual life is whether you are growing or stagnating? Spiritual growth is always in the direction of deeper relationships with others, a lessening of preoccupation with self, and a freer giving of oneself to others in service.

“Spiritual growth is not marked by flashing lights, sudden preternatural wisdom or certain knowledge that we are on the right path. As long as we are seeking God’s will in our life, we are on the right path. Occasionally, God may seem to hit us over the head to get our attention and get us to move in a particular direction. Much more often God simply uses our prayer and the circumstances of our lives to guide us towards Him and to open our awareness to the vastness of His love for us. It is important to remember that it is not just an expanding awareness that is important to spiritual growth but the development of our intentionality. That is, our ability to commit ourselves to what we perceive to be God’s will. In the process what emerges is a deeper and more expansive sense of meaning in our lives. That sense of meaning is not separate from the movement toward deeper relationships, greater self-emptying, and more total service.

“A couple of years ago a Jesuit friend, Fr. Bernard Lonergan, asked me to review a book he was in the process of having published. “Method in Theology” is the name of the work. As a technical work of theology, it is pretty good—quite readable. Though it is definitely written for an audience that is familiar with both philosophy and theology. What I really like about the book however, is the central place he gives to this process of constant conversion of heart in spiritual and human growth. He stresses that meaning is what makes us who we are and enables us to understand who we are. It is through meaning that we move beyond our present actuality and transcend our limitations to worlds and horizons presently beyond our reach. To seek meaning is to grow as a human being and that is what spiritual growth is about—growth as a human being.

“If you need something to help you pass the time as you recover, you might give the book a try.

“Maybe a story can help illustrate what I’m trying to express...as you know, my husband Ladi was taken to Auschwitz very early after the Nazi occupation of Poland. He was kept in the labor camp there. Normally, they didn’t murder non-Jews. Rather, they were used as slave

laborers until they dropped dead from exhaustion. I saw Ladi only once again after he was taken off to Auschwitz. It was when I went to Auschwitz representing the Archbishop with a delegation of officials to provide humanitarian aid to the prisoners. Ladi had been in the camp for over six months. He looked terrible. Even worse, we couldn't speak to one another for fear it might cost him his life. There were occasional messages sent back and forth through contacts but I never saw him again.

“Then after he was there about a year or so the messages stopped. I assumed that he had died but there was no notice from the officials who took him away. The messages just stopped coming. I tried to find out what happened through my usual channels of communication but there was just rumor. No one could confirm it, but the general impression was that Ladi was dead. I later realized that part of the reason that the lines of communication were drying up was because the Nazis were imposing an increased level of security and scrutiny over the camps. They were beginning to transform the labor camps into death camps and didn't want to have that information publicized.

“The direct result of all this on my life was terrible uncertainty. I feared the worst but I couldn't truly mourn his passing because I wasn't sure if Ladi was dead. So, I simply moved ahead concentrating on my ministry to the Jews and others who were trying to survive the insanity of those years. My prayer life was flat but I plodded along with it anyway. If I couldn't be close to Ladi, I made sure that I was a close and loving support to the women and children who depended on me for their lives. I also tried to be a source of support for the Archbishop and my co-workers at the chancery.

“As the years passed I came to look back on the war years as the most spiritually productive years of my life. They transformed me, allowing me to see the world and myself with a degree of honesty and maturity that was impossible earlier. While I went through those years they were a living hell, but they taught me the meaning of courage, self-sacrifice, and the burning power of love even in the face of the concerted forces of hell. I could perceive none of this while I was in the middle of it. Yet, as I faced daily challenges and learned to rely ever more totally on God, I changed. I really didn't notice the change until I looked back on the war years from the relative safety of my post-war position on the university faculty. It was only then that I was able to mourn for Ladi and my son.

“Spiritual growth is not something to be achieved, like a runner might strive to achieve a

gold medal, nor does God normally telegraph ahead details of the destiny to which He is calling us. Our particular destiny unfolds as the natural fruit of a life lived in concert with the Gospel, and in relationship with God. It unfolds through our experience and our decisions, as does spiritual growth. It unfolds as we move toward the vision of what might be that beckons us, or at least seems to be what is necessary in our present circumstances.

“Our effort at building relationships, being open to God’s grace, and being of service to others are our contribution to the process. As these virtues become characteristic of our way of living in the world, they become the substance of our transformation. They become who we are. This process occurs in the messiness of life with all of its surprises, heartaches, joys and challenges.

“Now each of us goes about building relationships, being open to God’s grace, and being of service in different ways. Each of us is a unique character and our relationship with God reflects this uniqueness. Even the most radical of spiritual conversions doesn’t make you into a totally different person. At the most, qualities that were present in you but not allowed to develop are given a chance to flourish and qualities that have not been used very well are acknowledged and put to better use. This is the process of spiritual growth. It is through this process, day by day that those transcendent qualities in us flower and yield ever more fruit. It is through this process, day by day that our other qualities are brought to the service of our eternal destiny.”

I’m not sure that I grasped everything that Tabitha was trying to tell me but as I thought about it in the days that followed it became clearer. It also struck me as very similar to what Barti was trying to explain the afternoon of the crash.

I realized that a good deal of my frustration was my own fault. In a sense, I wanted an angel to appear to me with golden tablets and tell me what to do with my life. Tabitha was telling me that I was asking too much. What I needed for spiritual growth was already available to me in the Gospels, in the Christian community, in reflection on the graces and talents that God has given me, and in simply living as a Christian.

I clung so tightly to the image of pilgrimage as a spiritual journey toward some holy place that I was blind to the deeper meaning of pilgrimage. I began to see my life as a journey toward a sacred destination and I became focused on the destination. So, when I had trouble finding the map that would lead me to that destination, I panicked. The point of the image however is not the destination. The point of the image is that the journey itself is what is

important. It is on the journey that we are transformed. It is on the journey that we grow in fellowship. It is on the journey that we let go of any burdens that keep us from the destination and surmount any obstacles. It is on the journey that we are able to heal, love, and serve one another. The seed of that realization was planted by Tabitha that evening, though it would take a while before the insight flowered.

The following morning Tabitha came in to wish me well and say good bye. The taxi was waiting to take her to the airport where she had to catch a flight eastward in about two hours. We exchanged our thanks and good wishes for one another, hugged and made our farewells. While Tabitha and I carried on a correspondence over the next few years that was important to me, that was the last time I ever saw Tabitha.

Within a year of that visit she suffered a stroke that left her considerably weaker. She had to withdraw from her more public ministries and refugee work. She lived for another five years during which her health steadily declined. Though we corresponded regularly, I was never in a position where I could visit her in Israel. She never spoke of her health problems in her letters. The letters revealed to me only a woman who seemed to be growing more compassionate, human and more transcendent as the months and years passed. Then, one day I received a letter from the Benedictine abbot in Joffa returning my last letter unopened and informing me of Tabitha's passing.

Chapter Seventeen

Christmas was pretty boring that year. I was getting around a bit more, as I was competent with a wheelchair by that time. The physical therapist was helping me to build up more strength so that I would be ready when the casts came off in March. So Christmas was pretty much home bound, except for mid-night Mass at St. Thomas Moore Church, where my sister and her family were parishioners.

I did a lot of reading that year. I found the Lonergan book Tabitha mentioned to be rough going at first. Though as I got into it his ideas became much clearer. It helped me understand what Tabitha told me during that last visit. There were also a few Thomas Merton books that I read, which gave me a lot of ideas to mull over. Being laid up left me with a lot of time for mulling!

That was about the time I began to keep a journal as well. The journal entries were an opportunity to put my “mullings” on paper. It really helped. I was forced to take my vague ideas and get them sufficiently clear to be expressed in words, sentences and paragraphs. The only reason I was able to remember so much of what Tabitha and Barti told me after all these years, is because I put much of it to paper while I was laid up and the memories were still fresh.

Early in the new year there was an initial settlement with the insurance company of the people who smashed into us. They were clearly been at fault. Their blood alcohol level was so high that if the accident hadn't killed them the amount of alcohol in their blood may have. So, the insurance company agreed to pay all my medical and rehabilitation expenses, pay for the car, and provide a substantial cash settlement in addition, to pay for my pain, suffering and potential loss of income. I figured that I might have been able to squeeze more money out of them if I pursued it through the courts but it wasn't worth the aggravation to me. If I was careful with the settlement money, I could live off of it for several years.

That got me thinking about the direction my life needed to take in the coming months. Soon I would be recovered sufficiently to begin looking for something to do other than sitting around my sister's house and read or write.

I considered going to graduate school, as the settlement would more than cover related expenses. The problem was that I didn't have a clear idea of what I wanted to study. I felt that a lack of focus as an undergraduate was understandable. After all a liberal arts education was

meant to open you to the world of ideas, not train you to be a functionary in some corporation or government bureau. However, at the graduate level, if you weren't focused you were wasting your money.

I briefly considered the priesthood during those early spring months. While the attraction was there, I wasn't ready to make that kind of commitment. I was powerfully attracted by Christian spirituality and the possibility of ministry. I wanted to build on and deepen what I learned from Barti and Tabitha and seminary seemed to be a way to do that. On the other hand, I wasn't sure I was made for a life of celibacy. I admired Tabitha and the profound spirituality that flowered from her life experience, much of which was spent married. Before long I realized that the call might be there but I wasn't ready to make that judgment call just yet. I needed a bit more life experience.

Melissa encouraged me to stay with the original plan, even if it was much delayed, and look for work in the San Francisco Bay area. That was the direction toward which I was leaning. The settlement allowed me to look for work at a much more leisurely pace than I would have if everything had gone as we were planning. The lack of funds would have created pressure to find work immediately. Now, I could take my time and look for a job that I wanted, instead of being forced to take anything that came along. I'd have a new car to get around with and enough money to get a comfortable apartment. So, toward the end of March, I decided to stay with the original plan and head for San Francisco once I had the "all clear" from my physician.

April 1 was on a Friday that year. I have always been a sucker for an April Fool's prank. When I was in high school my sister played a prank on me that involved the high school principal, the mayor and a gallon of ice cream. I won't go into the details of the prank here but I made such a fool of myself that I never lived it down. In honor of that prank and as an attempt at making it up to me, anytime we were close enough to visit on April 1st, my sister would take me out to dinner at the best restaurant in town.

So, that evening we all went out to the *Brasserie*. The food was delicious and a good time was enjoyed by all. We got back home fairly late that evening and everyone went to bed filled with great food and glowing with pleasure from good fellowship. That evening I had a dream.

I was back in the ambulance. There was an IV stuck in my arm and an oxygen mask on my face. I was covered in blood and looked terrible. In the dream I wasn't in my body. Rather, I was simply observing my body and what the paramedics were doing to it.

Then I wasn't in the ambulance any longer. I seemed to be back at the crash site. I saw my car upside down, crushed and torn apart. I doubted if anyone could have survived such a crash. I was surprised then when I saw Barti standing behind several paramedics who were working on the car. I called out to him and he seemed surprised. He turned, and lead me away. We found an empty ambulance not far away and sat down to talk.

"This is crazy. Just moments ago I was watching medics working on a body that looked a lot like me in another ambulance. Now I'm with you! That body was in really bad shape. Are we dead?"

"I don't know, Theo. If we're not dead, we have to be very close to it."

Just then a medic came over to the ambulance where we were sitting, went in and got a piece of equipment and returned to the car without even noticing that we were there. That added to the weirdness of the experience. I had seen enough movies about ghosts to get a really bad feeling when the medic walked past us—almost through us—without even noticing that we were there.

"I'm sorry, Theo. Maybe if I had been more alert I could have avoided that crazy driver who pulled in front of us."

"Don't blame yourself, Barti. You were driving as well as I would have been. No one would have expected him to pull in front of us like that."

"As we were talking, a beautiful young woman about my age walked toward us. Unlike the medic, she seemed to see us.

"Excuse me," she called to us. "Are you Bartholomew DelCalle and Theodore Douglas?"

We were both a little surprised that anyone noticed us after our recent experience. I have to admit that I was reassured that maybe we were not dead, if someone could see us. It also seemed very strange that a total stranger—no matter how beautiful she was—would know our names.

"My name is Sophia. I'm here to help you with the transition."

"What transition?" I asked.

"From mortality to eternal life." She responded.

That drew a total blank from me. However, something clicked for Barti. He had the strangest expression on his face. It was part surprise, part happiness, and part concern. I could see him struggle to put words together, then finally, he was able to say something.

“So, you are the angel of death?”

Sophia flashed a big smile and said, “Yes.”

This was becoming too bizarre for me. Though there was a clear logic at work. I was in an accident. I had been in an ambulance a few moments ago on my way to the hospital when suddenly I was here back at the site of the accident. The medic treated Barti and I as ghosts, totally invisible to him. What could be more logical than a beautiful young woman to come up to me and introduce herself as Sophia, the angel of death!?

“Each of you has a choice to make,” Sophia began. “You both are at death’s door. You can move on to the next world or return to your mortal existence. In the normal scheme of things each of you would have lived longer. Each of you would have enjoyed advanced old age and in relatively good health. At least, the potential was there for this. Your individual decisions throughout life would certainly have had an influence on the actual outcome.

“If I go back, what will become of me?” Barti asked.

“I don’t know. God has given you a rational mind and the ability to use that mind freely. You are not locked into some deterministic fate that I can read by looking ahead. You create your own destiny as you make decisions from one moment to the next. Both of you have good hearts and a real hunger for God. There is great potential for good in both of you. What happens to that potential is entirely up to you.”

It was strange seeing Barti in my role as the neophyte trying to figure out what was going on. However, Sophia seemed infinitely patient with both of us, apparently expecting such questions. It is more than a little unsettling to learn that you are on death’s door with decisions to make.

This time I asked a question.

“What would I be giving up if I decided to return to my body and wait you out for another sixty or seventy years?”

“Ultimately, you would give up nothing, as long as you remain as rooted in the Lord as you are at present. It is not easy to explain what the next world is like...allow me to let you see it for yourself.”

At that she covered our eyes with her hands. Again, I was no longer at the site of the accident but soaring through the sky over a beautiful landscape below. I was struck by the intensity of the colors and the golden tinge of the light. The flowers were a luminescent rainbow

of light. The distant snow was a shimmering, brilliant white. The grass and trees a rich emerald green. A stream of crystal blue and white ran down from the mountain nearby and cut the valley below in two. The view was breath-taking, as was the sensation of soaring above this wonderful scene in free flight.

A moment later I found myself standing in a garden next to the blue and white stream I had just viewed from above. There was a rich sweet scent that blew through the garden, a mix of flower and fruit, that made me want to drink in the air. It was delicious. The breeze was just cool enough to make the warm air of the garden almost perfect.

“Hello, Theo.” A tall, rugged looking young man greeted me as he walked up and threw his arms around me. He seemed very familiar but I couldn’t quite place him. Then I got a whiff of the lineament and bar soap that was branded in my memory from early childhood and I knew who it was.”

“Grandpa! Is that you?”

“Well I’m glad that you can still remember your grandpa after all these years.”

It had been almost twenty years since Grandpa died. I was only eight at the time and it was a major trauma in my young life. I idolized my grandfather. He was my friend, hero, and protector all in one. He would always listen to me and then after I told my sorry tales he would give me a big hug and make it all better. Then we would walk down to the corner store where he bought me a big candy bar. He was a great story teller himself, with exciting tales from World War I and his adventures in New Mexico with his brother just after that war. When I grew up we were going to go off on all sorts of adventures. We would go to the moon, fight pirates, be cowboys out west and climb the mountains of Nepal. At least, that is what we promised each other.

I clung to him weeping for joy that I could be with him once more and weeping for all the years we were separated. When he died the strong river of my love for him dried up at the loss. Now that love was once again a life-giving stream. The joy of this reunion was almost more than I could handle. For so many years my secret desire was to be with grandpa again, now I was.

“Theo, listen to me,” Grandpa said in a comforting voice, probably more appropriate for the little boy he knew back on Earth. “Sophia tells me that you need to decide whether you are going to go back and finish out the life you began on Earth or whether you will stay here. She arranged for me to visit with you, since it was one of your deepest desires. She was hoping also

that I might be able to help you decide.”

“Why should I stay? Why should I go back?” I asked with a frustrated tone.

“This is frustrating for both of us, Theo. You don’t have the experience or the understanding necessary for me to be able to explain the wisdom of either choice in any meaningful way. I have to convert everything to concepts that might be meaningful for you. Even these gardens and beautiful scenery, which you find so breath-taking, are only symbols that we are trying to use to convey to you something of the utter joy and beauty of the spiritual reality in which we live and have our being.

“So, why should you stay? This is yours. If you decide to stay then you get to enjoy it with all of its wondrous beauty. You’ve missed me and grandma. Stay and we can be together, enjoying each other’s company. You wanted a direction in life, now you don’t need a direction. You’ve already reached the destination.

“Why should you go back? There is still a great deal more that you could do to make the world a better place back on Earth. You have many gifts that could be put to the service of others. Many of those gifts and talents are as yet unpacked, lying dormant deep within your soul, waiting for the right time to germinate and flower. If you stay here you will not have the opportunity to see these talents to come to fruition. These are talents that you must grow into through facing challenges and overcoming obstacles. The necessary challenges and obstacles lie ahead as part of your life on Earth. Going back won’t be easy. Just the physical damage that you suffered in the accident will keep you laid up for quite a while. After that you will face all of the challenges that are part of life, as well as a few that will emerge out of your life experience to spark talents that will be especially important to others.

“I love you Theo and would be happy to have you here with me. But it is more important to your own growth and spiritual development that you go back. If you came over now, you would be happy. If you go back and allow yourself to grow and more of your potential unfold before coming over for good, both you and others would benefit greatly. Everything happens in its own good time. You’re not ripe yet. It just isn’t your time.”

I knew that he was right.

“Don’t you worry, Theo. I’ll be waiting for you here when its time for you to come back over to stay.”

Grandpa hugged me as he spoke those words. The next thing I knew I was back at the

accident site and Sophia was removing her hand from my eyes. She looked at me as if she were asking if I had reached any decision. Before she said anything, I made my decision.

“I’m going back. There is still plenty to be done, lessons to be learned, and love to be shared.”

Sophia smiled at my statement. She then turned to Barti who was standing next to me. This was the first time I had noticed Barti since Sophia covered our eyes. He looked different. He was glowing with light, like Moses come down from the mountain top with the Ten Commandments. Peace and joy seemed to radiate from him.

“I’ll stay.”

I felt a twinge of disappointment at Barti’s words. I realized that like my Grandpa, now my good friend would no longer be with me to share the rough and tumble of life. Barti sensed my feelings and tried to explain.

“Theo, there is work I could do back on Earth but my greatest contribution is to be made from this side of eternity. I’ve faced my major challenges and learned my lessons for the most part. The vision I experienced when Sophia covered my eyes took me beyond the horizon of Earthly life and into the transcendent. I’ve seen both options Theo. I’m choosing what’s best, at least for me.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“I will miss you as well. But remember that I will be with you. I am in your memory. Think of me, remember our adventures together. We remain united in Christ as well, as close to each other as each of us is to Christ.”

If you have ever watched a Revival, the preacher will put his hand on a person’s forehead as if to give the person a blessing. Some preachers will give the person’s head a little shove and the next thing you know the person is on his or her back in a state of religious ecstasy. They call it being “slain in the spirit”. Pretty much the same thing happened to me. Sophia put her hand on my forehead. The next thing I knew I was falling backward into a dizzying darkness.

The next thing I knew I was in bed in Portland. Even though there was a chill in the air, I was soaked with sweat. My heart was pounding. I sat up in bed. That was the strangest dream that I had ever experienced. It seemed so real!

I glanced at the clock. It was 5:30am and the sun would be coming up in the next twenty minutes. The gray light of dawn was already illuminating the sky. So, I got out of bed, put on my

robe and walked out to the back porch. It faced East and offered a beautiful view of the mountains surrounding Portland. I would go there often to pray and to think. Dawn was still a bit chilly in April but bundled up in my thick robe I was fine. I took my breviary from the book shelf on my way to the porch. Once settled on the porch I began reading the morning prayer in the gray light of dawn. The psalms came easily to me that morning. They spoke of the beauty of God's creation and how all creation offered praise to God. I was reminded of the garden the night before and my dream of soaring above a glorious heavenly scene. The dream and the psalm merged and both were the wings of my heart as it soared in the heaven of praise and God's wondrous glory. I was lost in the wordless perception of God's love when I noticed the sun rise over the mountain ridge. The air was crisp and cool enough, that even the details on the top of the ridge many miles away were sharp and clear. It seemed as if I could see to eternity that morning, as the sun came over the ridge with its brilliant golden light. Everything around me was intensely bright with rich color and light. The air seemed to hum with the intensity of the moment.

As I watched the sun rise into the sky, I was reminded of the time back at Ramlah when the old priest held up the Sacred Host during the Mass just before we left Israel. Gazing at the Blessed Sacrament that afternoon, the boundaries that separated me from it and from everything else seemed to melt away. It was happening again. The rising sun and the Son of God revealed in the Blessed Sacrament were one. The light filled my vision. It was one, yet in the light it was three. I didn't try to understand what was happening or even observe that anything special was happening. I simply sat in mute adoration experiencing such intense joy and peace that only the experience in Ramlah can compare with it. There were no words, only a knowing. I knew that God was with me. I knew that I could trust in God and rely on God even in the darkest and most frightening times. I knew this because I experienced the flaming, burning fire of God's passionate love for me—for everyone of us. That love knit together every fiber of my being and held me in existence. To live...simply to be...was to be held in God's loving embrace.

It seemed as if I was caught up in the light for hours...eternities of wordless joy...but it was only moments. The sun cleared the mountains and lit up the sky, beginning an unusually comfortable spring day. That morning felt like Easter morning. Christ was risen! I realized that like Lazarus, I also had been raised to new life.

Chapter Eighteen

So, this installment of the further adventures of a pilgrim reaches its end.

Even though I was able to grieve for Barti, I have never thought of him as really gone. Perhaps this is colored by the experience I had back in the ambulance following the accident or the strange dream I had the April following the accident. It has been his voice with me all these years, as the voice of conscience and mature wisdom. He has always been there for me, just beyond the limits of physical perception but present nonetheless.

In May I went down to San Jose and began looking for work. I submitted scores of applications and resumes with little response. There were a few interviews but nothing came of them. However, I had enough money from the settlement, that I wasn't hurting. I was willing to wait for the right job to come along. In the meantime I got to know Ian Dennison and found in him a good friend. Melissa and I enjoyed each other's company and had many good times going on adventures in the San Francisco area. I even explored the possibility of graduate studies at one of the San Francisco Bay Area universities, should no job turn up in the near future.

Just after Labor Day that year I received a large manila envelope from the Peace Corps. It had been sent to my parent's address back in Rochester and they forwarded it to me. Opening the envelope I learned that the Peace Corps was offering me an assignment as a Volunteer in the Eastern Caroline Islands, a place called "Truk". I borrowed an atlas. After a few minutes of searching I was able to locate a few small specks in the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean that were labeled "Eastern Caroline Islands".

I wasn't sure how I was going to respond to the invitation. I applied to Peace Corps over a year earlier and had long ago given up any thought of being a Peace Corps Volunteer. Now, this invitation came totally out of the blue. I spent a few days praying and thinking about it but in the end I accepted the invitation. The invitation had the feel of a major turning point in my life and I wasn't about to miss this opportunity, with all of its challenges and potential difficulties.

Just after New Year I boarded a plane and began a journey that would change my life forever. However, that is another story.

I hope you enjoyed The Journey. I occasionally offer extended stories like this as part of Along the Way because spiritual reflection is often best shared through the medium of a story.

We only need to look to Christ to get a sense of how important stories were to Him. The essence of Jesus teaching is presented in His parables and presented in a way that takes root deep in the hearts of those who hear or read his parables. There is no better example to follow than Jesus.

This story is written in the first person. This is only a convention I use in telling the story. The person telling the story is Theo Douglas and it is his adventures that we follow. While Theo and I have much in common, I am not Theo. Theo Douglas, Barti DelCalle, and Dr. Tabitha Glowaki are all fictional characters. As with any author, I draw from my life experience in crafting these characters and their adventures. Though I admit that there have been people in my life upon whom these characters are loosely based.

Also, I did make a cross country road trip to look for work in California roughly about the same time Barti and Theo made their trip in the story. A fictionalized version of that trip is the basis of this story.

Over the next few months Along the Way will return to its normal format of brief reflections on the spiritual side of daily life and current events.

A complete e-book version of The Journey is available for downloading at my website. The web address is www.tripod.com/atwstories.

Much of the insight offered by Barti and Tabitha in The Journey is drawn from classic works of Christian theology and spirituality. If anyone wants to learn more about the ideas presented in this series, I recommend the works of Fr. Adrian Van Kaam, Dr. Susan Muto, Fr. Bernard Lonergan SJ, Søren Kierkegaard, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and St. Augustine. If you would like more detailed recommendations, please send me an email.

Finally, if you have ideas for Along the Way articles or possible stories please send them to me at rsheyman@eriercd.org. If I use your ideas or story concepts, you will get appropriate credit when the idea or story is used.