

Chapter 2: Saved by a Bumper Sticker and an iPod (2006)

"All growth is a leap in the dark, a spontaneous, unpremeditated act without benefit of experience."

-- Henry Miller



offer for our house and an old yearning to experience life on the eastern side of the Sierra called to us.

Spontaneous action came naturally to both of us and within a couple of months after the birth of this idea, we were living the reality of life

In 2002, a new and entirely unexpected constellation of events changed the trajectory of my life.

Richard and I loved Santa Barbara and thought we would always live there. Then Richard's company folded; the Santa Barbara housing market reached white hot; a young couple made a ridiculous

in Bishop, California: high desert, Mt. Tom rising a majestic thirteen thousand feet behind us and the White Mountains looming across the valley in front of us. Our view stretched thirty miles down the Owens Valley from our front porch. However, what danced toward us hid behind the dust devils of fate.

Living the good life.

Shortly after our move, my stepdaughter Annie, her husband and Ava, our two-year-old granddaughter, followed us. We thought we found heaven. Surrounded by nature and family, Richard golfed, and I found endless places to take pictures as we shifted to part-time work and full-time joy. We rented an office together in the middle of “town” and congratulated ourselves on our decision to live life on our own terms. The license plate on our Roadtrek RV van read GOMOSLO.

Bishop is surrounded by alpine lakes and we began to kayak them one by one. I discovered that we could stretch the wildflower season into three glorious months by following the elevation. Richard discovered that he could fish joyfully for hours from his kayak by leaving the bait at home (no fish to clean) and never forgetting his cigars. He even bought a small anchor to keep him in place and actually minimize the need to paddle his kayak.

One summer day we were kayaking on June Lake. Richard anchored peacefully across the lake while I paddled around it. Suddenly a message startled me. It could not be heard, but it sounded loud in my head. While I stared at the twisted junipers clinging to the rocky sides of the lake, the message proclaimed: *Grow where you are planted.* I knew at the time, which happened to

be months before cancer arrived, that something unique had just happened and I knew it had little to do with geography.

The cancer call came on a lovely fall day. A routine physical turned into a visit to a specialist and then the diagnosis. Prostate cancer is supposed to be the one you want if you have to have cancer: slow growing, readily controlled or cured when caught early. However, someone always has to be on the other side of the statistics. Richard went from a “keep an eye on this” level of PSA (the standard test) to “OMG, we need to do something right now” in less than a year.

Whenever she visited, Ava played for hours on a huge, flat rock behind our house. The night of the call, we sat on the rock and drank two bottles of wine, talking as if we had gotten a death sentence, while at the same time not believing that it could possibly happen to us. We were blessed, the lucky ones, not the people that have bad things happen to them.

A third partner joins our marriage.

That night, though, the focus of life changed, and cancer became the third partner in our marriage, a bratty, demanding partner who insisted on being part of every decision and the focus of all attention. Richard’s cancer had progressed rapidly; the doctors deemed it aggressive, and every possibility seemed to carry a 50-50 probability. He assembled all the available information into large 3-ring binders, and, gradually, became an expert on the state of treatments and options, making one decision one day and changing it the next. Finally, he decided on a radiation treatment center in Atlanta, so we rented a place close to the center and entered the raging river of cancer patients and their families.

The months in Atlanta were simple and quiet. Richard went in for his treatments every morning and spent most of the day there while I continued my work with the InnovationNetwork. Fortunately, the treatments did not make him sick, just fatigued, so on weekends we explored the areas around Atlanta. Richard was jubilant about watching the Braves play in the delightful Turner Field park.

After we returned home, the waiting game began. We did emotional cartwheels when the first results arrived: almost zero PSA...perfect! We celebrated with a beautiful summer of kayaking and fishing in the high Sierra lakes, camping with Ava and assuming the worst was behind us.

The celebration ended with the next test, but they had warned us that sometimes there is a spike. However, it was not a spike. The long, downward spiral of setbacks had begun, broken by short periods of improvements as we tried one drug after another and watched each succeed for a while and then fail.

Normal gets harder.

In spite of mounting pain and fatigue, Richard never complained, and he went to work every day it was humanly possible. Always kind and gentle, his vibrant, mischievous self gradually paled as he endured the indignities of endless treatments that almost never brought him any relief. Both of us entered an almost stunned stupor, going through the motions of life, unable to see beyond the next doctor's appointment, the next test, the next dose of medication. Life began to flat-line.

We moved twice during this time, following Richard's job. Because of these moves, and because of my own tendency to isolate, I did not

talk about this to any of my friends. Why burden them? I just put on a happy face and tried to act “normal.” It got harder.

Denial comes easily.

After a crisis that put him in the hospital with kidney failure, Richard asked his doctor for the bottom line. I heard the response, but it did not compute. I thought he meant a year until the new medication would cure him. I thought he meant a year until something new came along. I thought he meant anything other than Richard would be gone in a year. What did that mean? How could life not include Richard?

I walked out of the office and put it in the “surely not” category. I think Richard understood the path ahead of us, but we did not talk about it. After all, the doctor told us about a new drug that might work. However, he also warned us that even if it worked, it would probably only be effective for a year and a half or so. It did work. Richard got better, gained weight, played some golf, and we had a lovely week in San Diego, kayaking, visiting friends and going to Padres’ games. For a few months life again looked sort of normal. However, the year-and-a-half drug only lasted three months before the downward spiral started again.

About this time, I could feel myself running on autopilot, functioning but in a muffled cloud, sliding on a thin layer of ice, hearing the crackle of it breaking beneath me. All of this focus on illness had distracted me from my normal routine of walking and exercise, draining my physical and mental vitality.

Bumper sticker wisdom.

I forced myself to start walking again, and one day I took a new route through an almost empty shopping center parking lot. A huge, black SUV loomed directly in the midst of my path. As I approached it, I noticed a bumper sticker that said: *Fear not, for I am with you*. Those words stabbed a hole in the well of tears that I had held back until that moment.

Although not raised in a religious household, I attended church most of my childhood because of the other kids there, a potent lure for a lonesome, only child. Those years steeped me in the stories of the Bible and, even though my spiritual beliefs eventually veered away from Christian dogma, that bumper sticker broke me open and gave me hope. Of course, I hoped for a cure, but I also suddenly felt that I would be all right regardless of what came next.

I generally walked without music because I liked to have my thoughts and ideas float freely, but now my thoughts were mainly just worries, so I thought music might help. I made a high-energy playlist on my iPod and tried it out, turning the volume up loud enough that nothing else could play through my brain. Some of the songs made me do a walking dance, pulsing my arms and my steps to the rhythm. My energy soared, and I felt strong and confident. Gradually, I tweaked the playlist until I could walk an hour or two and feel energized and joyful during the whole time.

This playlist became my lifeline during the times that followed. Even when Richard's end neared and I could not be away from him for long enough to do a real walk, I would go out on the deck, put on that playlist and dance. I often wondered if it were wrong to dance wildly while my husband lay dying. However, I did not know what

else to do...it felt like the only way I could stay alive in the face of his leaving.

Grow where you are planted. That message came back to me repeatedly over the next several years as it seemed like my life moved onto increasingly barren ground. *Grow where you are planted.* Life insists on living. Tiny seedlings grow up through concrete. Myriad life forms adapt to the inhospitable heat and drought of a desert. In the ocean, a worm lives around hydrothermal vents where the water can be 176 degrees F. Whatever life hands us, we can choose to grow. Wisdom comes to us from many places; receiving that wisdom is the challenge.

In the most momentous moments of our lives, the smallest things can save us: a bumper sticker, a playlist of high-energy music, a cup of tea with a friend. I have learned to take my salvation, my joy, wherever I find it or it finds me.



The peacock is a symbol of integrity and the beauty that comes when we endeavor to better ourselves and our lives. Combined with the message to grow where we are planted, this image represents the new opportunity for spiritual growth by learning from whatever comes our way.

I found both the peacock and this tree in Arkansas where I focused on finding beauty in spite of the emotional chaos of my life. The winter after creating this image, a record ice storm hit Arkansas and devastated this tree. Seeing it in its glory and its devastation gave me another reminder to appreciate every moment.

Interlude 2: Message on a Ring (Backstory)

*"Now here was I, new-awakened, with my hand stretching out
and touching the unknown,
the real unknown,
the unknown unknown."*

-- D. H. Lawrence



always wanted God to write across the sky in
ten-foot letters. Clear. Bold. Signed "God."

That way I would know what to do. However, the Universe delivers messages in its own way and on its own time table. The first I received came on a ring.

In my early 30s, I worked as a financial administrator for Science Applications, Inc. (now SAIC) in La Jolla, California, a place filled with physicists, chemists, engineers and other bright, fascinating people. During a meeting with a division manager in his office, I noticed his ring which had some symbols on it that I did not recognize.

A message for good times and bad.

I asked and he said the Hebrew symbols meant, *“This, too, shall pass.”* Then he carefully explained that it carried a two-fold meaning. In times of trouble and sorrow, it meant that they would eventually pass away. However, times of joy and gladness would also eventually change and be gone. The point was to savor each moment, find strength in the times of grief, and fill up our spirits during happy periods.

This message arrived several months before my first marriage ended. The message so impressed me that I needlepointed it onto a pillow, and it comforted me during the troubling times that followed. It also reminded me to savor the deliciousness of the new relationship that began with Richard shortly thereafter.

I carried that pillow with me through a dozen moves until seventeen years later when I met Jerry McNellis, whom I interviewed for my book, *Transformation Thinking*. He impressed me with his wisdom and understanding of thinking processes and the group dynamics used in his process of [“Compression Planning.”](#) When I began to

plan my first conference focused on innovation and creativity in business, Jerry was the first person I called to be a speaker.

New to everything about conferences, my ant-like confidence level crawled along the base of a mango tree wondering about the sweet smell high above. In a tiny, tentative voice I asked Jerry if he would mind flying across country to speak at a conference that had never happened before, planned and produced by someone who had never done one before, for no fee, and, by the way, would he mind paying his own expenses?

When he said “yes,” it felt as if God had spoken and declared the conference a success. Months later, when we met in person at the dream-come-true gathering of innovation practitioners at the lushly beautiful Santa Barbara Biltmore, where even the dolphins came out to perform at our reception, I discovered how much the trip had cost him. Jerry is a brilliant survivor of childhood polio, but he had not traveled for over a year because of an additional, serious health problem and, in that time, his marriage of thirty years had ended.

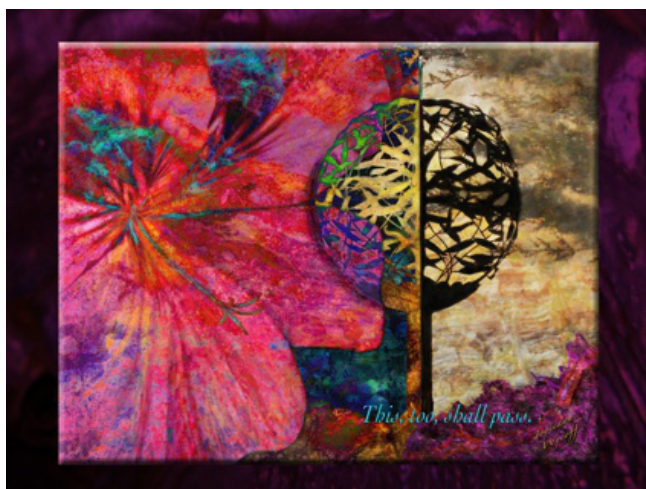
Jerry’s generous decision to be with us touched me, and we fell into instant friendship. After the conference, in a moment of brilliance or insanity, I packed up that old, battered pillow and sent it to him. Since it made him laugh and he appreciated the passed-along message, it sealed our friendship.

Curiosity can be a spiritual practice. By simply asking my coworker about his ring, I received a message that has guided my life for more than thirty years and inspired my art.

Along the way, I have learned that creating artifacts of meaningful messages seems to help me integrate them on a deeper level. Passing the pillow along to a new friend in its less-than-pristine condition was an authentic impulse that seemed risky at the time. Now I know that authenticity has a magic that transcends appearances and circumstances.

I also now know that God (Universe, Source, the Creator, Allah, Shekinah, Buddha, Brahma, Great Spirit, all the infinite names of the infinite presence) speaks to us through a thousand channels: other people, pets, trees, rocks, rivers, even bumper stickers. God is always speaking; whether we listen or not is our choice.

About this Image: *This, too, shall pass.*



First a pillow, now a collage. A bright flower; a piece of public art from Monterey Bay. Layers upon layers, until the world of reality becomes something never seen before, an instant of imagination captured, a moment of spirit and joy.

In this image there is a feeling that the flower is passing into something new, something obscure and uncertain.



Pause and Ponder

- ❖ *Have you ever received a “message” from an unusual source that you knew was meaningful for you? How has it helped you?*
- ❖ *What is it that brings you that nourishing feeling of joy that engulfs your whole being: physical, mental and emotional?*
- ❖ *How can you let that feeling sustain you when despair creeps back into every crevasse?*
- ❖ *What have been the turning points on your journey so far? What have you learned about yourself? About life and death and the points in between?*
- ❖ *What small thing has made a significant difference to you and your life?*
- ❖ *What has been the most meaningful gift you have ever given another person? What made it meaningful?*
- ❖ *How does God speak to you? How do you make yourself receptive to the messages?*
- ❖ *How do you let yourself follow your curiosities? How often? Where have they led you?*