

TALES OF A WANDERER



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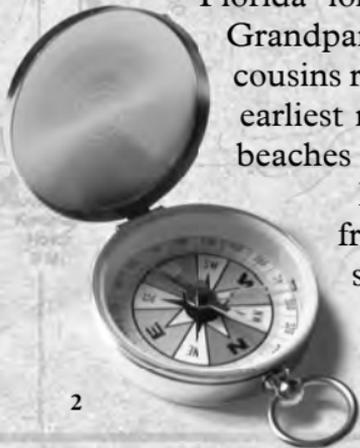


TALES OF A WANDERER

I was born in Manhattan to parents who were determined to overcome the devastation that occurred in their own families because of the depression. My small family lived in a beautiful brick house my father and uncle had built on Long Island. We lived in horse country, complete with tree-overhung lanes, still ponds, and stone-fenced horse pastures. But our family was far from “settled.” Like the migratory songbirds, my family had wintered in southwest Florida long before my arrival on the scene.

Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and multiples of cousins remained there year round. Some of my earliest memories are of expansive white sand beaches and crushed shell roads.

In an effort to distance themselves from the cruelties of their own hard-scrabble upbringing, my parents strove to give us all the “good” memories we could have as children — holidays and



family outings, weekends spent with friends and family, cookouts and fishing together. We were a normal, happy family by all appearances. We weren't rich. We didn't know what was coming until it came. Our area was "discovered" by developers. Big money started rolling in, along with the pressures to be part of the "beautiful people."

Now that I needed to attend school, we went back to Long Island for longer stretches. When it was just my older sister, she was smart enough (with my mom's coaching) to miss quite a bit on each end of the school year and still keep up. But with me just starting, the choice for a better education in the north prevailed. Besides, in a few years the twins would need to start school also. It would have been too much to keep us all up to speed. But we'd still spend as much time "down south" as we could economically afford.

Late one Christmas Eve my mother woke all four of us girls up at two in the morning. She whispered in a strained voice that we were all to quickly get dressed in the clothes she had laid out for us. Groggily but obediently, we dressed, sensing her urgency. Our whispered questions were given only the gentle but firm answer, "Wait, and I will tell you soon."

We slipped quietly past the decorated Christmas tree and out our front door. The air was cold on our faces and around our cotton tights as it swept up our little wool coats. We hurried through the blue snow of early morning to the car. The headlights highlighted the gently falling flakes as we drove off.

“Where are we going?” we whispered, still under the vow of urgency. “We’re going to see Grandma.”

“Isn’t Daddy coming?” No answer. She must not have heard. Sleepily, we didn’t press the issue.

The distractions of the next two weeks kept the question of Daddy at bay. But finally, it could no longer be ignored. Daddy wasn’t coming, and life began to unravel.

My father tried visiting and winning my mother’s heart back, but an insidious thing had happened. In an effort to “give us the good life,” my parents were exposed to another version of “the good life” which the new society of southwest Florida had brought with their affluent lifestyle. Unfaithfulness and deceit ran rampant among these people, who felt that their wealth lifted them above conscience. It was also accompanied by the familiar scourge of alcoholism that had ruined both of my parents’ upbringings.

Played upon by the “freedom” from moral restraint these wealthy people engaged in, they began to doubt each other’s fidelity. After all, my mother saw my father as handsome, generous, clever, and congenial, and he saw her as beautiful, intelligent, and gracious. Their new friends’ lack of morality and appetite for the hedonism eroded their confidence that the other wasn’t having an affair. After all, in those social settings, all the attention was hard to resist. Their covenant trust was broken, although neither was actually unfaithful. Still, they couldn’t believe the other didn’t give in.

One day my mother gathered all four of us girls into her arms. My older sister was nine, I was five, and the twins

were three. “You’re father and I have gotten a divorce.” My sisters sat stunned. I broke from her arms, standing on my little five-year-old feet, and shouted at the top of my lungs, “YOU CAN’T DO THAT!!!!” and ran from the room and buried myself in my pillow. From then on, nothing was ever “for sure” or secure. Life had repeated itself — as with their parents, now with us.

A broken man, my father gave up trying and plunged deeply into alcohol. Alone, my mother never sought government aid as she worked hard to raise us. She said that welfare and the like were for disabled people, those who couldn’t work. She never remarried or changed her name. Years later, at her death, my father wept bitterly. I believe they still loved each other.

She bought the small brick house behind my grandmother and worked hard to make sure we always had food, clothing, and a yard to play in. A young, attractive woman, she had many suitors, but she communicated very clearly to us that we were her first priority.

As good Catholics, we had never missed a mass. Yet now Mom dropped us off at Sunday School and when it was over we walked with the nuns to the Sunday mass to sit with Grandma. Mom wasn’t allowed in the church any more. Mom would be there waiting to pick us up when mass was over, and we’d spend the day all together as a family. I remember asking her why she didn’t come any more. “God isn’t for me anymore. I am a divorced woman, and I am on my own. I can’t ask Him for help. I have to fend for myself.” She tried to hide the trembling in her

voice by turning away.

At age eleven, after a few years of this, I asked as we sat on the beach drawing together, “Isn’t God love?”

“Why yes, why do you ask.”

“Well, the priest always makes it sound like He’s mad at us.”

“You don’t have to go.”

“What?! But isn’t that where God is?”

“You don’t have to go” was the only answer I got. Another foundation crumbled under my feet.

Growing up in a rapidly up-scaling community of lawyers and doctors, our family was a bit of a round peg in a square hole. Our grades kept us in the upper classes, but we were far from “upper class” in either our finances or ethics. I found it troubling to be surrounded by youngsters who were so financially set but morally bankrupt. They treated each other cruelly, causing the lessons we got at home that “money isn’t everything” to ring so clear. I began to despise the children of these “beautiful people.” They were malicious social climbers. I was terrible at playing their games and began a headlong search for anything spiritual.

So, if I didn’t need to go to the Catholic Church to find God, could He be found elsewhere? I began with my peers. Did any of them go to church? I ended up going to several different churches with children in my neighborhood. After eleven years knowing only Catholicism, it was pretty revealing, and I was still left with so many questions unanswered. Their hymnals were as stale as the ones in the Catholic pews, and the lives of their congregations were no

different than the ones that attended St. Mary's.

Where could you get in touch with something really spiritual? Where could you HEAR from God and KNOW you were doing what you were created to do? Why did I care? Why couldn't I just be like all my peers who seemed totally content with just growing up, getting a good job and a nice house, having children, and then dying at 80 years old? What was wrong with me? Why didn't this satisfy me? How come it satisfied everybody else? Was it just that my upbringing left me wondering whether there truly WAS anything that was secure, for sure, no matter what?

If God wasn't for sure, for certain, unchangeable, existing no matter what, then what was the point of life anyway? Primordial soup? *Come on*. So I started to try to find something... *anything* spiritual. I was hungry and empty. At the same time, I felt foolish for feeling that way. Why wasn't anybody else troubled about how people treated each other? Was I the only one who was insecure? There was a deep longing for connectivity to the spiritual. Where are we going? Is anybody paying attention?

I began to hear rumblings that you could experience a spiritual reality if you took these certain substances. That scared the daylights out of me. Drugs? My sister told me to switch the radio station from AM to FM if I really wanted to hear what was going on. The nasal voice of Bob Dylan, the harmonies of Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, the plaintive call of Joan Baez, Emerson, Lake, and Palmer, the Moody Blues, Eric Parsons Project, and others... there *were* others who felt like me! Had they found anything real?

Try this.

My first LSD trip lasted 36 hours. At least it confirmed that there *was* a spiritual reality. It wasn't a "bad trip," nor were the subsequent ones, but it always left me with the feeling that "truth" or "God" was tantalizingly elusive, that you only lightly experience this spiritual realm, but you couldn't *function* in it. It was like being in a bubble in a giant aquarium, and all the myriads of colorful, graceful sea creatures could swim all around you. You could stand in awe of their majestic beauty, but you couldn't swim with them or breathe what they breathed. There was a separation. You could cry at its overwhelming magnificence, but you were no closer to being a part of it. Every trip was a cry to be connected...

From age thirteen to eighteen, I wrestled with the spiritual menu offered in the '70s — Don Juan, Be Here Now, Universal Unitarianism, Tai Chi, meditation, Shamanism, Native Americanism, Buddhism, Third Eye inner consciousness, and on and on and on. In my simple young mind, the only way I knew whether a recipe worked was to try using all the ingredients and following the directions scrupulously. My grades fell off at school. I went from As to Ds and Fs. What was the point?

At 16, a tripping partner told me I should consider going to college. "WHY? The only class I like is art." In one of those stellar cosmic moments he said, "Because you can..." Was this the direction I was looking for? Maybe I could at least be useful to someone. I'd better get working.

I dragged my lagging grade-point average out of the gutter during the next two years. I worked hard at a local health food store and took my undergraduate classes at night. I became a scrawny 98 pounds and my friends and family worried. I was driven. At age 18, I worked as a receptionist for a filthy-rich realtor and picked up trash on the glitzy streets during my lunch hour. On the weekends, I rode my bike and wandered the lagoons and beaches of the inter-coastal waterways alone.

At 18½, I finished my undergraduate work debt free and my tripping partner became my husband. We moved to southern Indiana so we could both go to college. I quit tripping. I wanted to find out whether spirituality was available to me without the crutch of substances. He left after two weeks to “finish contracts” in Florida, and I went to work for the Comp-Sci department at Indiana University, where a year later I enrolled in art school. I worked, took classes, and cowered in my home, safe among the fish tanks.

My husband would visit between “contracts” and pry me from our home to visit his acquaintances. It was like my parents all over again. The college campus was overrun with moral decay. Some of these people were perpetual students whose esoteric rhetoric supported all kinds of abhorrent, bizarre relationships. My husband began coming for longer stays. He was rarely fully coherent, preferring a nitrous oxide, cannabis sativa, LSD stupor. This was later punctuated by cocaine and crack. I found out that his “contracts” were for dealing these substances

to the filthy rich, desperately lonely women of the upper echelon of both the east and west coasts of Florida. They “paid” him with long stays at their coastal palaces, giving him free run of their mansions and themselves. Some of these women even followed him home to our bed.

Our covenant had been broken a long time ago. After a brief stint of trying to coax him down from the rooftop during a crazed trip, the police came and he was institutionalized. His parents (both professors, and one a local judge) apologized profusely. In a short, sad conversation we acknowledged that we were going our separate ways. We divorced. I never changed my name.

When informed that I was required to take Modern Art, I dropped out of art school with one semester to go. I asked to “clep” the course and take whatever test was necessary to pass, but I did not want to spend \$2,000 to throw paint at a canvas from a ladder. They declined, and so did I.

I continued my work at Comp Sci, purchased some land in the southern Indiana woodlands, and built a cabin. I had to do something... something I had some sort of control over. Board by board, I labored, with tears streaming down my face. Why? Why couldn't I find my way? One board at a time, hand-sawing every plank and board, I labored. Sweating felt good. Even splinters felt good. I wasn't hurting anyone. No one was hurting me, except me, a few mosquitoes and sweat bees, and an occasional raspberry bush.

Every night I slept in my Volkswagen camper van, crying

to God to give me some sort of direction. Every morning I'd wake up, drive to town, shower in the university gym, put on my silk blouses, and play "purchasing agent." In the evening, I'd change into my fatigues, pick up supplies for the cabin at the hardware store, and drive home to continue building. I was thankful for the fellows at the hardware store. They knew I would do just what they told me. Just keep putting one board together with the next board. No power tools. Just sweat and tears.

People would come to visit. I'd put on some tea and try to distract them from my utter pointlessness with the fruits of my labors. Winters came and went. Fires felt good. I was cold, I was hot. But what did it matter? Who cared? I loved the beauty of the woods. I was as anonymous as the myriads of leaves on the trees.

One bright fall morning a flock of thousands of tiny red birds came through. Every branch, every twig held a tiny chirping bird. They washed through the woods in a wave of red and were gone. I was so thankful to have seen it. I caught myself. Thankful? To whom? I realized that I still had not forgotten God, but knew I had no clue where He was or how to get to Him. All my efforts seemed in vain. All I had was tears. Was my life really pointless? Later that year, in the spring, the little birds returned and again washed through the forest. "THANK YOU!!!" I found myself shouting after them. "Thank you," I said to no one, crying. Was anyone really listening? Did it matter that I was thankful?

One day, a friend of a friend of a friend stopped by.

I put on some tea. He and his wife and little baby made their way up the long log bridge over the stream that led up the hill to my cabin. Swinging back the heavy oak door, I greeted them and invited them in. They told tales of their adventures, and I pointed out my various creature-comfort achievements, like running water from a water tower, etc. The conversation rambled on, taking a surprising but pleasant turn toward the spiritual. We laughed (inside I winced) at trying to find our spirituality at the new-age smorgasbord.

Then he asked me whether I had ever tried the Bible. You could have heard a pin drop. “Well, of course. That’s where I started,” was my reply.

“Do you have one?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said, getting up to get it, and embarrassed at the dust collected there.

“Try reading it now.” Then our conversation switched to other things, but his words stuck in my heart. Okay, I can do this. What will it hurt?

That night, and every night after it got too dark to work, I would read, by candles or oil lamp. I felt utterly confused about the Old Testament. There was just so much bloodshed, I would have nightmares. The stories in Sunday School were so over familiar that I didn’t get much from them. But the New Testament was fascinating to me, especially the Book of Acts. Could people really do this? Is this what we were supposed to be doing? This had nothing to do with going to church. I had to find out.

Shortly after this, I gave my land to a friend of mine

and moved into a small, run-down farmhouse with this couple and a few others. We tried really hard to just read what it said in the Book and do it. When we came to the part where it said the women should cover their heads when we prayed or spoke, we did. When it said we should share all things in common, we did.

We even took turns “holding the wallet.” No one wanted to “hold the wallet.” It was a responsibility. People would come to you and say, “Hey, I really need some money to get a candy bar. Can I have some?” And you’d try to explain to them that we were scraping to pay the electric bill, and did they really feel like it was a true need. Everyone hated “holding the wallet.”

Then there were the “unity” sessions. One of us would be reading a Christian book on being quiet in your spirit, and another of us would be reading one on being outspoken, and the next thing you knew there’d be an argument as to who was the most spiritual. Then we’d get in these long — I mean LONG, days long — discussions, where we’d be brutally honest with each other. Everyone always ended up wounded, but wanting to love. We’d cry and try to act as if we were spiritual by not being hurt by the naked truths we heard about ourselves. We were SO needy.

We read the part about being baptized for the forgiveness of our sins, and so we took each other down to the little ankle-deep stream at the end of the lower field and baptized each other. Then it came to the part about trusting God and going and making disciples of all men. Yikes! So, I sold my car, quit my job (I was the only one

working), bought a school bus, and we outfitted it to travel across the country.

Really, we were LOOKING for someone who knew how to do what it said in the Book, and we hoped God would see our hearts and help us. So we traveled around the country. I felt like I was back in my teens. We'd drive into town and ask around locally if anyone loved God with all their hearts. We met so many people who said they knew "the Way," but it always turned out they had their own agenda. God told them to do this, God told them to do that. Most of the time they wanted God to fill their wallets.

One day, someone asked me if I was a Christian. I told him no, I didn't think so. I just wanted to be a disciple. What we witnessed in the name of Christianity, or places where people went to "serve God," made me ill. Did they really think that wearing all that make-up and those voluptuous Sunday dresses showed how God was blessing them? Did they really think that telling people who traveled thousands of miles to receive a healing from a "faith healer," who had spent the last of their hard-earned savings to get there, were without faith and that's why they weren't healed? Did they really think they could shame me into throwing back my head and saying some gobbley-gook to show that I had received the Holy Spirit and was now connected to the Creator? HELP!

This confusion was worse than the first! What happened to those simple words in the Book? What happened to the recipe? Was it just another false try to find God? I knew in

my heart that I had conscientiously given it all I had.

We were in Colorado when we heard a friend back home was due to have her baby and she wanted us near. We straggled back to Indiana for the birth. Living together in a borrowed trailer, we had no direction. Many people who said they too wanted to follow God came and went. We were utterly unable to do it.

It was December. Every morning I would scrape some change from the carpet, hitch-hike to town, fill up the empty gallon jugs with kerosene, and hitch-hike back so there'd be some heat for my "family." One frigid night, I rolled over and my blanket stuck to the frozen condensation on the trailer wall. "God, is this the life you have for us, who gave up everything to share what we have with others? A life of strife, jockeying for spiritual clout, of envies and mistrust? A life of hurts and misunderstandings and irreparable damage? God, please do something! You know all I wanted was to know You. I guess this didn't work, did it." The tears streamed down and froze on the cold sheets. "I guess I'll just go back to the woods." I gave up that night and sobbed myself to sleep. I had tried.

The next morning a neighbor, whose abandoned trailer we were borrowing, stopped by. He said he had something to show us. It was an article in *Christianity Today* about a church that was being persecuted for their beliefs. He said he knew we really wanted to be like the first-century church, and he thought we'd be interested in what they were going through.

We had heard about the "Yellow Deli" people in our

travels, and one of us had actually visited Chattanooga years before, but didn't stay. We had tried to find them by the phone directory more than once, but all we got was, "That number has been disconnected. No further information is available. Please check the number and dial again." But here they were! These people whom we had heard about! All we had heard was that everything they touched turned to gold — not monetarily, but things were transformed by their touch. They could take broken boards and broken lives and make them useful again. But we could never find them. Were they raptured or something? Maybe it just wasn't time.... till now!

When I saw the photos in the article, they looked like the most "normal" disciples I had ever seen. There was no make-up, no fancy hair-dos or jewelry, no uniforms, yet they didn't have the down-trodden repressed look of the Amish or Mennonites. They just looked NORMAL. The article was neither slanderous nor praising, just inaccurate. We called right away.

"Ahem, are you the church."

"Ah, yes, how can we help you?"

Then we hit them with a barrage of questions. Do you smoke? Do you drink? Do you eat pork? Do you play music? Do you dance? What about art? What about children? Do you laugh?" and on and on... and most importantly, "Can we visit?"

"Yes, of course!"

I was thrilled. Could it be? Did God really do something? Had He heard me, or was this just another cruel joke about

a love that didn't really exist. I was almost scared to hope. Half of our little group didn't want to go. The other half did. Some things never change. So we borrowed a car. The bus wasn't a good cold-weather vehicle. Besides, I didn't know what they'd think of us if we pulled into their yard in a big bus with a silhouette of Jesus on it.

We wound our way for hours through the snowy hills of Vermont to where they were. When we finally arrived, we were met with warmth and hospitality. We were tired, hungry, and in need of showers. We were invited to a banquet that night that was being given for a young couple soon to be married. We were treated like royalty. During my whole search criss-crossing the countryside, I had never been cared for like this by anyone who said they believed. Who were these people who sang love songs to each other and their Creator? Who were these people who so meticulously cared for our needs and made us feel so welcome, like we were long lost family?

The next day was a turning point for me. There was to be a big gathering. Over 300 people gathered together from all the houses they shared amongst the town. They were there to sing, dance, and worship together, and to hear and learn more about God. The gathering room was on the third floor of an unassuming old building in the middle of a tiny town in Vermont. As people came up, they warmly greeted one another, embracing, and laughing, and sharing stories as they found places to sit along the walls with their families. Once everyone was almost settled, a man stood up.

“Excuse me. May I speak?”

A hush fell over the room. One of my hosts leaned over and told me that this man was the one who had co-operated with people who were against them in spreading lies about the church. He was one of the people whose false reports and accusations caused the state to raid the church in attempt to take all of these people’s children away from them and put them in foster care forever. This man was the reason that article in *Christianity Today* was written.

“I just want to say that I am sorry for all the trouble I caused. I want to ask for your forgiveness. I was wrong.”

Inside, I reasoned that they would probably put him on some sort of probation period to see how he would do. Seriously, this man’s actions almost cost them everything. I was totally unprepared for what happened next.

With a loud voice, everyone in the room shouted, “Amen! We forgive you!”

What!?! How can this be? Then it dawned on me that these people understood something about their Creator that I had never, ever seen. They understood that if God was truly God, and He was truly in control of their destiny because they were connected to Him, they had nothing to fear. He truly would take care of them. It was like the Master Himself saying, “Forgive them Father, they don’t know what they are doing,” and loving those who betrayed and abandoned Him because He knew their frailty of frame. He trusted that God would take care of Him, just as Abraham knew that God would take care of him because he was completely connected to Him and didn’t have his

own agenda.

I knew that I did not possess the kind of love that would empower me to make myself vulnerable to faulty human beings. I knew I didn't trust God that much. But I *wanted* to have it. I *longed* to have that connection that takes away the fear that keeps people from loving one another unequivocally. Again, it came to me, "*God, thank you! Thank you that it's possible! Thank you that love is possible!*"

I asked if I could stay. This is where I found an unchanging, enduring love, a love whose foundations are an unshakeable reality — the reality of God's love for man. This is where I still live, and I've never regretted it. I'm still learning to love. There's so much to learn about loving others. God is vast. His heart for mankind is vast. There's so much more loving to do. It never ends.

I'm not saying it's not hard at times. But love finds a way, and true love, unselfish love, is never wasted. Human beings were created to be connected to God, the source of unselfish love, so they could love as He loves. The recipe works when the Master is the baker.

Love, *Yadel*

P.S. We went back and gathered the rest of our friends.

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