



## **A Bit of Analysis**

**W**HILE LISTENING TO LEE discuss his family and recalling my notes from his reflections as a 12 year old, I was struck with the strength of the women in his life. He remembered his sister and his mother both being strong, basically the cement that held the family together. While both his male role models seemed to disappoint and let him down, his female role models were steadfast, had servant's hearts and were resilient in times of adversity.

It is also noteworthy to point out that Lee's father had skills which he could possibly have used to bring his family out of the financial poverty. However, perhaps because of his own emotional poverty, Lee's dad perpetuated both types of poverty in his own family.

### **Another House, Another Chance**

It was hard to believe, but Lee moved to the sixth house he remembered living in and he was still not yet 12 years old. This was another rental property in the same small town and was

farther south. It was, as a matter of fact, directly across the street from the church where Lee and his sister had the unpleasant experience he spoke of earlier.

The house was a bit better than those he had lived in before, and he really didn't have any explanation as to how the step up happened. It was still one of the less desirable homes, but a far cry from the duplex where they lived when they first came to town.

As Lee opened up about this house, I found out things he had never shared with me before. Although it was hard for him to bring back the memories, it was another glimpse inside this very complicated man whom I thought I knew better than anyone else.

The house was one story with a bedroom in the front where Lee slept, a living room, a bedroom where his mother and father slept, and a bedroom for his sister. His brother had gone to live in the country with his new wife and now new child, so Lee's nuclear family was now four. The kitchen was small as were all the rooms, but the outside of the house had paint and looked fairly normal. The inside of the house was not much different than others as it had only cheap linoleum on the floors and the walls had long needed paint.

There was an old barn on the back of the property that bordered some open fields, and Lee said he had pleasant memories of playing basketball by himself using the goal on the side of the barn. It was like watching a scene from the movie *Hoosiers* as I listened to him tell of scraping snow off the ground so he could shoot hoops in the middle of winter. You could almost see him reliving this moment as he explained he always wore gloves, if he could find any, because someone had told him that would make him a better player if he could learn to handle the basketball while wearing gloves.

Lee's mood quickly changed, however, as did his countenance when I asked him how the family was doing during this quick stay at house number six. He began to have a very different look in his eyes when he began to recall memories that were evidently very painful. It seems that his father's drinking had worsened even more, and his memories of this particular house and the events that took place while they lived there were some of the worst. This was probably the reason he had not shared them with me when he was younger. During the early years of our relationship, he had learned how to mask the pain and hurt through laughter and achievement. Now, when he was older it was easier to let down his guard and speak from his heart.

Lee shared a particular hurtful event that occurred the first Christmas the family experienced at the house on South Main. He had spotted a football uniform, complete with pants, shirt, helmet and kicking tee in the window at the hardware store. He had gone by several times just to look at it and dream that someday he could have one just like it. With Christmas coming up he thought he might have a chance, so he pleaded and begged to his mother and father that it would be the best Christmas ever if he could just have that uniform.

One could only imagine the hope and yearning in a young boy's mind and heart that maybe, just this once, for the first time in his life, he would get what he had asked for—and the threatening possibility that he likely tried to suppress of the crushing disappointment he would face if that wonderful football uniform was not under the tree that morning. Lee shares that memory with you:

*I had really convinced myself that when I got up on Christmas morning that the football uniform would be under*

*the tree for all to see and for me to enjoy. I really had no reason to believe it would be there based on past Christmas disappointments, but all children have that hope that we as adults seem to lose.*

*As I carefully opened the door from my bedroom to gaze longingly at the Christmas tree ... there it was!! The only gift that could possibly have made my Christmas the most special ever was waiting for me to enjoy. I literally began to cry and could not contain my excitement. I rushed to the tree, tore open the box and began to touch and experience the best gift I had ever received! I tore off my pajamas and began to finalize this most special occasion by putting on my gift, when the joy quickly turned to devastation.*

*I really don't know what happened, and no one ever took the time to explain to me, but it was evident no one had thought of looking at the size of the gift and the comparable size of the boy. As I had told you before, I had gained a lot of weight, and when I tried to put the football pants on, I could barely get them past my knees. Instead of consoling or helping, there was laughter. I can remember the laughter that here this fat little boy couldn't get his football pants on. With that hurt ingrained in my head and now the tears flowing because of embarrassment rather than joy, the jersey and pads were to go on. The shoulder pads were held together with a shoestring, so I was able to pull them out far enough they could go over my shoulders (barely), and then it was time for the black Chicago Bears jersey to go over the pads. Of course if the pants were too small, I don't know why I or anyone else thought the jersey would fit, and it didn't.*

*In my memory no one ever tried to explain or apologize for the gift and the subsequent pain I felt. I do know that the uniform was never exchanged, and the only thing I was able to play with from it was the kicking tee and the helmet. It was just another of those events that at that time of my life made me believe that I was not worth much, not even the time to care.*

## **The Depth of Despair**

It is intriguing to me how God works and puts experiences and timing into our lives to make things crystal clear. Just the other night as I was sitting in a hotel in Florida waiting to work a show for one of our companies, I was watching a documentary television show about drinking and especially about the different types of vodka. Having never been a drinker myself, it really brought clarity to my thought process about what Lee had told me of his father's drinking while they lived on South Main.

In the show they defined vodka as a colorless, odorless and tasteless drink. They went into its history a bit, and the James Bond movies were the ones that made drinking vodka the "in thing" to do. In the documentary, they conducted a taste test, and none of the participants could pick out the vodka of their choice even though they thought before they started they would easily be able to do so. It was also stated by all the experts that virtually no one drank vodka straight; it was almost always used in a mixed drink, which caused it to be even harder to distinguish between the different brands.

The reason I share this bit of information is to underscore the depths to which Lee's father had gone during this time. Lee knew his dad drank too much, but not knowing the facts on vodka, Lee only had his view of his father, not that of any experts.

Lee shared with me that his father would come home every single night with a half-pint of vodka and six cans of beer. Knowing now that hardly anyone drinks vodka straight, Lee's memory of his father is even more telling. Lee shared that his dad would get a large glass, pour the vodka into the glass, and then proceed to drink the entire glass at one time. He would do that with consecutive glasses until he had "chugged" the entire bottle. He would then proceed to drink all six cans of beer in quick succession. Of course, by the time he ate his dinner, he would pass out on the couch and be there until he woke up to stagger to bed. Lee remembers this to be a nightly ritual. His father would be intoxicated all through the weekend until he ran out of his "stash" he had purchased on Friday and Saturday.

Lee already revealed that his mother and father would have their worst fights when the bank statement came and his father would have the family in dire straights because he had written checks and not informed his wife. After another fight, Lee experienced something no child at that age should have had to experience, but it was but another time when it was evident God was looking over him and his family even though none were walking in the Christian faith:

*My dad was drinking more and more. He also tended to gamble way too much, especially since we hardly had enough money to eat, let alone gamble any away. Maybe he thought he could hit it big and get us out of the situation we were in, but it never happened, and we sank deeper and deeper as he sank deeper and deeper into escape through alcohol. Of course, to gamble and drink he was taking money from our checking account and not even letting Mom know, and each time the bank statements came*

*there would be another battle.*

*Dad tried to rationalize both habits, and on occasion he would win something or some money. On one such occasion he came home proudly with a Remington Nylon 66 automatic rifle. It was an impressive gun and the only one we ever had in the house that I can remember. I don't know why, but he always kept the gun under the bed in my bedroom in the front of the house.*

*After one particularly volatile fight over the lack of funds in the checkbook, dad had his usual nightly drink. Before he passed out, I was standing in the living room and realized the door to my bedroom was shut and Dad was nowhere to be seen. I've never had the blessing of having God speak to me audibly, but something told me to open the door to my bedroom. It was not like a feeling; it was more like a demand. As I threw open the door, my dad was sitting on the side of my bed with the Remington Nylon 66 between his legs, the barrel to the middle of his forehead, and his thumb on the trigger. As I tell you this now, I can see it vividly as if I were there again. I lunged toward him and knocked the gun away and yelled at him. It must have startled him enough that he realized what he was doing, and he calmly got up, went to the couch and passed out. As was the norm in our family, nothing was discussed about the incident, and it was as if it never happened the next morning.*

It is telling and sad that this boy had to go through what he did without much help from anyone. The fact is that many today are living through the same if not worse situations, and many of us just choose to live our lives in our own comfortable worlds

and put those like Lee out of our minds.

I began to think back on all the children I had encountered as an educator. I wondered if I had missed any clues, overlooked any signs of lives lived in volatile circumstances. I felt a heavy sadness for Lee and the children like him who were wounded daily by the very people who should have been loving and protecting them. If not the parents, then who?

I am sure if people would take the time to observe and care for children and adults going through tough times, the pain could be lessened by simply showing compassion. Perhaps by caring and sharing, we could keep so many from failure and some ultimately from the correctional institutions our society seems eager to put them. “Tail them, nail them and jail them” seems to be the mindset in our country rather than “Know them, love them and help them.”