

NO FEAR
JUST LOVE

TY STINESPRING

Dedicated to the ones that need love

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PART I

THE BEGINNING

COAL

It was a cold winter in the early 1970's. A young mother and her three small children were facing the harsh weather with a very limited income. The mother did not know what to do. She was very concerned about how to keep the old farmhouse above the freezing temperatures. The family continuously wore their coats indoors to stay warm. There was just no money for heat. She had been raised to know and call on Jesus for help. She did what she knew how to do. She prayed that God would provide a way for them to stay warm.

Shortly thereafter, there was a knock at the door. It was a truck driver. He explained that there were plenty of cops on the main road. He had accidentally been overloaded when getting a load of coal. He asked if he could dump part of the coal in her driveway. He didn't want to take a chance on getting a ticket. The young mother was quick to accept the coal. She was grateful and thanked God for answering her prayers. My mother-in-law doesn't know how they would have made ends meet if it weren't for the stranger who dumped coal in her driveway.

Years later, I shared this story with my mom. She informed me that I also had a story involving a truckload of coal. During the winter of 1977, my family was also living in an old farmhouse and experienced financial troubles. Sharon and Allen Haynam offered my parents a load of coal. They said that they didn't want any money for it. My mom told me that my dad said it was "good coal" and that it kept us warm all winter. It was only by sharing the first story that the second story of generosity was discovered. I was only four years old when the coal was given to us. This is an example of why we need to share our blessings with others. Don't keep God's work a secret!

ST. PATRICK'S DAY

When I was in high school, my mom went to work about an hour before my sister and I left for school. My dad worked during the night and was usually still asleep at that time. One morning, as I was getting ready to leave, I noticed that my dad was awake, whistling, and looking like he was ready to go somewhere. He appeared to have a specific destination in mind.

I asked my dad what he was doing. He planned on visiting his parents. That was strange. I hadn't heard my parents talking about this. Visits with my grandparents were scheduled in advance and it was expected that you would arrive on time. It was never a possibility that you could arrive sometime in the morning or afternoon.

I asked my dad if he had called. Answering with a "no," he didn't seem worried about breaking social etiquette rules that he had followed for over twenty years. Instead, Dad said that he thought he'd surprise them. Surprise them? He was surprising the whole family! He didn't even tell my mom. Dad was acting weird. To me, it didn't sound like a good idea. I was pretty sure he was going to get "in trouble."

My sister and I went to school. My dad left for his impromptu visit. I'm told that during the hour's drive to his parents' house, my dad started to cry uncontrollably. He pulled over to the side of the road until he could compose himself and safely continue. When he arrived at my grandparents' home, he found out that his dad had just died.

Something caused my dad to wake up and do something that went against the family's norm and, to a degree, involved personal risk. I sensed no hesitation in him. It was as if he didn't need to call my grandparents and ask permission. The Holy Spirit was leading him. Logical thinking would have only interfered. Calling on the phone would have probably resulted in discouragement because of the short notice. In my grandma's limited mind, there would be no reason for such a sudden visit. Painful as it was to lose Grandpa, my dad could comfort his mother in her time of great sadness because he followed the tug of the Holy Spirit.

It is a gift from God to be able to feel the connection that goes beyond our human understanding. It's not logical and can't be seen with our physical eyes. It is, however, very real. Nobody denies the force of a magnet. The force is invisible, but we can feel its power. Being led by the Holy Spirit might be viewed in a similar way. It might be referred to as "listening to one's heart" or "having a feeling." I remember a powerful and humbling story my dad shared with me.

Around 1960, Dad was in 9th grade at Newark Jr. High School. He wanted God to prove that he was real. My dad thought of a deal so that God could prove His existence. Dad would train

faithfully in track for about a year. God would prove His existence to my dad by putting him on the front page of the Newark newspaper. It would not have been very likely for this to happen. Making the front page of the sports section would have been difficult, but it would have been within the realm of possibilities if my dad would have performed flawlessly. My dad recognized this and believed that the only way for him to be put on the front page was through an awesome athletic performance AND God's influence. Looking back, the "deal" sounds foolishly bold, conditional, and egotistical for a teen talking to the creator of the universe. Nevertheless, these were the terms in my dad's mind. God does say that if we seek Him, we will find Him.

The big meet approached. Coaches in the area knew that my dad had the fastest times and was expected to win. A day or two before the race, my dad demonstrated to other students in a shop class how to safely use a power tool. In the process, he accidentally cut off two of his own fingertips. Rushed to the hospital, a doctor was able to stitch his wounds... but could not repair his broken heart. He wanted God to be real. How was God supposed to prove Himself real if he didn't even run the race?

The Newark newspaper came out. On the front page, an article described an unfortunate accident that left a Jr. High track star unable to compete. Dad was fully convinced. God is real! Some might argue that God was cruel. God is supposed to be good. How can losing two fingertips be good? These are questions for those who can't see the end picture.

Notice the difference between the teen who tried to put conditions on God compared to the man twenty-five years later who jumps up from a dead sleep to follow the Spirit without questioning. My dad learned an important lesson he wanted me to know too. Laughing heartily at his own younger self as he shared his story with me, he exclaimed, "Do not test the Lord your God!"

I have included the earlier events though I personally wasn't alive to witness them because I observed the effect of the experience through my dad's beliefs and actions. When faced with disappointment or hardship, he grew closer to God. God's ways are always higher than our ways. He can see how everything fits together.

For some, it may be difficult to believe that God cares about one person's feelings or needs living in the world today. Now, try to imagine the needs of more than seven billion people at the same time. Some may argue that God only intervened in people's lives thousands of years ago. This is simply not true! God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. He can part the Red Sea, organize front page news, and deliver coal. People need to know about God's involvement in your life.

THE SEAGULL

Brent, my husband, and I met when I was in 8th grade. Looking back to our high school sweetheart days, I can see the confusion for adults “trying to talk sense into us.” We were young and the odds were against us. We were opposites. But we had an undeniable force that held us together in a way onlookers really didn’t seem to understand. They didn’t see that where I was weak, he was strong and vice versa. They didn’t see that we were both brought up in resilient Christian homes and were part of a handful of other teens who chose to start mornings at the high school in prayer. God was the invisible glue that made all the other differences insignificant.

One day when at my house, Brent saw a piece of leftover soffit that was left over from an old roofing project. He asked if it were needed for anything. It wasn’t. It was in the pile of things that wouldn’t burn.

Brent took the piece of scrap metal and cut away the unnecessary bits until there was a beautiful seagull in its place. I didn’t think much about it at the time, but over the years I realized that the seagull had an impact on my dad. We didn’t know it, but my dad loved seagulls. Behind the Bible, his favorite book was about seagulls. Having a piece of trash salvaged and turned into something that he could appreciate touched his heart toward my young boyfriend and future husband.

Just like the unwanted and useless piece of metal, Jesus saves us and slowly transforms us as we walk with Him, taking away the parts not needed to form a more beautiful and refined version of ourselves.

TAKE THEM AWAY

About thirty years ago, when I was a teen, I used to have a very vivid, reoccurring, dream. I always woke up with overwhelming sadness, many times hyperventilating or sobbing uncontrollably. It felt like my heart had been stabbed. The content and my distraught feelings are as clear as yesterday's memories. I tried to understand what it meant.

In my dream, I approached my home as if I had gone to the mailbox to check the mail. My parents have a very long driveway. Their home sits below the driveway, overlooking a small valley and mostly hidden from traffic on the main road. As a teen, there were many times I walked from my home to the mailboxes, get the mail if we had any, and return.

My dream started near the mailboxes. I moved toward my house as if I had just checked the mail. When coming closer to the house, I could see an ambulance parked in front of our home. I ran the rest of the way into my house. In my young mind, I lived with my parents. I was puzzled that I would have gone to check the mail with an ambulance by the front door. Why didn't I notice it earlier? In all my analyzing, it never occurred to me that it might be a glimpse into the future. I wouldn't always live with my mom and dad. I didn't like the ambulance dreams.

For some reason, I was convinced that God was responsible for the dreams. I didn't want them. I didn't like waking up sad. I asked God not to give me any more dreams. Why would God give me something that made me sad? It didn't make sense. My request was granted. For more than a decade, I didn't remember any dreams.

LINCOLN MEMORIAL

The first vacation Brent and I took together was about a year after we were married. In 3 days and 2 nights, we hoped to see Washington DC, visit the National Aquarium in Baltimore, and finally go to the beach. We were country bumpkins. To me, our adventure was both exciting and daunting.

Traffic was terrible and it was hard to find a place to park. We wanted to see the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, and surrounding historical landmarks. First, we visited the Washington Monument. I bought a couple of T-shirts for souvenirs. Since our car was far away, the shirts were stuffed in a small bag, and we continued with our new purchases.

Next, we walked to the Lincoln Memorial. Tourists that we were, we wanted a picture of everything. Brent had the camera. This was back in the days before cell phones. He took a picture of me sitting on the steps of the memorial. Then we stood in awe, looking at the giant statue of President Lincoln. Sightseeing continued. Finally, with tired feet, we made our way back to the car.

Problem! I did not have my purse with me! Problem! All our money was in my purse. Problem! The keys were also in my purse. Panic set in. We had no money, no way to get into our car, and it was at the end of our day. Places would be closing soon. We would be stuck in DC at night! I felt so naïve and vulnerable. I'd been robbed and didn't even notice.

Brent and I retraced our steps in hopes that we could at least find my purse. Without digging too much, we looked in trash cans. We were hopeful that someone would've just stolen my wallet and ditched my purse. Perhaps we could recover the keys to the car. Maybe, if we were lucky, I might even find my driver's license. I didn't have any credit or bank cards... just cash. We figured the cash was long gone, but we'd deal with that problem later.

As we made our way back to the Lincoln Memorial, we saw a man riding a bike. My first impression was that he looked homeless. He approached us and asked if I had lost my purse. For a moment, I was speechless. "Yes," I replied. He said that he saw it on the steps of the memorial and left it with the staff in the little office. He found my purse on the steps!?!

I was used to carrying my purse in my hand. I must have picked up my bag of souvenirs and didn't notice that I was forgetting my purse. My hand was still carrying something. Ouch! I was at fault but had mentally blamed an imaginary thief. Surprised, relieved, and thankful, I asked if we could take his picture. I didn't want to forget the nice man who had saved my purse! He seemed a bit awkward but gave me a giant smile.

With a click of the camera and a quick “Thank you!” we ran to the memorial, hoping to reach the little office before it closed. I think I got the words, “I lost...” from my mouth before my purse was handed to me. There was no claiming process. They knew it was mine. (I’m guessing they saw my Driver’s License and recognized me.) What a day of diverse emotions!

Not one thing was missing from my purse. As we walked back to the car at dusk, I was very humbled and grateful to be leaving DC safely. I think angels were working double time. With God’s protection, we continued our vacation and had a wonderful time.

THAT WAS CLOSE!

Brent and I had been living in California while I taught for two years. The original plan had been for me to gain teaching experience for one year. That had been done. When he saw how much I really liked teaching and living in California, he agreed to another year. Now, after two years, he was firm. He wanted to move back... to be as close to our extended family as possible.

We remembered how expensive it was to move our belongings to California. We did not want to spend another thousand dollars simply renting a vehicle to move our belongings again. Our stuff really wasn't worth that much. To buy everything new again would be expensive, but we would never do that. If needed, we would find things we needed at thrift stores once we found our new home. Plus, we still had some of our stuff in a storage unit in Ohio. The expense of moving everything seemed to hinge on our emotional attachment to our belongings.

We were never the ones to do things the "normal" way. So, we thought that if we could buy an RV (a camper that you can drive) to haul our stuff back to Ohio, we would have an RV to stay in until we got settled in our new home. That sounds logical, right....? Well, we had a limited budget and found an RV for \$650. Now you're starting to get worried about me, aren't you? It made sense at the time. If memory serves, this story took place in 1998. Yes, in 1998, \$650 was still cheap. We invested about another \$150 in maintenance, updating its appearance, and making it feel more comfortable. Have you thought about the weight factor? You're right. We shouldn't load it down too much because that would be hard on a vehicle... especially with the deserts and mountains when traveling across the country. That's a good point.

We considered these things. We had a big yard sale, sold a couple of bigger items, and gave away a bunch of stuff. We kept most of Roman's toys, small things that we used frequently and memorabilia.

We had a tight schedule. After the school year had finished, I planned to attend a job fair in South Carolina. Two days after that, I had an interview scheduled in Cleveland. When we had moved west, we took five days to make the journey from Ohio to California. Now returning to the east coast, we planned to stop at my parents' house to drop off the RV before driving our car south to the job fair. We budgeted five days. From Ohio, we would have two days to drive and be ready for potential interviews.

Our plan was for the three of us to ride in the RV together, hauling the car behind us. I'd never driven long distances before and was certainly not an experienced city driver. There were several big cities on our route. (Remember, this was in the days when we didn't have cell phones or GPS. We had maps made on big pieces of paper.) Back in the old days, arriving at a distant location required good teamwork. You had a driver and a navigator. Good navigators were just as important as good drivers. Navigators watched the map and told the driver the

next road or exit to use with enough of a warning that the driver had time to get in the correct lane, but not so far in advance that the driver might forget.

Brent and I made a pretty good team. We said farewell to our home in the San Bernardino mountains and headed east. Not even two hours into our journey, it became apparent that something was going to need to change. (That's right... we didn't have time to do a distance test to see how well the RV would handle pulling the car for a long period of time.) The RV was running too hot. We had only made it to Bakersfield, CA in the high desert. We determined that the weight of the car added too much stress to the aging RV. I'd drive the car and follow Brent. It wasn't ideal, but it was the right choice. We would drive for a while and sleep in the RV at night. The overheating was temporarily resolved.

This system worked well until we reached Arizona. We were a little nervous about overheating again in the heat of the desert, especially when we would be climbing in elevation. We thought it best to avoid driving during the day. We decided to drive in the morning and evenings when it was cooler outside. It was the first time we were using the RV's headlights for a long time. Originally, we had only planned to travel during the day and had not tested running the headlights for a long time. As we traveled, it became apparent that the headlights were becoming increasingly dim. The alternator was not keeping the battery charged.

We pulled over to discuss the situation. We would rest for the night. Brent had seen an auto parts store in the little town where we had stopped to talk. In the morning, he would go and buy a new alternator for the RV and change it. Roman went to sleep, peacefully unaware of any problems. Brent wanted to remove the alternator that night so that he would be ready in the morning to get right to work installing a new one. I was glad we had the toolbox with us.

Once the alternator was removed, I was out like a light. Holding a flashlight is hard work. Anyone who has had this job should completely understand. Honestly, I am surprised that with the stress of a broken vehicle, in an unknown town, and far from our destination that I was able to sleep. I snuggled next to Roman. Brent went to look at something else under the hood.

I woke up to Brent saying, "Wake up. Let's go." The sun wasn't up yet. I didn't think that an auto parts store would be open so early. Brent explained. He had stayed awake, torn the alternator apart, rebuilt the alternator, and installed it while Roman and I slept. All without my flashlight holding assistance! I knew Brent was good at fixing stuff, but that one caught me off guard. Now that I think of it, would a small auto parts store have had the right one in stock? Brent's late night of work gave us a few more hours of driving time. By now, because of our complications, we were cutting it close to attend the job fair.

We made it safely back to Ohio! It was the first time Brent had driven unfamiliar roads as both the navigator and the driver. There was one time in a big city when he had to change lanes

suddenly to merge onto a different highway. I was afraid that I wasn't going to be able to change lanes fast enough and we'd be separated. Then I would have no idea of where to go. Praise God, that did not happen. It was a close call. My little chatterbox in the backseat never noticed the near mishap. I wonder how many times I'm protected and don't even realize it.

We finally pulled into my parents' driveway with just a few hours to spare before needing to leave for South Carolina. Brent's mom went with us. She was concerned about all our driving and lack of sleep. I made it to the fair and was offered a job with one of the school districts. With a couple of weeks to accept the offer, I waited to see how the Cleveland interview went before replying.

Once back at my parents' house, Brent and I decided to take the RV to a state park just about five miles down the road. It would start but wouldn't move. Brent literally drove the RV from California to Ohio and it stopped moving in my parent's driveway. When I think back, every time I prayed, I asked to make it there safely. That was done. We were able to sell the RV for \$750 to someone who had to tow it away. It was evident to me that God was with us!

PEOPLE WORRY TOO MUCH

It was the year 2000. We entered Y2K without modern society collapsing. Grandma Ethel's health, though, was failing miserably. Brent's grandma had signed a DNR. A DNR is a do not resuscitate order. If her heart stopped beating or if she stopped breathing, CPR was not to be administered. A DNR prevents any machines from being used to sustain life.

Grandma's DNR order had been "misplaced." For several months, she had been in a coma following her vitals crashing. Life support machines kept Grandma alive. Shortly before her birthday, she just "woke up" but still needed professional care for other health needs. Grandma probably didn't know or understand the severity of her recent health problems. Who was going to tell her?

We planned a surprise birthday party for her. She was very happy to see all of us. Instead of complaining to her husband, she smiled at him. Her complaint of the day was that the staff wouldn't open the windows. We were on about the 8th floor and the windows were stationary. She said that Jesus was trying to come and get her, but the windows wouldn't open. Grandma tried to convince us to open the windows. She wanted to go with Jesus.

The following weekend, I planned to attend my sister-in-law's baby shower. I lived about 2 hours away and followed the directions carefully. It was before the days of GPS, texting and google maps. I could follow most of the directions, but I couldn't see the house indicated on my invitation. I didn't know the phone number and was frustrated. Not wanting to drive a total of 4 hours for nothing, I decided to drive 5 and visit Brent's grandma again.

Grandma Ethel was surprised and happy to see me. We were able to talk more personally since there were just the two of us. In our conversation, I shared some of the challenges I faced while teaching. She said, "There is no sense to all this worrying. People worry too much." At the time, I worked for the Cleveland City School District. I thought that people, my students especially, did not worry nearly enough. Grandma said that everything was going to be just fine.

Brent and I were expecting another baby but hadn't told the secret yet. Grandma heard the news during our private visit. Instead of a disappointing drive, we shared a very nice visit. God turned lemons into lemonade. A few days later, Jesus was able to take her home.

When Grace, my mother-in-law, learned of my experience, she shared another interesting part to the story. On the morning her mom passed away, Grace had awakened to a dream. In the dream, Grandma was with her family in their old home singing "I'm Coming Home." A few minutes later, the hospital called. Grandma Ethel was no longer with us. She went "home."

OUR OWN HOME

After moving from California, I worked for Cleveland City School District. I thought I could be a positive role model for my students. Love and forgiveness were taught along with reading and math. Two years later, I felt as if my strength, hope, and love had been depleted. I was a drained battery.

For my own good, I could tell that I needed a change. We lived in a nice apartment, but neighbors were increasingly disrespectful. I wanted a calmer neighborhood and a job with less stress. Brent agreed. We didn't know where we would land, but we started looking for different options.

Instead of looking for a different job, we started looking for cheap housing solutions. If we could find a house that we could afford in a more peaceful place, we would be able to find something to sustain us. Focusing on Sheriff Sales in rural settings near our extended families, we did research to ensure the offer accepted by the Sheriff would be the total amount due. We did not want any surprises from any old liens or mortgages. We found a house appraised at \$6,000. According to the rules, the house could sell for \$4,000 if nobody bid against us.

We made it a priority to investigate the property in person as soon as possible. We were told by the Sheriff's Department that there was no key to the house. A "little bird" told us that we could get in if we climbed through a window. The house had been vacant for a long time. I was "very pregnant" and there was no climbing in a window for me. Brent easily opened a window, went inside, and unlocked the door for me.

Built over 100 years ago, we noticed a firm foundation, solid hardwood framing and floors to match. Beautiful trim left me wondering about how it would have been treasured years ago. It was built to last and had updated wiring.

Unfortunately, it now had battle wounds from years of neglectful living. We were told the house was nasty inside. It was. Do you think a house that cheap is going to be free from flaws? No way! There was a ton of garbage inside. We were looking for a way out of our situation... free from renting. This could be it. We imagined improvements.

You had to look past the muck. It was the muck of the "stuff," however, that made the house appraisal so low. Nobody with \$4,000 cash wanted to do the work themselves. They would have to hire someone else to clean it out, increasing their investment. People who would have wanted the home for themselves either didn't know about it or didn't have \$4,000. At the time, we were paying \$685 per month in rent. Even if the house sold for \$8,000, it would be cheaper than one year's housing costs in Akron. To most people our modern apartment and

lifestyle was much more desirable. We tend to take the road less traveled. We would have to be humble.

Would it require sacrifice? Yes. Selling his prized camera, Brent sold his Canon A2E for \$1500. A place to relax and a symbol of freedom, he also let go of his motorcycle. Ouch! His GFS Suzuki Bandit 650 sold for \$2500. We still had some income coming, but we were hopeful that we would be able to use that money for updates and repairs. By selling those two things, we had the exact amount for which the house could sell.

The sale was upon us. There was one other bidder. Advanced in years and a shrewd businessman, he owned many properties. We were warned that this house was “not the kind of place you would want to raise a family.” It was a good investment property. With four bedrooms, isn’t it somewhat logical to think that a family would be renting the “investment property?” The property investor bid against us several times. After our bid of \$4800, he said, “Aw, let the kids have it.”

At less than 30 years old, Brent and I were blessed as the new owners! No loan payments, mortgage or rent. Brent’s mom chipped in the other \$800 so we could still have money for repairs and moving expenses. God provided for our family’s needs so I could replenish my drained spirit. Our family of three had a new home. It was almost time to meet the fourth member of our growing family!

9 POUNDS 8 OUNCES

When Brent and I realized that we were going to have another baby, we started a search for midwives in the area to support a homebirth. Brenda was perfect for us. She had delivered several of her own children at home and was expecting to do the same about a month before I was due. Of her clients, the one with the nearest due date to mine was due about two weeks after me. Brenda assured me that this wouldn't be a problem. In her many years of being a midwife, she never had to miss a birth. My due date came and went. I was hoping for the baby to come sooner, not later. I felt like I'd swallowed a bowling ball.

I was thirteen days overdue when I finally felt contractions. While waiting on our new arrival, we worked to improve our new home. This was quite beneficial, even if I was uncomfortable. My husband and his brother were digging a ditch for a pipe that needed replaced. Stepping out for a bite to eat, I noticed contractions and started timing them. They were about five minutes apart. I thought I had Brenda's phone number with me, but apparently it was at home. I went back quickly and reported the news.

With an hour's drive ahead of us, we hopped in the truck and headed back to our apartment. The bouncy ride made me think that the trip was never going to end. As my contractions intensified, I remember holding very tightly to the hand grip above my window. Finally reaching the apartment, I called Brenda and relayed that the time between contractions was about three minutes. Brenda lived about an hour away. She said that she'd be there soon. Unaware of the excitement about to unfold, Roman went to sleep.

Brenda arrived with her apprentice, one of her older daughters, and the newborn. At some point, Brenda's new baby would need fed. Brenda watched to see how much I struggled through the contractions and said I was doing a good job. She was surprised that I could talk on the phone as well as what I had. I sat, stood, walked, and leaned on furniture or walls as I desired.

My water had not broken. Brenda asked if I wanted her to break the water or if I wanted to wait for it to be broken naturally. She said that once my water broke, I could start pushing for the baby. I was surprised that I wasn't in more pain! Yes, it hurt, but it was nothing like the first time. Yes, please! Let's get on with it! I was grateful for ice chips and reminders to breathe. Small red dots appeared as blood vessels burst in my upper chest. After pushing enough to have the head, we paused for a moment. The shoulders just barely emerged. Brenda told me to reach down and get my baby. "What!?!"

I bent over a bit and grabbed the baby under the armpits. It was kicking my insides like crazy. I pulled him right up to me. What an awesome moment! Brenda said he was a big baby and the

scale agreed. It's no wonder that I felt like I was carrying a bowling ball. He was 9 pounds and 8 ounces. Yikes! God was with me. There were no problems, medications, or machines.

Shortly thereafter, as I was recovering and Brenda's group was preparing to leave, Brenda said, "Well, that worked out just right."

I wondered what she meant so she explained. Brenda had received a call from the other client who was expecting her first child because she had started labor. Because of that, Brenda called her apprentice, who lived about 30 minutes away. The timing of the other client's contractions was monitored while the apprentice traveled. During this time, I called saying that I was in labor. Because it was my second child and my contractions were closer together, the decision was made to come to me first.

While sharing this information, it occurred to me that Brenda never once told me that I should have the water broken to speed up the delivery. She mentioned it as a possibility. She didn't tell me of the other client's labor until I was resting, and they were ready to leave. Brenda wasn't done with her work. She was heading straight to the home of the other expectant mother.

Welcome to the world little Isaiah.

God's timing was, is, and always will be perfect.

AN OPEN DOOR

Moving into our home in July of 2000, we were ready and willing to tackle remodeling. Yes, a ton of work still needed done, but renting was now in the past. We just had one little problem... no job! Another paycheck was coming from my previous job, but it wouldn't last us very long. Time was ticking and a new source of income was top priority. I put in applications to be a substitute teacher, but little work was anticipated in August and September.

The new school year started. I subbed a few days with a district nearby, but we needed something more reliable. Personal satisfaction with the job was a luxury we couldn't afford. A random retail job wasn't my preference, but it was no longer a matter of what was wanted. I went to K Mart and filled out an application. A few days later, someone called to schedule an interview for the following week.

A few days later, news revealed that a grant had been awarded to my local school district. Even though the school year had already started, two full time job openings were advertised. One opening was to teach first grade. Desperately wanting to teach first grade again, a letter of interest was sent immediately. I had four years of experience with that exact grade level. The other job was for an alternative education teacher. A teacher was needed to support in school suspensions. I had just taught two years for Cleveland City Schools and had experience with some challenging students. To my delight, the school administration called and invited me to an interview. Now I had a chance with two different employers!

Not quite! When told the time for the interview, it was nearly impossible for me to go to both. They were scheduled about an hour apart. If everything went perfectly, the interview was short, and traffic was good, I could probably make it to the second interview. That was a big risk with too many variables. Everything in my gut told me to go to the interview for the teaching job. My passion was for teaching... not retail business.

I respectfully notified K Mart that I wouldn't be able to attend. My other interview resulted in a job offer for the alternative education teaching position. Because of my prior experiences, I had a much wider perspective about how to intervene to prevent future classroom disruptions. Most of my students that year just needed a little redirection.

As a first-grade teacher, numerous hours would have been spent working after the regular school day ended. My little one was just three months old. In hindsight, the alternative education job was much better for me. When the bell rang, I was free to go. There were no lesson plans to make or papers to grade. God gave me more time to enjoy my family.

The "good money" made from working in Cleveland was gone, but so was the stress. Comparing my new salary to my previous one, it was about half. The little lull in income made

me appreciative of any steady job. Humbled and mentally accepting of work with minimum wages and no job satisfaction, I was extremely grateful for the opportunity that went above my expectations and used my strengths. It was a bonus.

For 19 years, my classroom remained my home away from home. Thank you, Jesus for opening the door.

PIRATE SHIP

This is a tough topic for me to talk about. This experience happened about nineteen years ago. Aside from a few close family members, I didn't talk about it for over 15 years. With my new philosophy of "no fear, just love" I have started to tell it to others.

The 4th of July was approaching, and the country was getting ready to celebrate. My neighbor, the one who has had a history of consuming large quantities of alcohol on a regular basis, was getting ready for her son's birthday. Fireworks would be set off and lots of people would be drinking. Wanting an excuse as to why we wouldn't be able to join the festivities, I called my parents.

On July 3, I talked to my dad and explained the pending drunken birthday party invitation. Yes, I know that most people invite others to a party further in advance, but this was an individual that would most likely invite us over at the last minute. My dad said that we could come over to visit, but Mom would need to do the laundry. I didn't care if she was working on laundry. Again, he said it would be OK, but that my mom wouldn't be able to watch over the boys because she needed to work on the laundry. I thought he was acting weird. Why did he keep talking about laundry? He never worried about it before.

He asked if we were staying cool enough. It had been very hot and is probably why Mom had not been doing laundry. She was probably waiting for a day that wasn't so hot to run the dryer. They cooled their home by pulling in the night air with fans. I told him that we were running three different room air conditioners and made plans to visit the following day. My plan worked. Later that afternoon, I was able to decline the invitation.

The next morning was beautiful. My mother-in-law had recently bought an inflatable pirate ship pool for Roman and Isaiah. It was cute and a perfect way for us to beat the heat before visiting my parents. Because Isaiah was not quite two years old, I sat in the pool with the boys splashing and playing.

I thought of all the chores I could be doing. I could be doing dishes or cleaning something. Our house was in the process of being remodeled and there was always something that needed done. It didn't matter. It was a perfect moment. The sun was shining. The flowers were in bloom. My children were playing nicely together. I never wanted to forget the moment.

How many times do you think to yourself that you never want to forget a specific moment in time? There are times when I have had great joy. In those times of great happiness, I never stopped to deliberately think about the specific moment and deliberately plant it in my head as a time not to be forgotten. I just assumed that I would remember. Just as memorable are

times with the opposite feelings. For my parents, they remember exactly where they were when they found out that JFK had been shot. For me, I don't forget where I was when the Challenger exploded or when the planes hit the towers. In times of intense emotion, you don't vow not to forget. You just don't. Yet, there I was, sitting in a little pool several inches deep promising myself never to forget the simplistic beauty.

Then, a strange thing happened. Physically, I was fully aware of sitting in the pool with my two children. Mentally though, I saw the three of us from an overhead view. The image formed in an instant and disappeared just as quickly. I remember thinking that it was very odd. I decided that we probably needed to get out of the pool and get ready for our visit.

"No!!!!" came a shout from inside my head. The voice wasn't angry, just very firm. I was not to get out of the pool. Once again, a strange thought. I argue with my conscious just as everyone does. This was different. There was no arguing. The decision was not mine to make. I needed to obey. OK. I could spend more time in the pool. It didn't really matter. Nothing earth shattering was going to happen if we arrived a little later. They wouldn't care. I let the kids play for about 5-10 more minutes and again thought to myself that it was about time to dry off. There was no protest in my head. My brain had gone back to normal. I wasn't thinking of an extraordinarily beautiful moment never to be forgotten, seeing myself from a different perspective, or having shouts of protest from within my own head. I was ready for a nice visit with my parents.

THE AMBULANCE

Refreshed from our swim, I went to my parents' house with the boys. As I drove up my parents' driveway, the dream from my youth suddenly became my reality. Instantly, I knew why I had awakened in such devastation. Even before I ran past the ambulance, I knew Dad was gone.

Once inside, an EMT told me to calm down and to breathe. My dad's empty shell was still upstairs. In recent years, my former bedroom had been converted into his office. Mom asked if I wanted to see him. It was a normal question. We have funerals so that loved ones can have closure. I already had my closure. Not thinking about how insensitive I might sound to a woman who had just lost her husband, I asked, "Why? What would be the point? He's not there." Luckily, my mom completely understood my feelings.

As his flesh had failed him, his spirit soared. Mom reminded me that we never know when these things will happen. Dad wasn't sad. He was finally free! He knew Jesus was waiting for him. He was ready to celebrate his own personal Independence Day!

It has been about nineteen years since my dad "moved on." Mr. Hallberg... who you will learn more about later... asked if I could see how the dreams were helpful. Helpful? I had never thought of them from that perspective. I only saw sadness. At the time, I didn't understand that God was trying to prepare me. When Mr. Hallberg asked the question, I needed time to think about it before I could answer. Now I can say that it was rather obvious. God was trying to ease the pain and develop my spiritual eyesight. I cried many tears that day, week, and months to follow but not for Dad. I cried for my own loss.

Don't worry. I asked God for forgiveness for being ungrateful and apologized for not wanting His gift. God has since given me more glimpses to ponder. Because I've seen past dreams become reality, it brings a spiritual awareness to the moment. "What is significant here? Why would I have been shown this place at this time?" Now that I have been shown and have begun to understand the connection, I have a greater faith and hope during times of hardship. This process didn't happen overnight, it took several decades for me to connect the dots.

PHONE VS. CHAINSAW

One day Brent was alone at our rural property of about 15 acres cutting some trees with the chainsaw. I was at school teaching while Roman and Isaiah were in their classes. Although our home is in a neighboring town, we have raised goats, chickens, rabbits, pigs, quail, turkey, and fish. We even had a cow and a llama for a while. We spent a great deal of time there enjoying the great outdoors while practicing some homesteading skills. In time, we hoped to build a home and live there.

When school was through, the boys and I went to this property. On that day, we followed the chainsaw noise through the woods and found Brent. He was perfectly fine, but his jeans were not! I asked, "What on earth happened?!?" Brent looked down and casually replied that the chainsaw got a little too close. Too close! His jeans were completely ripped across one of the pant legs in the front. With a sheepish smile, he said that I should see the phone.

When he pulled the phone from his pocket, a groove the width of the chainsaw blade was revealed on the back cover. Incredibly, the phone still worked! While removing a difficult branch, the spinning chain had fallen against his leg exactly where the phone was in the pocket of his jeans. (They were cargo jeans with big, deep pockets in the front of them.) If the phone wouldn't have stopped the chainsaw blade, Brent could have easily bled to death. As it were, he didn't have a scratch on him.

I used to worry about Brent constantly. It seemed like he was always doing something that could be dangerous. For example... installing trusses for a house above concrete, hunting, driving a car with poor brakes and bald tires, using a tractor on a hill, riding a motorcycle too fast, using power tools and very sharp things, running into a burning building with no fire gear, helping at accident scenes, lifting very heavy things, and speaking his mind to those who might not always want to hear it. You get the idea. I never knew what could be next. Finally, I was given relief in the form of a dream. In the dream, Brent was a much older version of himself. I've never really worried about Brent after that. Somehow, God will protect him.

ANOTHER HOME

For over a decade, children seemed to swarm to our yard. Most days, there were at least four kids playing, but it was not unusual to see six to eight. The swing set, trampoline, sandbox, playhouse, and picnic table were all popular places to gather. We hosted numerous bonfires and picnics. We had one rule for anyone who came into the yard: be nice.

When Roman was 2 years old, Brent and I took classes to be able to adopt. We were confident and willing until a social worker showed us pictures of real children who were waiting to be adopted. Suddenly we got cold feet! We decided to postpone this sort of commitment until Roman was older.

Years passed. Roman was in high school and Isaiah was in Jr. High. Finally, I thought we had come to a time in our lives when we were ready to adopt. The training was identical for fostering, adopting, or doing both. Fostering could allow us to ease into adoption.

To prepare for this potential change and to have the most stable environment, we wanted a home that would be easy to live in and didn't need much maintenance. Our current home always had some sort of remodeling project in progress.

We found a house for sale nearby for \$17,000. Advertised as having two bedrooms, we easily envisioned the conversion of two more rooms so that we'd have a home with four bedrooms. It wasn't perfect, but with minor work that could be done before we moved in, we felt that it had everything we needed.

It is an unusually difficult process to be approved for a \$17,000 mortgage. It doesn't cost enough for a bank to finance through traditional loans. Bankers want homes to be free from flaws. If the house would've been perfect, it would've cost more. A personal loan for that amount was out of our reach. As we tried to figure out a way to get it financed, the price suddenly dropped from \$17,000 to \$10,000 on the HUD website. We didn't understand why, but suddenly the home was within our grasp.

We were able to view the home. Copper pipes in the basement had been stolen, but the rest of the house looked to be in good order. The missing pipes explained the price reduction. Brent would be able to replace the plumbing without too much effort or expense.

Only real estate agents are allowed to bid on HUD auctions. I called the agent, said that I wanted to place a \$10,300 bid, and sent the necessary paperwork. We watched the time count down online and saw that no bids had been accepted. How could I offer \$300 more than the minimum bid and the home had not been sold?

I took my questions straight to HUD. The representatives explained that for houses selling at such a low cost, the real estate agent usually charges a \$500 minimum fee. Because HUD wanted \$10,000 for themselves, someone would need to bid \$10,500 to cover the costs. It was the agent's job to explain this. Why would she place a bid for me knowing that her own fee would cause the bid to be rejected?

The average person does not know these details. I explained that it seemed unfair for me to lose the auction because I had not been informed and offered to pay \$200 more to make up the difference. When asked, I agreed that this home was going to be my primary residence. People interested in a home for themselves are given the option to buy before agents and investors. They would be eligible to bid on the home the next day if nobody bought it for their own housing.

With a short pause for management approval, the \$10,300 bid was accepted. HUD agreed to sell the home for \$200 less. Investors and agents would have wanted the home simply to increase personal wealth. God knew we were motivated by love. Through a series of seemingly unrelated events, He used His perfect timing to provide us with a suitable home, within our budget, that would allow us to pursue adoption.

FORWARD, NOT BACKWARDS

Brent's dad left his family when Brent was 2 years old. Approximately 25 years later, Brent summoned the courage, found his phone number, and called him. It was disappointing. His dad took no responsibility for his absence and shifted blame to Brent's mom. During the call, he encouraged Brent to visit a certain church with beautiful chandeliers. Of all the things to talk about, a pretty church building was not on Brent's mind. Aside from a letter or two sent from his dad shortly after the call, about 15 more years passed with no further communication.

While Brent and I were in our classes to become foster or adoptive parents, Brent got a call from his brother. Relatives had invited the three brothers to see their dad in the hospital before his death. Brent had a decision to make. The first choice was to drop his plans to go see a man who shared one phone conversation with him. The second choice was to finish the class so that we could offer a home to a child in need. We were hoping to adopt one girl... possibly two, if circumstances were just right.

Brent chose not to dwell in the past. In hopes of helping someone he had never met, he invested his time and energy in finishing the process we had started. A new phase of our life was soon to begin. If we would have left that fostering class early, our license to open our home would have been delayed for several months. God has a plan. Our lives were about to change faster than we ever imagined.