



## Rock Bottom

**M**y divorce unraveled me on a profound level. I viewed the family as the pinnacle statement of one's life, and now I was merely visiting the house I had worked so hard to make our home. One of the most painful parts of the divorce was walking into "my" house and feeling like an outsider. Knocking at the front door and entering like I was a guest, and then looking around at the rooms I renovated and the walls I painted. I heard once about something called "the picket fence syndrome" where a person grieves the loss of the home scenario; the house, home, and family life. I found myself feeling that regularly. Our front porch had a white picket fence with a gate that needed periodic adjusting to work well. Sometimes, when I was waiting for the kids to answer the door when I came to pick them up, I fixed the gate.

More importantly, my family breakup struck at the root of what I believed about God. How could this have happened? Specifically, how could it have happened to me? How did I get it wrong? I could see how it could happen to a guy who worked all the time, went out drinking and carousing with his

friends, coming home drunk, or lost his job because he didn't show up for work. But I was an Elder, for God's sake, a Sunday school teacher, involved with the church, deeply committed to seeking God on a personal level, longing to know him better. On top of that, I had several avenues of connection to God through friends at church, many times of worship, and my spiritual rituals. It didn't make sense to me. I had no idea why or how it happened. I was devastated, lost, angry. . . defeated.

It's not that I was angry at God, although there was an element of that at times. I was more upset at myself and began to question my beliefs about God and if my expectations about how he was "supposed" to help us were valid. Maybe there wasn't a God. Maybe it was just a nice idea that people made up to cope with life. Maybe it didn't matter what you did with your life because there was nothing out there, no one that cared or intervened when asked. I visited a few nearby churches but did not make any connections, and the Presbyterian church was too far away.

My anger smoldered and turned into a depression that began to overtake me. I was living alone in a town 45 minutes from my children and 10 minutes from my job. I managed to get out of bed, get dressed, and to work each day. At least work got my mind off things for a few hours and provided some stability in my life. But still, the strain of the loss of the picket fence, questions about all the time and effort I spent pursuing God over the years, and financial devastation began wearing on me.

During the second year after I moved out, I entered a dark time. I began drinking regularly and heavily, mostly wine and

especially on the weekends when I didn't have the kids. Many times, I even drank during the week. It helped mask the pain and let me forget about things, at least enough to get through the nights. People offered platitudes such as "not lose heart," or "this too shall pass," "the first two years are the hardest," and "there's a light at the end of the tunnel." Blah, blah, blah. I appreciated their sentiments, but they were of no help. When you are in that kind of pain, no words from anyone can help.

One night I hit rock bottom. It was two days away from a court date to settle financial aspects of the divorce, and my attorney, as usual, was not returning my calls. I felt exceedingly powerless and depressed. It was raining, and the last straw was my HBO had been turned off. I had been receiving it for free since I moved in because it was never turned off when the previous tenant left. A new tenant had moved in below me, and I guess the cable company audited the building and discovered that I was receiving it erroneously. Although it may seem trite, it was a big deal to me, especially on top of everything else. At least I had my HBO to watch. The kids were young, not teenagers yet, and got excited too. Now and then I overheard them talking to a friend saying, "We have HBO at Daddy's."

Feeling the way I did, I resorted to my staple feel-good solution. I walked around the corner to the liquor store and purchased two bottles of my favorite Australian red wine, Rosemont Shiraz, and returned to my apartment. Not too far into the second bottle, I was feeling the welcome numbness that had become familiar over the last year. Only this time, I sank deeper into a sea of depression and hopelessness. Where

could I turn now? There was nothing. My friends gave me well-intentioned platitudes and God . . . well, God was MIA if he'd ever been there at all. I had nothing.

The rain let up around midnight, and I was almost done with the second bottle. It was a warm night, and I contemplated another run to the wine store for one more bottle, but the liquor store was closed. Damn! Well, that was it; I remember thinking. I exhausted all my resources for feeling good, and there was nothing on the horizon that was bright. I had to work the next day but why should I bother, considering I gave most of my money to my ex anyway? There was one other thing.

I had a life insurance policy that would put my kids in good stead for the future. What a great parting act, I thought. I could end the pain and provide for my kids all at once. I had a motorcycle I'd purchased a few years earlier. My ex-wife and her family hated it, but I was a biker through and through and rode when I could. It was a red and white Honda CB1100F, a beautiful and powerful street bike that could exceed 125 mph with no problem, as I knew from experience.

I lived near a major highway with lots of straightaways to get to maximum speed quickly. I had spent many hours on the Garden State Parkway over the years and thought now of the many bridges that crossed over the parkway, with their corresponding concrete pillars and walls. If I hit one of those going over 100 mph, I was confident I wouldn't make it. I had to pick the spot carefully because some of the concrete structures had grassy areas in front, and that could slow me down. There was one spot, not too far away, that was perfect.

This was the solution — finally, a plan, a way out for me and a future for my kids. The kids would have to deal with my loss, but they already had a rich guy in the home with their Mom's boyfriend. He was a nice guy, and they would have a bunch of money. I thought about the helmet. It might spare me. I could throw it off right before I hit. But, was there a suicide clause in the life insurance policy? If they saw the helmet was released yards before the crash site, blood alcohol level off the charts, and learn of my recent divorce, they would put two and two together and deny the claim.

It was a chance I would have to take. I would put my helmet on but leave it unstrapped, so it would easily fall off. Of course, the risk in all of this was the non-fatal injuries that could leave me severely disabled, requiring others to take care of me. Here I was wanting to end it all with no strings attached, providing one last gesture of life insurance money to my kids, and instead could end up being a burden for decades, not to mention enduring unending pain and operation after operation. Damn it. I didn't know what to do. But life is filled with tough choices. What hell, I thought. I'll do it.

I was sitting on the floor resting against the couch in front of the TV when I decided to put my plan into action. I could walk the mile to my friend's house where I kept my bike and go for one last ride. I stood, abruptly banging into the door jamb. Taking a few steps back, I ran into a different door jamb. The next thing I knew, the TV flashed past my eyes, and I felt a hard whack as the carpet hit my face. Okay, let's try this again, I thought, but slowly this time. I got to all fours, and slowly stood, steadying myself against the wall unit. I had the idea

that I should call my friend and tell them I was coming over to get the bike. I picked up the wall phone and stared at the buttons. They were all blurry. Confirming that my glasses were on, I realized I was operating on two bottles of wine with a small lunch and no dinner.

“At least, whatever happens, it’s not going to hurt.” I thought. I glanced at the oven clock. 2:05 AM. I was glad I hadn’t called. I decided to walk to the bike. When I headed to the door to leave, I found it locked. Try as I might, the door would not budge. Then I thought, “But I’m on the inside; this shouldn’t be happening.” Ahh, the deadbolt was in. I reached for my keys to unlock it, only to remember that no keys were needed, just a knob that needed turning to the left. As I pulled the door, it seemed to burst open with a force, just missing a direct hit to my head. When I stepped back out of the way, I tripped on the kitchen chair and felt the sharp thud of the cool linoleum floor hit the back of my head.

When I awoke, the morning light was streaming in the open front door, my head a few inches from the refrigerator, and all the lights and the TV on. A massive headache and stomach-ache were my first sensations. After vomiting for a while, I took a handful of Advil, a shower, and went to work.

That night was the starting point in reconstructing my life from the ground up. That had been ground zero. Something, and to this day, I’m not sure what it was, but something deep inside me formed a firm ground to stand on emotionally. Even with no real answers to what the future held, I knew nothing could be worse than what I just lived through. If I had been able to get to my bike that night, I most likely would have

completed my plan. But I didn't, and I had a sense of relief that although I had gone to the precipice and looked deeply into the abyss, I had found something of myself. I felt as if I was now standing in the rubble of the burned-out building of my life.

It was also the first time I was standing on my own.