

INTO THE LIGHT

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Jerry Aveta

He was running late and wanted this day to be perfect. He had traveled this route many times as a child in the back seat of the family station wagon but that was years ago. Nothing looked familiar and neither did the traffic.

“Get here when you get here,” was her response when he texted about his tardiness.

Whew, at least she’s not ticked off at me. He thought as he sat, simmering at the endless stream of red lights.

This casual lunch was scheduled after an almost fifty-year break since their last encounter. They were reunited through the wonders of social media available to any bored office worker as was his circumstance. After initial email exchanges, ensuring they hadn’t forgotten one another, phone calls and texts on an ever-increasing basis, they planned this physical reunion. As he parked outside her office, he noticed his palms were sweaty and he had butterflies in his stomach. He felt like a teenager again.

They were from two different life experiences when they had met in a physics class during their final year of high school. She had lived on four different continents before she was ten years old, and

JERRY AVETA

he lived in the same house from preschool until the time they met. Her father was in the State Department, which took her family from Washington D.C. to Germany to the West Indies to Canada to New Jersey. His dad, the son of an immigrant, dropped out of school in the eighth grade and survived the African and Italian campaigns of WWII as an Army medic. His dad met his mom when he gave his seat to her on a crowded train while on leave from the Army. Her dad and mom met on VE Day during a street celebration in Paris. It was probably those same romantic spirits that they inherited from their parents that led the high school sweethearts to reconnect many years later.

What they did not know was that each had experienced a few very dark days since they last saw each other. They would soon learn their stories as time passed. They would listen to each other's pain and in so doing would help each other to heal. What they didn't know was that they were preparing themselves to experience a few additional dark days, only this time, together.

She had married in her mid-twenties, had three children, and lived through the horrible experience of losing her son to an accidental drug overdose when he was only twenty-five years old. Trying to describe her journey through those dark days and the subsequent dismantling of a forty-year marriage was not the subject of this writing. Those details are for her to tell, in her time, in her way.

His adult life was quite different from hers. In comparison, by his mid-twenties he had married, and became a parent. Shortly after his divorce, his ex-wife died in a car accident in the mountains of West Virginia on Christmas Eve. He learned of the fatal accident upon his Christmas morning arrival in West Virginia but hadn't known if his daughter was also in the car. One can imagine the emotional release later when he discovered his daughter safe at her aunt's house. All were awaiting his arrival so he could explain to his daughter the death

INTO THE LIGHT

of her mother. Summoning the words and the manner to broach the subject escaped him. He was content to just hold her until she asked about her mommy. He was surprised how easily he found the right words at the right moment.

He left his northern Virginia apartment alone and returned as a single parent of a three-year-old. He had little knowledge of little girls. He had no sisters. He'd only been married a few short years before divorcing, and most of that time was childless. Those early days of single parenting were pure survival, making it through with the use of Hamburger Helper and occasional baby-sitting from his mother. Each day was a challenge but filled with gratitude for having his daughter in his life.

Three years later, he met and married a divorcee who had two daughters, one the same age as his daughter and one about to turn thirteen. He thought it was a great arrangement. A playmate for his daughter, a built-in babysitter for both younger girls, and a woman who could cook. Needless to say, he was a little naïve about the dynamics of a blended family with three children of three different fathers. It wasn't long before the dysfunction became clear, even to him.

He was inadequately equipped to deal with the relational dynamics of stepchildren and stepparents while trying to deal with the natural child-parent relationships, all blended into the same family. There were competing priorities. No matter how much one tried, there were always a bias or favoring toward one's natural child compared to a stepchild. Likewise, regardless how close the stepchild became to the stepparent, inevitably the stepchild would one day announce, "You're not my father!" He could attest to that experience.

Additionally, there were the dynamic of one of his wife's ex-spouses trying to parent his child sporadically and chaotically in this new blended family. Given any day of the week there were bound

JERRY AVETA

to be one or more crises percolating through the household. These were some of the challenges involved in fashioning some resemblance to a functional family life.

After the marriage, he discovered his wife's excessive drinking. It wasn't long after that he then discovered her tendency towards infidelity. Confronted with the possibility of going through another divorce so early in this new marriage he did something that he had never done before in his life. He cried out to God in desperation. He had no idea that God would take him up on his invitation. God entered into his circumstance and gave him the help he desperately needed to be the father and husband required for this relationship tornado.

He described the next thirty years as a faith journey. Being raised a Catholic and sent to parochial school for his first eight grades, he was comfortable with the concept of faith being a part of the family's social architecture. He avoided recruitment into the Catholic priesthood in the sixth grade because of his parents' emotional reaction against a commitment at such a young age. He came to realize later in life that it was God's grace that saved him from such a mistake. Only God could know that this Catholic child would eventually become a Protestant Pentecostal pastor. He would have never made it as a Catholic priest.

Late one night after a difficult evening, he was alone in his bedroom evening when he requested God to intervene in his family. That night started as a social engagement with a few friends. There was excessive drinking, subsequent arguing, and a late-night call to his father-in-law requesting intervention. By the next day, his passionate plea to God was dismissed until weeks later.

The event was a business weekend held in a resort in Pennsylvania. A convenient non-denominational Christian service was offered to the conference attendees on Sunday before their departure. A friend, who was speaking that morning, invited him

INTO THE LIGHT

with his family to attend the service. His friend had a successful career in government, had an Italian heritage, and was raised Catholic like him, and was well respected among their common professional associates.

He had been to Protestant services before, which were quite different from those in the Catholic church. After a moving testimony, his friend asked the audience to invite God into their lives. He was conflicted because he sincerely believed God was already in his life. He didn't believe that more demonstration of that fact was necessary, but he wanted to support his friend in some manner. Feeling conflicted, all he could do was utter a simple prayer, God help me. He had no explanation for what happened next. He literally felt transported to the front of the room where his friend was standing. They embraced and he wept uncontrollably. When he finally stopped crying, something inside him had changed.

Beginning in college, he routinely contended the anger deep inside of him. It was a slow burn, ready to be revealed with an explosion of emotion in moments of stress. For the most part it stayed hidden in the recesses of his soul, others unaware of its existence or that it was a source of great anxiety for him. That day, after embracing his friend, the anger was gone replaced with a deep feeling of peace and joy. At the time, he was facing severe financial stresses with no apparent solutions. The relationships in his family continued to be strained. In spite of these issues, he walked away from the service with an internal assurance that everything would be alright. He didn't know how or why, just that everything was going to work out somehow.

There are many scriptures that describe the transformation of a life through faith. His favorite was found in Peter's first epistle where it describes God calling us, 'Out of darkness into His marvelous light.' (1 Peter 2:9) That was the way he felt after that Sunday morning service in Pennsylvania. For the first time his internal

JERRY AVETA

darkness was removed, and he was thrust into the light of God that provided peace and joy like no other. His faith journey had begun, unannounced and without warning. He would find that his journey would be highlighted by many similar events like that initial one. He would learn to characterize them as the intersection of the natural (us) with the supernatural (God). It was similar to a tornado, which is the intersection of the natural with the unnatural, where the landscape of that intersection is changed in an instant. An intersection of the natural and the supernatural when the landscape of one's faith was changed to a faith based on experience with God and not just information about God.

His friend who was speaking that impactful Sunday morning was also instrumental in the redirection of his faith away from Catholicism. His friend had transitioned into a Baptist congregation from his Catholic tradition, and it seemed like a logical first step to follow his friend's lead in his new journey of faith. The church provided a structure for his entire family. There were separate ministries for the children and teens which provided their children with an important peer social structure. At the same time there was a selection of adult ministries for men, women, and married couples. He found an umbrella of instruction and accountability for each member of his family at a time when it was desperately needed. Through this instruction, his family began to achieve a sense of normalcy in its daily functionality. Consequently, he was able to dive into a structured study of his newly found faith consisting of Sunday classes and more formal studies during the week. Eventually he earned a Master of Arts in Religion and counseling from Liberty University and became deeply involved in teaching and counseling within the church.

His faith grew in knowledge through his various studies and in experience of teaching and counseling others. However, instrumental to his faith journey was the continuation of those

INTO THE LIGHT

intersections between the natural and the supernatural. These experiences changed the understanding of his faith, enabling him to move first from Catholic to Baptist (non-Pentecostal protestant) then to Assembly of God (Pentecostal protestant). The journey continued until he became a licensed, ordained minister in the International Pentecostal Holiness Church, finally starting and pastoring his own church for seven years.

While ministering at one of the local churches, his pastor asked him to take on an additional duty. He was asked to counsel a minister who had recently been removed from his pastorate due to infidelity. The suspended minister and his wife attended his class and were counseled as part of the minister's restoration to the denomination to which they belonged. He and the former pastor spent many hours talking and soon became friends. In one of their sessions the suspended minister was asked how he could preach and teach in front of his congregation while he knowingly was doing wrong. His answer was that he would confess his sin to God every week and feel forgiven in order to effectively minister on Sunday, but then would continue in his infidelity during the following week. The minister would repeat this cycle each week until he was caught. He found that logic perplexing and wondered how anyone in the ministry could fool themselves in that way for a continued period of time. Ironically years later he would find himself in a similar predicament.

After being delivered into the light that Sunday morning almost thirty years ago, he now found himself in a very dark place again. He had closed his church, left his denomination, and was drained of his faith. Sunday mornings would come, and he was more interested in playing golf than attending church. He was recovering from two major surgeries, and on the eve of returning to work, he discovered a sexually explicit email from his wife to her lover.

Where is God now? he thought.

JERRY AVETA

The rage and bitterness consumed him as he prepared for the legal battles that lay ahead for the financial unraveling of a thirty-year marriage. The Commonwealth of Virginia did not levy any consequence for infidelity in the divorce settlement that was solely subsidized by him. His spouse had not worked for many years and therefore was interpreted not to have any liability in spite of her acts. It was a simple numerical calculation that prorated the retirement he had earned between both parties based on the number of years married. It is referred to as a no-fault divorce because his wife did not have independent means. The only condition that would alter the calculation was in the event that his wife remarried. A consideration rejected by her and her live-in boyfriend because they did not want to jeopardize their income.

He'd been faithful during his marriage but felt that paying the consequences for his divorce was an abandonment by God. Especially, after devoting most of his adult life in service to his faith. Who wouldn't?

Two critical events happened. First, was the reconnection with his high school sweetheart. It was ironic they were reconnecting when both were experiencing similar circumstances. Because of his bitterness, he was not willing to admit that God was involved. That his life was his doing alone, at least that was the way he felt. They leaned on each other and helped each other to heal. The second even occurred when he felt he needed therapy. He was recommended to a local professional and diligently met with him twice a week for months. The first event restored his heart. The second was instrumental in pushing him back on the path to his faith.

Counseling was cathartic. There was nothing said or done that was particularly innovative, but the therapist validated his anger was justified, which helped but did nothing to alleviate his bitterness. He knew his anger was a spiritual problem invading his soul, and the only solution was forgiveness. He had taught and counseled this

INTO THE LIGHT

spiritual principle many times throughout the years. But he could not go there now. He wasn't going to forgive anyone who had hurt and taken advantage of him. However, that all changed.

He could never recall what was discussed in the counseling session that day. But he did discover the besetting issue causing his bitterness. His daughter had been abused with indifference from her stepmother and indirectly from him. Her stepmother gave little affection while giving over-attention her own children. His daughter's bedroom was next to her stepsister's and night after night she would listen to his ex-wife spend quality time with her daughter and then walk right by his daughter's bedroom without acknowledgment. This type of rejection was manifested in different ways at various times. He would confront his ex-wife behind closed doors, but it would escalate into bitter arguments, each accusing the other of neglecting each other's children. It was a no-win situation, and he gave up trying to solve the problem.

He tried to make it up to his daughter in other ways but there was no substitute for a mother's love, or in his daughter's case a surrogate stepmom, no matter how hard he tried. A stepmother can never be the equivalent of a natural mother. But what he didn't realize was the devastating effects a stepmother's rejection could have on a child. To this day his daughter, by her own admission, still coveted the approval of her former stepmom.

That day in counseling, he felt the extent of the pain he had caused his daughter by not fighting for her well-being, shaking him to the core of his soul. So much so, that he sat in his car and openly wept, unable to drive. He called his daughter and asked for forgiveness.

"Of course, Dad," she said as she cried.

He wept again, this time with his daughter. It was healing for them. A forgiveness that was needed to expel the bitterness he was harboring. He didn't need to forgive others, he just had to ask his

JERRY AVETA

daughter for her forgiveness. Over the years lived oblivious to his own hypocrisy while ministering weekly, just like the pastor he counseled years earlier. Once he accepted that, he felt his faith returning. His journey back into the light began in a new and revitalized way.

The transition from two marriages into a third was not without complications. Even his daughter experienced some remorse. He and his new wife faced a lack of enthusiasm by her daughters for they were blamed for the general hurt felt by all, even ex-spouses. It was a dark time shared by all.

Everyone's reactions were understandable, and their therapist told them the normal time for such adjustments was about five years. The therapist had nailed it. They celebrated their fifth wedding anniversary with a small catered affair in his daughter's backyard. In attendance were the children of their previous marriages, including one of his former stepdaughters with her husband, son, and her son's girlfriend. The culminating moment of the event was when their children collectively gave an unrequested witness to the happiness of their marriage, and the loving acceptance of it. It was worth the five-year wait.

The reemergence of his journey brought him to a different place in his faith and in a completely different context. He calls it being freed from his denominational view and released to the full expression of his faith, not limited to conventional form and function. Because of that freedom his life has changed dramatically in many ways.

His wife was undergoing hip replacement surgery, so he arrived at the hospital waiting room with plenty of reading material to occupy himself for the duration of the procedure. As he started to read his mind was flooded with thoughts. It was not like those times when reading and one's mind wanders to what we ate last night or a recent football game we watched. His mind was filled with some of

INTO THE LIGHT

his experiences throughout the years of ministry, what they meant to him and others throughout the years. Suddenly he had the desire to write down what he was thinking but he came prepared to read not write. He promptly borrowed a pen and began filling in the blank pages, margins, and any blank spaces that were available in the books he had brought to the hospital. The words flowed with examples of his experiences and their relevance to the times of today. Before he knew it, they were calling him to join his wife in recovery because her surgery was completed. He left the hospital that day having discovered the joy of writing.

Through his most recent “dark days” he was filled with regret having wasted his life in ministry, studying scripture, and trying to help people. Through the joy of writing, he was learning how to synthesize those experiences and leverage his learning into writing about the relevance of faith in the events of our nation today. He has come to realize that the divide between the church and state as governed by our constitution has been compromised, beginning years ago with the polarization of the faith communities in politics. He has learned in that nexus of politics and faith there has been a prevailing silence of religious leaders which has led to a compromising of faith in many aspects of the politics of the communities of faith. This has led to further divisions in the communities of faith along political lines that has facilitated further divide in our nation.

This new understanding has fueled a passion in him to write about these issues of faith in our times. This passion for writing has allowed him to leverage his many years of experience in his faith and in his government career. He has published one work, drafted a second work currently seeking publishing, created a blog that addresses faith and political issues, and routinely writes about these issues in any opportunity that presents itself. He reaches more people in one day with his writings that he did in all the years he pastored.

JERRY AVETA

In all this activity his wife has been his source of encouragement and inspiration. She has proved to be a valuable asset in her general wisdom and especially as his chief editor. She offers an objective view, not being tainted by years of denominational faith as he was. In addition, her skills in grammar and vocabulary far exceed the capabilities of her engineer husband. She is the perfect complement to him. She is his help meet. “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him.” (Genesis 2:18) He now realizes God has been in this journey all along. God never left him. He forsook God. He was the one that walked away from God. But God is never moved by our rejection or rebellion. He is in no hurry. He is quite content to wait. Time is on His side.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, and notable author, describes the pattern of spiritual transformation as involving three steps: Order, Disorder, and Reorder. He agrees with Rohr. Looking back, he now understands the necessity of breaking down one’s former faith habits in order to build them back up with a new understanding. He now sees it was necessary to go through a season of disorder so God could bring a new order to his life. What is more he is now realizing that this is a general principle involved in all of our lives. We may not recognize God’s involvement or even attribute it to anything to do with one’s faith. We may refer to it as “finding the good through the rain” or some other phrase depicting a struggle through a difficult time only to realize a great benefit from that struggle. He believes that is God’s working in all our lives, covertly and silently participating, not requiring any immediate recognition. He is the perfect Gentleman, just waiting for us to come to the end of ourselves and invite Him into the circumstances of our lives.

The moral of the story is simple. When “dark times” come, lean into them, and persevere. Once you come through “into the light” look up and you will see a new world around you. Embrace it. Recognize that everything you have gone through and that you will

INTO THE LIGHT

go through in the future is part of your journey. Then enjoy the rest of your life. You are in good hands.