

Crossed Roads

by Jerry L. Sherman

You were driving ahead of your lights.

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I had to laugh, like you laugh when it hurts. I was finding comic relief in a sports metaphor. My whole problem, I decided, was that I peaked too early. I was barely 25, but I already had to look back nine years to see myself as a success.

There were two peaks, actually, with a long saddle-back ridge of pleasure between them.

The first came in Phoenix, Arizona, during my junior year in high school. It was Tempe, actually, but I liked the mythological aspect of “Phoenix,” where I flew so briefly on fragile wings. It was a promontory from which to swoop gleefully over to the other high point, only to find from there that the bird flies but once.

Fifty years later I would learn I had the Phoenix metaphor wrong: the bird flies many times, repeatedly resurrecting itself from its own ashes. The crash and burn metaphor fits my life better, in the long run, but early on I thought it was it was a one-shot deal.

Phoenix was the farthest west I had been in my 16 years. I locked on that metaphor, too, and wrung from it another quickie diagnosis: I had failed to heed the classic injunction, “Go west, young man.” I went east to college at Wisconsin, and success did not go with me.

A young man in a novel I read then went west, to Minnesota, some hundred and fifty years ago. He went to serve God as handyman and builder for the missionaries of his church, thinking to be one of them himself. But he left that behind to be a builder for all the pioneers who came, and he prospered. The story ends in his non-religious prosperity. One imagines his grandchildren settled in comfort on the tree-lined streets of the Twin Cities, where my great-grandfather once walked, their opulence the mark of the wide open spaces that America got rich

filling. But the brooding young man in my story looks at the wave of growth that swept across the land, with opportunity at every felled tree and ferried river, and he muses, *No wonder we became so sure of ourselves and saw less and less of God.* I pictured the wave of success hitting the western shore and sloshing back, our youthful energy emanating novelty and audacity and growing more perverse, as we searched for meaning in the riches we had chosen.

Just as well, then, I reasoned at 25, that I traced that young builder's steps backward. But I could still taste the sweet in the poison I had tried.

The sweetness was Tempe in February: orange trees, spring balm, blue nocturnal motel pool, and Trophies, four of them on the dresser, glistening with promise amidst the hilarity of four young men flushed with success.

We were in Phoenix for a speech tournament. Speech was my forté, the vehicle of my emergence from shy kid to cocky young man. All speech tournaments were peaks for me, because I would be whisked away from the general atmosphere of school, where athletic ability and dating skills overshadowed intellectual gifts as the basis of peer approval, and plopped into my own little pond, where what I did best was valued.

This tournament was a peak among peaks, because it was the most distant, and the biggest. Our team, Manzano High School of Albuquerque, New Mexico, was always successful in New Mexico, but now we were trimmed down to lean muscle to take on new opponents.

It was also the only tournament where we spent Saturday night away, which meant a night of motel room revelry after the preparation was over and the nervousness dispelled.

I was entered in Senior Men's Oratory. I was mainly a debater, but in my junior year I discovered I could write a speech, memorize it, and deliver it. I had won a few awards quickly.

Awards—these were the peak of every tournament. Since our school usually won a lot, we had plenty of exhilaration. But award ceremonies usually had a flaw. In the individual events, five or six people are in the finals round and know they might win. This was the case with me in Senior Men's Oratory. Those who do not place first, second, or third get honorable

mentions. But the announcements of these names come first and are blows of disappointment to those who knew this was the worst they could do.

The third place announcement is a bigger blow, to one of the top three whose hopes just rose as he or she survived all the honorable mention announcements.

But second place is even worse. This name, as soon as it is recognized as *not* the other person's, will be drowned out by screams coming from another corner of the auditorium, where the unnamed winner sits.

First place, when it comes, is anticlimax.

But He who determines the course of the stars would not tolerate such poor design in my case. This was one of the first computerized tournaments, and it ran very smoothly until the man rose to announce my event. He fumbled around a moment and said, "Uh, I don't seem to have the names of the honorable mentions, so I will announce the first three winners, and the rest will get honorable mentions."

The stage is set for drama.

Third place—not me. I have less hope, but a better one.

Second place—not me. Now all hope is gone, except the greatest hope.

"First Place in Senior Men's Oratory—Jerry Sherman!" My section of the auditorium erupted in joy, and I stumbled out to receive my glistening trophy, as I peaked out on success and became, as my friend Fred would say from then on, "The best orator in four states!"

Fred and his debate partner won first place in Junior Debate, and his partner placed second in Extemporaneous Speaking, and our fourth bedfellow won third place in Dramatic Reading. That is how four trophies came to bedeck our motel room dresser, adding their glittering benediction to our sleepless night of hilarity.

Yet Everything was not perfect. One of the trophies was broken. Mine. I dropped it while returning to my seat and broke it off at the base. It had wings, but without its base it leaned nervously against the motel room wall.

This was the first I heard from God, a gentle word, considering that I stood in a place where a lightning bolt would have made sense. I had grasped my fame by denouncing him. My speech was an allegorical declaration that we, the human race, had grown up and no longer needed the Heavenly Father idea. I had not heard of Nietzsche, but I was joining his declaration of the death of God.

On the bus back to Albuquerque, with sleep closing in, I learned from Mrs. Myers, our coach, as she looked over the printout of the computerized results, that I had nearly placed in the other event I entered, which was a new event, requiring no preparation, for those less gifted at the mouth: *Listening*. I listened well, and learned how to make shadow-box eggs, which I enjoy to this day. I don't know what else I learned there. But I learned something important on the bus, as sleep advanced on me. The whines and whirs of the bus across the desert highway were punctuated, staccato-like, as I went in and out of sleep, but that meant that my ears were shutting off while my mind was still working. The ears can fall asleep before the mind does.

Another thing I might have learned is that the ears can't do much while the mouth is going ahead full speed. This explains my new-found faith, atheism. It is an easy faith to maintain, as long as you don't listen, don't ask, and don't do any research. I happened upon it easily when I read Bertrand Russell's *Why I am not a Christian* (but not the sequel, *Why I am Dead*). From there, I tangented off on my own, believing what felt good.

Some of those around me knew me better than I knew myself. Mrs. Myers, while applauding my success, stated I would probably be a minister. She knew the type. A girl in my creative writing class knew. We worked together on the literary magazine, *The Phaeton*—another mythical reminder that a young fool can get swatted out of the sky by a disapproving father. Even though I was an editor, I did not see her poem next to mine until they were both in print, able to stand together over all the years that would tell who told the truth. I wrote:

A figure in Fright

A Shadow against the Light

Who are You?

I am God, he said
I laughed. He fled.

She wrote:

Big Brave Intellectuals. . .
They Laugh; God Flees.
Big Brave Intellectuals,
Are so Naive.

She—Nancy Wallace—was probably a Christian. I didn't know what a Christian was. I didn't know there was a distinct sub-species called Christian, only that certain people believed certain things about God, which I found revolting. My resentment, quite personal for one who acknowledged no personal God, was that God would rob us of knowledge. He said knowledge was bad; we should not have eaten of the tree of knowledge. But I knew that knowledge was our salvation, or at least the thing that would provide my daily bread and pats on the back.

On most of our speech trips we shared a bus with the team from St. Pius High School. This was a time to argue about religion. One time, a friend and I maintained at length that we respected Jesus as a teacher, but not as God. The Catholic kids said we could not just accept his teachings, but had to accept *Him*. This was plain-facedly reasonable: you can't accept a person's teaching without accepting him if he teaches that you must accept him. But for all my worship of reason, I could not see the plainness of this argument. The concept of "accepting Christ" glanced off me, producing an almost angry frustration at their illogic.

A similar response was stirred in me by the person who knew and said the truest thing about me. This was my mother, raised in a Methodist pastor's home and always a believer, although my father's lack of support kept her from teaching us much about it. She said, "You'll

believe in God when you need Him.” Again I was incensed by the absurdity of it, pacing in a tight circle on the living room carpet and exclaiming to myself, “You don’t make something true by wanting it to be true!” That is true, of course, but I was the one trying to do exactly that, believing atheism because it felt good. It did not occur to me then that if you want something to be true, you will make a serious effort to find out if it is true, which I had not begun to do.

Later I would learn that the fool says *in his heart* that there is no God, not in his mind. The mind plays puppet, dreaming up the reasons to trail along the path of the will, which is bent on self-glory. I was the champion atheist of my high school, loving every minute of it, from the triumph at Tempe through all the laughing, boasting successes that followed.

That first peak was like a mountain I climbed that same year. Dubbed “The Needle,” it stands on the craggy west face of Sandia Crest, above Albuquerque, with its base at 8500 feet and its pinnacle at 10,000. It is a spire of rock that is a favorite for climbers who scale cliffs in the technical way, but my friend Tom and I decided we could climb it without equipment. To do so, we had only to hike up to the base of the Needle, then wedge our way up a “chimney” for about 30 feet; then we could climb hand over hand to the top, where we gloried in our feat and left our names in a pile of rocks with a glass jar for that purpose. This was like my easy climb to glory in forensics . . . coming back *down* the chimney was the frightening part.

Thirty years I climbed the Needle again, with my brother, who had also done the dare-devil ascent years ago. We brought a rope, and we happened to be there to see three teenagers make an easy leap from a place where the crag almost connected to the main part of the mountain. My brother told his teenage son that they would not be able to make that leap back to the adjoining mountain. A while later we were at the chimney and they were above, looking for a way down, so we threw them our rope, and they secured it and came down, and we were able use it to go up and down. We climbed the rest of the way to the top and found a small tree where the stones and glass jar should have been, and no record of our bravery.

The second peak came in my senior year and was like another mountain I climbed when I was 19. This was my personal high point in altitude, at the top of Santa Fe Baldy in the Sangre de Cristo (Blood of Christ) mountains, just east of Santa Fe. I went with Jim, my debate partner in my senior year and the one who helped me argue with the Catholic kids about believing in the teachings of Jesus without the theology. He wanted to fish at Lake Katherine, which is cradled in the lap of the mountain at 11,500 feet. To get there, we hiked first to Stewart Lake, where we camped, and then we climbed without our gear to Lake Katherine. Jim was ready to fish, but I could not resist the magnificent sloping shoulders of the peak above us. All I had to do was crawl on hands and feet up a long slope of gravel and wildflowers to the ridge, then follow the ridge around and up to the summit.

Once there, at 12,600 feet, I had 75,000 square miles of New Mexico and Colorado spread in glory at my feet. And that was what I had at my feet early in my senior year: miles and miles of view, with vistas of opportunity. I had scaled no cliffs to get there, just walked upwards a long time along the trails of academic achievement, then scaled a flower-strewn ascent to the summit.

The summit from which I drank in a view of unlimited success was my status as a finalist in the National Merit Scholarship program. The chances of winning a scholarship in this program were slight, but that was not the point. Students who did well enough in the local testing to be finalists had *arrived*. They were *college bait*, one of Mammon's chosen few.

For several weeks that fall, I received letters from colleges and universities small and large, but all prestigious. There would be an immaculately presented letter of congratulation, and then an invitation to come and bring my brain. There were the not-too-glossy brochures showing expansive green campuses with stimulating architecture and earnest students carrying colorful books, planted there in the garden of intellectual Eden. There were course descriptions and curricula, mental menus to whet the appetite, and maps of intellectual continents to be mastered.

On one of those sunny October afternoons, everything fell into place. I saw my whole future spread before me. I would go to Yale (prestigious) and study math (easy) and be a professional person (naturally) who lived in a big, new house (life's purpose).

If anyone had asked me what would be the meaning of all this, I would have found the question meaningless. That was just what one did and had fun doing. My dad had a bigger, newer house on the drawing board, for a lot he wanted to buy up the street. It was a sloping lot overlooking the freeway with a clear view of Sandia Crest to the northeast. A two story house on a sloping lot with four fireplaces and four living areas, one big enough for ping-pong—this speaks for itself. This is Life, with a capital L. Long after I had learned differently, I continued in my dreams to see huge houses as the expression of Life abundant. These dreams fill my heart with a longing joy that fades in the morning light. But now I know where I am going and from where the dream is beckoning. At 17 I knew only what they told me, which was that I was smart and could go to college and experience easy personal success and be happy.

I doubt they tell kids that anymore, smart or otherwise. The world groans too loudly to shut the school doors against the sound. Even then they must have known, the grownups, that it wasn't out there. But somehow if they could prime us and pump us and launch us with enough confidence, they could hope to send us sailing clear over and beyond reality, into the Land that America invented.

I was ready for take-off. Overcome with joy, I ran to get Fred, and we jumped in my 55 Chevy and picked up Jim, similarly blessed, and we drove and talked a blue streak of success. I have always vividly remembered the substance of that stream of chatter—success, success, success. But I had forgotten its specific content. Sixteen years later, in a brief phone reunion with Jim, he reminded me. "I'm not surprised at what you are telling me about yourself," he said. "Remember that night in your car, when we were talking about the Golden Rule?" The Golden Rule! It, along with college diplomas and other easy achievements, was the basis of our optimism. We were persistent, Catholic kids notwithstanding, in our intent to follow the teachings of Jesus without following Jesus. With hardly a shred of religion, we had nevertheless pledged ourselves to simply and easily be good, and thereby be happy. And surely the rest of the world would follow our easy plan! Be good, be smart, be successful, be happy; be three kids in a Chevy, tracing a dusty, hilarious path up Juan Tabo Road to the base of Sandia Crest, city lights a

carpet of promise at our feet. From the mountain we turned west and rolled down the long, straight dirt road that descends from Sandia Crest to the highway north of Albuquerque. "The downhill road of life" is a two-edged metaphor, of course, but to me at the time its other cutting edge was not in sight, and it just meant easy going.

But someone working at cross-purposes with my own had that day plowed another road at right angles to the one down which we so breezily and easily rolled. He left an 18 inch mound of dirt across our path, and by the time the Chevy slid to a stop some hundred yards beyond, its two front wheel were staring each other in the face, very surprised.

The three of us were amazingly silent after we got the car going again and began creeping toward town, our exultant voices replaced by the steady whine of the fenders cutting ridges in the new tires. At the edge of the city we called my dad, and he came to rescue us. He was angry, in his mild way, and he prophesied unwittingly when he said, "You were driving ahead of your lights."

It was not my car, but my dad's, and I had no money to fix it. He did not say whether or not he would. So I went on into the fall sobered by the possibility of a senior year without a car. But my father was a lot like God. On Christmas morning he said, "Go look in the garage." I opened the door, and there was my Chevy, all fixed, wheels facing straight ahead and ready to go, wherever I would point them.