

In a Lonely Place

A true relationship with God can be a very lonely experience. Alone with your thoughts; often alone with your convictions. I liken it to being a soldier on the battle field. There are times when even a good soldier doesn't want to be where he is. He might not know where he's going or why. He just knows he has to be there for he is serving a greater cause; something beyond his desires. It's not about him; he is just a sentence in a greater story. He goes whether he likes it or not for he is called.

I am a soldier. My battlefield isn't the Mideast and doesn't require training at Fort Dix. My battle is one of spiritual warfare; my confrontations are with non-believers, believers and too often my very own mind. I have been a follower of the teachings of Jesus Christ for the past sixteen years. My devotion to Him has led me down numerous paths, all ultimately for my own good. Now I'm at the beginning of

my final semester of grad school, at a Christian university in a town far away from all I know, studying something close to my heart; theology. I moved here only because I felt a strong calling from the Lord. I always go where He calls. It has been my experience it's a mistake not to.

Don't get me wrong, I have friends or should I say colleagues and acquaintances here in Tulsa, OK. But sometimes I find it hard to be around other Christians. That feeling is even more exacerbated with Evangelical Christians. It often seems there is a game they play trying to 'out Christian' each other. "I don't smoke or drink," one might say only to be triumphed by another claiming "I never watch TV or go to the movies." And then there's "I was twenty-eight and married before I had sex." "Oh yeah," says another, "Well I didn't even hold hands with my spouse until the wedding night." It makes me wonder: *what do Christians*

do? I love the Bible but if all I did was read it 24 and 7 I would go nuts.

I have a strong need to talk and share my ideas with others in civil conversation and not be judged. That can be hard to do in a Christian environment. The Bible states that *'there is no new condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.'* (Romans 8:1) and *'For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him.'* (John 3:17) I guess those are passages many Christians either haven't read or don't subscribe to. For one wrong statement; "I read in *Vanity Fair* that..." or "I don't watch *Fox* but *CNN*," can bring on looks or comments that damn one straight to hell. Crazy, huh. I'm a devoted follower of Jesus Christ yet I found myself not wanting to be around people who can't talk about or recognize anything but Him and the Bible. It

brought me to a lonely place; a place of isolation. Just me, a comfortable apartment filled with books and a TV that has the nerve to have cable in this the ‘buckle of the Bible Belt.’

I wonder if there is a state between happiness and unhappiness. I wasn't *unhappy* just not happy. The knowledge and experiences I had in my short time at the University have really broaden my horizons. Yet there are days when I feel so lonesome and out of place I could cry. It's like a shroud of darkness is covering me. And then there is the age gap. I'm twenty-five to thirty years the senior of the undergrads and most of my grad school colleagues. I feel like a wolf among the sheep. In crowds, especially in chapel, when I see friends together or couples paired I want to dive under the seat and hide. I know it's just me. With the exception of my liberal views, no one says hurtful things or treats me like an outcast; it's something inside of me. The feeling of being an alien in a foreign land prevails too often.

God's plan for His children is no great mystery. To avoid confusion Jesus summed the books of the Laws and Prophets in one sentence, *'Love the Lord God with all your heart, soul, body and mind and love your neighbor as yourself.'* (Matthew 22: 37-40, Mark 12:29-31) I understand and practice this, yet sometimes I feel something is missing in my life; that my time isn't adding up to anything; I just exist. I have plans---but do I fight with all my heart, soul, body and mind to achieve them or do I just wait on God? No matter what I do, it's all in His timing. Sorry if I sound like I'm feeling sorry for myself. I just feel like I have it all yet I don't have anything. It's frustrating. Sometimes I just don't know.

One thing I do know; you don't have to earn a Master's Degree in Divinity to learn you go where God calls you. I guess that is what my tale is about; following God's call on your life. This is my story. Believe it or not; it's true.

First Semester

The Stuff That Dreams Are Made of

Tulsa is a city that begins its day with an ‘early warning forecast.’ Granted, the weather can be severe; tornados, massive hailstorms, extreme heat. The forecast for this morning in May should have been ‘don’t waste this day; it will be one of the most beautiful in recorded time.’

Walking into the early morning sunshine, I could smell the freshness in the air. The taste of the approaching summer was so pronounced one couldn’t miss it if they tried. As always, the sun was shining warmly against a cloudless blue sky. Unlike my hometown of New York City, there was always calm in the air, an atmosphere of tranquility. I never had to walk with one eye looking behind.

This was the third day of the first week of summer school. On Wednesday morning classes were cut short by an hour so all could attend chapel. The school required us to

attend service; twice a week during the regular semester and once during the summer. Attendance was taken and missing a certain number could lead to dismissal. But who would want to miss it. Many of the top speakers in the country came to preach. People I watched on TV, learned from and admired were now at my disposal. During the summer the speakers came more from the local vicinity than the annals of the greats of television evangelism. Yet I always felt I could learn from everyone; even if only what not to do.

During the Fall and Spring semesters the three-thousand seat chapel was filled to capacity. The summer session found a few hundred students and a handful of faculty scattered about. I slumped in an empty row noticing the majority of students were clustered in groups of friends. Once again I felt like the odd man out. I was the one everyone knew; would wave to, say hello, but never invite out. Ah it's just satan having an attempt at my thoughts. I

said a quick prayer to dismiss the attack then prepared to hear a word from God.

The Dean of Students introduced the speaker of the hour, a young clean-cut minister in khakis that should have been pressed and a striped shirt from Wal-Mart. He took the podium and asked us to join hands in prayer. This instruction was hard to follow sitting in a row by myself. Without turning, the young lady in front of me stretched out her hand. I took it. It was soft and feminine; nails manicured to perfection with French tips. Though the preacher called for all to pray for the sick and unsaved my thoughts were solely on this girl; *what did she look like? what was her name?* Her hair was black and shiny. I thought she might be Asian but her skin was porcelain white not olive or tan. She had curves in all the right places. I love curves on women. Her butt was perfect. This girl had to be a dancer or an athlete or someone who worked out harder than most. She also stood erect like a

ballerina. That was always a turn-on for me. I tried to steal a peak at her face but it was covered by her stylized short hair as she bowed in prayer. Frequently I could make out a delicate chin then a tiny turned up nose. I had to see her face. I couldn't wait for the Amen. *Note to the Reader* please don't be shocked, people do think like this in church. The 'amen' finally arrived. She kept her head bowed and eyes shut as if asking one last prayer. She whispered an 'amen,' opened her eyes and turned to me. Our eyes met and I knew a new chapter of my life was about to be written.

“God bless you,” the blue-eyed beauty whispered in a soft sultry voice.

Her eyes hit me with a piercing look that said more than words. Her face was perfect, more than I imagined; porcelain skin, jet-black hair, deep blue expressive eyes that sang and full lips that came to a pout, forming the shape of a

kissable heart. It was like God took all the beauty He could form and created her face.

“God bless you too,” I replied. I’m glad that came out. Otherwise, I would have stood speechless gaping at her beauty.

She kept her hand in mine as we stood transfixed by each other. From a distance I could hear the preacher calling for all to take their seats. Her friend bumped her shoulder and whispered in her ear. Slowly she released my hand and shimmied in to her seat, sharing a hushed word with her friends. Her back was to me but the magnetic attraction still lingered.

What just happened???????????

Somehow I found my seat. I could hear only sparing words from the sermon, something about Mark 5. Often her blue eyes would shoot a glance at me then quickly turn away

when she caught me looking back. There was something about her; something about *us*. I knew it. She knew it.

Though my thoughts were on the girl, I started to pick up the preacher's message. He was speaking on wholeness, his Scripture; the Woman with the Issue of Blood. After she left Jesus, she wasn't just healed of her infirmity; she was made whole. Putting it in contemporary terms, he spoke of how a person can be healed of an illness but become sick with stress over the unpaid medical bills. Once you receive wholeness from the Lord you lack nothing; even the bills are taken care of. "*Your faith has made you whole.*" The woman believed in Jesus for wholeness, not just healing. All our needs are met through Christ Jesus.

Was this a message from God's lips to my ears? I would soon find out; for chapel was over. I had to meet this beautiful lady. I reached to touch her shoulder but her friends dragged her away in conversation. I thought I noticed some

hesitation on her part but she walked with them. One thing I gathered about women, they never separate from their friends. A guy will leave his best buddy injured in the gutter to chase after a pretty girl who he thought smiled at him. But not women. No matter how fine they think a man is, they stick together. I didn't want to seem obvious and dart over; but a move had to be made. I slowly tailed behind the three.

“Dylan,” a voice called from behind.

It was Victor, a classmate. My sense of discernment knew he was troubled.

“Hey, Victor,” I said turning to him. It was my personal theology to put the needs of others ahead of mine.

“Hey mate, I hate to ask, but do you have twenty dollars I could borrow? My loan hasn't come in yet and I'm busted.”

“Sure,” I said handing him a twenty from a roll I had in my pocket. I hated carrying a wallet. “Is that all you need?”

“That should do it. My loan was supposed to come in this morning, but now they say Friday. Thanks so much, mate. ”

“Hey, I’m blessed to be a blessing.”

“I’ll keep you in prayer.”

“Me too.”

He left smiling as if I had just handed him a million dollars. I had been there when a quick twenty from a friend made all the difference in the world. I turned to find my dream girl. She was gone. I quickly made it to the lobby. I found a few scattered students but not the one I was looking for. My only consolation was during summer session there were fewer students around and I would probably see her on

campus or in chapel next week. Oh my God! I hope she wasn't visiting for the day!

Books are my passion. Though my class load left little time for casual reading, I was still buying them. I promised myself once I graduated I would read everything I could get my hands on, including re-reading many of my assigned texts. I would take my time and ponder the thoughts expressed and not just race through them to complete an assignment. The books I had under my arm fell in that category. The University bookstore always carried a large array of theological works both scholarly and trade. I also picked up some study cards for sign language. That was something I wanted to learn and they would be a great start.

There was a book on the sales table I thought I wanted but really didn't need. 'Why not, it's on sale,' was

always my rationale. I turned from the line to get the book.

The girl from chapel was standing behind me.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi,” she replied.

Now the awkwardness. I could talk to anyone about anything but was always shy when making the first move to a woman of interest. She looked like she was about to say something but also remained silent. Her eyes were too beautiful for words. Her lips made me wonder what I would have to say to get them to touch mine. I asked God for the wisdom to win this girls’ heart.

“I didn’t know they taught Japanese here,” I said referring to the Japanese study cards she was holding.

“They don’t. I’m studying it on my own. I’m an international business major and knowing Japanese will be a great asset.”

She looked at the books in my hand then motioned something in sign language.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Aren’t you studying sign?” she asked with a smile revealing two rows of perfectly aligned white teeth.

“Oh the cards? No, I’m just buying them because I want to learn. What did you say?”

“I said my name is Bethany, what’s yours?”

Bethany. I finally knew her name!

“Bethany. How did you say that?”

“Like this.” (She pointed to her hair and made a circular motion) “Well that’s really a shortcut for my name. Hearing impaired people give you a sign name; it’s usually a feature you have. When I was studying sign my hair was curly so that’s how they named me.”

“My name’s Dylan, how would you say that?”

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