

Introduction

In a sometimes cynical world it is easy to believe that there are no happy endings; that most people who struggle to get somewhere never actually get there, that the notion of any of us rising above our circumstances and upbringing is a notion for Pollyannas and people who are mostly out of touch with reality.

Nothing could be further from the truth, and the story you are about to read is living proof of that. Take heart. There is still romance, mercy, salvation, resurrection, laughter- all available and in ample supply. No one is so far down that they cannot drink from the cup that contains those all-important ingredients of the good life. Let me encourage you: no matter where you are today in your walk through this world, the potential for you to have a life well-lived is still within your grasp. Trust me.

It has always been my contention that the closer one comes to escaping one's circumstances, the louder the chorus of failure gets. It whispers in your ear every day when you're defeated and not trying. Take just a few concrete steps toward a better life and the decibels really begin to rise. Near the exit, the noise is deafening. "Look at your upbringing" it says. Or, "you're not worth it", or "this won't work" or "this will be another one of your temporary fixes". We've all heard it from time to time.

And oftentimes the cacophony brings company. Miserable people enjoy congregating with other miserable people and reassuring each other that they are all ok. Or even worse, that they are *not* all ok, but that it's not their fault. The talk at these gatherings usually includes at least a portion of the time being spent railing on "my circumstances, my bad luck, the government, my parents, somebody who done me wrong"-all or some of these

conspiring to hold them back from being all that they could be. I suppose there's some kind of comfort here, where everybody's life is in the pits. Many people live their entire existence on this earth and never break free from these paralyzing surroundings, often dying penniless, broken, and in denial. Some, though, miraculously get a momentary glimpse of another kind of life. Many times the admonition to step out and step up comes from just one true friend who cares deeply for them and is willing to get on their horse and ride in and save them despite the slings and arrows associated with doing so.

It's an age old story, really. Someone with hope shows up. Arriving at a better life more often than not, requires great sacrifice and perhaps even separation. Most importantly, though, we need to hear the good news that someone else has escaped, and that they accomplished it even though they share many, if not all, of our weaknesses and shortcomings.

I hope this tale does that for you. It's a very encouraging and completely true story. It has it all, really. Poverty, abandonment, alcoholism, drug addiction, divorce, jail-you name it, it's here somewhere.

You or someone you know may be dealing with all or some of these issues. In reality every family does, though many don't talk about it or acknowledge it. One thing for certain: the problems will surely linger as long as they are ignored. Fixing them absolutely requires facing them.

You may finally be nearing your exit from the difficult life you've always lived and you may be seeking something better because you just know in your heart it's there and you are willing to do anything to find it.

My advice to you? Just for the time it takes for you to read this story, tune out the world, your relatives, your in-laws, your parents, your teachers-whoever it is that has told you that you *can't escape*.

Because, they are wrong.

You *can*.

Chapter 1 A Pre-funeral Celebration

“A good name is better than silver”

Proverbs

Sometimes the chasm between where we are and where we would like to be seems vast and unable to be spanned no matter how hard we try. Our better future lingers off in the mist, distant and shadowy. Grasping it requires a mix of faith and perseverance and hard work and obedience.

As she sat on the wooden bench in her white luminescent car hop outfit and surveyed the parking lot filled with cars and friends and customers, a faint smile crossed Patsy Yates’ tired but still beautiful face. For just a moment she thought she got a glimpse of where she was going, and it comforted her a bit, if only for the moment.

If only she had known on that muggy Houston night back in 1953 that someday....

Surprise!

There are two constants about Patsy, my mother. One, she has kind of weird Lucille Ball types of episodes and if you’re going to hang out with her you’ll probably have to participate. Over her life she has had driving episodes, leaving her children episodes (accidentally, she claims), miraculous unexplainable episodes, and generally odd but true episodes. She has a good time with all of it, and the people who are in her orbit fully expect her to do this stuff. The episodes live in legend in the Welch family, and like the old sitcoms, are rerun often over Thanksgiving dinner, Christmas get-togethers, etc.

Secondly, she has always had great friends. Throughout her life she has obeyed the admonition that if one is to have friends they must show themselves friendly. She certainly did that. So, it came as no surprise, really, when on a cold Sunday afternoon back in 2000, two good friends of the Welch family, Pauline Johnson and Gaye Johns, called my house to discuss the possibility and the logistics of putting on a “pre-funeral celebration” for my Mom (Patsy) and her lifelong friend, Boots Jackson. The Johnsons (David and Pauline) and The Johns (Roy and Gaye) are two of Mom’s and Boots’ best friends from the 60’s. David was my first Sunday school teacher that I can remember. I don’t recall all the lessons that he taught, but I do remember that he was always there and that he was kind to a bunch of smart-aleck eight year old boys. He and Pauline are two of those really good-hearted people who work hard, and they are generous to a fault. They have done well in this life on every front and they deserve everything they have earned, including their circle of lifelong friends. The Johns’ were missionaries to Peru and Brother Roy pastored our church for awhile when they were home on sabbatical. Great people, all, with good hearts and generous souls. If they love you, you know it. So, their desire to honor Mom and Boots was not surprising, really.

Good Cop, Bad Cop

I chuckle a little when I think about these two women they wanted to honor. Boots Jackson and Patsy Welch could not be more different.

Boots is a swarthy, loud, dramatic person who is more fun than she has a right to be. She doesn’t mince words ever, so if you come to her for advice you had better be prepared to get it straight on, right between the eyes. And, she really likes for you to do something

about it after the talk. Action. She likes action and excitement. She is very public and outspoken. No secrets.

Patsy is private and tactful. She can talk the horns off a billy goat but she is more genteel in her counsel. Yes, she is always happy to talk with you if you really need help. Yes, she would like for you to do what she suggests, but she would never wrestle you to the ground and pin you until you cried "Uncle!" and acquiesced and changed your life.

Boots would.

Once, Boots was in charge of the youth department at our church and none of the youth could keep up with her. She could stay up all night, work all day, and do it all over again the next night. There were lots of parties that ran late into the night. No drinking, no drugs, just good clean fun, non-stop. One night a young man named Rick Schrader was at one of these fiestas and he had no idea what was about to happen to him. He had visited the church a few times, mainly (by his own admission) because of the cute girls who attended there. On this night, Boots grabbed him by his shirtsleeve and took him into one of her rooms at her house and closed the door, bracing it shut with her foot. Her basso voice boomed over the sound of music blaring from the living room: "Rick, just because you are in a garage doesn't mean you're a car. Right? Then, coming to church doesn't make you a Christian, either. You've been hanging out at this church for awhile now. It's time you accepted Jesus as your savior. Let's pray." He did, and for the past 30 years he has been the pastor of a great church in Katy, Texas that has done some of the most charitable work in his area, feeding the hungry, reaching out to the homeless. Great work that is changing the world he lives in. Probably not exactly the way the Apostle Paul would have done it, but Boots had her own methods: she pinned him, and the world was better for it.

Patsy would never even think to do that. But that doesn't mean she doesn't have any idiosyncrasies. Once, my dad was asked if he ever watched Lucille Ball. "Watch her?", he said, "I live with her." She's always gotten lost a lot and she's done weird things with her cars. Her synapses fire funny and occasionally she does things that are completely inexplicable. And yet, she can teach the Bible for two hours with no notes of any kind. It has always been miraculous, really, to hear her speak, especially if you were one of her young sons who she left at the grocery store only the day before.

Somehow, these two very different people were a team, the EMT of counselors, if you will. They got calls at all hours from desperate people and for more than 40 years they had responded with no regard for themselves, their time, their lives, the dangers that may lurk, nothing. They were always there, oftentimes together, to rescue the perishing. "Good cop, Bad cop" is what one rescued soul called them: Mom, sweetly chiding and encouraging, Boots breathing fire and brimstone, both doing so with a lot of love and concern.

Everybody knew that. That's why Pauline and Gaye were calling me to put together this shindig.

"We shouldn't wait until people die to tell them what we think of them should we?" Pauline asked me, rhetorically.

"Of course we shouldn't," I responded not really sure where the conversation was going.

"Then, let's have a big pre-funeral celebration for your mom and Boots. It will be fun."

Yes, it would surely be fun. I listened intently as they unfolded the scenario for how it might come to pass.

Filling the Room

The premise was simple---we would enlist a few of this duo's inner circle of friends and allies to build a list of potential invitees. Then, on the sly, we would secretly invite a few hundred of mom's and Boots' closest friends to join us at mom's church to celebrate their life and the work they had been doing all (or at least most) of their adult life. Everyone (even those who could not attend) would be asked to write a letter to put into a scrapbook. This letter would be a testimonial about what Mom's and Boot's lives had meant to them with a word of thanks for being obedient to their calling.

Also, any funny stories about Boots and Patsy would be included in the letters. I wondered how big the scrapbook book was going to be. It was going to have to be pretty large to have enough room for all the funny stories because there were so many of them. These two had done it all over the years and even in the direst of circumstances there was always something humorous (either intentional or unintentional) going on. I have chosen just a few that I am most familiar with and included them in this book. In fact, every few pages will include a "Patsy Moment". I will have to be selective about which of those stories to include or this book will be as thick as "War and Peace".

But, I digressed. Let me get back to the "funeral" arrangements.

Those who were indeed able to attend the event in person, would be given the opportunity to speak directly to the two guests of honor. From the stage they would tell about how their work impacted their lives and the lives of their families and those around them.

The most difficult part of this whole deal would be keeping the secret. After more than three decades of friendship the vine that connected this group was advanced beyond anything that man has ever invented. Everybody knew everybody else's business in a good kind of way because they really cared for each other. The bond between them that began all those years ago at Thornton Street Baptist Church was as strong as ever and they talked among themselves on at least a weekly basis.

We remained hopeful about being able to successfully invite 400 people to a Saturday morning event in a little fellowship hall at Airline United Methodist Church. The invitation letters were sent and we held our breath, hoping people would respond in one way or another.

“Funeral” Day

The morning of the big day arrived and we were all set. The scrapbook was packed to overflowing with many RSVP's and letters from literally all over the world, each with accolades and anecdotes about these two great women. The parking lot began to fill up and soon the room was filled to capacity with well wishers and friends. At last, the guests of honor arrived and were so surprised by the whole thing that I was actually afraid for just a fleeting moment that it was going to be too much for them. But, soon they both recovered and the show got underway.

All morning long, hour after hour, one person after another came up to the microphone and began to recount how they had met Boots and Mom and what their circumstances had been at the time they met. Many had been in dire straits, at their wits end, strung out on drugs or alcohol, homeless or penniless. One lady had lived next door to us with her alcoholic husband, and one day she banged on our front door frantically, and

screamed for us to “hurry and open the door!!!!” When we opened the door, she was practically naked, wearing only a slip and covering her torso with a towel. It turned out that her husband, Chuck, in a fit of drunken rage, had piled all of her clothes in to a heap in the front yard and burned them up. She was clothes-less. We took her and her young son in for a few days until her husband settled down enough for her to go back home. She hid out with us.

We always had a lot of drama like that around our house. One time, I came home from school and upon reaching my front porch, I was pulled into the door by my mother yelling “hurry, get down, the people two doors down have been shooting at each other!” One of them (the husband) was eventually shot in the stomach by his irate and slightly deranged wife. He lived, but his ever present limp always reminded me of that afternoon.

All of these people, and many, many others, wound up going to church with us and finding a different life there for themselves. Many of them-at least the ones who were still alive-were there on this special day and delighted in telling their stories. There was a lot of laughter and tears, skits and stories, hugs and handshakes. As the day came to an end I sat alone in the now empty hall and pondered the whole thing. Isn't this how every person wants to be remembered? Doesn't everyone want to get to the end of their life and still have a great reputation and be revered and honored?

I would certainly think so.

An outsider might have wondered what could have brought such an outpouring of affection on two seemingly regular folks. They had never climbed Mt. Everest, never built a skyscraper, or run for office. They weren't scientists or Harvard grads.

But they did have one important thing in common. They were givers-of their time, corn dogs (I'll explain later), talents, and yes, money (if they really thought you needed it).

A Boat and a Car, Maybe

Yes, if you really needed money even that could be arranged. As a young boy I was surprised when I would see Mom give away money. Most of the time she was so tight with the family funds that I thought at the time we must be saving it all for something really big. Actually, even though her bank account stayed the same most of the time, Mom would waver back and forth between feeling incredibly wealthy and completely destitute.

“I’m thinking about buying your daddy a boat and a new truck to pull it with” she would say out of the blue in a wealthy-feeling moment. I would seize upon these moments to ask if I might have a dime to buy a coke. (Yes, you could buy a coke with just ten cents back then. It was a long time ago.) It seemed like the opportune time, especially with boats and new trucks coming into view on the family’s financial horizon.

“What do you think I am, made out of money?” she’d shout. Uh, well, no. I guess not now. Under my breath I would mutter something about how if cokes were outside the budgetary constraints, then boats and trucks were probably not going to happen anytime soon either.

Somehow we got by, though. Once, when my dad and uncles were in business together (The short-lived Welch Brothers Machine shop), my dad brought home much less than the poverty level for several years, and yet we had all we needed and we never missed a meal or went without clothes, or school supplies. I distinctly remember many mornings before school, we would pray for food and our daily bread, so to speak. We always had it by the day’s end.

In those days she would take me to thrift stores over in what I considered the seedy parts of town to buy school clothes. “Don’t worry boys, rich people shop here” she would always say preemptively to us as we got out of the car and headed inside. Occasionally we would have to step over a couple of the wealthiest ones who had passed out in the doorway of the establishment. “That must have been the Rockefeller’s” I wisecracked once, but she pretended not to listen.

She was on a mission and she would not be deterred or discouraged. Taking care of her family was really her life’s work and this was part of it. With all Patsy had been through in her life, shopping in a second hand store for hand-me-down clothes was no big deal. Her pride never got in the way of what really mattered.

And did she mean it when she said that rich people shop at those thrift stores in the “seedy” part of town? I suppose it depends on your definition of wealth. If being wealthy means having friends and people who love you unconditionally, and a reputation in your old age that shines like gold, than she was right. Rich people did shop there, and she seems to be getting richer by the day.

But, the truth is, there was a day when she and Boots were not so rich. They were just two warriors on the ropes and barely standing. I would imagine that the last thing either of them would have thought at that time was that one day they would be loved so and respected even more. Thick and ominous clouds hung heavy over their lives back then that seemed destined to do them in.

If a day like this celebration day was ever going to happen, somehow, the rescuers would need to be rescued.

A Patsy Moment- Blackmailing the Kids

When we were boys, my dad was a machinist and sometimes he would work the second shift, from 2:30-10:30 PM. That, unfortunately, meant that on those evenings he wouldn't be home for supper. We all liked having him home for supper, but my mom especially did. His presence always insured peace and tranquility in the home, mainly because he maintained an austere and commanding presence. Nobody tested him. Nobody. Most remarkably, he was able to pull that off without raising his voice, or throwing fits, or anything. He just had *it*. Later, when I watched my first Clint Eastwood spaghetti western I realized "hey, I know this character. He's the guy that looks over my report card every six weeks." The only thing missing was the poncho and the cigarillo.

Anyway, when he wasn't around, it was pandemonium. Dinner was a circus. My brothers and I would throw food, fight with each other, argue. You name it, we did it. Mom would try to corral us, but alas it was to no avail. We were 7, 12, and 17.

"Pass the bread!!!!" my brother shouted as if we were all hard of hearing. I grabbed the loaf and dropped back in the pocket, surveying the field to find an open receiver. Then, I flung the bread across the table and hit my brother squarely in the face, setting off a wrestling match on the floor, which I lost in three falls as I recall.

This went on night after night....

On one particularly memorable night, she wasn't acting like herself at all. We boys fired up the dinnertime party and she just sat and minded her own business and ate her food and kept to herself. No yelling or threatening. Nothing. We thought she might be sick or something.

We “passed” the bread, stuck our fingers in each other’s mashed potatoes, wrestled and screamed, and just generally made complete fools of ourselves.

After about 30 minutes or so, she interrupted our little shindig: “You boys done?”, she asked. I popped off “Done? Yeah, we’re done, we’re well done, just like this steak”. I distinctly recall exactly what I said at that moment because of what happened next.

Mother got very calm, and she reached across the table into the flower pot that was the dinner table’s centerpiece. She pulled out a little microphone and then she opened the oven and took out a reel to reel tape recorder. Everything was moving in slow motion, now. The buttons on that little cheap tape recorder sounded like cannons going off as she stopped the tape and rewound to the beginning. She smiled a sinister smile while she played back the entire dinner episode to us. Our behinds tingled thinking about what “The man with no name” would do to us when he heard this stuff. Oh, boy.

We dropped to our knees and begged for clemency, and hoped that the milk of human kindness still flowed. After a prolonged period of sobbing and sucking up she finally relented. Not without some conditions, however.

“Now”, she said her voice lowering into a scary register like mafia guys sound when they’re about to make you an offer you can’t (and shouldn’t) refuse.

“I’ll tell you what I’m going to do.” She was boxing up the tape and putting it into her blouse pocket with a safecracker’s dexterity and smoothness. We three sat in rapt silence. I can’t imagine what our faces must have looked like at that moment. We hung on her every word.

“I’m going to hide this tape in a place that only I know about.” Then, she gave the terms for this undeserved act of mercy. “I won’t play it for your father as long as I get co-

operation from you three.” Brando would have been proud of this performance had he been aware of the drama transpiring that night at the Deerfield Street Theatre. .

Wow. *Blackmail*, I thought. Our mother has resorted to *blackmail*. Are we that evil that we’ve driven her to this?

For years when things would begin to get out of hand she would get eerily calm, her hand raised toward us, index finger pointing skyward, “Don’t forget THE TAPE.” We surely didn’t, and no matter where we were thinking of going, behaviorally speaking, order was immediately restored.

On my high school graduation night mom came to me, crestfallen and obviously heavy hearted about something. “I need to confess something to you, son.”

OK, momma, Fire away.

“You remember that tape I threatened you boys with all those years?”

“Of course, mother, how could I forget?”

“Well, I want you to know that I threw it away the next day after I recorded it. I felt horrible about taping you guys without you knowing it and blackmailing you, so my conscience wouldn’t let me keep the tape.”

Hmmm. I pointed out to her that apparently her conscience had not been piqued enough to keep her from still leveraging the tape through the years to keep calm in the house when she needed it. So, blackmail is bad but fibbing isn’t?

Apparently not, if your motives are pure.

I did forgive her and we had a good laugh about it back there in 1974, standing in the Houston Coliseum among all the other proud graduates and their parents. The story has been told plenty of times down through the years. It is one of the pieces of “Patsy-ology” that

people want to hear over and over again. I couldn't blame her a bit for what she did. It was probably an act of desperation. If I had three kids like me and my brothers I would have probably resorted to the same kind of stuff and I wouldn't have been near as nice about it. What she did must have worked on some level. We all grew up and turned out ok for the most part.

The moral of this story for you parents out there who may be reading this?

Whatever works.