

A New Life

The year I began writing this account of my life was the year in which I also celebrated an event of perhaps as great a joy as the day I married my wife Alice in 1967. It was twenty years ago, during the summer of 1981, when I was "born again." Even though that little phrase "born again" has caused more confusion in some many than I care to remember, I nevertheless experienced a dramatic *new birth*. Regrettably, I have seen the words "born again" waved by others like a magic wand in my face as if "born again" was some celebrity status, or some ID card for special club-membership. Others insisted that after a person had repeated a short "sinner's prayer," presto, that person had arrived into the hallowed halls of spirituality, no further repairs needed. Some even stated emphatically that being "born again" was the same as church membership. Furthermore, that little phrase launched an entire evangelism movement in which people spent more time counting the numbers of those who "got saved" than preparing those new to the faith for life in the Kingdom of God. For many, if one could not pin the event to an exact day and hour, one was not really born again. Needless to say, it's not my "testimony" or purpose to reduce the experience to mere definition which inevitably will lead to wrangling over words. Born again is a phenomenon of profound spiritual experience that cannot be packaged or put in a theological box. Nevertheless, it is an encounter with the Spirit of God. But, the question is a valid one.

What exactly did happen in 1981, when I was *born again*? One of the simplest answers is to say an event took place that radically changed my life from one of *inability* to a life of *ability*. In other words, what I could *not* do before, I was now able to do. But how? By giving my life to someone who would not only help me, but turn the very course of my life around. He is none other than Jesus Christ. But how you ask? How did I experience a spiritual rebirth in a temporal life?

Permit me to try and explain. First the experience itself and after that, my understanding of what had happened.

Suffice it to say my life was an overwhelming example of inability, yet able to provide for my family. I was able to do my work, build a national advertising agency, serve the community in numerous volunteer service organizations, and along with my wife raise our children. My life included a journey in fine arts as well as the more mundane tasks of cutting the lawn and shoveling snow. All these I could do. I was a hard worker and committed to the job. By all accounts, I was a success, our marriage a blessing, and our children gifts from God. What more could I ask for? So, what precisely was I so *un*-able to do?

I was unable to deal with the real effects of a major nervous breakdown which resulted in depression, anxiety, fear, pressure, and ultimately a fear of death. I had not seen that coming and although "nervous breakdown" is no longer fashionable, preferring instead to call it a "panic attack," I know what happened that day. Our agency was in the middle of producing the Annual Molson's Brewery Sales Convention, complete with a live stage-show, multi-media presentations, endless script revisions and last minute changes. Nor did the *attack* go away after a few deep breaths and few aspirins.

I will never forget the never-ending anxieties of those terrifying ten years from 1971 to 1981. Some of those anxieties I have already shared (see "Mid-Seventies Crisis"). To prevent my disabilities from seriously affecting my abilities and by doctor's orders and supervision, I took Valium each day, additional sleeping pills at night, as well as a generous supply of alcohol and

tobacco Those two were *not* doctor-recommended). I have also already explained some of the terrors of that time, so I need not go into further detail to explain the long nights of panic, the paralyzing effects of repeated anxiety attacks, and the grinding fear of another nervous breakdown, like the one I suffered in 1971. Then there was the numbing consolation of alcohol, only to wake up and realize I had not escaped the day's gauntlet. It was still there, waiting for me just as it was yesterday as it had been for ten years. Somehow, I managed to stay afloat and keep working.

Then, one summer night in 1981, it all came to a grinding halt. My finely-tuned system of coping began to crumble. I had known about Jesus Christ, God, and the Bible, because I grew up in a religious home and disciplined church environment. But the truth of a personal relationship with Jesus I had never experienced. That summer night I stood at the precipice of another nervous breakdown and I made a desperate attempt to reach out to God. I didn't pray a formula. I didn't follow a procedure. I simply buried my face in my pillow and gasped, "Jesus, help! Come into my life!"

I began to sob uncontrollably as He came into my life. How? I didn't really know how during that specific moment, but it was His Spirit who came into me and birthed in my heart and in my mind an awareness that something awesome, something new, had taken place.

However, I must begin "my testimony" in Sauble Beach.

Sauble Beach remains in my memory as one of the most incredible places on earth. The beach is located on Lake Huron's sandy eastern shores along Ontario's Bruce Peninsula. It may not compare in grandeur and size to the Pacific West coast, but for memories it outstrips all other beaches. Not even the Bahamas was a close second. It was at Sauble Beach where we saw our children grow from tiny tots into young women and young men. All that touched by soft sandy beaches, clear cool water, spectacular sunsets, and not to forget hot, crispy fish-and-chips right from a beach-front stand. There were many days when my skin trembled from a day's exposure to the sun only to be kissed by cool evening breezes off the lake. Despite years of tranquilizers, anxiety, and pain, Sauble Beach always was a place of retreat. The summer of 1981, promised to be yet another great summer in our rented cottage. There was, however, one major difference. After ten years of tranquilizers, I suddenly got fed up with being enslaved to them. In part, this was because I had always believed Dr. McEwan and our family doctor, who said that Valium was not addictive. Now I realized they were wrong. I had been addicted to a large dosage of pills for ten years. I was disappointed with myself. I felt a failure. Therefore I made a decision that our holiday at Sauble Beach would be a perfect time to "kick the habit." No one said I couldn't or shouldn't at least not a gradual withdrawal.

I began my total withdrawal on Saturday, August 8, 1981. A careful record of my decision was kept in my sketchbook journal as each day came and went. Torrential rains had fallen all day as we left for Sauble Beach. By the time we entered Bruce County, the rain had stopped, yet threatened to start all over again as it clung in large shredded clouds, looking like long hurried rags soaked beyond saturation, passing from town to town as we threaded our way north. The usual drive of two-and-a-half hours, took nearly twice as long. Orangeville was a lunch stop-over, and when we finally stepped into our cottage at four in the afternoon, we were glad to have made it. The kids were terrific throughout the entire trip. Jeff was eleven, Wendy nine, Angela five, and Karen two. The following Sunday morning a lazy sun began to make brief appearances. Winds climbed with the temperature. In my sketchbook I wrote: "*day one without tranquilizers.*" After a good day and a good barbeque, accompanied by some good home-made white wine, a Spanish white from 1978, the day quickly settled into an early retirement. Both

Karen and Angie fell out of bed twice. Our bed was two feet too short and the mattress was lumpy, but for the rest of the night everyone remained peaceful.

Monday was a day of sun, sun, more sun, and sunburns. I was and still am amazed when I look on a beach crowd, how many young people try to look old and how many old people try to look young. I was thirty-six, Alice was thirty-three. *Day two without tranquilizers* became a major event as the van needed to have its brakes repaired, an unwelcome and unplanned expense. Alice and I did a lot of talking, a practice very common to our life-journey together. The size of our family, now four children, was a favourite topic. Not until 1984 and 1987, when Suzanne and Matthew were born, was this energetic topic put to rest. But the day was not over yet. My heart skipped more than one beat as I opened the cottage door only to find Karen right behind it. I couldn't catch her. She fell down two concrete stairs. As if her pain and bloody bruises were not enough, supper was fly-ridden and in the distance, thunder rumbled to signal more rain on my parade. Tuesday was more of the same weather but fortunately there were no more accidents. On Wednesday, Alice burned her arm in the steam of an electric kettle and the brake repair on the van totaled one hundred and six dollars. Still a lot in 1981. As the wind settled down in the evening, I began to feel pressure rising. It had been *four days* without a single tranquilizer.

By now I would have taken at least sixteen of the little yellow helpers. While I taught my children to draw figures and *things* during a makeshift workshop in the cottage, I was reminded of a dream I once had in 1968 - a dream to be an art teacher. Thursday afternoon, after a pancake breakfast, the threat of more rain, and memories of better days, things began to close in on me. I could not stop thinking about *six days* without tranquilizers. At one in the afternoon I capitulated and took half a pill, 5 mg of Valium. I felt terribly guilty. Guilt crept through every vein in my body. The next few days included short excursions to "The Old Indian Church," a Wesleyan Centenary church built in 1891, on the Saugeen Indian Reservation in Southampton, just a short drive from Sauble Beach. I went by myself to draw and paint. Sitting in the sun on the sloped hills just beside the church, offered not only a magnificent view of the Saugeen River as it slowly snaked towards Lake Huron, it also offered some relief from the pressure. The result was two beautiful watercolours. More rain followed. On Sunday I took another Valium. Another on Tuesday. On Friday, two weeks after we came to Sauble Beach, we finally "broke camp" for home. Both Alice and I agreed the vacation was a success. I was left, however, with my private pain of having failed to "kick the habit." The thought disturbed me. Was I destined to spend the rest of my life enslaved to those miserable little pills?

Early on Saturday morning of August 22, without warning, I slipped into an anxiety attack. And it was a big one.

The clock said 2:00 am. Outside it was still night.

I panicked as it felt like a repeat of my nervous breakdown ten years earlier. I woke with a jolt and sat upright, terrified. The room started to spin and everything began to fade before my eyes. Was this judgment for *not* having taken Valium? Should I have kept my regular daily dosage? It seemed all systems were backfiring. I thought death was imminent. I knew beyond doubt that this was real and not imagined. Like the dying white spot as it diminished on an old black & white television when turned off, so I felt my life slipping from me.

I woke Alice. My voice trembled.

"Please pray for me, I am dying!" I blurted out at two in the morning.

She did. She took my hand, prayed, and the terror stopped instantly.

Suddenly I knew what to do.

I cried in my pillow as I asked Jesus to come into my life.

Immediately I became aware that someone else was there with me, even though I could not put words or clear thoughts to the awareness. I needed comfort, help, assurance, and a feeling that life had far greater goals than just earthly accomplishments, as wonderful as those may be. That is when I felt His presence. Jesus compared the experience to being "born again," in other words, starting all over again with a brand new life and a life with Him. In the weeks that followed the effects of my new birth were obvious. Where I had fear I now had assurance I would not die. When anxiety came I knew I could talk to someone who did not judge me or ridicule me for having feelings that others thought to be just imaginary. He knew my nervous breakdown and anxiety attacks were as real as the leaves on trees in midsummer. I discovered I could talk to Jesus just as I would talk to a friend. When I needed strength for decisions big and small, I could find peace where there was none. He became as real to me as my best friend. Even in His physical absence, His spiritual presence was nevertheless tangible and very real. I developed a great thirst for truth. I became a disciple in His Kingdom and a student of the Bible. I wanted proof and Scripture revealed it – abundantly.

Was I floating on Cloud-9, cares cast to the wind, all bliss and no blisters? No, it took months for the clutter to be cleared from my closet but clear it Jesus did.

Six months after that unforgettable experience, I threw out all my pills, all my alcohol and all my tobacco. As I write about these events, even forty-two years later I realize it has been over forty years since I had any alcohol or tobacco. Regrettably but not shamefully, fifteen years later, after we had moved to Gabriola Island, I suffered another breakdown but have managed to keep a steady course with mild medication. Needless to say, today's problems still spill over into tomorrow and life is never free from disappointments, accidents, and other "thorns in the flesh." But one thing I know for sure, after forty-two years of being "born again," I really don't mind if others don't quite understand what the words mean, or what they may think my "experience" was, maybe just some emotional release or existential high.

Some may think that in 1981, I got all religious. Others treat the experience as a passing fad. Nevertheless, one thing I *do* know. I was there the night it happened. Alice was there as well. I was there during that summer night in 1981.

It's been 42 years and counting. Born again with freedoms I never thought possible, graces I thought impossible, and a faith though often tried, yet still able to experience the holiness of beauty and the beauty of holiness, notwithstanding. Freedom, grace, and faith no one can take away from me.

It was time to start a brand new sketchbook on that special day in my life.