

Bill

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A classically American childhood

I was the first born child and grandchild of a large, close-knit Polish family. I grew up in the same neighborhood and on the same street as my father, living only ten doors down from the house still occupied by my grandfather. It was an idyllic neighborhood, filled with a mixture of young and old, all working-class people, also filled with kids, lots and lots of post World War II kids, all attending Harvard Elementary School, just two blocks away. The school was like an old castle and its teachers were old—a couple of them had even taught my father. Every day a parade of kids walked past my house to get to school. I was just one among many.

The milk man came daily, letting me ride in his truck. The drugstore down the street had a soda fountain where, after school in October, we watched World Series games on a small black and white TV, drinking vanilla phosphates or cherry cokes. Being the oldest, I was doted upon by my entire family, but being very small, I was easily overlooked outside the family. I was always “busy” and wanted to be liked, so I worked hard at getting along with others, especially those older than me.

My parents were stable. They worked hard and rarely fought. They blended German stubbornness with Polish stoicism. To this day, no one in my family has ever divorced. My mother cooked, cleaned, and cared for us dutifully. Every night we had “supper” together, joined by my grandfather, who walked down the street from his house, entertaining us with vibrantly relayed stories of the events of his day. He was small in stature, but large in presence. He was in his 70's and seemed old. His cantankerous, crusty character sometimes drove my mother crazy, but then his warm heart would lead him to bring home trunk loads of green beans or fresh picked corn acquired from his buddies at the nearby state hospital, or bring

home a new baby crib for my sister—acts of kindness that drove my mother to unusual displays of gratitude.

I lived in a classically American setting. I was surrounded by what seemed to be the best ideals life could offer: stability, love, loyalty, security, positive role models, and a strong work ethic. Life did not *seem* rosy; it *was* rosy. I was given a lot of freedoms. I roamed the neighborhood at will, going from house to house, visiting all the old people in the neighborhood weekly. To this day I am not sure why. I explored the Maumee River, played baseball at the school playground, took the bus downtown to go to movies, rode my bike to Maumee to get ice cream, and ran errands for Mrs. Nelson, the lady on the corner. I developed a lot of bonds and enjoyed my many freedoms.

2 Getting lost in Leviticus

I grew up Lutheran and, perhaps once or twice a month, attended church with my family. I was enrolled in a catechism class taught by the pastor and even went to summer Bible school a time or two. I heard about Jesus and was somewhat familiar with a few Bible stories, but for the most part I did not understand why I was there and most of what was being taught went right over my head. Church was filled with people just like my parents, from my neighborhood and beyond. Except for the sermons, hymns, and Sunday school classes, it could just as easily have been an Elks Lodge. As I recall, nobody talked about God or had any spiritual discussions.

Yet despite this, or perhaps because of it, I discovered that I had a “spiritual” side to myself. I found moments at church when I felt strong warmth in my heart toward God. And though nobody ever told me to, I strongly desired to read the Bible. I thought it was a “book” that could tell me about God from start to finish. Or perhaps it was a book that would somehow increase this “warmth.” As it turned out, I was partly right and partly wrong. So I would eagerly begin reading Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created....” Happily I would read the stories contained in Genesis and move on to Exodus, but, right about Exodus 22, I would begin to falter in my zeal, getting bogged down in the laws that followed the Ten

Commandments. I could never muster the strength to get past Leviticus chapter four or five, finally giving up altogether, never thinking I could just skip over those chapters (you do not skip over chapters in a book). Though mysteriously drawn to the Bible, after five or six attempts spread over two or three years, I concluded that it was impossible to understand.

I attended catechism classes and was probably exposed in some way to the Gospel message, but I sure do not recall it ever having much of an impact. I was never left with much of an impression about Jesus, His death and resurrection, sin, or prayer. I do not recall anyone telling me that the Bible is in fact a collection of “books” written by a number of different authors and that the Bible revealed God’s plan for humankind’s salvation from start to finish.

3

Forecast calls for pain

That cantankerous paternal grandfather, who lived down the street, was as much a daily part of my life as my mother and father. He was a lively character. Every night he walked down the street to have supper with us, enlivening the dinner table with vivid stories of his day accompanied by the banging of his palm and a sprinkling of swear words. Grandpa went downtown everyday to his lodge where he played cards with his buddies and often times bought something to give me, when he came down for supper. Frequently I would go up to his house to visit him and he would give me raisins as a “treat” or I would “help” him pick pears in his backyard or shovel coal into his coal bin when he got a delivery in the Fall. Sometimes we would walk the three blocks to the Toledo Zoo and roam around, looking at the animals.

Occasionally, after school, he would be waiting for me on the other side of the crosswalk to take me to the drug store to buy me candy or a coke. I loved him dearly and, though I do not recall him ever hugging me or letting me talk much, I knew he loved me, too. I think I was the “apple of his eye.”

At the age of 80, painting the peak of his house, high up a ladder, he fell to the roof and then to the ground, slicing open his skull. Bleeding, he walked down the street to our house, and dad took

him to the hospital. X rays taken revealed that he had no broken bones. But he did have tuberculosis in his lungs. He entered a special hospital where he stayed for the next eight months and for the next couple of years his health declined.

It was the summer of 1966; I was twelve and attending a week-long Boy Scout summer camp when my dad unexpectedly showed up. He told me to gather my things together and that I had to come home. I knew why. As we sat in the car together, dad asked me, “Do you know why I’m taking you home?” I replied, “Grandpa died?” His “Yes” blew apart my world. A previously unknown pain hit me, invading like evil, consuming me, and taking up residence somewhere in my stomach and heart. I could not breathe. I wanted to vomit. I cried uncontrollably, seeming like I could not or would not ever stop. So, at the age of twelve, I was introduced to grief, the other side of life, with full force. No matter what I did, even long after my beloved grandfather’s funeral, I could not make it go away. I was held captive to this grief for so long that my parents worried about me. Eventually, as grief does, it melted away. But it left scars. I resumed my life, with a large hole in the place where my grandfather had been, but also with a little more wisdom regarding life and relationships. This was my first “wake up call” to a reality of life that I did not know existed, and could not possibly have been prepared for: pain and loss.

4 Dazed and confused

We moved out of the neighborhood the following year. My parents had sold the houses that my grandfather left to them in his will. He also left my dad a grocery bag: all the rent my dad had paid him, for the last twelve years, had been stuffed in a brown bag in the cedar chest at the foot of his bed. All the times I had been over to that house I had always wondered why that cedar chest was locked.

It was a big change. Ninety percent of the kids with whom I went to Harvard Elementary never moved or changed schools; I had known them all since kindergarten. But I was ready for this change. The new neighborhood, where I lived from 1967 until 1973, was a subdivision called “Crossgates.” For me, it represented adolescence,

high school, growth, rebellion, and experimentation. It also meant a new high school and new friends. One new friend was Ron Burgett. His parents were Baptists. We would play basketball in his driveway, day after day, for months at a time. There was something different about Ron, a quiet confidence and maturity that none of the boys our age had. He never swore, seemed kind of serious, and said that he wanted to be a pastor or perhaps a missionary when he got older. He eventually invited me to a basketball day camp sponsored by Youth for Christ. In the middle portion of the camp, they had all of us sit in the bleachers while the college-aged men shared their testimonies and told us about Jesus. I loved the stories and paid close attention, but nothing 'clicked' inside of me. Hadn't I taken catechism? Wasn't I a pretty good person? I was not sure about this 'personal relationship with Jesus' concept and I could not understand what it meant. I was not so much opposed to it. I just did not seem to 'get it.'

My new neighborhood also contained the parsonage for a Lutheran church directly across the street from us. My parents switched to this pastor's church. But his kids and even the pastor himself were not like Ron or Ron's family. Several years later the pastor ran off with another woman and became a restaurant manager.

At sixteen and seventeen I had a girlfriend, Kay, and she had a younger sister, Gretchen. They were daughters of a pitiful, sometimes vicious, raging, alcoholic mother. She once pointed a loaded gun at my head as I stood at the front door of their house. Their dad did not live with them. At some point Gretchen "got saved" and when this happened, she began to witness to anyone and everyone. Every time I went over to their house, which was frequently, it was "Bill, do you want to know Jesus?" But I was not at all interested. My heart seemed to have grown cold since that Youth for Christ camp and I had no interest in reading my Bible anymore. In fact, I remember mocking Gretchen and making fun of her, telling her to shut up often and that I thought it was great if she needed and had "a crutch", but I did not.

As a result of all these distracting options in life, I was an average student. I finished in the middle of my class. I was not good at anything and had no real goals in life. I was neither popular, nor

unpopular. I never got into any serious trouble, although I certainly deserved to. I was just another face in the crowd.

5 The lost years

I am not sure if I graduated from high school or got “processed out”—one of 527 seniors of Rogers High School, class of 1971. I certainly did not feel prepared and did not have a clue as to what to do. I do not recall getting any guidance beyond, “It does not matter what you do, just be happy.” So that is what I tried.

But this advice led me nowhere. I moved from job to job, transferred to four different colleges, and had several failed relationships. There were many sad consequences connected with these events, but, in the end, I had become a lonely, listless, and lost failure. In the name of just trying to “be happy,” my bad judgments and conduct hurt myself and others. These were difficult years—and I had only myself to blame.

Two key spiritual events had occurred, however. At one of the colleges, I briefly had a roommate, transferring to my dorm room for about 6-8 weeks. Ralph was a fun, party guy, often coming home drunk. At the end of the term he moved out, but a short time afterward I ran into him. He was completely different. He said he had “gotten saved” and he proceeded to share the gospel with me. Ralph’s radiant countenance and the conviction with which he spoke was like Gretchen’s and Ron Burgett’s. He concluded by saying, “Bill you gotta accept Jesus. He changed my life.” He left it at that. I did not know what to think. It was obvious something had happened to him. I thought about it for days. Eventually I dropped out of that school and a year later I was passing through that town and stopped to get some gas. The station attendant was none other than Ralph. He asked, “Bill, did you find Jesus?” I said, “No,” working hard to not look him in the eye and leaving in a hurry. I had not found Jesus. I had never tried or followed up. I did not need to get “religious.”

The second key spiritual event occurred in June of 1975: a near fatal car crash, involving my two sisters. Barb was released the same day, but Becky lay critically injured in Toledo Hospital’s emergency room, awaiting a surgery that hopefully would save her

life. My mother, father, and I sat silently, stone-faced in a small waiting room. We could not speak. It was as if all three of us were simultaneously staring into an abyss, so horrifying that it had sucked from us the very life force. Overwhelmed by pain, sadness, and worry, unable to speak or even to look at each other, we spontaneously started to pray together, out loud. We cried, begged, and appealed to God out of our pain. We needed Him, His presence, His power, and His mercy in a very personal way. Becky needed Him too. We left the situation in His hands, hoping for the best. Around and around we went in our prayers, several times, until exhausted, we ended. Pain and the threat of loss had brought us to this point. We felt small, overpowered, and fragile. I had travelled a road so far from God; all I could do was rely on His mercy. Little did I know that this event would mark a turning point in a long journey, literally and figuratively, to, as Ralph would say, “finding Jesus.”

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The determined years

About a month later, I met Karen. We hit it off immediately and for the next seven weeks we saw each other every day, bonding quickly. It seemed as though we had known each other for our whole lives. Although we had lived two blocks from one another, our paths until now had never crossed because she had attended parochial schools her entire life. When she left for St. Louis to return to school, I was alone and left to chart some sort of course for my life. I knew that whatever my plans were, I wanted to include Karen in them, so for starters, a few months later I moved to St. Louis.

It was during the course of these years that I discovered that I had choices to make. Instead of waiting for life to simply “unfold” before me, I could make a determination and follow it. This was a critical distinction. I am not sure why I had never thought of it earlier, but all my life I had been playing “catch up” to others who seemed to have “got it.” I was never taught to make a decision and to follow it wholeheartedly, making adjustments on the way. I had been told to “just be happy.”

I enjoyed connecting with Karen. I learned how to study, imitating Karen’s habits, disciplining myself along the way. My

attitude had transformed, affecting my grades and my overall approach toward life. These were happy years. They were also hard working years, with my goals out ahead of me. One goal, as soon as the others appeared close on the horizon, was to ask Karen to marry me. They finally came within view and we married on October 27, 1978, bringing a chapter of my life to a close. I could think no longer of “me;” it was now “we.”

Spiritually speaking, I would like to have said that I was tuned into God. But during this time, I never thought about God or went to church, and I had not picked up a Bible in years. And although I had completely forgotten about Him, He had not forgotten about me.

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The searching years

Before we were married, Karen and I had a series of pre-marital interviews with Father Wilhelm, the priest at Karen’s parish who would marry us. I enjoyed talking to him immensely and, even though our sessions lasted only an hour, I could have sat there all day. Father Wilhelm talked about love, commitment, loyalty, forgiveness, and he talked about these things being grounded “in the Father, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” I had grown up in a home that valued loyalty and commitment, but pretty much had substituted sentimentality for love. None of us knew how to love very well. There had been a few people in my life who had tried to explain Jesus to me, but I had ignored what they had to say. I did not know it, but, through Father Wilhelm’s talk, I was starting down that figurative road to Jesus.

Karen and I began our new life together with hopes and dreams, like all people do, but, like all people do, we soon discovered reality: life sometimes hits hard; it can be a stressful grind, filled with responsibilities for which we are not prepared. I certainly was not. Four months after the wedding, due to these stresses, I went through a period of anxiety attacks. Karen and I began asking, “Was this all there was? Was this how it was going to be?” We decided to move to Oregon for a better “quality of life.”

The road to finding Jesus was literally I-84, leading us from Ohio to Oregon. We had begun to discuss God even before the move, but now, on the drive to Oregon, scenery inspired us to comment about God to one another. God was using life's stresses and frustrations, hardships and dissatisfactions, to lead us to Himself.

When we moved to Vancouver with our two kids and a dog, it represented the culmination of a lot of work and dreams. But we expressed a doubt about life in the form of a question, "Well, what do we do now?" My mother infamously replied, "Well, now, you decorate."

God, it seems, was bringing things into focus through the witness of Ron, Gretchen, and Ralph, through the discussions with Father Wilhem, and through the emptiness and stresses of a life seemingly wired for frustration. They were all playing key parts in drawing me to Him. Then, one day, someone knocked on our door to talk to us about Jesus. Of all the doors on all the houses on all the streets in southeast Portland, she knocked on mine.

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The found years

Judy, the person who had knocked on our door, began a Bible study with Karen. A short while later Karen became a "Born Again Christian." I felt threatened by this new division of loyalties and energies. I did not understand it; nothing about it made sense to me. It was as if I had forgotten everything I had ever been told about Jesus by all the others. Now it was Karen telling me about Jesus, her church, and the messages that were preached. I recall looking forward to her coming home from the services because she would retell what had been preached in great detail. I found myself giving my full attention to her words. The enthusiasm with which she spoke also stood out to me. As hard as I tried, there was no denying that whatever had happened to Gretchen and Ralph had now happened to Karen as well. But the main thing that stood out to me was the conviction with which she spoke, as if something real had truly happened to her and she believed it with all of her heart. I tried to dismiss it, hoping that if I tolerated it long enough, this fad would run its course and fade into history. But it did not.

We had been arguing about this one evening and in the course of the argument Karen, as if running out of all other words to say, simply, but passionately, stated, "I do not know, Bill. All I know is this: 'And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.'" In the Bible, while Daniel was in the lion's den, God sent an angel to shut the lions' mouths. Now He had shut mine. I was speechless. I was not sure if it was because of the power of the Word or the conviction of Karen, allowing her to muster her strength to utter the one Bible verse she knew (1 John 5:11-12). But looking back, I now know it was both. I felt exposed, "*He who does not have the Son does not have life.*" Confronted with this truth, in the core of my being, I knew where I stood. I did not have the Son; I did not have Life; and I knew it. I wish I could say that I invited Jesus into my life then and there, but my inner self, the one descended from stubborn German stock and nurtured in independence, was not done fighting yet.

About a month later the Gospel was shared clearly, patiently and effectively with me. All my desperate arguments were listened to and refuted with stories from the Bible. Clearly, these two guys who knocked on our door that evening knew their stuff. Faith? I needed to take the first step; God would build it as I went. Doubt? Did not Thomas, one of Jesus' own disciples, doubt, and did not Jesus mercifully remove it? Sin? I was clearly separated from God because of it and there was a chasm, as wide as eternity itself, between me and God. If God became a man and died on a cross for my sins and if this man, Jesus, God's Son was the only possible way to bridge that gap, why would I not seize the opportunity to walk across that bridge to God? I wish I could say that I invited Jesus into my life then and there, but I still was not done fighting. I do not know if I was finding Jesus as much as He was finding me.

The next day, for the entire day, my soul was captured by my need for Christ. The sobering vision of me separated from God because of my sin, the pit below, God on the far side, Jesus bridging the gap. It all became clear to me. I wanted to be "over there," to be forgiven, to belong to Him out of gratitude for what He had done for me. That night, with Karen on the couch next to me, I prayed and invited Jesus to come into my life. I was His. It was Friday,

November 8, 1985. On Sunday, November 10th I walked into church as a brand new Christian.

And so began my new life: a life of learning to live by faith; a life of love, of community and forgiveness; a life with many failures, but always met with the miracle of forgiveness and mercy that defines Jesus himself. It is a life that, I have come to find, is often misunderstood by others, just as Ron, Gretchen, Ralph, Karen, and even Jesus himself, were misunderstood by me. But through the unwavering love, guidance, encouragement, and patience of my pastor and dear friend, Mike, who took me under his wing, teaching me, and the community surrounding me, I have been able to grow, to learn, and to give to others what others have given to me, who is best described by the words of St. Patrick, "...a careless and unworthy fool and the least of all His saints."