

FACE TO FACE

I have always enjoyed the fruit of the word-smiths, especially poets and songwriters. They seem to have an almost divine ability to take a few simple words and arrange them into beautiful profound thoughts and emotions. When I was much younger a popular song was titled “What a difference a day makes”. As a recently married, college graduate with a future of hundred's or thousand's of days, what kind of a difference could one or two days make? My answer was, little or none. I enjoyed the song's lyrics and melody, but soon forgot about it. In fact, it was probably many many years dormant in my memory before it surfaced again. Over three decades later the haunting lyric, “What a difference a day makes, 24 little hours,” came out of hiding with explosive force changing our lives forever. Cindy and I were grandparents by this time and life was good. The future held promise of exciting service to others, we had felt the warm fuzzy of seeing lives changed, addicts set free, an encouraging word offering hope and comfort when the world had given up.

Then, one day did make a difference, a day we'll never forget . Every detail is forever carved in the fabric of my soul. Our son Bruce had come home to take over the day to day operations of a small family business, leaving me free to manage and sell. Bruce had worked with us summers while in school and off and on for several years, he was good at getting the jobs done and done well. He had some of his mother's traits especially an organizational ability and very outgoing. I always said give Cindy 5 minutes and she could start a conversation with a telephone pole, Bruce could too. You need to picture Bruce in your mind: He was about 6 foot 2 inches tall and weighted somewhere around 210 pounds, V shaped from working out at the gym. Easy smile, blonde hair and an inked over upper arm tattoo of an ex-wife's name. Bruce had done several things and was now walking with the God of his youth and was ready to settle down for the long haul. Weeks before we had received a couple letters telling us of his turn around. It was no more fun and games, but a true born again experience.

After dinner Bruce and I talked briefly about his current assignment, before he left to pick up a friend and go workout at the gym. To my questions he'd just smile and say “Dad you know too much already”. I did know he was undercover on a interstate gun and drug ring, working with a FBI agent code named “Steve”. All he would say was “This is the last” What that meant I had no idea. As he left, to go pick up his friend he turned and looked over his shoulder, waved a hand and said “Love you dad, see you later”. What a moment! Your prodigal son saying “love you dad”

I didn't sleep much that night. I kept rejoicing and replaying "Love you dad, see you later". Call it whatever but seeing your only son walking in Godliness and righteousness is about as good as it can get for a parent. We had little to do with it, it was strictly a God thing. I felt and returned respect, a closeness and love between dad and son that had never been there before. The best description is an unconditional love, an agape love. As sleep finally came and a new dawn was on the horizon I didn't know that one of the best days of my life had become history.

Light was starting to streak through the heavens as the phone jingled us awake. Cindy answered "Hello" and then silence. After about 20-30 seconds a hideous, pain filled Noooooooooooooooooooooo escaped her lips. On the phone was, Bruce's friend Jimmie's mother. She had asked "Did Bruce come home last night?" We made adjustments for Bruce's schedule, often he didn't come home. When Cindy replied "No" she went on to explain that Jimmie was in The Erwin hospital with a broken ankle and a minor bullet wound and he had seen Conley shoot Bruce last night on Fire Tower Road.

The worst day of my life just started! I'm not proud of my thoughts, intentions or actions of the next few days, but when I finally turned my feelings and emotion over to God, according to Romans 8: 28 all things did work for good. But first came the question where is Fire Tower Road and right behind the question was anger, bitterness, revenge and rebellion. When we got to Fire Tower Road it was taped off with yellow safety tape that read: "Crime Scene Do Not Enter". I slowed down only for the pot holes of this seldom used dirt road. Cindy and I spent the day in the intense heat, the hottest August 15 on record, avoiding TV cameras and praying they would find Bruce alive.

We had rushed out early in the morning without food or water for ourselves or for Steffie, our dog. By mid afternoon we were hungry, thirsty and irritable I know law enforcement was fed up with not only our constant questions but also the fact we ignored their yellow "Do Not Enter" tape. About 4:00 PM a Deputy came to us and said "Bruce may have made it out and is trying to contact you, go home". What he really was saying is "We found Bruce's body and we don't want you here".

Sometime near 7:00 PM a Unicoi County deputy called and asks me to go to the Johnson City Medical Center Morgue and make an identification. He emphasized "Go by yourself". The lobby was nearly empty, I finally found someone to escort me, I quickly nick-named him "Unfriendly". My first reaction was why are all morgues movies, TV and real life underground, stainless steel with bright glaring lights and cold? Unfriendly, my escort, unzipped a dark colored body bag stepped back and said "Well"? I looked and my heart broke although, not a sound was heard. Lying here without breath or heart beat I saw a dark swollen face with maggots crawling in and out of the nose and mouth, not the smiling handsome face of a few hours ago. The only thing I

recognized was the hair. I turned towards unfriendly and whispered “That's my son|”. My emotions said take unfriendly apart. Reason said “run”. I ran. I came apart when I arrived home.

I was angry, I had to break something or crack a head. I threw my favorite coffee cup as far as I could. I heard it shatter into hundreds of splinters and I said a few words I thought I had forgotten.. I went up stairs to a loft office, strapped on a six gun, got extra ammo and a deer rifle and went hunting for Conley, the man accused of Bruce's murder. I am familiar with weapons being an army vet and having lived several years of my adult life in cowboy country. God was with me, all I accomplished was to use a tank of gas and lose sleep. What foolish demonic action would I have taken had I found Conley, praise God we'll never know. Looking back I see God's hand. My place was really by Cindy's side supporting and comforting her. I do understand better now the crime of passion. The crime of passion is self-centered, hateful, vengeful and demonically inspired. Don't go there!

Nobody knew what Bruce knew or had shared with Cindy or me. For safety sake we were placed under around the clock police protection. My GMC pick-up was impounded as evidence in an ongoing criminal case and could be impounded until the case was closed, however long that may be. That meant I'm on unpaid vacation maybe out of business, as the work trailer and towing pick up were built on such a design, like a key and lock, to work as a matched pair.

The next few weeks were a roller coaster ride. Conley was arrested and charged with Bruce's murder. The young couple next door, living together, started harassing us. Court dates were set, delayed, postponed, a mistrial was declared. Conley nearly escapes. Cindy and I became recluses even grocery shopping at 6:00 AM. A deputy shared that 80% of couples, where there is a violent death of a child, divorce. We vowed, with God's help, not to be another statistic.

Another indications of Romans 8:28 at work was the Unicoi County Sheriff's department released my pick-up and Christian brothers and sisters were there with support, encouragement and especially hugs. We didn't know we had so many friends.

Through it all God gave us a ministry of forgiveness especially to inmates at a nearby prison, NECX (North East Correctional Complex) A couple at church, Steve and Judy, had a prison ministry at NECX of encouragement, music and sharing the gospel on the 5th Saturday of a month, which occurred about 3-4 times a year,. They invited Cindy and me to join them. After running out of “NO WAY” excuses and praying we had peace that this was the will of God for us. The next 5th Saturday night with fear and trepidation we went behind razor wire fence and

through heavy steel doors that clanged shut, into the yard where hundreds of men milled about. All were dressed the same, denim shirt and jeans with a white strip down the jean leg. Quickly we were in the chapel. The chapel would seat about 75-80 people. Already there were 30 some men praising God in song. The small group leading the men, a couple of guitars and John the lead singer, were good. I felt myself relax just a little. What followed was not a typical church service. These men, at one time bad actors, whose lives had been changed by the gospel, knew Jesus, loved Jesus and wanted you to know they knew and loved Jesus. Time quickly passed and on the way out Steve turned and asked "What did you think?" I answer "I'd like to come back". With that simple Q & A God opened the door and started laying the ground work for a ministry of helping the broken hearted through forgiveness. See scripture references below.

After nearly 2 years of a on again off again trial in the early spring of 1997 Conley was convicted of Bruce's murder and sentenced to what amounted to life in prison. He was sent to Brushy Mt, TN for processing. During this time Cindy and I had become 5th Saturday night regulars. We are now approaching the last 5th Saturday of 1997, November 29th the Saturday after Thanksgiving. Somewhere around November 20th or 21st the chaplain called Steve and Judy with the message that Conley had been transferred to NECX, had been baptized, and was attending chapel services and probably would attend Saturday night. The chaplain felt Conley was sincere and had had something like a Damascus Road experience. He went on to say "The Stukeys' are welcome, but may not want to come." Was it real or just another con game? Our emotions were exploding. If it is real, an encounter with Jesus, then he is a brother in Christ. Our reaction was "Oh, Conley can come and ask forgiveness, we'll forgive him". But God had other plans. In prayer God said "Where Conley asks for forgiveness or not is immaterial, you forgive Conley in front of 50-60 men".

There was a crowd in the chapel. The rumor was that the Stukeys' were there and Conley was coming. Would there be fireworks? Who really knew? Looking back, now about 25 years, I believe the administration took a calculated risk, by allowing Cindy and me access. The service was ready to start and Conley was not there, had he decided not to come? Tony, one of the inmate leaders, slipped out to check Conley's status. Tony reported back that the unit Conley was in had not been called out for chapel but Conley was now on his way. Suddenly the door opened and Conley stepped into the chapel and was coming down the outside aisle toward the front where Cindy and I sat. We moved into the aisle, I was in front of Cindy. Was it a friendly move or a hostile one? No one moved, not a sound, 75-80 people ceased to breathe. Every eye was focused on the three people in the outside aisle. The Holy Spirit took over, it was not Cindy, me or any of the leaders, and it was God's time. The next few minutes showed what God can do with willing servants. Tears and quaking voices was the chapel's atmosphere as the three of us touched hands and hugged. Cindy said in a very soft gentle voice that was not much more than a whisper "Conley I forgive you". Deep down inside of me the Holy Spirit said "Conley let's take a horrible situation and make something good out of it." An awkward silence followed for 15-20 seconds. Cindy heard the Holy Spirit say "Invite Conley to come sit with you". There we were sitting on either side of the man who murdered our only son and we had peace, God's peace.

Cindy had a leather “What Would Jesus Do” bracelet that she put on Conley's arm and said “In the morning when you see this bracelet you'll know this was not a dream”.

Looking back I understand now, that Bruce's assignment was to buy a stolen gun with Conley's fingerprints on it. Conley with a long rap sheet could then be offered a choice: Work with us to get to the ring leaders or face a long prison term. We never did find out what went so wrong to cause Conley to react so violently.

Over the next 25 plus years we've seen time after time again when a day did make a difference, when we have been able to encourage, comfort and build up someone at the end of their rope, both inside and outside the prison walls.

Something we've learned. It's hard not to dream about what could have been and concentrate on what is. You cannot change the past, but you can change the future. Your future is an individual thing, a God given dream and only you can shape it into your future, not a mob nor a law, but you must step forward accept responsibility for your dream.

We let our dream, for Bruce, go when it began to dawn on us that, we saw Conley face to face but, Bruce saw Jesus face to face.

HALLELUJAH

Three scriptures we relied on:

Romans 8:28

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

Matthew 6:12,14,15

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you

But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Matthew 25:34-40

Then the King will say to those on His right hand, “Come you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.”

Then the righteous will answer Him saying, “Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You? And the King will answer and say to them, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.”