

STEPS

It is good for me to be here with you and to have an opportunity to share a little bit about where I am in this journey of life, now 53½ years down the path. My life to date has been described well by Charles Dickens' first line in *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times" I am often astounded how frequently this line has played out in my life, often many times in the same day. I offer the entire first line of the book for our contemplation:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

Is this the theme of relativism and nihilism* played out? I don't think so. It seems to me that this is a healthy observation of reality, certainly for the setting of this historical novel (which is set in the years leading up to the French Revolution, 1788 to 1799) but even for our own times. I have long wished and hoped and dreamed that only the first part of the line was true. How I have longed to say, "It is the best of times," stop there, and truly believe it. But alas, I cannot do that. And today, I must accept responsibility for most, if not all, of the reasons why that is so. I do not live in a totalitarian monarchy. I am not an oppressed worker without say or rights. I have far more choice about how my life plays out than 99+% of the world. Oh, but it's an inside job. Attitude and acceptance is such a big key for me.

* **Nihilism** (from the [Latin](#) *nihil*, nothing) is the [philosophical](#) doctrine suggesting the [negation](#) of one or more putatively [meaningful](#) aspects of [life](#). Most commonly, nihilism is presented in the form of [existential nihilism](#) which argues that life is without objective meaning, [purpose](#), or [intrinsic value](#). [Moral nihilists](#) assert that [morality](#) does not inherently exist, and that any established moral values are abstractly contrived. Nihilism can also take [epistemological](#), [metaphysical](#), or [ontological](#) forms, meaning respectively that, in some aspect, knowledge is not possible, or that contrary to popular belief, some aspect of reality does not exist as such. (Source: [wikipedia.org](#).)

This Dickens-esque observation of life was reinforced for me when in the early days of the Internet (yes, way back in 1996) there were tests going around by email that one could take and share with others so folks could get to know you better (post letter writing, pre-Facebook). One of the tests was “Are you an Optimist or a Pessimist.” And of course, the proverbial question was posed: “Is the glass half full or half empty.” One particularly astute friend answered, “Do you think I’m an idiot? It’s BOTH.” And he was right; life is a mix of blessing and curse, joy and sadness, community and loneliness, feast and famine, health and sickness.

So tonight I’m going to talk all about me. Not because I’m so interesting, but it’s the best shot I’ve got at telling you about life and experience and hope for today and tomorrow. As much as possible, I am going to try to stay out of “you” and what you should do, figuring you probably already have enough other people telling you all about you.

I’ve got to insert here one of my favorite passages from Ernest Hemingway’s posthumous book *True at First Light*, which is labeled as a curious anomaly in my mind as a “fictional autobiography.” The book was edited by Hemingway’s son Patrick from manuscripts written on a 1953 safari with Hemingway, Mary (his third wife) and Patrick (who was about ten at the time). The first-person narrative in this passage (on page 14) refers to Hemingway (or a character closely resembling Hemingway):

There are people who love command and in their eagerness to assume it they are impatient at the formalities of taking over from someone else. I love command since it is the ideal welding of freedom and slavery. You can be happy with your freedom and when it becomes too dangerous you take refuge in your duty. For several years I had exercised no command except over myself and I was bored with this since I knew myself and my defects and strengths too well and they permitted me little freedom and much duty. Lately I had read with distaste various books written about myself by people who knew all about my inner life, aims and motives. Reading them was like reading an account of a battle where you had fought written by someone who had not only not been present but, in some cases, had not even been born when the battle had taken place. All these people who wrote of my life both inner and outer wrote with an absolute assurance that I had never felt.

Lots of people have insight into *my* “inner life, aims and motives” and have shared them with me over the years. Have you ever gotten that or are you still getting it? “Well, you are this way, or you are that way, or you think such and such.” I’ve often disagreed with them, but had no ammunition with which to do battle because I had become oblivious as to who Kip was. Today, I don’t want to do battle; I just want to become more and more aware of who I am and who I was created to be, and to live that calling out to the best of my ability. And I am blessed to have VERY few people in my life who still talk to me that way, and no one in my close relationships talk to me that way because they have grown and matured and stay focused on their side of life and let me handle my side of life.

I have set my spiritual focus this year on a theme called “Walking With Jesus.” My orientation and view of this theme may be different than others, but to me, I have been coming at this feeling like I don’t really know who Jesus is and I don’t know what it even means to “walk” with him. So what does all my commentary about who I am, who I’ve become, what I like or don’t like have to do with Walking With Jesus? Everything. Because if I don’t know who I am, or how life is going or my part in it, I don’t have a chance of entering into a real relationship with God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or anyone else in my life. Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians (I Corinthians 13:1), *“If I speak with the languages of men and of angels, but don’t have love, I have become a sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal.”*

To me, it seems that more demonstration of blessing/curse dichotomy in life comes in the form of expanding human knowledge. We have SO many ways to fill our lives and paths to pursue that it is very easy to try EVERYTHING except to follow the Christian Path. I used to wonder why that was so, but no longer do I wonder. I now *know* why I have not pursued it more faithfully. But before I get to that, a little historical background.

I was born in 1957 in Baltimore, Maryland, to working middle-class parents of Irish/English/German/Dutch descent. I was raised Catholic and attended Catholic grade school and was an altar boy, first learning the Mass in Latin. There was much I liked and enjoyed about the church growing up, but I “knew” quickly that the God presented did not match the God I hoped for, and, I do not know why or how, but I could dismiss that which I disagreed with and hold on to that which I felt was “true.”

Many of the characteristics of God presented seemed to be very similar to, if not exactly, what I saw in people in general, and I wondered why the Creator of the universe would express feeling, emotions and actions that seemed to be a demonstration of the worst of humankind. Would he not be better than that? I sure hoped so and clung to this for years. I would go to Mass many mornings before school and often four to five times a week in total. When I was fifteen, I started becoming less and less a frequent attendee, finally stopping almost completely. My spiritual development from then on was mostly derived from studies in Philosophy and Psychology.

Kathy and I met in 1984, married in 1988 and began our family, with Kasey, Conley and Stephen born in 1989, 1991 and 1993. We were not attending church, but Kathy's mom would come over to our house on Sunday morning, get the kids dressed for Sunday School, and take them to church. After a month or so of that, Kathy and I thought "Well, maybe we should go too," so we did. We began attending the Presbyterian Church where Kathy had spent her teen years in a youth group she loved, and where Kathy's family were very involved and committed members. For me, I enjoyed this setting, but had no passion or inclination for any involvement beyond attending Sunday services. We moved from Claremont to Newport Beach in 1995 and our children began attending the Waldorf School of Orange County. Waldorf schools are an independent body of schools (approximately 160 in the U.S. and 1,000 worldwide) that are based on the teachings of the late 19th-, early 20th-century Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner. We have no time to talk about his teachings, but the orientation we found at the Waldorf School opened Kathy and me up to more awareness of community and spiritual growth in ways that were profound. We began looking for a church home and finally found Community Church after attending the wedding of a friend's son. Fast forward and we have been here for the past sixteen years. I have served five years as Chair of the Diaconate, five years as Moderator and am currently Chair of the Personnel Committee. I have been in Bible study groups and spiritual formation groups, have participated in almost every retreat possible and have led several workshops, classes and retreats. Despite all of this, or perhaps because of this, I found myself at the end of my ability to live life even remotely effectively about four years ago. I was at a spiritual crisis point.

Another offering from *True at First Light* (page 282):

No man is ever really alone and the supposed dark hours of the soul when it is always three o'clock in the morning are a man's best hours if he is not an alcoholic nor afraid of the night and what the day will bring. I was as afraid as the next man in my time and maybe more so. But with the years, fear had come to be regarded as a form of stupidity to be classed with overdrafts, acquiring a venereal disease or eating candies. Fear is a child's vice and while I loved to feel it approach, as one does with any vice, it was not for grown men and the only thing to be afraid of was the presence of true and imminent danger in a form that you should be aware of and not be a fool if you were responsible for others. This was the mechanical fear that made your scalp prickle at real danger and when you lost this reaction it was time to get into some other line of work.

My response to this crisis was not my best hour. I will not share the details now, for it would serve no purpose. But one area I will highlight is the absolute fear that consumed me. I used to joke that I had a fear of failure, a fear of success and a fear of mediocrity. Sort of funny until it rang too true to deny. Fear was my motivation for almost every action or inaction in my life. Coupled with fear was isolation. I talked to no one, shared with no one, rejoiced with no one (there was nothing to rejoice anyway) and cried with no one. This was my choosing, not those around me. This was my descent into hell. I had no way out of this, but the things I did do, and continued to do, eventually helped lead me out of the abyss into something more closely resembling a life of calling. I would read and study the Bible regularly; I would pray and began journaling. I would listen to spiritual music, and I always look for the God connection in all areas of life. I began studying Philosophy again. I continued to attend church regularly and went on retreats. In August of 2009, I became acutely aware that my life trajectory was heading on a crash pattern, and that if I did not take action differently than I had been taking, I would lose everything. So I began making small changes (despite great fear) that had a compounding effect. A month or so later, a retreat was on schedule that was to be led by Bruce and the topic was HOPE. Well, I thought it would be a good idea to attend since I didn't have any hope. I came away from the retreat not believing one whit of any of it, but I kept showing up and taking steps forward even though there was ZERO connection. It was really easy for me to know that I was at fault here, not God. I was the one not able to connect.

I came to realize that I had no idea who I was anymore, and what's more, had no idea how I got to this place so unaware. Someone gave me an exercise to do asking me to make a list of ten things I like to do for fun and I could not do it. I wrote down two things and could go no further. And my two things I wrote down were SLEEP and SEX. Pretty pathetic, but that is the truth. I had no idea who Kip was anymore, could not even tell you what I liked. And I had no hope and no idea how to get it. That is the ultimate description of nihilism, and I was living it. Another piece of the puzzle regarding the question of hope and how to get it was, for me, addressed most spectacularly in a series of lectures by a lay theologian by the name of Gil Bailie. Bailie delivered a series of lectures entitled "Why Did It Take ____ to Save Us?" and, over three lectures, he filled in the blank with the topics The Incarnation, The Crucifixion and The Resurrection. I have listened to these lectures many times and I marvel at this man's ability to articulate an intelligent description of faith and action all steeped in mystery and love. I disagree with some of his premises and conclusions, yet am enlivened by his process. His lectures draw from a wide variety of disciplines, including anthropology, philosophy, religion, art, literature and psychology. He weaves tales and disparate themes into a tapestry of marvelous integration. In his opening lecture on The Incarnation, he quotes an early 20th-century theologian named Hilaire Belloc regarding the world view of Christianity (and the corresponding hope that emanates from it) versus the alternative world view playing out in much of the (increasingly) secular world.

Joseph Hilaire Pierre René Belloc (July 27, 1870 to July 16, 1953):

The central theme in the business of Europe is the doctrine of the incarnation; the affirmation that God appeared among men and the denial thereof. From the first public announcement of that affirmation, about AD 29-33, it has been the main issue dividing all mankind of the Greco-Roman world. Let there be no error, the question is fundamental, not only to that time, but to our own. It remains the root question for those who would ridicule the doctrine, for those who are indifferent to it, and for those who would defend it. With Jesus Christ as God incarnate, there is one view of the world. With Jesus Christ as a prophet, a model or a myth, there is another. And the one view is the mortal enemy of the other. The point in that early day was this: there had been presented before the world by this new thing, the Christian Church, this new society, which changed the values of human action and the nature of social life. Despair, which the old pagan civilizations universally admitted, and from which

it turned away its eyes by following pleasure on the one hand, however shameful, or honor on the other, however sterile, this despair was, by the Christian hope, denied its empire. If that claim to divinity were ever abandoned by posterity however, the hope would be lost.

Gil Bailie goes on to say that the denial of divinity need not be a formal rejection of the Trinitarian doctrine, but only that it become a matter of “shrugging indifference,” the shrug being the first ominous signs of the despair which it foreshadows and which Belloc proposes is the natural consequence of the abandonment of that doctrine.

I am breaking off on a small tangent here, but want to talk about our faith family a little. I am so incredibly grateful for our growing congregation and community of *The New Church*. We have a group of people in this church who are loving, patient, kind, and open to discussion, interpretation and argument. We do not subscribe to a set of creeds that dictate what we must think or believe or even how we behave. But we DO stay focused on God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, prayer and scripture. And that is priceless.

So with that being said, I do not know if I agree 100% with Belloc’s assertion. More to the point, was Jesus God incarnate? I don’t know, but I cannot think of how that is true. The discussion surrounding this is way too long for tonight, but my quick version is I see Jesus as a man being born as we are all born. I see Jesus as the Christ (the anointed one) after his baptism. And I see Jesus Christ after his death as our risen Lord and Savior. What I do agree with, and I think it is embedded in Belloc’s assertion, is that without Jesus as my risen Lord and Savior, there is a world view that would lead to nihilism. And indeed, for much of the secular world, that is playing out. (The only REAL hope is Easter hope.)

What is my walk with Jesus and what steps am I taking that *are* working? Today, much of my growth and connection to God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit has come from 12-Step Study work that I have been doing over the past two and a half years. I have been pursuing this in many different ways, but for now, I will confine my discussion to a SPIRITUAL 12-STEP STUDY. I’ve been blessed to study and practice the 12 Steps with others in my community, and to work on these steps with my Sponsor (Mentor, if you prefer).

Remember earlier I said I now know why I have not pursued the Christian Path more faithfully? Well, in practicing the Spiritual 12 Steps, I had to look no further than Step 1:

We admitted that we were powerless over sin – that our lives had become unmanageable.

I had no problem admitting my life was unmanageable, at least not to myself. But I had a very real aversion to admitting I was powerless. If that were true, that meant I had to give up control. You've got to be kidding ... there was NO way I was going to do that. And therein lay my problem. I was going to stay in control, even if it killed me. And it was, and it will. In so many more ways than I could describe tonight.

* * *

I am going to read the 12 Steps listed in the Spiritual 12-Step Study Guide (copies are available for all who desire).

1. We admitted that we were powerless over sin – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and, when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

To me, these steps have become the basis for much of my spiritual work. There are SO MANY other ways to grow spiritually, and my growth comes from many other courses of action in addition to this, but I can honestly say that without the Spiritual 12-Step Program, I am sure my life today would not be the same, and by that I mean it would not be a pretty picture. Today, I know far more about who I am, what I want, what I

need and what my part is in the life given to me by God. I do not know perfectly and I definitely do not live as well as I would like, but I am far better today than I was twelve months ago, or three years ago. Today, I have hope for today and hope for the future.

In the 12-Step world (and it does not matter whether you are 12-Stepping for an addiction, a dysfunctional family or relationships, or just an inability to live life on life's terms), many times the program is described as a "program of action coming from love." I cannot move forward without taking steps. I must be in action or no growth will occur. For me, this means more than reading or thinking or praying about it. It means meeting with people who are like-minded. It means sharing in discussion what is going on in my life (reasoning things out with someone else). It means praying and writing about my awareness of the 12 Steps and sharing it with myself, God and another human being (my Sponsor/ Mentor).

For today, much of the dance of life has to do with the steps I take. I saw a bumper sticker not long ago that said "Life is a dance, IF you know the steps." I do not know if this was a reference to 12-Step Programs or not, but I sure took it that way.

I've come to appreciate all the steps, and the insights I gain keep revealing more and more, like peeling an onion, each time I revisit a step. But critical for me is to repeat the following like I'm taking an Arthur Murray dance class: 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3. They are worth a revisit:

1. We admitted that we were powerless over sin – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood Him.

The first three steps have been summed up like this:

Step 1: I can't.

Step 2: You can.

Step 3: I'm going to let you.

What I know today is that God has done things for me that I cannot do for myself. Critical within that knowledge is that Jesus the Christ has shown that path, and we have a way to walk and principles to follow and love to receive and a calling to live out. I cannot do it alone. And I cannot do it sitting still. I must take steps on the path, with Jesus, and he will continue to guide and help me with love and compassion. And that, to me, is the magic of being saved.