



**PART TWO:
AN AWAKENING**

Spiritual Experience

THE CRISES

At 40 years of age, I had been overly proud of being a high school graduate, a former banker, finance company lender, industrial accountant and truck driver, when “between jobs”. I was now seeing myself as an absolute and total failure.

My best friend had abandoned me. The company I was employed by was about to be closed down due to a non-reversible decline in orders. All I had learned and done in accounting and administration was not enough to help the General Manager of Canada Envelope turn the operation around. Month after month the financial statements, which I was responsible for preparing, showed an ever-expanding annual loss and nothing in sight to suggest it was about to change.

Several postal strikes and several significant jumps in postal rates coupled with the advent of e-mail had guaranteed the doom of the Atlantic Division plant of Canada Envelope. I feared for my job and the jobs of all my co-workers and my fears were not to be denied. Then the axe fell.

My wife had not been too happy with my performance in other areas either, and I really felt I had loused up royally. In my desperation, I was going for little walks in the woods behind the plant every day at noon hour. There was something about that little patch of nature that helped me get through each day while I waited for my last day of work.

As I told you earlier I was not a church going man...not at all. My wife and children would go off to church on Sunday morning and leave me to nurse a bottle of beer or a “rye and ginger”. That angry upset with our new Presbyterian minister when I was in my early teens, had left such distaste for clergy in my mouth that I honestly did believe they would get me to marry me and bury me, and that’s it. So I wouldn’t be caught dead in church.

I didn’t own a bible and was perplexed when I found myself suddenly finding some comfort in the local newspaper’s daily scripture quote. I could read that...and no one would be able to see me savor it.

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The craving expanded until I found an old copy of the King James Bible. When no one could possibly catch me I would disappear with it and study the psalms and proverbs. Those I liked, but King James and I spoke two different languages and so it turned out that one day, when no one else was around of course, I slipped into a bible bookstore and bought a Good News Bible. Finally, I had one that was in my language.

But Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John didn't have much in the way of details about this mysterious Jesus fellow. But read it...I craved the time to read it.

One day I sat parked in my car behind Canada Envelope, quietly eating my lunch and satisfying my hunger for the Good News Bible's message when it happened. I suddenly heard something.

It was not an external voice but it was so clear and unmistakable that I responded out loud by saying: "You don't want me! I've been too bad! You want this person or that person but you don't want me!" Then as fast as I could I started the car and got out of there as though the devil himself was after me.

A day or two later I was in the same spot, doing the same things when the voice spoke again ... saying the same thing. My response was the same as last time and again I got out of there quick.

Then the third time...a few days later, same place, and same scenario exactly. I blurted out: "You don't want me! I've been too bad! You want this person or that person but you don't want me!" What followed was about three seconds of profound silence and then came the VERY CLEAR WORDS: "Who are you to tell Me who I want and who I don't want?" I slid down under the steering wheel and was *very* quiet.

I phoned the minister at the church where my wife and children went every Sunday morning. I told Rev. McDougall that something had happened and I needed to talk with him. He invited me into his office and I followed him in, making certain that the door was firmly closed behind me, for I wanted no chance that anyone could possibly hear me tell *this* story.

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He tried his best to make me feel comfortable and I poured out to him the story about hearing this voice speaking to me. I couldn't help notice a small smile growing on his face as I unfolded my earth-shaking saga to him. When I got the last words out I then demanded. "Now you've got to tell me if I am insane or not?"

He said: "I can best answer you by telling you what happened to me" ...and he proceeded to pour out a story almost identical to my own, except at the time he had been sitting in a row boat on a pond in Prince Edward Island.

"Oh my God!" I thought to myself. "Does this mean God wants me to become a minister?! Me?!"

My head was spinning from the incident and I wanted to know: What just happened? Where did that voice come from? Where is God? That was the beginning of a long search that took me 30 years. The first clue that I got came from the words of the theologian and poet Alfred Lord Tennyson. "Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet."

THE MORNING AFTER (so to speak)

That was how it all began. It took me several years and interaction with many understanding ministers from different churches before I came to understand that God, as I knew Him, did *not* want me to become an ordained minister. He had something else in mind for me...music. What a relief!

And yet part of me wanted to become a minister. There was now an appreciation for the ministry and it stroked my ego as well...but it was not to be, at least not for many years.

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DEAR GOD WHY IS THIS HAPPENING TO ME?

Have you ever looked at something and received the strangest feeling that what you were looking at was somehow trying to tell you something?

Such was the feeling I got when I attended the Atlantic Christian Training Centre (ACTC) in Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia on a late fall day. But first I need to back up my story a bit in order to bring it all into focus.

God had “called” me and He alone knew why at the time. It turned my world upside down in more ways than one.

The idea that God wanted me for *anything* was in itself a shock that sent me reeling. But the sequence of events that followed was beyond my wildest dreams and my greatest fears.

The envelope plant where I worked closed throwing 25 of us out of work in an area of eastern Canada where the unemployment rate, at the time, was over 20% in real terms. I felt I had *no* chance of getting a job ... and I proved to be correct ... no paying job at least.

The ministers started teaching me and started me into teaching ... Sunday School.

In the meantime, I judiciously planned to bank my severance package to ensure that if I used my unemployment insurance as my base income and only took one twelfth of my severance package to go with it each month that I could financially keep our heads above water for one full year ... and I did.

Month thirteen however meant the unemployment insurance ended, the pension money was now gone and I had only one place to go ... the welfare office. It was the most humiliating day of my life. My pride hit the dust.

Next the bank got into the act. No money, no bank loan or credit card payments and therefore I was escorted into bankruptcy. The trustee showed up and all assets were listed. Most of them were seized and sold for peanuts. We were left with only the essentials to maintain a family.

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Gone was everything I had ever struggled to earn and enjoy. But the greatest loss to me personally was ... they took my Gibson J45 sunburst guitar and my heart was in music. I loved that guitar.

I received work in the form of volunteer projects helping people who were worse off than me ... non-status Indians and prisoners seeking a place to sell the furniture they were building in prison.

It was when I was in this period of being a welfare recipient that I found myself going to the Atlantic Christian Training Centre. (ACTC). It was to be the first step in my ministerial training which could lead to me becoming a “Lay Supply Minister” for the United Church of Canada. That was the only ray of light in my future at that point.

So there I was at ACTC on a late autumn day. I was walking from the main training building to the residence when I was strongly drawn to stop and stare at an apple tree.

In my humble opinion someone had all but massacred that poor tree. The ground had a large neat pile of branches and the tree must have felt like it had just been given a crew cut ... and winter was just around the corner. I thought how inappropriate and cruel. I could not get that image out of my head so I went and got my camera and took a picture of it.

Then it happened. I picked up a copy of my old favorite spiritual reading book, opened it at random and found myself looking a page that contained this message:

“I have pruned you of much that you might bear better fruit for Me.”

Now at last I knew the answers to my questions. “Why me Father? Why have you allowed them to take away all that had been important to me?” So I would worship and serve Him and not the material things in life. In time all those material things were replaced, but by then God was firmly in place as number one in my life. That is what the apple tree was trying to tell me.