

From the
Poorhouse
to the
Penthouse

The fall and rise of Jeffrey Irwin Willerton
an autobiography

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The Fall and Rise of Jeffrey Irwin Willerton

Who Is Saying What About This:

“Life is full of right hand turns (pg. 8). It’s what we do with them that counts. What a message!”

Marina Rossetto, Entrepreneur

“I started reading this book with my Saturday morning coffee. Half way through my roommate woke up and came into the kitchen. I told her to sit down and listen and read the last half to her out loud. Willerton’s life is a story worth telling... and sharing.”

Anne Greenwood, Bookkeeper

“I laughed. I moistened up. Then I laughed until I moistened up again. What a story!”

Dr. Curtis Wall, Chiropractor

“This is the funniest book I’ve ever read. Funny, but meaningful. You’ll see.”

Penny Bird, Office Manager

Chapter 1:

In the Beginning

On May 6, 1964, a beautiful baby boy was born. As all do, his story goes back considerably further.

In the final year of the Great War, at the battle of Amiens, Thomas Ethelbert Willerton lay on his back in a field of French mud. Paralyzed with much of the bottom half of his face blown off, he furiously blinked his eyes to get the medic's attention. But for his success in doing so, his grandson wouldn't be writing this today. But for the sacrifices of thousands like his grandfather, he wouldn't be free to do so.

For Tom the war was over. A piece of his hip became his jaw, he married Lulu Rubina 'Ruby' Irwin (from whence comes the author's middle name) and had a family well underway in time for the onset of the Great Depression. The financial hardships that followed were all that, but they paled in comparison to the anguish of losing six year old Shirley in a house fire. Though he never spoke of it to me (he died when I was twelve) having witnessed the effect of losing a child on my own parents I can only imagine that neither he nor my grandmother ever entirely got over it.

On June 13, 1927, Norman Ross Willerton made his grand entry into the world. Eighteen years later he proposed to his sweetheart Bernice. Four years on she accepted. (As she tells it, no better offers were forthcoming.) Married in the summer of '50, by '58 their family of five was complete, or so they thought.

At thirty-six, N.R., as we at times colloquially refer to him, was hospitalized for three weeks with rheumatoid arthritis. Unaware that in sufficient quantity it was like overdosing on today's Viagra, the doctors loaded him up everyday with cortisone. They turned him loose, and nine months later the 'Cortisone Kid' made his grand entry into the world.

That would be me, and had I known how challenging my road would be I'd still be resisting the birthing process. Unaware of what lay before me, I pressed on. I still do. This is the story of that road.

Born the fourth child and third son, your scribe was the proverbial, accidental afterthought. And a most difficult child. Refusing to fall asleep unless being bounced in my mother's arms, these eyelids rarely closed before 11:00 pm. And I had a schedule. Up at six, I would have two fifteen minute naps during the day and otherwise wanted attention 24/7. Dad swears if I had been their first I would have been an only child, but having a demanding toddler around would turn out to be a well-disguised blessing.

Dean was six years my senior; Cheryl, eleven. Ken, the first born, was thirteen when I arrived on this planet, and he enjoyed hunting with dad. One weekend when the family was out he stayed back. Alone in the house, down came the .22. I suspect you know where this is going.

The gravel driveway announced our return and back in the closet it went. Some time later this increasingly charming three year old asked mom for a gun for Christmas, "just like dad's." It reminded Kenny there was a loaded gun in the closet.

With no one looking he tried to sneak it up to his second floor bedroom where he could diffuse the situation. It was November 5, 1967. He was sixteen. It should be noted that .22s of that era were notoriously sensitive to changes in air pressure, and as he turned and closed the door it went off, the projectile finding its way under the upper orbit of his eye socket, taking him from us.

Dad followed the ambulance to the hospital where the doctors told him his son was brain dead and asked his permission to take him off life support. He asked for twenty minutes to get home so he, rather than mom, could receive the call. Being the father of a couple of teenagers today I have no idea how he made the trip. Of course, at three and a half I was oblivious to the train wreck unfolding around me.

I said having a demanding toddler around would be a blessing. I was told years later that mom might have gone crazy with grief but for her preoccupation with me. I had purpose; its fulfillment required no special skills; I just had to be me. Things... haven't changed terribly much, really.

Mom stayed home until I was in school. It was about then dad started working straight midnights at the airport. He'd get home at 7:30 in the morning, make us breakfast and send us

off to school before catching a few hours sleep. After making us lunch he'd do his thing in the afternoon, that often consisting of a combination of gardening and/or housework. And as Dean would say years later at his funeral, he did it all, day after day, year in and year out, without so much as a whisper of complaint.

When mom got home at 5:00 dinner would just about be on the table. A few more hours sleep for him and it was back to the airport. So I had the pleasure of both my father's company during the day and mom's every evening, which is considerably more parental exposure than most kids enjoy. I was blessed with a good childhood despite the trauma we'd experienced, but there was more to come. And this time, yours truly would be right smack in the middle of it.

Chapter 2:

The Accident

At eight your humble scribe had his first brush with unconsciousness (and the law, but that's secondary). That I have no recollection of the event should be self-explanatory. At forty-two the story was brought to my attention.

Visiting Cheryl in Minnesota, I tracked down an elementary school chum living in Minneapolis. When we got off the phone he laughed himself silly recalling one of his earliest memories of me.

We were eight and walking up the street after dark. Being cooler than my friend it was I who flipped the bird to a passing motorist, that coolness evaporating when the tires screeched to a halt and the siren came on. *I didn't say I was smart!*

On my screamed orders Brent ran down the street while I tore through a neighbour's yard, at the back of which ran a tall heavy wire mesh fence which I apparently failed to take note of.

Thus whether it was the ground I hit or the almost instantaneous change of direction that preceded it I don't know, but ten minutes later Brent found me several feet back from said fence slowly regaining my faculties. I told him if I were to ever write my memoirs this story would be destined for the early chapters. Unfortunately, my next bout of unconsciousness would not be nearly as brief or free of ramifications.

Todd and I were ten and on our bikes, apparently being chased by some girls. The year 1974 was also long before bike helmets were popularized. At a blind T-intersection of alleys he said, "Split!" and went left while I went right into the front of an oncoming sedan.

My left leg was ripped open on the vehicle's hood ornament, and its extended rear-view mirror won a fight with my head before my lifeless body wrapped itself around a telephone pole. Five days later I came to.

"Hi mom." Well, you would have thought she would never stop crying! Though my coconut was cracked wide open, by some small miracle none of the bone fragments had penetrated

the skull's membrane. There had, though, been considerable bruising of the areas of the brain responsible for memory and social functioning. The family, of course, had no idea if I'd wake up or what I would remember if I did. All mom knew was that I remembered her, and for the moment that was enough.

In fact, I forgot a lot of things, but they came back. Coordination was a different matter. My right side had been temporarily paralyzed and for some reason learned skills lost. I literally had to learn how to walk and throw a ball again, to say nothing of the finer things in life like writing and spreading sugar on a bowl of cereal. (Those two stand out as having been particularly challenging.) Add to this that in some ways I was a five year old inside a ten year old's body (social functioning had taken a hit, recall) and you will understand that the following years were going to be turbulent.

Other kids didn't understand the changes that had occurred; friends were hard to come by; and many fights ensued. Recall the aforementioned loss of coordination and you'll understand why I didn't win any. A neighbourhood kid and I had a little 'set to' one day, he easily avoiding my swung fist. Having missed its mark, my body followed it around in a kind of pirouette before my combatant collapsed in hysterics. (Technically, I kind of won that one.)

And bugged? Teased mercilessly is more like it! I wasn't exaggerating when I said those were tough years. I am, though, of the conviction that all things can work together for good. Looking for some in those years, it's clear they've given me a greater empathy for the underdog, if for no other reason than because I was one for so long. As much as any physical event, that accident shaped my early years. Probably my life.

Pot was prominent in the teen years. It was the '70s. (I trust some kind of statute of limitations applies here.) I'm also very glad to have quit.

Marijuana is inarguably a stupefying drug with deleterious effects on both one's short and long term memories. In 2007, it was also definitively linked to the onset of schizophrenia. Be that the case or not, we live inside our minds, and it's simply counterproductive to purposefully strip them of furniture. Young adulthood, career choices and more turbulence were to follow.

Chapter 3:

Military Service

My grandfather served. My father likewise for a short period as a paratrooper. My uncle had made a very successful career of the military, and growing up near a base so did many of my friends' parents. I enlisted. It was not a good fit.

Welding, plumbing and carpentry were part of my trade as a naval shipwright. Recall the coordination thing I was telling you about and the following conversation with the chief of my first trades school will make perfect sense.

I had passed the different sections of the course. At its conclusion he sat me down in his office: "Willerton, you're a nice guy. Your instructors all thought so and didn't want to fail you thinking the next one probably would, but they didn't either." I could have remustered at that point to any trade I wanted. I declined. I was in what was arguably the best trade in the Navy. I passed the course. I might not have been particularly good at any one part of it, but I could learn. And thus began my life at sea – and a rerun of high school English. Allow me to explain.

Mrs. Armstrong was my grade 11 university stream instructor. With one assignment left that year I was sitting at 48%. (She was a tough old bird!) I needed 70% on that paper. I got it, but when she gave me 25% on my first assignment the following year I packed it in and took a less demanding course.

In the Navy I got it in my head to become a Chaplain and found I needed that course to gain access to post-secondary institutions. British Columbia offered it through correspondence and sent me seven modules. I completed them and awaited my graduation papers. Instead, I got seven more. Clearly, I should have read the instructions.

Two years, twenty-eight modules and about a dozen close calls with deep sixing what remained of that project later, I finally got those papers. I never did pursue the Chaplaincy. After bobbing around the Atlantic for a couple of years I was sent back to the

west coast for another trades course which I ultimately failed. The ensuing remuster to medic, a tri-service as opposed to a strictly naval trade, largely followed a similar pattern.

I did well on the academic side and got through the first course with considerable success that time, but again failed the second two years later. I redid it and passed it, but basically by that point hated my existence in the Forces. I was a fish out of water, and not only because I was no longer in the Navy. I wanted out altogether, but let's back up a little.

Chapter 4:

The Invasion

I joined the Canadian Forces in March of '83 at the tender age of eighteen. After basic training we were sent to Halifax, in my case to kill time before that first trades course. It was there that I met Catherine. She was into the whole Jesus thing, much like my sister.

Cheryl, if you recall eleven years my senior, had accepted Christ in her early twenties. Before going off to basic I paid her a visit in St. Paul, MN where she not surprisingly gave me a Bible.

If memory serves I read five chapters of the Book of Matthew over the next eleven weeks. While waiting to go on parade one day our platoon NCO (noncommissioned officer) asked if there were any Bible thumpers in the room. I put up my hand. I had one. I'd even read a bit of it. Why not?

Fast forward to Halifax. One Sunday the whole platoon was required to go to chapel. About a third of us made it. The Chaplain had told a few of his more regular female parishioners to try to be there as it might encourage some of the guys to come back. One was drop-dead gorgeous! I would have gone to church everyday if it would have ingratiated this humble sailor in her eyes!

Getting a little hammered in the Fleet Club one Saturday night I ran into her self-described "ugly-duckling sister," who was neither ugly nor her sister, but she was certainly different. She was sober on her 19th birthday! Catherine was also an attractive, intelligent, and obviously very nice young woman. We agreed to meet for church the next morning. It would be a day that would change everything.

Sailors have a bad rep. Having done my best to reinforce it that night, I naturally slept through a good part of the morrow's sermon, but I heard that bit about getting off the fence. "You can fool man some of the time, but you can't fool God." It may or may not have been directed specifically at me.

Leaving church I unintentionally threw my new friend the softest of softballs: "That'd be neat being a Christian someday."

I might as well have hung a sign around my neck reading "Please evangelize me," but that was the last thing on my mind. Did I mention she was attractive?

"What's this 'someday' crap," she asked? "What's wrong with today?" Her vernacular caught me off guard. She explained that I could never be good enough for God, but that one's salvation was not based on works but on faith in Christ alone.

I didn't know much about this Christ really, but I believed He was who He claimed to be: the Saviour of the world, that kind of thing. With that limited knowledge and a mustard seed of faith, in a park on a warm Sunday July 31st afternoon in 1983, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, I accepted Christ as my Lord and Saviour and invited Him into my heart. In doing so, according to Scripture which I've come to trust implicitly, I also received God's unspeakable, indescribable gift of salvation.

I read a book recently, a biography of a certain atheistic, rather prolific historical writer who shall remain nameless. In his early nineties, he had lost his sight and was largely confined to a nursing home. Contacted by a reporter who was doing a series on the history of his home province, he asked if she was a Christian, she responding in the affirmative.

"That's the difference," he replied, "because I have nothing. I'm an atheist. I'm sick. I'm blind. I live between these four walls, and I'm waiting to die." As challenging as the Christian life might be (and it is) I suspect I'll never face that end, and I have a gutsy nineteen year old journalism student to thank for bringing the message of God's grace to my attention.

Posted to the west coast, I had only nine days left in Halifax, and she was a woman like none I'd ever met. Naturally, I wanted to spend them with her. She rejected my initial proposals, but I'm not so easily dissuaded. It was a great nine days, and we then did the long distance thing for three years in the days of snail mail.

To make a long story short, she fell out of love with me, married a U.S. naval officer and is today the proud mother of two with a full-time counseling practice and radio program in southern California. Frankly, if Catherine Mary Butler doesn't become the next Dr. Laura, it will be America's great loss.

Chapter 5:

Read the Directions!

The rerun of my second trades course as a medic was, I suspect, a little taste of hell. Remember the opposition I encountered after the accident? It's inexplicable in light of my charming personality, but it was back with gale force. I won't bore you with the details except to say that life was extremely challenging – and the opposition, I would like to believe, somewhat irrational.

I add that because of a conversation I had with one of my classmates on the second half of the course. The first was at Canadian Forces Base Borden near Alliston, Ontario. Upon completion, we were sent to different base hospitals across the country to put what we'd learned into practice, three of us to CFB Cold Lake in northern Alberta. Smitty remarked one day that he couldn't figure out why he hated me so much in Borden.

My theory is that it was the zeitgeist: the spirit of the age, or in this case, the moment. The leader of the pack had it in for me. A number of others fell into place. (I warmly remember the two who didn't.) And they nearly did me in!

It was merely a friendly game of pile-on. I won't insult your intelligence by telling you who was on the bottom. Unfortunately, I was also on my back with my arms pinned at my sides and half the class on me – and chests are not designed to take that kind of pressure. (God as my witness, I literally felt these ribs bowing.) But for the first guy realizing the danger and taking what weight he could on his arms and legs, I would have been finished. So he might have started the ball rolling, but he also might have saved my life.

So I didn't much like the military (and apparently the feeling was mutual) but as a Christian I needed more reason than that to quit. I needed direction, and if I prayed for it once I prayed for it a thousand times.

Getting out after the course and staying on Vancouver Island where I then lived was a highly desirable option. Staying in and

taking a posting to yet another base most decidedly was not. With posting season fast approaching I needed an answer, if I was going to get it, by the date on which the course was to end.

Having finished two weeks ahead of schedule, I was home on the date in question. That evening I closed the kitchen door, opened the Word and looked for wisdom in the book that bears that name. Two passages seemed to speak directly to the situation.

One was that "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches" [Prov. 22:1]. To get out then would have been referred to as a posting-evasion release and would have been yet another black mark on what was already a considerably blemished record. If that passage was in fact speaking to the situation, it wasn't what I wanted to hear.

The other was, in effect, that one should not knock oneself out trying to get rich [23:4] which was exactly what I was planing to do. Having purchased a couple of cabs in the city, I enjoyed driving hack when I could and had every intention of doing so seventy hours a week when I got out, but again if these passages were speaking to the situation, it appeared the answer was 'no'. I sold the cabs, packed up the car and headed over the mountains to CFB Calgary... and continued to be utterly miserable in my work.

Overnighting at the base hospital I turned to the Book of Ecclesiastes. It's basically a lament by a certain King Solomon who found no pleasure in the things of this world, no matter that he could afford two of each. (Sometimes a thousand!) Therein I discovered that it was God's gift that a man enjoy not only the fruit of his labours, but even those labours themselves [3:22]. I clearly wasn't, there had to be something better, and obviously I wasn't going to find it sitting still.

And thus I submitted my request for release the next day without the faintest idea of what I was going to do next. Ten days later Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Six months later I walked off the base for the last time, the same day some of my colleagues were boarding a plane, ultimately for the Middle East. Some were later to be diagnosed with what's become known as the Gulf War Syndrome, apparently related to a bad batch of Anthrax vaccine from an American supplier. As

much as your scribe supports war as a means to a positive end, I don't mind that I wasn't among them. Frankly, I have enough health issues on my plate.

During what was the standard six month release period I took a three week real estate course. The intent was to pursue that career and make money hand over fist obviously, but two days prior to my release an insurance company called with an offer of a commissioned sales position with a modest guarantee. Considering what's happened in the real estate market in Alberta I'm tempted to regret having taken the safe route, but if I'd done literally anything but that you probably wouldn't be reading this book today. Allow me to explain.

Chapter 6:

Careers Move

Getting out of the military, I had some choices to make. Working in the province's primary industry, the oil patch, never really crossed my mind. Nor with a wife and young child at home could I afford to spend years in school. The siren call of sales beckoned, but would it be real estate or insurance? Of course, you already know the latter won out.

The insurance company eventually transferred me to Red Deer, Alberta where I inherited the account of a man named Ken Hughes. As with Catherine in Halifax, it would prove to be another of those transformative encounters.

Ken worked for the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, an organization that exposed and otherwise fought government waste and inefficiencies. As it was, I was already passionate about the subject.

Years earlier, Pat, to whom I was then married, had brought a newspaper article on welfare abuse to my attention. I was incensed, and it became the hook by which I was drawn into the political realm.

Suddenly I had a voracious appetite for information and read just about anything I could find on the subject. The insurance company paid the bills for five years, but when the opportunity came along to work for the Taxpayers Federation it was a fait accompli. The year was 1996.

I got my feet wet trying to raise support for the organization in the business community in Red Deer. It didn't go well, but one encounter bears repeating.

Shirley owned a couple of coffee shops in town. In the course of making some small talk she mentioned her then deceased husband had served in the Forces for twenty-seven years. It seemed appropriate to ask what rank he was when he retired.

"A corporal," she responded, looking in my eyes for a hint of condescension. I looked down, and with a bit of a wry smile told her I got out after eight because they kept busting me

back to private. When we finally stopped laughing she cut the organization a sizable cheque. Who would have thought that would ever work to my advantage?

That deal aside, Red Deer wasn't paying very well. I was told farmers were pretty solid supporters and I needed a piece of the country. They gave me the county of Lac St. Anne northwest of Edmonton. I did it well and soon needed more, so they gave me the neighboring county of Barrhead and eventually a couple more to which it was central. Before long I was their top new business rep in the country. Commuting from Calgary to which I'd returned and staying in motels didn't make much sense, so I bought a mobile home in the lovely town of Barrhead, Alberta and started writing letters to the editor of *The Barrhead Leader* - another move with far-reaching consequences.

Chapter 7:

Barrhead

Not long after I'd settled in my new community, a gentleman named John Moerman began writing an articulate, conservative column on the editorial page of the same paper. Sadly, some months later, the retired pastor would breathe his last.

This created a bit of a problem at the paper which the higher ups resolved by opening up the space he had occupied to guest writers. An enthusiastic young scribe filled it every week but three in the six months following John's passing, management eventually giving it to him as his own byline for the princely sum of \$15.00 a week. It was, of course, my coffee money.

For the next year I wrote about issues as they arose and any others I felt needed addressing, and it was nothing if not controversial. Gambling, gay marriage, gun control... and those were just the G's! I had what is obviously the relatively rare opportunity to gather my thoughts on whatever issue I wanted, express them in 430 words and see them published every week. And I missed it dearly when it was gone.

Three years into my career with the Taxpayers, I got it into my head to try to raise some money for an all but defunct political party I'd been hanging around with for some time. As the CTF is nonpartisan I couldn't do both, so I stepped out in faith and fell flat-on-my-beak.

It was a disaster! I spent as many thousands on a mailing campaign as it raised hundreds. Suddenly I had no money, considerable debt and no job besides an addiction subsidizing weekly column. I had a plan B, except that didn't work out too well, either. By my own estimate I could sing and play the guitar reasonably well and often wondered if I could make a living at it, so I set out to busk... in Toronto! It was a long commute.

On the way I stopped at mom and dad's in Manitoba for a few days. To say they weren't pleased with my plans would be a bit of an understatement, but they needn't have worried. After spending the night in the car in a Toronto suburb, I parked downtown, walked to the waterfront and put my hand to my

new trade. I made \$8.00 in four hours. Parking cost twelve. I said to heck with it and drove back to Winnipeg to take dad up on his offer to put me through a truck driving course.

Dean, my brother, had done well for himself in the industry. I would not, but after failing that first road test I had three weeks to kill while I waited for another shot at it, so I opened the paper to look for something short term.

An ad stood out. I investigated. It turned out to be one of those direct sales companies where the weekly meetings are characterized by overblown hype. I hate hype but took the job anyway, became 'the knife guy' and passed that second road test.

My first driving job kept me on the road for a month steady with alternating months off during which I sold those exceptionally good knives. Unfortunately, my partner tired of me trying to break his neck as I cornered the rig. Sleeping on the bunk it would sometimes get a little sore as centrifugal force propelled him into the bulkhead. (I maintain it was a slippery mattress.) He quit me, but I wasn't ready to quit the industry. Maybe I wasn't terribly good at it yet, but I could learn....

I went to work for a large company, jumped in a truck with a trainer in Winnipeg and headed for Vancouver. Somewhere in Saskatchewan he assured me that he was most satisfied and the rest of the trip was merely a formality. It was false assurance.

In the mountains I drove slowly enough to be leading a convoy of twelve complaining drivers, but apparently it wasn't slow enough. In Vancouver my name was mud and Winnipeg would be the end of the line.

In Calgary I was granted a reprieve. He had an opportunity to pick up a load of beef for New York, and I had twelve days in which to redeem myself.

You'll understand that I was disappointed when I didn't. I'd failed at enough things by then that I really didn't want to add to the list. I hadn't given the knives a full-time kick at the can, and nor did I particularly want to, but it seemed like the thing to do at the time. Of course, it's not as manly as becoming an accomplished truck driver, but I sold more knives than anyone in the country, and that financed my next adventure.

Chapter 8:

The Book

I had an advantage. Having gone through those counties with a fine tooth comb as I had for the Taxpayers, I had an almost endless supply of contacts – and they all had friends and neighbors, and they all had crummy knives. I could still be working that business!

I did well, made some money and went to work collecting what had been those op-ed pieces into book format. I updated the issues (as I've done a number of times since) wrote an introduction and conclusion and called a publisher. He promised to get around to reading it in about two years.

An acquaintance told me about a gentleman in Edmonton who, if I were to send him the manuscript, could format a book for me. I did; he did; we found a printer; and about \$8000.00 later I took possession of 2,000 copies of *The Reality and the Facade of Ralph Klein*. With those in hand, I began campaigning toward the 2001 provincial election, selling books as I went. And thus, for a time, the bills were paid. Placing a distant second to the incumbent I thereafter went back to selling knives for a spell, but I was soon to put Barrhead and that great knife market behind me.

I had no qualms about driving eight hours every other weekend to spend time with my then ten and eight year old son and daughter. Or sixteen on long weekends when I could bring them back up north for a few days. I had no problem with doing so, but nor was I going to continue with that less than satisfactory arrangement while I waited for another election. As soon as the trailer sold, I was bound for Cowtown.

Chapter 9:

Calgary

In the summer of '01 I moved back to Calgary where a used oil reclamation outfit paid me to run around collecting 45 gallon drums of used oil filters from local garages. It was physical, it required little in the way of analytical thought, and it was a nice break from sales, but it didn't pay the bills. So to balance the books I took on a few paper routes, set the alarm for 2:00 am and became an even more devoted patron of the neighbourhood Tim Horton's coffee shop.

The reclamation gig was up a couple of months later when the company couldn't make payroll. The last one in was the first one out. Oddly, it felt kind of good to be let go for something that was demonstrably not my fault, but obviously I needed to find something rather quickly.

At a small gathering of Christian singles I uttered the fateful words, "I don't want a job; I want an opportunity." A woman handed me her card and insisted that I call her manager. Direct sales? I'd had quite enough of that thanks, but she insisted, and to placate her I agreed to make the call.

Her manager wasn't in when I did, but his wife had just finished cutting a weekly cheque to one of her husband's sales reps for a ridiculously high four figures – and lo and behold I'd found that opportunity I was looking for! Soon I was the top rookie in the history of the office. That might have become a promising career too had my restless feet not got the better of me. Money in hand, I republished, changed the title of my little paperback to *Time's Up! Fix Canada or Lose It* and hit the campaign trail again.

I'd finished third in my first election in '97. Second in 2001. Things were looking up, which made getting punted down to third again in the fall of '04 even more disheartening. More than that, I was in deep trouble this time.

The equity in the Barrhead trailer had become a down payment on a three bedroom condo in Calgary. Knowing the

unlikelihood of a fringe party win in the city, I sold and moved into the heart of a riding that wrapped around the north and east sides of town.

That would have been fine except I rented and invested what equity I had in a national advertising campaign for what was by then the fourth edition of the book. Without going into too much detail, let's just say the exercise was at the same time both a great deal more expensive and even less successful than that fund raising effort that went south in '99. Out of work, out of money and out of a home, you would understand if a guy got a little depressed. I did, but after '95, I figured I could handle just about anything....

Chapter 10:

The Great Depression

I'd lost the kids; a woman I'd come to care for had taken her leave; the insurance job was tenuous and I was dealing with the onset of some chronic health problems – and there's only so many hits the soul can take at one time before things start to break down - and so they did. It would be hard to describe the enormity of the depression that followed.

Sleeping maybe two hours a night, when I quit the tranquilizers I literally went four days without sleep. Guzzling coffee to stay awake during the day, I'd spend my evenings staring at the walls. Being in the insurance industry, I was reticent to mention any of this to my doctor as I knew it would end up in my medical records and adversely affect any future applications I might make for said products. After a couple of months of this, however, I had little choice in the matter.

My doctor, a Christian gentleman, gave me some dope and some advice. "We're often told in church to tithe on our resources," he said, "but what do we really have in this world?"

"Time and money," came the answer, and according to him we should tithe on both. Ten percent of a twenty-four hour day is two hours and twenty-four minutes, so he encouraged me to spend two and a half hours a day with the Lord, be that in Bible study, prayer, or even listening to praise and worship music in the car on the way to and from work. One way or another, just spend two and a half hours a day with God.

It was the most legalistic thing I'd ever heard, and of course I told him so, but I wasn't accomplishing anything lying in bed, either. So the next morning I got up at 5:00 a.m. and cracked open the Word—the Psalms to be specific—and in so doing, day after day, little by little, I began to see the light at the end of the tunnel. And I learned some things. There was a reason for my depression. It was self-induced as most are, but more importantly I found its antidote. Unfortunately, it can't be bottled.

Not everyone will be able to accept this statement, but Psalm 16:11 teaches that, "In His presence is fullness of joy." Depression and "fullness of joy" cannot coexist. Time in, with God, in His Word, I found, drives it out. That little lesson was going to come in handy nine years hence.

Out of work, out of money and out of a home, I then watched the housing market in the province take off into the stratosphere while I paid the mortgage of a man named Herb. And therein lay the silver lining....

Chapter 11:

The Heart Sings

When I accepted the Lord at nineteen, I picked up the guitar after what had been about a five year hiatus. At twenty-three, while on course in Borden, inspiration struck.

If you recall those were tough days, this one not being terribly remarkable in that sense. That evening I spent some time in the Word. A Larry Norman tape played in the background.

Later that night, a line dropped into my head. Then a second. And a third. After a short pause a fourth fell into place. It rhymed, and it made sense musically, so I did what you would have done: I ran out of the shower and wrote it down. By the end of the night your humble scribe was a bit of a songwriter. More were to follow.

Driving long haul, my reprieve offering trainer and I were overnighing at a truck stop in Connecticut. The trouble is, there was only one bunk in the truck. I offered to spend the night in the restaurant. There was something I wanted to do.

The songs were nice, but I felt that within them lay the seed of something larger than the sum of its parts, so I sat up all night and sewed them together into a kind of gospel presentation. Having done so, however, is a long way from having something marketable. That's where Herb came in.

I put on an acoustic concert one day at a church in his neighbourhood. Afterwards, he recommended I meet a fellow who did some work for him who "knew everybody who was anybody in the recording industry in the city." Chuck McEwan introduced me to Danny Patton. A few others ultimately contributed, but by and large the three of us put together a pretty decent CD.

We're all created differently. Our personalities are in part the result of cultural influences in our environment; in part they're hard wired. It would appear I'm a type A personality. I like to be doing things (provided they don't involve a hammer and a bag of nails). I don't sit on the sidelines and complain about the political situation, I run. I write letters and columns

and books to influence political thought. Basically I believe God can direct a moving ship easier than one that's tied up in harbour, so I'm a doer. And as such, apparently, a prime candidate for chronic fatigue syndrome.

Winston Churchill conducted much of WWII from his bed at the British prime ministerial country estate, Chequers. John F. Kennedy had to nap a few times to get through the day. Kim Bassinger is a sufferer.

In the summer of '06, your humble scribe got sick. Engaged in sales I needed to be able to speak without coughing up a lung, so I was unable to work for a few weeks. Months later the cough was gone, but I still couldn't get past 8:00 a.m. without needing a nap, and it would be the first of several.

Blood tests revealing the presence of its antibody confirmed that I'd contracted a particularly nasty virus. One of the side effects of this antibody is chronic fatigue syndrom, by all reports a lifelong condition that a person just has to try to make the best of. Limitations, of course, can also give us direction.

Chapter 12:

Change of Course

I had sold enough insurance to qualify for a certain level of reward and could make my choice from a selection of items in a catalogue. At twenty-nine, I was working out at the gym on a regular basis and in good shape, but I knew I could go much further. I wanted that twenty-one speed mountain bike.

My workout that winter was adjusted to include increasing time on the exercise bike. My goal for the following summer was to ride from Red Deer to Sylvan Lake and back, about a 40K trip. Before the leaves changed colour I could do it before breakfast on a workday. Did I mention I was type A?

Brad Johnson was my cycling buddy. Our first road trip was to Ponoka, 50K north of the city. I couldn't believe how much I loved the open road!

My usual training route took me south of Red Deer through an area known as 'Gasoline Alley'. This, as it turned out, was also the stomping grounds of a particularly territorial red-winged black bird. Every time I approached, that thing would fly up and come to rest on one of those high light standards that line the highway before dive bombing me, coming up from behind and dragging its claws across my helmet. It was like a scene from the movie *Birds* spliced into *Groundhog Day* as it would repeat itself day after everloving day.

What I couldn't understand was the increasing tremulousness in my lungs. It would be there; it would be gone; and it would be back again, all in the space of about thirty seconds. When my nice Christian doctor diagnosed 'exercise induced asthma' I told him he was on drugs. That didn't line up with my plans at all!

Eventually I had to relent. He was right. The more I rode the worse it got. Dreams of Olympic gold and the eventual publication of my autobiography, *It's Been a Long Road*, were dashed. This one will just have to do.

Chapter 13:

The Column

Eventually I couldn't ride even for pleasure, let alone competitively, and I needed a hobby.

Thankfully, at twenty-six, when the political bug bit, I fell quite in love with reading. Until then you couldn't pay me to read a book... or so I thought.

In the early elementary years, a teacher had initiated a book reading contest. Having been taught to read before entering kindergarten, I reported having read what must have seemed to her an unrealistically high number of books during the contest period. I know because she called me a liar in front of the class. I don't remember this (dad told me about it years later) I just know I didn't pick up another book I didn't have to for twenty years. You have to be careful what you say to kids!

Politics changed that. Suddenly I read everything I could get my hands on regarding the subject. As mentioned in the introduction of what is now simply called *FIX CANADA*, in doing so I was in effect building a grid of information through which new information and events would be filtered. Giving up riding simply gave me more time to do so. And thus when the opportunity came along to write a weekly column, I was well enough versed (or sufficiently opinionated, if you prefer) to take a stab at it. My point here is simply to show how seemingly unrelated events can work together for good.

Calgary over Victoria... insurance over real estate... Red Deer... the Taxpayers... Barrhead and even the asthma all combined to make the column and the publication of that first book possible. And without the first, I doubt you'd be reading the second today either. And none of it would have been possible but for the timely passing of a great man.

As a teenager, John Moerman worked with the Dutch underground protecting downed Allied airmen. After the war, he and his young bride immigrated to the country of their liberators where they pastored churches in the Edmonton area

for forty years. An avid letter writer turned weekly columnist in retirement, the protection of the unborn was John's focal issue. His passing almost on the day of the Supreme Court of Canada's Vriend decision ensured his successor of another.

If you're unfamiliar with the case, Delwin Vriend had been fired from a Christian college in Edmonton because of his overt homosexuality. To make a long story short, by the time that case wrapped up, protection from discrimination based on sexual orientation was cemented in provincial law, and we were well on our way to becoming the third country in the world to legalize gay marriage. Referring again to Ecclesiastes, there's a time to be born and a time to die [3:2]. John's issue was the unborn. His passing at that particular moment in history ensured the expansion of gay rights in Canada would be mine.

A year and a half later, I dropped that writing gig and got behind the wheel of a truck to make ends meet. That didn't pan out so well, but I managed to put away enough cash selling knives the next year to republish those columns in book format. In 2003, I quit that second rather promising direct sales job to reboot my bookselling/political campaign. The third and fourth editions came into being the following year.

I said I was in trouble after a third place finish in an election that fall. Financially I was a wreck, granted, but in the latter half of '05 I did some manual labour and wrecked my arm, too. Broke with no formal post-secondary education, even manual labour was then out of the question. I'd never tried selling books outside of campaigning before, but it seemed like as good a time as any to give it a try.

Conclusion:

The Power of Books

I made reasonably good money during two distinct periods in my life, both while working in financial services. As important as that is, though, there's more to life than making money, and I have no intention of going back into the industry. Nor can I, realistically.

The chronic fatigue almost precludes working an eight hour day (let alone the evening work that entails) and I don't know too many employers who endorse nap time. Despite this small handicap, the possibility of looking for some kind of work weighed heavily on me in early '07. Two years into full-time book schlepping I enjoyed my work well enough, but the bills were mounting.

Things had gone downhill since that third election loss. Herb had sold the house. I relocated to a basement suite in one of Calgary's satellite communities which I shared with 3,000 copies of the fifth edition, daily questioning if I hadn't completely gone off the rails somewhere. I suspected the fifth would be the last, but as in my latter military days, I sought direction. This time it came in the form of a book.

Driving to Winnipeg for dad's 80th that summer, I stopped to say 'hi' to the folks at the Taxpayers head office in Regina when one in their storeroom caught my eye. It was on 18th century philosopher Adam Smith, a man universally revered as the Father of Capitalism for his work, *Wealth of the Nations* (1776). What I discovered therein was that *Wealth* was almost an addendum to his earlier, seminal work entitled *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* – a book on social issues. This he first published in 1759 – and republished five times in the thirty-one years following.

So questioning if I was on the right road publishing and republishing a book to a considerable extent on social issues, it came to my attention the one I was on had been trod before by no less than the Father of Capitalism himself! The moment was surreal, and after it there was simply no question about

continuing with that project. I credit *The Rescue of Capitalism: getting Adam Smith right* by Dr. James Dyce (Stress Publications, 1990) for the inspiration to stay at it.

A couple of passages from Proverbs, if you recall, inspired me to shut everything down on the island and move to Alberta where the column and my first book would become a reality. A passage from Ecclesiastes was just the green light I needed to put the Forces behind me. The asthma led to much book reading which gave your scribe a wealth of information from which to draw inspiration for the column. Then writing and selling books door to door, another was inspiring me to stay at it. Do you see what I'm driving at? Books change people, or at least they can if they're read.

But why this book, why now? Because it begged to be written! I'd been thinking about writing my autobiography for years. At one point, as I told you, it was going to be entitled, *It's Been a Long Road*, that project being derailed by the asthma. Then *From Homeless to High Office*, except that would have to be predicated by significant electoral success, which has thus far proven somewhat elusive.

Whatever it was going to be called, if it was ever going to be written it would begin with that scene in WWI France. It's remotely possible some folklore has developed around the event. In the fall of '07, your author was an extra in the movie *Paeschendaele*, a Paul Gross flick about another WWI battle. I mentioned my grandfather's blinking eyes to a fellow on a coffee break, he responding that there was a story told of that very thing. Now I'm pretty sure that lore is not about my grandfather, but it was my intent to honour him regardless, should I ever get around to writing this book.

Now I rarely read every Remembrance Day article carried in whatever newspaper I happen to subscribe to, but the *National Post's* coverage was so good in the fall of '07 that I read every word of every column on the subject. The inspiration to get after this project was palpable, and I had increasingly good reason to do so forthwith.

Dad turned eighty that summer, and he simply revered his father. I calculated that if I was going to honour my grandfather

one day it would be nice to do so, if I could, while his son was still in the land of the living.

I told a friend what I was up to. He deadpanned: “Don’t you have to accomplish something before you write your memoirs?” It stands to reason that would lead to more book sales, granted, but the answer is still ‘no’.

While first putting these thoughts to paper, I read a column by Frederick Dreyer in the *National Post* (Nov 16/07) on one Edmund Burke, an author, politician and a contemporary of the previously mentioned Adam Smith. The main point of the column was that Burke had written *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790, years before that event turned ugly. He was, in the words of Dreyer, “undertaking to address an audience *that did not yet exist*” (emphasis added). How much do you think that would encourage a guy then writing his memoirs with few in what might be considered significant accomplishments behind him?

I told Dad what I was up to. He responded that there were two types of people in the world who write their stories: those who have accomplished much, and those who have been through much, so you qualify. We both knew what he meant, and with all due respect to Tony Robbins, you will realize by now that this book was not written by some larger than life guy with a fat wallet telling you how to live your life. On the contrary, it was written by someone who simply survived and therein found cause to write.

You might also correctly assume the author doesn’t live in a ‘Penthouse’. In fact, I wrote part of the first draft of this book propped up on some pillows in a room in a friend’s home for which he refused even my nominal offering. I graduated from there to another friend’s garage. (It’s called couch surfing.) So I know poor well enough, but what of the rest of the title?

It’s creative license. There may or may not be a penthouse in my future, but as dad drilled into my head growing up, “Life is 10% what you make it; 90% how you take it.” What he was doing was echoing the gospel of contentedness as espoused by the apostle Paul, himself having learned to both ‘abase and abound’, though I don’t recall dad ever crediting the Bible with its inspiration. A little family history is probably in order.

My great, great grandfather was a Baptist minister and a well respected man by all accounts; my great grandfather, his son, a lay minister who rode the circuit and, allegedly, both a harsh man and a husband most unfaithful. That would understandably turn his kids, my grandfather's generation, off the gospel he preached, which seems to be the case.

It has been shown, though, that character traits often related to the faith like honesty and integrity can remain and be passed down from generation to generation with or without the faith itself, albeit in the latter case in often diminishing measure. That my father so respected his father who embodied these characteristics (who I suspect learned to do life at the feet of his mother and grandparents) is not all that surprising then. Nor is it terribly surprising that my siblings and I have come back to the faith of our forbears.

Cheryl, recall, had accepted Christ in her early twenties, the first person in three generations in our family to do so as far as I know. No one is perfect, let alone our dad, but when presented with the idea of a loving heavenly Father it wasn't a concept with which she was entirely unfamiliar.

I made the same decision in a park in Halifax ten years later; Dean in a truck five years after that, all three the children of a self-proclaimed atheist who sometimes humorously questions where he went wrong.

Actually, I suspect it's in part because of his considerable depth of character that we were open to the gospel message when, by various means, it was presented to us. So mom took us to Sunday school when we were kids for which I'll be eternally grateful, but oddly enough I have to credit the outspoken atheist in the family, in part, for our salvation.

The Bible is clear that there are two roads in this world. One is a broad road that leads to destruction; the other a narrow road that leads to life. The broad road, as I understand it, is our natural lives without the Lord, whereas the narrow road is Christ Himself, who said "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" [Jn 14:6, NASB].

These roads are personified by the men who were crucified with our Saviour. They both derided Him for a spell, but one,

recognizing His greatness, declared his faith in Him when he asked Him to remember him when He came in His kingdom [Lk 23:42].

According to Scripture, it's God's will that none perish, but one of those men, it can be assumed, did that day. The other, said Christ, would be with Him in Paradise.

If what the Bible says of these roads is true, that day in Halifax in the summer of '83 I crossed a bridge, in effect, from one to the other. Informed that we were saved by faith, not works, with what little I had I said a simple prayer accepting Christ as my Saviour. It went something like this:

Thank you heavenly Father for sending Jesus to die for my sins. I now, by faith, accept Jesus as my Lord and Saviour and invite Him into my heart. Forgive me for the sins that I have committed, fill me with your Spirit and lead me in the way everlasting.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Now assuming the existence of these roads, there are two theories as to how you got on the one you're on. Discounting the fiction that non-living matter can evolve into a scientist, there is a God in heaven Who created you, loves you and has a will for your life (as He does for all of us) and it begins with a trip across that bridge. Now I don't know everything about anything, and I know very little about surprisingly few things, but unless I'm completely mistaken about everything I believe on this subject, the future is immeasurably brighter for those who take that particular step of faith.

The reference to 'Penthouse' in the title is also, in a sense, a statement of faith. Your author doesn't so much as visit the 'Name it and claim it' camp or give two whits for positive self-talk, but political ambitions may yet be realized. Or maybe one day *FIX CANADA* will fly off the shelves. Or this one. Or maybe there's a bestselling book or song yet waiting to be written.

Or maybe I'll just keep struggling along. If the past is any indication of the future I'm doomed, but fortunately I'm not limited by my past.

Rather, I know I serve, albeit feebly, a God of changing circumstances. Consider Joseph, for instance, a man who went from prisoner to prime minister of Egypt in about three hours (archeological evidence, as it invariably does, verifying the biblical account). Has God changed?

In fact, the author is aware of a gentleman named Bob Carlisle who wrote a lot of very good music... and struggled along. Then one day he wrote a little number called *Butterfly Kisses* and his career will never be the same. So God is still God.

Similarly, I spent two years writing *FIX CANADA* and about two decades revising and updating it, selling it door-to-door to keep the wolf away from my own. The 21st edition rolled off the press in the closing days of 2023. Could it be my *Butterfly Kisses*? You never know until you try. So keep trying, whatever it is. If you fail, try again. Or try something else. Just don't give up. And always, always, always look up.

And read books! Most contain a precious nugget or two. Hopefully you found some here.

My name is Jeffrey Irwin Willerton. I was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada on May 6, 1964. Had I known how challenging my road would be... I would have been born anyway. I didn't have a choice in the matter. Today I do, though, and everyday I choose to press on. I hope you will, too. It's the only way to find out what's around the next corner in this adventure called life.

EPILOGUE: To bring you up to speed, Dad got saved at the tender age of eighty-seven, and he, Mom, Kenny and the Lord are presently enjoying a cup of tea in Paradise, or something to that effect. Cheryl, who became a first-time mom at sixty-three, is busy raising her awesome adopted grandson in Bimidgie, MN, and after selling trucks in Winnipeg for thirty years, Dean's "retirement project" is selling truck accessories with which, among other things, he's lighting up the highways of North America. And I'm somewhere in this vast country flogging what is now the 22nd edition of *FIX CANADA*, working on the 23rd... and slowly becoming a better guitar player.

Never give up. Never surrender!

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