

The night I learned to take chances

We stood along the highway in a blizzard, trying to hitchhike. We started reciting Bible verses to pass the time.

Faith Matters

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My father was a preacher who believed it was important to memorize verses of the Bible. On Mondays he'd give my older brother and me a verse written out on a little white card. We were expected to recite it from memory by dinner at the end of the week when our father would point to one of us and say something like "Romans 8:28." If we didn't start chirping away with "For all things work together for good for those who love God," we'd have to leave the table.

By the time I was a teenager I had memorized a lot of the Bible, not out of love for the sacred text but because I didn't want to be dismissed from Saturday evening dinner. I never paid attention to the words. But they were still in me.

When I was not quite 17, my parents' marriage broke apart. My mother left our home on Long Island and went to live with her sister in Dallas. My father left the church he had started and just disappeared. My big brother dropped out of college, got a construction job, and helped me finish high school. I got an after-school job at a gas station. Together we got by.

Since we had lived in the church's parsonage, it fell to us boys to move the family's stuff out of the house. I don't remember what happened to most of it. I just remember boxing up our family's life.

Oddly, my brother and I didn't talk about how our world had crumbled. This wasn't just because we weren't good at sharing our feelings. Mostly it was because we couldn't afford emotion. We were too worried about the next meal and a place to stay.

The following Christmas my brother and I decided we would go to Dallas to visit my mother. We didn't have the money for a plane or bus ticket, so we did what young people sometimes do when they're not thinking clearly. We decided to hitchhike from Long Island to Dallas.

By the end of the first day we were somewhere in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia on Interstate 81. It was snowing hard, the sun was long gone, and we stood on the entrance ramp with our thumbs sticking out. As the snow got heavier, there were fewer and fewer cars. After two hours, we finally saw a pair of headlights pull over in front of us. It was a Virginia state trooper. We were expecting a lecture about how dangerous, not to mention illegal, it was to hitchhike. Instead he told us that the highway had been closed for two hours and that after attending to an accident up the road he would come back for us and take us to a diner that was still open.

We stayed put on the side of the dark highway in the blizzard. After months of hustling our way through the immediate issues of making life work, my brother and I were finally forced to talk to each other. We took a stab at describing our situation, but it didn't go very well after I mentioned that we were basically disposable to the people who were supposed to love us. We tried to pass the time by quizzing each other on sports statistics. Neither of us had ever been very good at that.

Then my brother pointed to me and said, "Romans 8:28." We spent much of that night asking each other to recite the verses of the Bible we had memorized but never truly heard. At one point I found myself saying the precious lines of Isaiah 43:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you . . . Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.” By the time I finished reciting those words, I was crying.

That night, when a passage about the sustaining love of God cast out fear that was too deep for me to even acknowledge, became the turning point in my life.

I’ve told this story before and keep telling myself that it’s all behind me now. I’ve been blessed to be in one position of leadership after another. But what I finally learned in hearing that text was that my experience has stayed with me every step of the way.

I don’t keep taking chances in offering leadership because I expect to succeed; I take them because I know I can handle it if I fail. What’s the worst that can happen? Will I be alone, broke, and abandoned? Been there. Will I make humiliating mistakes? I tried hitchhiking on a closed interstate. And at the bottom, I found the relentless love of God who was with me and always will be, no matter how deep the waters.

When you find God at the bottom, it’s possible to enjoy life’s highs and lows without fearing you’ll fall beneath the love of a Savior. No one can be fully alive, and no one can lead, without getting rid of that fear.

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