

Four days later was The Fourth of July. I was estranged from my wife who had filed for divorce. I felt obligated to go by Mom's house for the annual neighborhood party. Many years we'd watch fireworks from the roof of our house because we could see four separate suburb's firework shows from that vantage point. My sister and nephew were living there, and all the neighbors were my friends. Problem was, there'd be plenty of booze flowing all around our big backyard patio. I'd begged out of cooking, my annual responsibility since my Dad's death two years earlier. My solution was to go to the early meeting and ask one of my new recovering friends to accompany me to the picnic, forcing me to keep sober. Bob agreed to be my safe-keeper and followed me to Mom's.

My time there was tense. We didn't stay long, and I rode back to the club with Bob. Our group was having their annual Fourth of July cookout in the club's parking lot. I experienced my first sober social function, ate my first pieces of pie made by Sandy H., and, just like that first night, felt completely at home – much more at home than at my mother's where I lived over twenty years. The club was probably five miles from my Mom's, and her house was one block off the main road between the two points. I decided to walk back to my truck. It was a beautiful day, warm, a magnificent blue sky, something I hadn't seen since for who knows when. I'd grown accustomed to hiding in the dark bar with my other sick alcoholic friends.

I could take you to the point in the service road where a miracle took place. Then it was only fields of tall weeds, the area devoid of development. The high-rise condos and homes haven't changed the spot.

I say it happened there, but I'm sure seeds planted earlier just bore fruit then. I walked, thinking of the past few days, the previous couple of years, and my desperate attempt to pinpoint what was wrong with me. I believed in God – I'd prayed for help those last dreadful days of drinking. Those last months of drinking I could no longer teach my bible class or even usher – I felt degradation and despair. I never told anyone of those feelings, just tried to drink them away. Getting clearer minded by the minute, I sought a renewed connection to my new God – a "higher power" they called it – and I longed to converse with him.

There, on the service road, a presence entered my mind, walking with me. There was no voice but a clear thought. It would keep me sober the rest of my life. There were no conditions just a statement – a matter of fact – put forward as if answering all the questions I ever had or would have. I accepted the thought as truth. I didn't vow or promise, but experienced an overpowering sense of wellbeing. The mental and physical compulsion was relieved. For nearly two years I was in the chronic stages of alcoholism, probably not breathing a sober breath. Now, four days later, I was as far away from a drink as a pig is from the moon.

[I'm marking this paragraph and the one later in the piece because it is my intent to omit them entirely. They're fine for a stand-alone piece but interrupt the flow of the book.] The next few weeks going to meetings was my priority, and I tried to figure out what to do with the rest of my life. I knew drinking was not an option and never would be. That was July 4, 1977 and I have remained clean and sober, survived throat cancer and have been cancer free for almost four years, and a victim of Katrina having lived two and a half blocks off the beach in Gulfport, Mississippi.

Years after that July of 1977, Katrina had driven me away from my Gulfport, Mississippi, home. I lived in Sioux City, Iowa, going to meetings daily. A survivor of throat cancer, I shared with the group speaking with my device through the microphone. I told of my experience, strength and hope to the group, which included many newcomers like I'd been that month, speaking with my device through the microphone. I let them know about Pat C. who relapsed two months after our first night and died shortly thereafter, about Jack O. who went back out but made it back and had over twenty-three years of sobriety when he died from cancer. I told them God continues each and every day to keep the promise He made to me, and He will keep the same promise for them – they never have to drink or use the rest of their lives, one day at a time.

I have remained clean and sober now over thirty-one years and have moved back to

Gulfport Mississippi in the same zip code as before Katrina but farther off the beach. I still go to meetings and have been blessed in so many ways. Like we say in one of my favorite songs "God is good all the time".

OK

It Wasn't My Fault

Pat C. stopped coming to the club, and after a couple of weeks I asked someone where she was going to meetings. I was told Pat was dead. She had caught a serious cold and treated her illness with an over-the-counter cold medicine laced with alcohol. A few nights of use set off her physical compulsion, and off to the races she went. But this time Pat didn't come back. We learn quickly our disease can be lethal.

More bad news came. Ed T., who I met at that first meeting, promising I'd return that evening, was my sponsor and was the first person to help me, but he went back out and started drinking again.

My first serious choice – whether to give up or keep staying sober – was easy. I chose sobriety. During those early days I listened to people share, and I was impressed with one fellow and asked him to be my new sponsor. Stan P. instructed me to focus on the third step and get ready to do the fourth.

My wife filed for divorce while I was still drinking. We'd been Sunday school teachers,

and the last couple of months I drank, on mornings I couldn't get out of bed she continued to teach the class. She continued after I got sober until she moved back to her mother's house. One Sunday morning I walked, hung-over, into our sunroom. Kathy was sitting there all nice and proper, dressed up and sipping a cup of coffee.

"It's time to consider a divorce," I said, trying to hold the coffee cup from shaking in my hands.

She calmly informed me she had an appointment the next day with a lawyer downtown and was hoping I could drive down to meet them. I guess she assumed, now that we were thinking alike, I would go along with her plans. I was devastated, but agreed to meet her there. So much for my ploy to further manipulate my partner.

Now, having asked Stan to sponsor me, I returned to this same home. We were moving out. My stuff fit in the back of my pick-up. She needed a large moving van for hers. That Monday morning at the lawyer's I had signed the Monte Carlo title over to her for one dollar. She handed me the dollar. I left soon, to lunch at a steak house, and got totally blitzed. I don't know if I made it back to the suburbs that night or not. My guilt allowed her to take all the furniture and most of our belongings, including the dog. She was moving to her mom's basement, almost the size of our house, and I was moving to a rented room. I kept the goldfish. It was dead the next morning when I woke up from sleeping on the couch that fit in my little room.

Larry W. had his own business and a house on his property. He rented rooms to recovery fellows trying to make a new start, including me. The good news was that Stan was going through some changes, and he rented one of Larry's upstairs rooms. I was next in line for the other attic room, and then I could live down the hall from my sponsor. Most clubs have people going in and out all the time, and I was upstairs in the larger loft area in no time. The bathroom we shared was small but functional and located between the apartments. I even had my own coffee pot, which Stan took advantage of each morning.

During these transitions I attempted to salvage my business and convince my now-divorced wife to keep trying with our relationship. I met Keith who became a good friend, took over my room downstairs, and helped me with my business. We worked pretty well together. That summer Star Wars hit the theaters and we went to see the sensation. The "Force" took us over and we'd go see the movie once or twice a week during the cheap matinees for the next six to eight weeks. The jobs suffered from the corresponding lack of progress.

The fog between my ears began dissipating. Late August, I was in the discussion room at the club for a noon meeting. Sunshine and a nice breeze came through the windows, and I was feeling in touch with the "Force" or God or something. During that meeting I realized I was not responsible for my father's death. Guilt and shame flowed from me as if it were a spirit with

form and substance. A portion of my mind had been shrouded in darkness but now saw light. The release and relief overpowered me as I sat there, sucking in the new breath of life that surrounded me.

The Friday three days before the Dad died, he picked me up for a game of golf, though I was still recovering from back surgery. Dad was acting really weird, driving like a maniac. We both got excited about getting to the golf course, but his actions were stressed- filled and out-of-sorts. I put aside my worries. I wanted to play golf, not ask what was wrong. I knew there was something going on with his health. After his sudden death, guilt over not confronting him ravaged my mind and soul for the next two years, catapulting me into my chronic stage of alcoholism. My Dad was my business partner, friend, confidant and drinking partner. He died the following Monday afternoon in the parking lot of a golf course, having played nine holes with friends from the Elk's Club. My sick mind declared me responsible for his death.

Sitting there in that sun-filled room, I realized I was not responsible. My Father chose his path, chose the life he would live, and I was not part of his demise. Sometime later I realized I chose to get sober two years to the day he died. He passed away on June 30, 1975, and my sobriety date is June 30, 1977. The lifting of this remorse and guilt had an astounding effect on me. I willingly launched into working the steps.

Surprising Sunday

Those early days, keeping focus was so important – and in many ways still important these thirty-one years, five months and sixteen days later (still clean and sober). It must have been the first Sunday of that August in 1977. I woke up remembering it was my turn to usher. I hadn't been to church since weeks before hitting my bottom, probably five weeks. Prior to that, each Sunday was hit-or-miss, depending on how bad my hangover was. My wife was faithful and continued to teach our Sunday school class and I felt so guilty when she told me the kids missed me. I don't remember missing being an usher on a first Sunday, but don't know for sure. Should I show up and help out or just blow it off and go to a meeting? I'd told a neighbor friend I'd go to her church some Sunday soon, too. She'd been our neighbor growing up since the mid-fifties, and was best friends with my Mom. Still being new at the prayer and mediation thing, I took a few minutes, quieted my mind and came up with a plan to keep everyone happy including myself.

Showered, shaved, dressed, plenty of coffee and cigarettes, I was at the Good Shepard Lutheran Church in time to be an usher for the first service. People greeted me more than I

greeted them, I think, and Pastor Weber was really glad to see me. My ex-wife had moved back to her mom's house. Though she wasn't with me like before, people were still very warm and non-judgmental.

Pastor Weber's sermon, from a biblical passage, used the Hebrew word "Abba". He translated it as meaning "Daddy," not father, as Jesus used the word in his prayers. Religion has always been a problem for me – the formality of the ceremonies clashing with my always wanting to be a free spirit. I liked this concept that God was my "Daddy", close, intimate, friendly, and Pastor Weber described the full meaning of the word. I had lost my Dad and this new "Daddy" could definitely be not only a spiritual father but also a relationship to replace the one I lost.

The service ended and I promised the Pastor I'd be back next Sunday to usher and finish out the month's commitment the following two Sundays. The plan was to go to the late service of the new church after grabbing breakfast at the Greek restaurant nearby – gyros and eggs, toast and jam, more coffee –heaven. The idea of welcoming this new "Daddy" into my heart and mind was attractive and interesting to say the least.

The services of the new church, Willow Creek Community Church, were held in a movie theater. I entered the theater, received a bulletin, and took a seat not too far from the back of the theater. Early on, they had a meet and greet part of the service. I was nervous and said to the first person I met, "Hi, my name is

Ed, and I'm an alcoholic." I had been to so many meetings the past month I couldn't think of anything else to say. The person smiled and introduced himself. I was so embarrassed! The service was ultra modern with a band, skit, and up-to-date music with a great beat. With one more song before the sermon began, I was primed for the Spirit to do its work. Hearing the Abba story, a full stomach, feeling very comfortable in this relaxed worship atmosphere, I watched the singer approach the center of the stage. "Desperado" was the song, and the line near the end hit me like a ton of bricks. "You better let somebody love you before it's too late." I cried as I opened my heart and – just as importantly – my mind to this new "Abba". The sense of wellbeing was wonderful and still is when I get out of the way and let it happen. Was this a conversion experience or taking the Third Step? It didn't matter really – I just knew I had a spiritual experience that confirmed the one I had on the 4th of July a month earlier. The entity that made itself known that day identified itself this morning and the message was clear. Let my new "Abba" love me before it was too late. It was easy actually – not many alternatives in my life at this point. The spiritual adventure of sobriety began in earnest.

The Mayor

Sober only a few months, having some time on my hands – which is always dangerous – I called Greg, a National Guard friend in the construction business with his father. My business was in turmoil, and I didn't expect it to survive but another month or two. My friend was doing a home improvement show at the O'Hare Inn. They had become a dealer for a brand of doors and windows – nice ones too. Wanting to see my friend and seeing the visit as the possibility of finding some work, I agreed to come by the show.

The place was buzzing. Greg, stranded alone in their booth most of the day, desperately needed a break when I showed up. "No problem," I assured him, knowing enough about the windows to answer most technical questions while he was gone – and who knows? I might get an installation job to boot.

Greg said, "Have at it," and headed for the bathroom and snack bar a few aisles from his booth.

Time passed quickly as I stood near the walkway, handing brochures to prospects. A few stopped and took a closer look at our wares, but went no further. A professionally dressed lady was asking some good questions when Greg

returned. He busied himself, not wanting to interrupt our conversation. I was nervous, not because of the possible window deal, but because she appeared to be interested in me. I was unsure of myself, vulnerable, needy. Somehow I summoned the courage to ask if she wanted to go have a drink at the snack bar. She said yes! Greg, overhearing the conversation, grinned, said his goodbyes and thanked me for watching the booth.

We walked to the snack bar, making small talk and looking at a few booths. I struggled to remember what everybody at the meetings said about how to handle these situations sober. She was recently divorced – something in common already – and not a friendly one either, the way it sounded. But she was handling it fairly well, and this was one of her first ventures out and about.

She ordered a glass of wine and I asked for a cup of black coffee. Greg had given me a couple of complimentary drink tickets, which I used instead of paying for the beverages. I was amazed at how easy our conversation went. Two lost ships in a big sea? Or was that my resident romantic self that has always got me in trouble. She was very attractive, I thought, and we agreed to go on a date that Friday night. I was so excited I went back and told Greg about our plans after she left.

Back at my upstairs room at Larry's halfway house for recovering folk, I told Stan, my sponsor and fellow denizen of the attic. He was as excited about my date as I was. "Try to be

yourself," was his counsel. I didn't need to tell her I was in recovery but not to hide from the issue either, if the subject came up. My first date sober was a big deal. "Remember, roll with the punches, let her lead the way and don't expect anything. After all it's the first date and you just met each other."

I took his advise to heart and left driving nervously the whole way there. She lived in a classy neighborhood along Lake Michigan, a suburb north of downtown Chicago. Ritzy, larger houses surrounded her smaller but very attractive home. She immediately took charge of our date, which I appreciated deeply, not having any idea what to do. We went to a pizzeria for dinner. I'm sure I just sat there most of the time marveling at her good looks and attention she was giving me. My self-image at the time was only a few feet above whale droppings, but I was feeling better about myself with each passing minute. We saw Cabaret at the local neighborhood theater, an old-fashioned movie house built in the twenties very crowded but an appropriate atmosphere for the movie we were watching – and romantic too. I'm sure I never stopped smiling throughout the reel and remembered steeling glances at her perfect profile.

As we walked to her front door, I figured our date was over, but she invited me in. I followed tentatively and wished Stan was there to tell me what to do. She poured herself a glass a wine, and I asked for a soda. I was surprised when she

sat next to me on the sofa, and not much later moved over closer to me for a kiss.

The taste of wine about blew me away, and I was definitely reacting to her affection. She said nonchalantly that it was time to go upstairs. My extremely romantic response was "OK", as we held hands and she led the way up the narrow staircase.

The bedroom was magnificent – cathedral ceiling with skylights, the outside wall was glass, surrounding a patio door leading to a second floor deck. Thunderstorms were predicted and as we lay on her bed kissing and snuggling, a lighting show debuted in the skies overhead. We made love as large raindrops pelted the skylights and lighting streaked across the glass wall. The lovemaking and storm were over before I knew it, and we just lay there, not knowing what to do or say next, two lost souls desperately trying to make a connection – I know that now, a truth that eluded me at the time.

I simply left escorting myself out of her house to my truck for the drive back to Larry's place. We agreed one of us would call the other in the near future.

The misty air and fog after the storm made the trip home feel like driving in a tunnel. All I could remember was the lighting show while making love – or maybe it was just having sex for the first time in my sobriety. Either way I decided staying clean and sober was definitely for me. No doubt about it. I always thought alcohol added to the lovemaking experience. It

probably does for a normal drinker, but not for an alcoholic. I hadn't had such a wonderful experience at lovemaking since my first time at the drive-in movies, a high school student in the front seat of my father's Ford Galaxy.

We only talked on the phone one other time after our date, considering riding horses or maybe playing golf. Neither of us knew what the next step should be in our relationship – or if we even had one. We were terribly uncomfortable with each other over the phone.

A couple of months later I was speaking with Larry at the kitchen table before leaving for a meeting. He resumed reading the newspaper as I got up to leave. I noticed a photograph of my date in the community section. I asked Larry for the section and read the article praising her recently implemented policies as the mayor for the suburb along the lake. The article mentioned she was recently divorced and was grateful for her position as mayor and city manager, which kept her busy. Dining on pizza, going to movies, riding her horse and playing golf were her favorite pastimes.

I didn't say anything to Larry, and I'm not sure I even told Stan. It was important for me to protect her, to keep our interlude a secret, but she'd never know how important it was to my recovery and my self worth. Her mistake or indiscretion had made me feel forgiven, whole, like a returning member of the human race who had been lost and nearly forgotten.

I remember the night in the cathedral-ceiling bedroom like it was yesterday. Yet I can't recall

her name. The magic of that night healed a gaping hole in my soul, definitely a spiritual experience. If by chance the former mayor reads this story I would love to hear from her. There's a direct flight from Biloxi/Gulfport to the Windy City. I'd love to take her out for pizza and a movie.

Haunting Melody

It was the first winter. There was a movie series on TV about World War II and, without a TV set upstairs at Larry's house, I would drive over to Mom's and watch the segments with Karen, Mom and Eddie, my nephew.

I was taking a shower after work, letting the hot water pour down on the top of my head, not washing, just letting the cascade massage my scalp when a mournful tune came to my mind – sad notes, and there were even lyrics, passages from something religious, biblical, haunting. I listened to these notes and words as much as muttering them as the water continued to pour upon my head.

The tune continued to play in my mind as I dressed and drove the few miles to Mom's house. We fixed dinner and carried plates filled with our portions to the family room to watch the program. It was well into the history of the War, following a number of family members from different countries. One of the family's was of Polish Jews trapped in the Warsaw Ghetto. This

episode depicted the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Prior to the battle scenes there was a Hanukah dinner with the Menorah lit and the family gathered around the table set with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

The father or elder began humming the Jewish melody sung at these dinners. I listened as if it was the only sound I'd ever heard. The notes matched perfectly the tune in my mind in the shower. Next came the words. A part of me still remembers the sense of awe my being experienced. Granted, I may have heard the words from some obscure bible lesson, church service, or spiritual reading, but instinctively knowing the melody was beyond reason.

I'd really never given reincarnation, living past lives, much thought – not in my belief system. I sat there overwhelmed with gratitude for having such a spiritual experience, yet felt an uncanny awareness of the camps, not the survivors – like in a previous life I had died there in one of those hellholes. I cried. My sister Karen believed in such things and other pathways, too, and was not surprised when I shared it with her. I told her that same night before going back to my attic room in Larry's house. I didn't tell Mom about it though, believing she wouldn't understand.

The identification of the Passover hymn set me on an adventure with all things Jewish, ending in a trip to Israel years later. The happening watching TV on the winter night was always with me, and affected me deeply for many years to come. There wasn't anger,

resentment, or fear associated with the memory or thought of a memory of a previous life and death. The emotion, if there was one, was peace. A peace that comes with knowing something that had bothered me in the past, but now was resolved or completed.

Those early days, those first months of being born again, were so eventful, so dramatic. It was as if the Spirit sat on my shoulder, and my ear was tuned to its promptings.

Pam F

Sober only a few months, and having been advised by my sponsor not to "thirteenth step" anyone (a guy trying to pick up a woman newcomer for purposes other than staying sober), I hadn't realized thirteenth stepping could be done the other way around. I met Pam F. my first couple of weeks in the program. She was moving out of her boyfriend's high-rise condo. My sponsor also didn't tell me about entrapment.

After an evening meeting Pam asked, "What are you doing this weekend?"

Not knowing to answer a question with a question, I responded, "Nothing."

"Good, you can help me move. John H. is helping me, too, and we're using his truck. He'll meet you here at the club Saturday morning." Another lesson learned: members always pick on newcomers to help them move.

I dutifully showed up as arranged. One of the last things I carried from the up-multiple-stairs condo was a lawn chair from the porch. The apartment was carpeted with a very expensive pure-white shag carpet. Rusty water dripped across the whole front room from the lawn chair frame.

Pam was beside herself. She said something really sarcastic like, "Leave it to a newcomer to screw up the carpet." I felt just horrible, but there was nothing I could say. I lowered my head and walked to the elevator holding the chair so it no longer dripped its evil fluid.

After that when a member asked what I was doing, I always responded, "Why do you ask?" That way I wasn't entrapped. They knew full well that a newcomer rarely had anything to do except try to stay sober that upcoming weekend.

Winter was approaching, and the northwest suburbs of Chicago braced for the cold and foreboding weather ahead. Our first snowstorm was predicted. By this time Pam was settled in the apartment I help her move into. After a Saturday night meeting, a group always went out for coffee and meals at one of the local restaurants. Pam and I were remained after everyone else paid and left.

She stated, "Winter is upon us. I hate to spend the winter alone. Do you want to have a relationship?"

Whoa! I wished my sponsor were there to tell me what to say. I'm not sure I said anything and

she continued, "Why don't you come over to my place?"

The snow was already piling up. I followed her outside and all the way to her apartment. We had very little foreplay and were in bed together soon. The snow in the parking lot lights, visible through a gap in her curtains, looked majestic. We both smoked a cigarette and watched the big flakes fall to the ground.

My experience the last few months, going to church, listening to the messages, left me and desperately trying to reconcile what I had just done with the principles I was considering following. I got out of bed and started putting my clothes back on.

"You're leaving with this snowstorm outside?"

She was right the snow was piling up outside.

"You sure you don't want to spend the night?"

"Yeah. I'm going to go home and go to church in the morning." I knew if I stayed there would be no way I'd be up or want to leave her warm bed and I'd miss the service.

She didn't get out of bed. I left.

The next morning I was in my usual place in the theater transformed to a church. I had no ill feelings towards Pam. We actually became very good friends before she moved to California. I had other affairs while attending church – practicing the thirteenth step myself. But that night with Pam was unique and, to this day, I really don't know why. Knowing I really had no deep feelings for her, more than the Christian principals, made me leave. Sex without love was no longer acceptable to me.