

MY TESTIMONY (THE WINDSOR STAR)

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I was a slender eighteen-year-old standing on the curbside of Huron Line Road near the Ambassador Bridge, an army duffel bag at my side. I was thumbing for a ride that would take me away from Windsor to somewhere else. Anywhere else. I had to find a better life.

I was number eight of nine kids, and though our small house at 569 California Avenue was congested with siblings of various ages, I had a lonely childhood. My mom was a gentle but tired

and distant parent. My dad, very un-gentle, was also distant. I remember asking my mom, "Are we poor?" After a few seconds hesitation she replied, "Yes."

I cried my first day at Saint Anthony catholic school, a five minute walk down the street. The young Sister, dressed in an intimidating robe covering hair to feet, wrist to wrist, only her face and hands evidence that a person lived inside all that black, seemed troubled and uncaring. I cried often in class, not wanting anything to do with this strange world into which I had been plunked.

Mrs. K. was my grade six teacher, her diameter almost matching her short stature. The first day she greeted me with an *Oh no! Not another Jones* remark, having already suffered through some older brothers. One day while sitting at her desk she stared transfixed at my oversized, winter socks for a minute or so and then told me to trade places with the girl behind me. Embarrassing. Mrs. K. wasn't yet satisfied. Again she stared at my socks, again she told me to trade places with someone further back. Embarrassing times ten.

Being catholic was being nervous. Hell awaited me because I was bad, bad, bad. After confessing my sins in that dark confessional to a bored priest, I was never sure if I did a good enough job. Did I hold back any sins? Was I sufficiently repentant? You see, to make a bad confession was a *sacrilege*. The only remedy for a sacrilege was to confess that horrible sin during the next confession, but that was so embarrassing and complicated. A second sacrilege was committed when failing to confess the first one. I was in big trouble.

My grade eight teacher, Sister H., was also garbed in black c/w a peculiar headpiece hiding hair and ears, but she was nice and she liked me. One day she told the class, "I think Larry is going to be a priest!" Not likely, thinkest I.

Assumption High School (1958-1960) was scary. The first day a young catholic brother on his way to priesthood approached one of the boys in class (no girls allowed back then) and gave him a choice, three moderate punches to his upper arm or one hard punch. "Your choice! What will it be?" he demanded. Menacingly strolling up and down the rows, he picked out his second victim, and then his third, fourth and fifth. I was hoping he would pick on that burly and tough-looking kid, but he was smarter than that.

The brightest kids were in A class and the slowest kids in F class. I was in E. One day the science teacher, when entering the room, accidentally closed the door on the bottom of his black robe. The class giggled. "What's the matter, sir," I loudly asked, "did you get your dress caught in the door?" He didn't seem upset with my attempted humour that exploded the giggles into an uproar. Nonchalantly he strolled past me and when out of my sight he turned around and pummelled me with lots and lots of slaps to the back of my head. I guess I deserved it.

A layman teacher called me to the front of the class because of a perceived misdemeanour. He tightened my tie until my face turned red and my knees buckled, at which time he loosened my tie and my legs straightened again. His smirk told me he was having fun. Tighten, loosen.... tighten,

loosen.... tighten, loosen.

I delivered the Windsor Star on California Avenue to make cigarette and coke money. My memory tells me the cost per issue was six cents. (I distinctly remember a small bottle of Coca-Cola costing seven cents and when they increased the size the price jumped to eight cents.) One late afternoon while approaching my old Saint Anthony school – let's see now, that could have been the spring of 1958 – I saw Sister H. across the street chatting with a couple of students. *Oh-oh!* I remembered her telling my class that the thing that most grieved her was being intentionally ignored by her graduated students. And here I was coming into her view. I pretended not to notice her. She took a step forward and stared at me. She knew I had seen her, and I knew she knew. I really wanted to go to her, the only teacher who ever liked me, and tell her how unhappy I was, how I hated high school, how I hated life, how I hated myself. I hope to see her in heaven some day and give her a big hug and a bigger apology.

I passed grade nine and flunked ten. I felt bad that my dad had a loser son that wasted his tuition money. He laboured at Ford Motor Company for many years and made extra money painting and wallpapering. I repeated grade ten at Forester Secondary (1960-1963). No more tie, no more priests, and plenty of girls.

In grade twelve a passing science teacher from other classes, Mr. H., reached into my locker and pulled out books into my face because I was slow and late for class. I angrily pushed him away, and he challenged me to a fight in his class after school hours. The door would be locked from the inside, he said, so no one could interfere, just him and me. I told my friend Dave and Dave didn't believe me. "Come and see." So he came and saw Mr. H and me walk into his science room, the door locked behind us. We made lots of noise but neither was seriously hurt, just plenty tuckered out. And guess who replaced our incompetent science teacher a few weeks later. Hey, good guess!

The school counsellor called me into her office. Of the four grade twelve classes, she told me, I had the lowest marks, and the second lowest was far higher than me. I hated school but dreaded the thought of quitting to work at menial labour. I was afraid one of the auto factories would slurp me up. That is why I found myself on Huron Line that June morning, thumb in the air, a few dollars in my pocket. I left nothing behind, no trophies, no badges, no awards, no accomplishments.

When in Calgary I was told the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia had need of fruit pickers. That's how I ended up in Kelowna. Another teen and I attended a Salvation Army church service in the hope of being allotted a free room. My friend said that if I would 'take the flop' I would get special treatment. "Take the flop? What's that?" He pointed to an old man in a trench coat making his way to the front altar to kneel repentantly before Jesus. That was taking the flop.

I and my duffle bag hitchhiked north to Prince Rupert and spent a month or so in a hostel run by the United Church. That's where I met Rocky, a war vet. Rocky was about to be shipped to a lighthouse station along with an alcoholic buddy who, Rocky said, was a real pain in the you-know-where. So

Rocky slipped him a large bottle of cheap wine the night before scheduled departure on the Coast Guard ship. Sure enough, the guy got loaded and was a no-show. I took his place and I was soon on my way to Langara Island, a two day trip to the northern tip of the Queen Charlotte Islands. The ocean fascinated me and I perched myself at the bow of that huge red ship... up, up, up, down, down down, up, up, up. Lotsa fun!

Joe was the chief lighthouse keeper at Langara and also a war vet, a hastily trained fighter plane navigator. Rocky and Joe and I had lots of time to interact, but neither wanted to talk about their wartime struggles. Nor did they want to talk religion or God, subjects that were beginning to interest me. Langara was a fascinating island that would probably take three days to walk around. Rocky read books, Joe pattered in the engine room and I hiked and pondered. Other than the merciless #*!#!#! rain, it was idyllic. Like really. Near the high concrete lighthouse the never relaxed ocean rushed into jagged gullies every few seconds, erupting in noisy and impassioned displays of spray. *Whomp!* In other parts of the island uncrowded and unmolested forests bordered serene beaches where deer could often be spotted licking salt from the rocks. It was a wonderland. Once I came face to face with a doe, staring with stunning immense eyes at my rifle pointing at her heart. I couldn't miss. So glad I never pulled the trigger; I would remember that malignant slaying to this day. I was told young people were never hired as lighthouse keepers because they couldn't take the isolation. I was nineteen but me and alone got along just fine. Langara provided plenty of time to think about my future, to think about purpose, to think about God.

Eight years later I was back in Kelowna, married with two young children, c/w an electrician contractor license. I was doing okay. And yet I was not okay. My emptiness was still empty. What's the purpose of life? What's it all about? I never envied those financially secure; wealth seemed pointless. I couldn't admit to suffering depression; only old ladies got depressed. Perhaps eastern religions have the truth. Truth. *Hmmm*. Is there really such a thing? If so, what does it look like? And relevance. Where do I find relevance?

Sitting with my wife and children at another boring mass at Saint Theresa church one Sunday morning, I found myself staring transfixed at the crucifix at the front of the church. A crucifix is an image of the suffering Christ hanging by three nails on a cross. Tears were streaming down my face! *What's happening?* And then, for the first time ever, the Holy Spirit spoke to me: "Don't you get it?" To which I replied, "No, Lord, I don't get it." My wet eyes still glued to the crucifix, He spoke again: "Don't you get it?" "No Lord, I don't get it." You see, the answer to my search for truth was, as the Bible says, "Jesus Christ and Him crucified." Jesus and His atoning blood was the truth and relevance my heart pined for. I was staring at the very remedy (that is, a *depiction* of the remedy) to my emptiness, but I just.... didn't.... get it. "Don't you get it?" the loving voice urged again and again. "No, Lord, I just don't get it." And sensing the moment about to pass, I said, "Don't give up on me, Lord! Don't give up on me!"

There was a short little sister at Saint Theresa's, a feisty thing; I liked her. One day I noticed her outside the church when the Holy Spirit spoke: "That person has what your heart is searching for." Just like that. She invited me to a church council gathering even though I wasn't a member. We broke up into small groups and I made sure I was in hers. She said nothing unusual and, disappointed, I was about to leave when she said, "Larry, I have something for you", and handed me a yellow tract produced by Campus Crusade (a protestant ministry!), *The Four Spiritual Laws*. "Why does Larry get one and the rest of us don't," someone quipped. And then Sister said something you would never expect a catholic to say: "The Holy Spirit told me to give this to Larry!" *Wow!* My hope soared! The Holy Spirit told me this nun had what I wanted, and she said the Holy Spirit instructed her to give me that tract. I'm not the brightest kid on the block but it was obvious that what I pined for was in that small pamphlet!

I stayed up until midnight reading that tract again and again and again. I was devastated! I was enraged! All this tract talked about was Jesus! This was nothing new! I knew all about Jesus! Oh, I get it.... I was the butt of God's sick humour! I trusted Him, I really trusted Him, and now He was having a real belly laugh! I went to bed with bitterness corroding my insides.

The next morning the bitterness hadn't abated, not slightly. I went into the bathroom, stepped up on the side of the bathtub, and shook my fists at a very spiteful and wicked God. I couldn't hit Him with my fists so I hit Him with words. Being a construction worker, I had plenty of salvo and I unleashed it. Then I told God I was through with Him. "Send me to hell if You want: I will never repent! Never!"

Never lasted about three or four hours. Incredibly, the Holy Spirit spoke to me again, very gently: "Give Jesus a chance! Give Jesus a chance!" Over and over, "Give Jesus a chance!" Life was hard, but I had never been *hopeless*. Before that day there was always hope. But I had just thoroughly rejected God. I called Him names this paper wouldn't print. And yet the Holy Spirit was beckoning me! "Okay, okay," I relented. "What have I got to lose?"

A few days later I'm all alone in Saint Theresa church; church seemed a good place to surrender my life to Christ. I imagined placing myself in a pretty box, c/w a bright bow, and presenting myself to Jesus. There. But I felt nothing. The amazing Holy Spirit spoke again: "In the same manner *receive* Jesus, as a gift." *Yeah sure, me receive Jesus. Fat chance.* I knew Jesus was God; how could I receive God, the creator of the universe? *Preposterous!* But I did as the Holy Spirit said and prayed something like this: "Jesus, I hereby receive You as a gift." And then it happened....

I was taken into a spiritual dimension I never knew existed. It was like passing from darkness to light, from death to life. I had never heard the Bible expression, "born again", but that's what it felt like. It was incredible times a hundred. The Bible says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away, behold all things have become new." That day I became "a new creation".

I discovered that the truth I desperately wanted was actually a person. Jesus: "I am the way, THE TRUTH, and the life." He said, "I have come that they may have life.". LIFE.... that's what I found.

Reality, relevance, truth.... LIFE. I became spiritually alive in Christ. That's the testimony of my conversion way back in February, 1972. Jesus said, "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear." Windsor, do you have the humility to hear from a high school dropout?

Paul the apostle wrote, "I am a debtor, both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise." Windsor, I too am a debtor. I owe you the gospel of Jesus Christ. Do you understand that when you were conceived in your mother's womb you were destined to live forever? No disease, no accident, not even suicide can put an end to one's existence. When your body stops functioning you simply move to another location. You, the real you now living in your earth-suit, will live for all eternity... *somewhere*. The Bible tells us there is a heaven to gain and a hell to shun. To believe otherwise is to argue with the Bible, not me. Heaven must be quite a place; the Bible says, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him."

I especially reach out to former classmates and neighbourhood friends, many of whom hung around the basketball court behind Prince of Wales Elementary on Wyandotte Street West. As the Lord recently brought names and faces to mind – Danny and Gordon and Tom and Jim and Doug and Steve and Allan and many etceteras, all now in their late seventies, none of whom I have seen or talked to for sixty plus years – I prayed they would find my Jesus. Will these words make their way into a few of your lives? If so, please humour me....

In your imagination, stretch out a tape measure on the floor. Good. Now lock it so it doesn't rewind. Good. Now, in your imagination, put a heavy felt-tip mark at 80 inches, representing male life expectancy in Canada. And then mark your age (77?). Great. Now consider the long stretch on the yellow tape from zero to 77 inches. That illustrates years lived. Now I want you to look at the short distance between the two marks, 77 and 80. This short span could signify your remaining years. Scary, isn't it?

Please hear me. Everybody dies. Your parents are gone. Your teachers are gone. Your coaches are gone. Death was faraway but is now nearby. Eternity may be just 'three inches' away. Eternity is a lo-o-o-ng time. And there is no Redeemer on the other side of the grave. So choose Christ now. Please!!!

Before closing, I want the reader to know what I am and what I am not. Okay? I am not a catholic, not a protestant, not an evangelical, not a pentecostal, not a baptist, etcetera, etcetera. I am what the Bible says I am - a redeemed, born-again, adopted child of God, an "an heir of God through Christ".

I invite my past teen-age friends and acquaintances (or anyone else) to contact me. I think you would agree that a conversation with someone you haven't seen or heard for sixty years would be, at the least, interesting. Text or phone or email. I expect to come to Windsor for a few days in May; does a Tim Horton's coffee or a walk along the riverfront sound okay? And if you do Facebook, send a friend request. God bless you!

