



**THE LIFE AND TIMES
OF
EDWARD T. PLUNKETT**

as told to
David J. Wallis

DEDICATION PAGE

I want to write something different from the norm. It took me a while to realize all the miracles and luck that occurred in my life. These happen in everyone's life. So, I am dedicating this book to all who can find those miracles and moments of luck that make life joyous and free.

To all of us!

Index of Episodes

[Book 1: Miracles, Luck, or What](#)

[Book 2: Don't Count the Drunk Out](#)

[Book 3: Horses Can't Read a Racing Form](#)

[Book 4: The Bean Counter](#)

**MIRACLE,
LUCK,
OR WHAT?**

FOREWARD

I have PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and the thought of suicide has always been close to me. Yet, as I turn eight-one years old, I retired as a very successful Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer of a billion-dollar bank. Was my life a miracle, just plain luck, or what? As I relate my story to you, I'll let you the reader decide.

Index of Episodes

[Introduction to Ed Plunkett](#)

[Almost Drowned](#)

[Special Scholastic Help](#)

[Going to La Salle Academy](#)

[Sports Career at La Salle Academy](#)

[Almost Dead in a Vault](#)

[John Bernard](#)

[Allied Artists Picture Corporation](#)

[Ernie Nieves](#)

[PEAT](#)

[Into the Corporate Jungle](#)

[Suicide Attempt](#)

[Losing Car Brakes](#)

[Republic Bank of New York](#)

[National Bank of Washington, D.C. \(N.B.W.\)](#)

[Evelyn On Confession](#)

[Bahamas Bank Branch Manager](#)

[Plane Trip From San Francisco to New York](#)

[Dolores McMullen: Angel](#)

[Christmas Eve, 1973](#)

[Meeting Al at AA Meeting](#)

[Valley Bank of Nevada](#)

[Ray Vega](#)

[Deloitte Touché to the Rescue-Again](#)

[Equity Bank](#)

[Heart Attack: December 8, 1998](#)

[Living in Thailand](#)

[Tsunami, 26 December 2004](#)

[I Am Not Dead](#)

INTRODUCTION TO ED PLUNKETT

In a final analysis, there are two Ed Plunketts in this book and in my life.

The first Ed Plunkett was a punk, on a collision course with life, society, and, of course, the Law. The second Ed Plunkett ended up making something of himself personally and a philanthropist of sorts. The major contradiction between these two Ed Plunketts is that one seemed destined for a tough and possibly short life while the other eventually became very successful as a Certified Public Accountant and an Executive Vice President in the banking world. I am convinced that something miraculous happened to me that led me from a wasted life to one that contributed to life—my own and others around me.

I heard that Pat Robertson the Evangelist wrote a book about miracles. That got me to thinking: I have had a very interesting life. I started going over my life, and I came up with thirty-three strange episodes in my life. I began to ask myself: what a bunch of strange stories – was there a common thread behind them?

A look at the first nineteen years of my life will illustrate a lot of the mental anguish I went through as a child. Both my parents were alcoholics and fought almost constantly; it would be an understatement that I grew up in a dysfunctional home. I attended Catholic schools for twelve years, which were not only brutal but also socially, physically, and mentally damaging for a young boy.

I am very hesitant to tell my story of my youth because, honestly, I am embarrassed by a lot of episodes that happened. They're very embarrassing. I've shared some of these embarrassments with my friends, but I've never put them down in writing before. I do so in this Introduction because my reviewer noted that one key ingredient is missing in my story: the "Who Are You?" Without a "before" picture of me, no one would understand the transition that took place in my life. It's nice to talk about miracles, but I want the reader to understand who I am and where I came from to appreciate my own view of my life, which, quite honestly, I believe to be a miracle.

The alcoholic home. Every weekend—as I recall—my father would get drunk. And then the "games" would begin. He turned to violence, and my mother was his target. I can still so vividly recall when I was five or six years old, my sister (who was five years older than I) and I were holding each other, crying our eyes out, as my father was beating the hell out of my mother. My mother was screaming for dear life. Nobody came to our rescue. Understand that we lived in an apartment building with many families crammed together. No one stuck their noses into other people's business. Perhaps no one wanted to face my father, because he was known for his meanness, roughness, and fighting prowess. (In fact, his nickname was "Rocky.")

Many times the police had to be called to arrest my father for spousal abuse, but back in those days (the 1930's and 1940's) all the police did was to take the abuser for a walk around the block, tell them to sober up, and go back and be a good father and husband. Well, in my case, my father never changed. He would placate the policemen and

promise to change, but the following weekend was just another repeat of abuse and violence.

There were times where he tried to electrocute my mother. He would hold her up in the air while standing on a chair and try to force her hands into the fuse box. Luckily, I was able to knock the chair away from him and prevent an electrocution. Other times, he just brutally threw her out the window; she was badly bruised where she hit the ground. I hated both of them, and for years and years after they were dead I still hated them. They were the meanest persons I have ever known in my entire life.

I always considered myself a nice kid; my mother did, too. When my father wanted to be proud of me he would call me a nice guy.

I attended a Catholic grammar school in my childhood, and my teachers were all nuns. In my later years, I was taught by Christian Brothers. They all had a rather negative impact on me mentally and socially.

In the third grade Sister Bernadette beat me up pretty bad just because I touched a car. "I hope you learned your lesson in not touching other people's property," she said to me.

In the fourth grade Brother Michael accused me of throwing another kid's coat on the floor, assumed I was guilty, and beat the hell out of me. I wet my pants, and I was crying. When he was finished banging me around, he then hugged me and told me he was sorry. I couldn't but wanted to ask him if he was so sorry why did he beat me so badly in the first place.

In the fifth grade I had a teacher named Brother Ambrose, and for some reason he and I just couldn't get along. He and his ruler had a love affair with my knuckles. I had him in the fifth, sixth, and seventh grades as well. In the seventh grade the principal, Brother Victor, told my mother that I was a trouble maker and if she didn't straighten me out they would. They figured they were doing the best they could by banging me around on a regular basis. But my attitude was that I was right and they were wrong. I was not going to change. I was going to always talk back to them, and in Catholic schools you don't talk back.

I was threatened with expulsion. I decided to "play it straight" so I could finish my grammar school career. I was a very poor student all those years in grammar school, forcing me to go to summer school.

So early on, my sister and I were stuck in this mad house of violence, and God-only-knows what this does to the psyche of young people. But around the age of fourteen or fifteen I decided to murder my father. I couldn't see him spending the rest of his life meting out unrestrained abuse and the rest of my mother's life being abused. I rationalized that the only arrest that he had was for spousal abuse and not attempted murder. But if I murdered him instead, the charge against me, at best, would only be manslaughter, and I was willing to sacrifice a lot of years of my life in prison out of love for my mother. She was an excellent mother and as to why she stayed with this maniac man, I will never know.

I purchased an illegal knife; my plan was to stab him while he was sleeping. I made the fatal mistake of telling him about my plans. But, what the hey! I was a young hot-headed kid. In response, he coolly called the police. They came, and he told them about my plans. The policemen warned me that if I did do this particular crime I could spend a lot of years, maybe the rest of my life, in prison for first degree murder. They explained that it was no longer a murder of passion or an accident; it was a premeditated murder. They demanded I turn over the knife that I had purchased and planned to use.

“What knife?” I said. “I don’t have a knife!”

My father described the knife to them. They demanded: “Where is it?”

I lied: “I don’t have one.” Actually I was sitting on the knife, but they never asked me to get up off the couch. If they had, they would have seen the knife right off. They searched the apartment high and low, but they couldn’t find this particular illegal knife. So they swarmed around me and said: “You’re on reckon now, my friend, of threatening your father, and if something happens to him we’ll know where to look.”

Looking back on this episode, my blunder turned out to be a miracle. Yes, it would have been a “juvie” record, but it would have soured the rest of my life.

Things started to change for me a little bit when I started high school in 1947. But when it came to discipline, there was no difference from elementary school. In my Freshmen year I talked back to a librarian (a Christian Brother), and he, too, smacked me around and sent me to the Principal’s Office. When I told the principal what I had done, he, too, smacked me around. For the next four years in that Catholic high school I got smacked around pretty good by the Christian Brothers. At the time, I didn’t understand the psychological damage they were causing. I just knew that their form of discipline made me a very angry kid, and I would fight anybody who threatened me, including the Christian Brothers.

On the streets where I grew up you had to be able to fight for yourself because there was a lot of violence on the streets. I was molded in an environment of violence: a drunken household, a violent household, violent schools, and the streets of New York City were pretty violent, too.

On the bright side, I found that I had an athletic ability. As a Freshmen, I made varsity in baseball, which was quite an accomplishment in those days. Not only did I make the team, I was a star team player, and for the rest of my years at La Salle Academy I was a starter for the team. I also became a varsity basketball player in my Sophomore year, and I stayed with the varsity team until I graduated in 1951. (I’ll go into more detail in my chapter “Going to La Salle Academy.”) I think sports started to alleviate some of the anger and resentment I had growing up in a dysfunctional home. I was getting a lot of praise about my athletic ability, and I became very popular with the girls. Every year I received a high school jersey and a high school athletic jacket, which was really beautiful.

In my Junior year, 1950, the war in Korea had broken out. At first, it was just another American war to me, but to my father it was something else. All of a sudden he said to my mother and I, “Upon graduation you are going to go into the Navy,” and my mother

said “No, He’s not. He’s going to go to college with an athletic scholarship,” which was fast unfolding. Some colleges were already showing a lot of interest in me because of my athletic ability, and I was quite enthused about by going to Duke University.

But the more my mother and I fought my father about my going into the Navy, the more abusive he became with my mother. Then he and I began fighting—I mean actual fisticuffs—over me giving up my sports career to go into the Navy only because that is what he wanted. He didn’t give a damn about what I wanted or desired.

So, I made a deal with my father: if he stopped abusing my mother, I would enlist in the Navy upon graduation from high school He agreed. As I mentioned earlier, I loved my mother so much that I sacrificed any potential sports scholarship.

I enlisted in the Navy at the age of seventeen to placate my father and save my mother from more spousal abuse. I admit I had a behavioral problem. It appeared to me at the time that I was a Yankee in Deep South territory, and that geographical difference was all it took to begin a fight. I wasn’t really cognizant of what my problem was at the time or why I had this impulsive desire to strike out, but I did have a problem with people who wanted to shove me around, and I retaliated by physically fighting back. On one ship I complained a lot about being attacked by other shipmates. The executive vice president told me that if I didn’t like it then to transfer myself off the ship, which I did. In fact, I kept getting transferred from one location to another until I volunteered for tug duty. It was my last duty assignment in the Navy.

Tug duty was one of the most dangerous jobs in the Navy back then. Death was common enough. Or disfigurement from loss of limbs. They warned me that it was a dangerous job; they just didn’t warn me how dangerous.

My shipmates were old hands, meaning that they had seen a lot of action already. They were a surly lot, and I didn’t get along with them either. Besides, most of the time, as I remember, they were drunk. Then there was the accident which cost me most of my left hand.

The day before the accident, I was lying in my bunk, praying to God to get me out of this assignment. I was fighting everybody. I was miserable. My life was going nowhere, except maybe downhill. There had to be something better.

I volunteered for an additional, duty which eventually led to the accident. We were towing two barges loaded with supplies out in heavy seas. It was supposed to be a two-man job.

“Skipper,” I told the Captain. “You know if we do this operation, it’s kind of dangerous. This is a two-man job.”

My shipmate who was supposed to be working with me was drunk and didn’t show up.

The Skipper didn’t seem too sympathetic: “We got no choice. It’s got to be done. You know you have to do it alone because the other guys are drunk.”

I said: “Well, I’ll do the best I can.” Looking back on the episode, it seemed pretty stupid but a blessing in disguise. I was trying to manipulate two pairs of steel cables that

helped steer the two barges in tandem, but a stray wire grabbed my left hand and jammed it into the winch. My whole body should have followed, but for some reason, the winch just stopped. I almost died that day because there was no one around on deck to see I was in trouble. It was almost a last minute rescue when by chance one of the crewmen noticed my predicament. I lost a hand and a sports career, but in the end I became a successful banker.

Since I was in the military one of the benefits was to go college. I was petrified to attend because I was convinced that I was stupid. My grades in high school were really low, and only one college, St. John's University, would accept me on the condition that I maintained a B average. I never maintained a B average in my life in high school. Fortunately, I found a good mentor in Brother Lauren who taught me how to study, and I started to excel in college.

The same shipmate who was supposed to share this duty but was as drunk as a skunk later came to the hospital after my surgeries and apologized for being too drunk to show up that day. I eventually forgave him when I realized the loss of my hand caused me to turn over a new leaf. I had been given a second chance to get on with my life.

I graduated from college as a Certified Public Accountant. Throughout my business career, I held several high jobs in banking. Some people thought I was qualified to become a Chief Executive Officer or even President, but I knew I wasn't qualified for these lofty positions: too political. I might have called myself an emotional cripple: my temper often got unleashed at the wrong time. I was told that I was brilliant but that my emotions were in need of taming. One of my employers wanted me to go to Harvard Graduate School in order to refine my emotions. I politely declined.

Was my life a miracle or was it luck?

Several of my friends suggested that maybe something spiritual was happening in my life. Now, I am not a religious person; I don't attend any particular church. Sure, I was raised Catholic and had sixteen years of Catholic education. Somewhere in my late twenties I began to question the Catholic Church. In my opinion, it controls its followers through fear: that if you break the commandments you will forever burn in hell. I can't buy that. I do have a God or Higher power in my life. My God is loving, forgiving, and guiding. I don't argue with different religions. I have my beliefs, and I respect everyone else's opinions.

Let me give you my understanding about what a miracle is and what is meant by luck.

A "miracle" is a wonderful and surprising happening.

"Luck" is what happens to someone who is positive in their outlook in life.

The reason I am calling this book "Miracles, Luck, or What?" is simple. I want the readers to discover for themselves the nature of these episodes. The readers will decide for themselves if miracles happened in my life or if I was just plain lucky.

I have had four marriages, which all ended in divorce. It took me four marriages to understand that I was the problem.

I admit to two addictions: alcohol and gambling. As far as gambling goes, I never hit that Big One, which would have put me on Easy Street. Luckily, I have not gambled in many years. One of my individual stories will explain the circumstances that occurred that brought me to my senses about gambling. The alcohol addiction was not so easily controlled, and to this day I still attend AA meetings.

As you read the stories I will advise you that I have no witnesses to these events. As they occurred over the years I wasn't thinking about getting witnesses. It wasn't until years later that I put these events on paper. If there had been only a couple occurrences you could say: "No big deal." Put more than thirty together, and you don't just have isolated events, but a pattern.

Finally, I don't think that I am special. I believe many people have had miracles in their lives. I have taken time to share mine in writing. Others may just have not taken time to do so. As I have found out, being eighty-one years young is not too late.

I hope that you enjoy my stories here in *Miracles, Luck, or What?*

Edward T. Plunkett

ALMOST DROWNED

My Irish immigrant parents would often go to Keansburg Beach, part of the Bayshore, located between the Township of Hazlet and the Township of Middletown, New Jersey. It has a long history as a summer resort, and many New York City dwellers would make the “long” trip to escape the sweltering heat and humidity of the City, for which it is famous. I write “long” because for a New Yorker, anything outside the metropolitan city is considered “long.”

Before World War II, Keansburg boasted a winter population of around five hundred hardy souls, but during the summer months this number exploded to ten thousand or more. An amusement park had been built in the early 1900s along with a thousand-foot long fishing pier. There were a few bars and restaurants along the waterfront, the former attractive to my parents.

Beginning at the age of five I accompanied my parents to wade in the cool ocean water.

On one particular Saturday, my parents left me alone on the beach and went to the boardwalk where there was a saloon. I mentioned before that they were both alcoholics, and parenting was the last thing on their minds at that moment. Perhaps they had asked someone to watch me; I’m sure not sure because it didn’t matter. After a bit, I left the beach towel and walked down along the pier to look into the water. While I was gazing over the edge of the pier someone pushed me off into the deep water. I don’t believe it was an accident. I can still remember hitting the water and going down, down, down; I didn’t know how to swim, so I just kept sinking like a rock. Things can be kind of funny when your life is in danger but you don’t know it, for I can still remember seeing this wooden pillar as I was sinking to the bottom. And then, everything turned black.

The next thing I knew I was back on a beach towel. There were a lot of people standing over me, including my parents. Sad thing it: I don’t remember if they were shook up by the incident. That I had survived must have been a miracle, for everyone around me was jabbering about how lucky I was to still be breathing. Eventually I learned that a man saw me being pushed off the pier, and he had immediately run over and dived into the water to save my life.

When I was much older I was told that the only other person on the pier was that very stranger who saved my life. The big unanswered question to this day is: would I have survived if that stranger had not seen me pushed? I call him my guardian angel.

SPECIAL SCHOLASTIC HELP

From my earliest recollections, people saw things in me I didn’t know I had.

I attended a Catholic Grammar School, which was directly across from the tenement I lived in with my parents. We lived on the ground floor facing out to the street. We had no air conditioning or even an electric fan. In the summertime on extremely hot nights, I would sleep by an open window, hoping to cool my feet. Other people in these tenements would try to access cool air by resting on fire escapes, if they had one.

I don't recall seeing a movie about the conditions the Irish and Italians were exposed to when they first came to America. Their children in their formative and constructive years didn't fare too well either.

Scholastic aptitude was not emphasized in the immigrants' households. Their main concern was working and providing food, clothes, and shelter for themselves and for their loved ones. They turned the responsibility of education over to the Church.

From the very beginning I was a slow learner. My parents didn't take any interest in what I was doing in school. Contributing to my problem in learning was my fear of the nuns and the Christian Brothers. Combining the indifference of my parents and my fear of teachers, I hated school.

To make up for my poor performance in school and my lonely home life, whenever I could I would wander the streets of my neighborhood. Eventually, in Grammar School I received the nickname "Ned of the Hills." I preferred to just walk alone. I guess I felt secure with myself. My home life was horrible due to the violence there. I was also sexually abused as a child but not by any of the Brothers. I won't go into the details of those days except to say I didn't know how to stop it. I was afraid to tell my parents. I was afraid of the perpetrator.

To sum up, my home life, my fear of school, and the sexual abuse I was exposed to greatly impacted my scholastic work.

I noticed in the third grade that my teachers were taking a greater interest in me. For example, Sister Bernadette told me one day that I was destined for greatness. I didn't ask her what she meant, but I have always remembered what she said. I think she planted a seed of confidence in my young mind. I should point out that this same Sister slapped me around for touching an automobile, which was parked in front of our school. Looking back on that incident, since then I have always respected other people's property.

The Christian Brothers I had in grammar school would occasionally take me for walks on non-school days. They would take me to their quarters on a few occasions for dinner and candy or ice cream.

The Principal considered me to be a "wise guy," but even so they tried to talk me into becoming a Christian Brother after graduation. They would take me to a place called "Barry Town" where boys studied to become Christian Brothers. I figure that they saw something in me that had promise if only they could straighten me out.

After school each day I would go to church and pray to Jesus Christ. They probably saw my routine and figured I was worth trying to save. Or they read into my behavior a desire within myself to join a religious order.

Going to church each day started when I was in the fourth grade. Usually when I visited the church I loved the quietness, the aroma, and the burning candles. Most of the time I was the only person in the Church, and that is exactly how I liked it. I would kneel in front of the Crucifix and pray to Jesus Christ. I looked upon Jesus as my hero who was willing to give his life for his fellow man. To me that is a hero.

As much as I hated my father it could have been his behavior that influenced my teachers to take a greater interest in me. Whatever the reason, I am happy my Christian Brothers teachers took a special interest in me. Who knows, if they just treated me as a bad apple I could have spent a life of being a “wise guy.”

GOING TO LA SALLE ACADEMY

This was the one school I didn't want to attend: the teachers were all Christian Brothers like the ones that I had in Grammar School. I didn't relish the thought of continuing the rough and almost inhuman treatment for four more years, which I figured to be the last of my schooling.

La Salle Academy was (and still is, by the way) a private, all-boys high school in the New York City borough of Manhattan and part of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York. It was founded in 1848 by the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The Brothers were affiliated with a Roman Catholic religious teaching congregation founded in France by Jean-Baptiste de La Salle, circa 1681. The Brothers stand as the largest Roman Catholic lay religious order of men exclusively devoted to education. The New York State Board of Regents granted La Salle a charter in 1896. In 1936, the Brothers built a five-story building to accommodate increasing enrollment. When I went there, the enrollment had already expanded to 950 students.

De La Salle said, describing his purpose of establishing the Brothers: “The spirit of this Institute is first, a spirit of faith, which should induce those who compose it not to look upon anything but with the eyes of faith, not to do anything but in view of God, and to attribute all to God.” (Rule 1718). He also said that “To touch the hearts of your students and to inspire them with the Christian spirit is the greatest miracle you could perform, and the one that God asks of you, since this is the purpose of your work.”

In retrospect, the defining of how to touch the hearts of students usually involved corporate punishment, as if the sole means of getting through to the spiritual soul and the physical mind was through the gluteus maximus. Repeatedly!

The Brothers Rule stated that the Mission of the Institute is “to provide a human and Christian education to the young, especially the poor, according to the ministry entrusted to them by the church.” Again, it was how they administered their mission and education that never came under scrutiny by higher authorities, and in keeping with the times and opinion of the day, corporate punishment was meted out regularly as an effective means for discipline and enforced order.

I never considered myself a “wise guy,” but the Brothers had a different opinion. I had a singular problem: what they termed as “talking back.” If I had question or an opinion about something, they didn't appreciate that. In the so-called “good-ol'-days,” a good student merely listened and parroted whatever was taught. Critical thinking and learning how to analyze were not tolerated. And I might add original thinking, too. I became known as “Eddy But.” If the Brothers taught that the world was flat, there was no tolerance for either rebuttal or argument.

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