

When God Comes Calling

by Edward Kelley

In February of 2008 I thought my life was over. I was seriously ill, strung out on narcotic pain killers, destitute and about to be evicted from my home. Death was knocking at my door. I wasn't afraid to die. In fact, I welcomed it. I longed for the peace that I knew would come in a matter of months. I was tired, so very tired of life, and had given up.

God wasn't ready to take me though. He had a plan for me, a purpose beyond anything I could imagine, one so radically different from what my entire life had been about that I would never have even thought it possible. Looking back now though, I see that my journey began long ago, in the year 1971, when I was only 11 years old.

In the fall of 1971 I became a 7th grader at The Patterson School of Lenoir NC. I spent six years at Patterson, graduating in 1976. With not much of a real home life, Patterson had become my home. The other students became my sisters and brothers, the faculty and staff became my mothers and fathers. The most formative years of my life were also the happiest years of my life. I felt safe, secure and loved. When I finally said good-bye to Patterson one late spring day in 1976, my heart broke. I was leaving home, never to return. I never forgot Patterson though and not a week would go by when I did not have at least one dream about the school. She would forever be in my heart.

For the next 25 years, I focused on my career at the exclusion of everything else. In July of 2000, while working for AT&T, I started a part time business on the internet. The business took off, exceeding my wildest dreams. By the end of 2003, ecstatic and confident, I left AT&T to take the business full time. Then my world crashed.

In February of 2004 I was rushed to the emergency room with the most horrific pain I had ever felt. The pain was so bad I was screaming and in tears. I begged God to take my life, just to stop the pain. Over the next couple of weeks I underwent spinal taps, nerve conductivity tests, an IVIG and more. The conclusion

was frightening. I had a disease called Chronic Inflammatory Demyelinating Polyneuropathy (CIDP). My body's own immune system was attacking and killing the nerves in my feet and legs. Eventually I would lose all feeling in them and face a future that might eventually require amputation. There was no cure and the pain was only to get worse.

I was put on powerful narcotic pain killers to control the pain but as time went on and my body became acclimated to the drugs, I had to take higher doses and ever more powerful drugs. Ultimately I was taking large doses of morphine 3 times a day. In a drug induced fog, unable to think clearly, and really not caring, I watched as the business I had worked so hard to build began to crumble around me. Within 3 years it was gone, everything was gone. My medical bills were enormous and had wiped out all my assets, investments and savings. That was when I knew my life was over. There was simply no way I would ever be able to recover. My journey in life was at an end...or so I thought.

Two weeks before I was to be evicted from my home, my closest friends and my sister gathered at my house in Atlanta. They packed what little of my belongings they could and moved me to Charleston SC to live with my sister. By this time I was so frail and so weak, I couldn't even walk. My first visit with a new doctor in Charleston was while in a wheel chair.

I was immediately taken off the narcotics, going through terrible withdrawals in the process. All the more reason I wanted to die. After a couple of months though, I was able to stand again and eventually to walk again, at least for short distances. I started putting back on some of the weight I had lost and my depression lessened.

I still had a lot of pain and still do. Chronic fatigue and weakness are my constant companions. The disease has spread to my arms and hands and I suffer from many permanent side effects of the drugs, as well as the disease. I would never be able to work again. Unable to support myself, I applied for social security disability benefits. A year and a half later, I still await a hearing with an administrative law judge to approve those benefits.

About a year or so before I moved to Charleston I happened to reconnect over the internet with the headmaster of Patterson School during my time there, the Rev Floyd Finch. To my surprise, he lived in the Charleston area, as did his now grown children and their families. About a month or two after I moved to Charleston in February 2008, he and his wife came to visit me at my sister's home. While there, he gave me Communion, which I had not been able to take in many years, and said a healing prayer over me.

About a month or so after Rev Finch's visit, I received a phone call from William, Rev Finch's oldest son. He asked me if I would like to come up to his house on Lake Moultrie for a visit. I jumped at the chance to actually get out of the house for a while. Quite frankly, living with my sister and her husband wasn't easy and I stayed closed up in my room most of the time to avoid conflict.

William came and picked me up to take me back to his place. Milton, Rev Finch's other son, was also there and Rev Finch and his wife came up later that day. We sat around talking and reminiscing late into the day and I ended up spending the night. We laughed till we were in tears. It had been a very, very long time since I had laughed but that day I was doubling over with laughter as we talked about the many things we experienced during those years at Patterson School. The joy I felt was bursting out of my heart. I was happy, for the first time in 5 years, I was actually happy.

Once the mental fog I had been under from the narcotics lifted, I started wondering why I had to go through all the horrible things that I had. I wasn't a bad person. I was a kind, loving, caring and giving soul. I had taken many people into my own home and helped them find their way in life. I shared my wealth and even sponsored some kids in the Philippines. So why was I being punished so harshly? Surely Job had nothing on me!

One day, I stopped questioning. I let it go. I told God that I had no idea why I had to go through all that I did but he must have had his reasons and I accepted his will over me. I passed from grief over into acceptance. God had obviously pulled me back from the brink for some reason though. What was it? And so I prayed,

and I prayed, and I prayed. For six months I prayed, asking God to reveal to me what it was he wanted me to do with the rest of my life.

I was still asking God to show me his purpose for my life when I wrote Rev Finch, asking him, “How do we know what God’s purpose for us is”? His reply was simple and succinct, “follow your passion”. The only problem is I had lost all passion. The years of illness had taken their toll and I was left empty.

In January of 2009 I received an email from Janet Spoon, a member of Patterson’s Board of Trustees. In that email she related to me the challenges the school was facing. I responded with some questions, and some advice. Thus began a deluge of email flying back and forth between us, several times a day. We kept at it for more than two months.

In May, she informed me that the Board of Trustees had been forced to lay off the entire staff. Patterson was facing the worst crisis in its 100 year history and unless there was some miracle, the school was faced with closing forever. My “home” would be no more.

Suddenly, everything, all of it, came into focus and I was overwhelmed with the greatest sense of peace and tranquility that I had ever felt. I knew what God wanted me to do! I heard his words in my heart as clearly as if he had spoken them in my ear. Immediately my mind began reliving the events of my life and I knew! God’s hand had been guiding me all along. My purpose was to save The Patterson School, but how? What could a broken, destitute, severely ill man possibly do? I then realized that he had given me the one gift that could change everything. He had given me the gift of writing. I could write the words he was placing in my heart and share them with any who would listen.

Patterson School had been my home and had always been in my heart and now she needed me. It was all so clear. I had a purpose. I had a fire of passion burning within me. I suddenly had a passion of purpose unlike any that I had ever had before and I knew it was right and true.

Over my career I gained the experience and skills that I could use to help the school. My illness removed all obstacles and worldly concerns so that I would be

free of all hindrances to help the school. Reconnecting with the Finches had brought back a flood of memories and planted the seeds of passion in my heart. The timing of events fit together like a puzzle. As a former project manager, I could see how one event was dependent on a prior event and how events had to converge at a certain point in order to complete the project. God was my Project Manager and he was masterful in its implementation.

My challenges weren't over yet though. My living arrangement with my sister was precarious. She and her husband faced eviction themselves and I had nowhere to go if they were evicted. I would be on the street, homeless, and unable to help the school. What then of my new found purpose?

As God closes one door, he opens another. Out of the blue, Milton Finch and his wife offered me a spare bedroom. They took me in, supporting me entirely while I have no income or disability benefits. God had put it in their hearts to help me, so that I could help the school.

I took over as the school's webmaster and created a blog for the friends and alumni of the school. I began a campaign to re-engage the friends and alumni of the school. I reached out to communities of alumni on various websites such as Facebook, Classmates, MySpace, Twitter and LinkedIn. I started various fund raising efforts and began looking for other ways to help the school. I even wrote the Press Release about the layoffs that was issued by the school's Board of Trustees.

Even with my new found passion of purpose though, I am only one man. I knew I could not fulfill God's purpose alone. To succeed I had to build an army, his army, to spread the word that it is his will that The Patterson School survives and thrives. He has been preparing me for this task and only now, when there is nothing left to hold me back, no one who depends on me, no financial obligations, and no worldly goods to distract me, only now that I have been through the fire and purified, has he revealed that purpose to me.

I have learned many things about God since becoming ill. He does indeed answer prayers and prayer is the most powerful force in the universe. He does have a

purpose for each of us, even when we think we are no longer of use to anyone. He will reveal that purpose to us in his own perfect time. He must prepare us and strengthen us before he can do so. Suffering makes us stronger and better able to weather the storms ahead, removing obstacles in our way. When he finally reveals his purpose to us, he will give us a passion for that purpose so profound, that it consumes us.

Patterson School has a long, rich history. Above its academic, athletic and civic excellence, it has always provided a Christian environment in which young men and women could be molded and prepared for their years in college and beyond. In the last several years though; the school strayed from its founding principles and lost its way. I believe this is why it now faces its severest crisis, but it doesn't need to end there, nor should it.

As with the confluence of events in my own life, so too have the events in the life of Patterson School come together and brought her to a point where she can get rid of the stains of the past. Once again she can provide academic, athletic and civic excellence in a Christian environment. The slate can be wiped clean and she can be given a new vision, a new mission, and offer young men and women something that is profoundly lacking in our world today; an education in an environment built upon Christian principles and traditions.

My time on this earth is fading. One day my illness will overwhelm me and God will call me home. This won't happen until my purpose is fulfilled, of this I am sure. I hope to move to Lenoir in the near future where I will dedicate what time I have left to serving and preserving the school in any way I can. This is my sole purpose now, my reason for being. There is no other.

Patterson School is more than a school. It is a sanctuary and a house of God. We may be of many denominations but we are all God's children. Whether we are Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, or Muslim, we all worship the same God and the death of even the smallest house of God diminishes us all.

God gives each of us gifts, gifts that we can use for selfish purposes or that we can use for his purposes. Some have the gift of prayer. Some have the gift of money. Some have the gift of time. Some have the gift of speech. Some have the gift to inspire. Some have the gift to lead. Some have the gift to heal. Some have the gift of wisdom.

Think deeply about the gifts God has given you. God wants you to use those gifts for his purposes and if we truly live to serve his will, then we will do so. There can be no other choice. You either live by his will, or you don't.

God has made me his messenger. I am not a priest, a pastor, a minister or even a great orator. I am merely a man, a lowly one who has suffered greatly. Has that not been true of all his messengers? I cannot give physically, I cannot give financially. Both of these are beyond my ability now. What I can do is share my story, share my passion, and share God's message to all who will listen.

I don't know why God chose me but chosen me he has. He speaks his words into my heart and I now share his message with all who will listen. God knows your needs. Focus on serving him and he will provide all that you need.

God's message must be heard by more than the alumni of the school. It must be heard by everyone who loves God. All those who are broken, suffering, ill, destitute, beset by addictions or worse, must be told. They must know that even when they think there is nothing left for them, even when they think they are useless, there is still hope. God still loves them and God can still use them for his purposes and the joy they receive from serving his purpose will overwhelm them, making their misery seem insignificant.

"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12).

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