

Better is the End

A Novel by Curt A. Canfield

Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.

Ecclesiastes 7:8

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Where real-life historical figures and events appear, citations are numbered in context and their source can be found in the Endnotes section of the book. In all other respects, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Dedicated to my beloved wife:

Christine Sharon Kirpan
Softly speak and sweetly smile

August 17, 2024

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Part I: The Beginning of Things

2017-2022

*Wisdom is the principal thing;
therefore get wisdom:
and with all thy getting get understanding.*

Proverbs 4:7

Chapter 1

My grandfather, Thomas Barnes, was a simple man, in the best sense of the word. He was a second-generation steel-worker but a carpenter at heart. In his spare time, he built whirligigs and birdhouses. I remember when I was ten or twelve, he took me to his woodshed and showed me how to pick out wood. He selected one plank and gave it to me. He told me to look down its length and see if it was straight or not. He showed me how to check for knotholes, which were a bad thing, and how to check the tightness of the grain.

He was a quiet, simple man. He took things as they came. If something good came his way, he accepted it without fanfare and was thankful. If something bad happened, then he took it without complaint. He was steady and never showed much emotion one way or the other.

He was drafted into the Army on December 7, 1917, one month after the Armistice. The government authorized the draft less than five months earlier on May 18, 1917. He was one among the 2.8 million drafted. He was twenty-one years old at the time. He served two years, made it to sergeant, and was honorably discharged in May of 1919.

He married a good woman, Emily, in 1922. She was twenty years old then and he was twenty-six. She graduated from college, a rarity for women in those days, and became a teacher for many years. They had three children and were married for thirty-nine years until Emily passed away from cancer. You could see the grief in his face and demeanor, but he never spoke about his feelings.

Thomas came from a long line of English settlers who came to America in 1637. They passed all their traits down to him; work hard, suffer much, and keep it all inside as complaining fixes nothing. Life was simple as you resided and married within your own kind. Everybody held the same beliefs and worldview, for better or worse.

My father broke the mold in 1947 when he married my mother, a German woman whose family came to America in the mid-1800s. I never saw my grandfather, Thomas, warm up to her. She was too emotional and verbose for his liking. He would take me aside and gently slap me upside the head when he saw me behaving like her. He told me to start acting like a man.

Unlike Thomas, my life was never simple. My parents made it terribly complex. My father abused me mentally while mother watched in fear of making it worse. I left home as soon as I could to join the Marines and things got worse until a stroke felled me at the age of forty-nine. It undoubtedly came from stress, but I soon realized that it was a gift of sorts, a blessing that purged all the fear and shame embedded in me by my father. I subsequently learned the stroke was caused by a hole in my heart. A blood clot passed through it and went straight to my brain. My wife, Cynthia, saved me that day even though I had broken her heart days earlier. Both of those events stripped away my *persona* and left me rudderless, searching for a purpose in an otherwise aimless life.

I struggled for sixteen years after that stroke to save my job and my marriage. I finally retired in 2017 and began tracing my mother's family history to fill the time. It was then that I discovered Johann, a previously unknown, distant relative of my mother. My research showed he grew up in Nazi Germany, came to America in 1956 and now lived nearby in an assisted living facility. He was ninety-years-old at the time. I was anxious to meet him, given his age, so I could hear about his life.

Our initial meeting started out rocky. He seemed wary of my intentions. I tried to break the ice by noting he was the same age as my father and asked if he also fought in the Second World War. Rather than answering my question, he asked if I was ever in the

military. When I replied that I was in the Marines and served in Vietnam, he opened up and told me he was in the Waffen-SS.

I was shocked and ready to leave when he remarked that we shared certain similarities. We were both teenagers when we enlisted to fight in two different wars that were both stained with notorious war crimes. I was intrigued by his theory and came back several more times to hear how his story unfolded.

We met five more times over the next several months. He became like a father to me as he walked me through his life and asked about mine. He listened to me, unlike my father, and helped me untangle my past. He taught me a lot about human nature as he explained what drove our two countries into two different wars and why they committed war crimes. We plumbed the depths of our past as we tried to understand why we voluntarily fought in those two wars. During my trips back and forth to see him, I struggled to understand my other past transgressions and what drove me to break my wife's heart.

It was early in the fall of 2017 when we had our sixth and last meeting. We went outside and sat on our favorite bench. Together, we discussed our place in this world and found peace. We closed our eyes afterward and let the sun's warmth envelop us. When it was time for me to leave, I reached over to wake him. But he had passed.

It was a hard to take, especially since he was like a father to me. The enormous sense of loss overwhelmed me. It was a familiar feeling, but it came from the distant past. I couldn't put my finger on who was involved or when it occurred, but I couldn't deal with that at the time because I had just lost Johann. And now he, like many others who were lost to me, dropped into a dark, bottomless well inside of me.

When I arrived home, I told my wife about Johann's death. I also told her how Lena, another resident, and an Auschwitz survivor, had finally reconciled with him. Lena told me, as I was leaving, how the two of them had managed to overcome their past and forgave one another. Cynthia was moved by my story. It was

then that I asked her to forgive my past transgressions, and she did. And for the next few days, life was simple and peaceful.

A day or two later, Johann's son, August, invited me to the funeral. I first met August during my fourth meeting with Johann. He was devoted to his father. He asked me to call him "Auggie" and participated in our discussion that day. He listened in rapt attention as his father delved into the many economic pressures that led to the Second World War. We all learned something about human nature that day.

I accepted Auggie's invitation to the funeral. It was well-attended. The nursing home brought several of his friends including Leon, a Vietnam veteran like me, and Lena. Both participated in my conversations with Johann. I pointed them out to Cynthia. She was anxious to meet them. After introducing them to Cynthia, she listened gracefully as we spoke about our time spent with Johann. There were some chuckles and tears as we recalled our shared memories and disagreements. When it was time for the service to begin, we walked inside. Cynthia told me how glad she was to have finally met everyone I had been talking about for the past few months.

After the service, the family provided dinner that was served in the church hall. Everyone broke into groups and headed in that direction. Auggie came over to us with his family. He introduced his wife, Patricia, and their son, Friedrich. Friedrich, unlike Auggie, was no chip off the old block.

Both Auggie and Johann had slender builds and full heads of hair. Friedrich, by contrast, was slightly paunchy, balding, and sported a neatly trimmed moustache and goatee. I was surprised when I heard his first name; it was the same as my great-grandfather's. I was even more surprised by the fact that I had never heard of him before.

While the ladies began chatting among themselves, I asked Friedrich what he did for a living. He was more than up for the task, giving me more than I expected, both in terms of quantity and presentation. He was a history professor at Ithaca College and came across as a classic intellectual, using words you would never hear outside of a college classroom. As he expounded on his credentials, I looked over at Auggie occasionally to see his reaction. He appeared proud of his son, but I detected a bit of distance between the two.

Auggie cut into his son's monologue as soon as the opportunity presented itself. "Friedrich, you should know that Willi is a distant relative and became good friends with your grandfather"

Friedrich looked at his father and then over at me with the same look of disdain. It was then that I remembered that Johann mentioned that Auggie was a machinist, just like his father. When Friedrich nodded without replying, Auggie added, "You two may hit it off since Willi is quite a history buff himself. Your major in college was history, wasn't it, Willi?"

I smiled. "Oh, that was a while ago, Auggie. But I did enjoy learning new things about history from Johann. He really opened up my eyes to events leading up to the Second World War."

Friedrich gave a knowing nod. "Interesting. He never engaged me on that topic. And yet, here I am!" He lifted his arms and chin skyward. "A professor who teaches the history of Imperial and Weimar Germany."

I was impressed. "Too bad you weren't there with us. We also had a third person sit in with us. Do you see that woman in the wheelchair over there? Her name is Lena. She is an Auschwitz survivor. She taught us both a lot."

He looked over and grunted. "I hope you and he learned something from her because that is where all his ideas about National Socialism lead."

I looked at him askance. "What do you mean by that, Friedrich?"

“I mean, the Germans in that period, including my grandfather, were so focused on their own superiority that they treated everyone else in the world like inferiors. They steamrolled over everybody to get what they wanted. It was all so horrible. I try to avoid anything having to do with that period of history.”

I did a double-take. I couldn't believe my ears. Not because of what he said about Nazi Germany, but because of what he said about his own grandfather. “Well, you should know that your grandfather apologized to Lena before he died, and that Lena told me he was a real *mensch* after all. She told me she was sorry that history got between them.”

I saw Auggie's jaw drop. “You never told me this, Willi, but I am glad to hear it. You were with him when he died, weren't you?”

“Yes, I was. And he went in peace. He told me he was never a Nazi. He said he only believed in justice for his country. He tried to study all the events that led up to the war to understand why it started and why Germany acquired such a bad reputation for doing the same things as the Allies did for the past three hundred years. And do you know what else he said, Friedrich?”

Friedrich tilted his chin up and looked down as if he were expecting an answer from one of his less informed students. I set my jaw and fired back a reply. “Well, I'll tell you. He said Lena was right when she said Germany was blinded by pride to the suffering of others. He said they struggled to overcome all the hardships imposed on them by the Allies after the First World War. And when they finally restored their country under National Socialism, they were proud of their success. Unfortunately, during that time, they lost their way as an otherwise God-loving people.”

Part II: The First Attempt

2023

And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image ...

Revelation 14:11

Chapter 11

Despite my agent's best efforts, none of the mainstream publishers would touch the manuscript. It felt like a pervasive knee-jerk reaction to anything that ran contrary to the traditional view of Nazi Germany. Fortunately, she persevered and found a niche publisher.

The book received warm reviews from readers and critics. One critic, however, stopped me short when he wrote, *Readers are allowed unpredictable glimpses into his struggles following his return from Vietnam—and only intermittent exposure to the darkness lurking inside of him.*

His last comment was insightful and hit me like a gut-punch. I had just spent five years overcoming my past and now this critic saw otherwise. But he was right. There was a darkness still lingering inside me; it emerged when I had my angry outburst with Friedrich and when I had that recent flare up with Leon.

There was an imbalance inside me. On the one side, there was this state of peace I found after Johann's death and, on the other, was the anger. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like a conflict between mind and heart. I remembered leaving Auggie's home the other day and thinking that knowing something doesn't mean a thing unless you act upon it. I was stuck. I didn't know how to rid myself of the anger that had disrupted my peace.

I kept thinking about that for several days until the term *Praxis* came to mind. I was fairly certain that it came from a Political Science class in college. It had something to do with changing things; first by learning something and then by putting that knowledge into practice. I looked it up and saw a reference to it in Paulo Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. We had studied that book. Freire used that term in his book to describe the dialectic between learning and putting that learning into practical application.

His book was about helping the underprivileged in South America evolve from a state of oppression into what he called an “epoch” of liberation. Freire stated that this “epoch” of liberation would evolve from “*a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites striving toward their fulfillment.*”¹ Their fulfillment was overcoming the legacy of colonial oppression.

I had been through a similar *complex of ideas ... in dialectical interaction with their opposites* through my meetings with Lena, Johann, Leon and Auggie back in 2017. All of them helped me to overcome a sense of oppression. But while my mind may have reached that “epoch” of “fulfillment,” my heart apparently had not. Anger still lingered there causing my actions to disrupt my mind’s sense of peace and the peace of others.

Did that anger come from the *lingering darkness inside*? Was that darkness a stain on my heart? Was it blocking the light from my mind, which would lead to a complete fulfillment? Was it keeping me from reaching an *epoch* of total liberation? And, if it was, how could I ever get rid of it?

My head was spinning. I didn’t know what to do. I felt like a recovering alcoholic, knowing that one drink, one more incident, may cause me to relapse and permanently lose the peace I had known. That analogy kept playing over and over in my head for several days until an idea struck me while walking Mabel a few days later. We made a beeline for home because I didn’t want to lose that thought. I kept repeating it so I wouldn’t forget.

As soon I made it home, I hung my hat on the hall rack and went straight to my study without saying anything to Cynthia. I feared being distracted before I could get it down.

“Will, are you okay?” She shouted from the family room.

I quickly sat down at my desk and wrote “AA” on a sticky note.

She was persistent. This time her voice was louder and expressed concern. “Will?”

“Yeah, yeah. Sorry, but I had to write something down before I lost track of it. You know what that’s like.”

We both were losing our short-term memories. I resorted to using sticky notes while writing my book to remind me of any number of things.

“I’ll be out in just a few minutes, honey. Give me a moment.”

I went online and searched for the AA website, hoping it may offer some advice. I began reading their Twelve Step Program and made it up to Step Eight. I stopped there, suddenly realizing that I had already completed the first seven steps. I went back to read Steps Eight and Nine. I stopped there and flinched.

The first seven steps were all introspective. They all involved admitting my shortcomings and asking God to forgive them. Johann and Lena helped me do all of that. Steps Eight and Nine, however, required me to stop thinking and start acting.

Step Eight required me to make “a list of all the people we have harmed and become willing to make amends to them...” Step Nine required me to make “a vigorous attempt to repair the damage” with them. When I read this, I felt my heart expand. I decided to not only undertake these two steps but also to write about the process. It would be a sequel to my first book, which came from the mind. The sequel would come from the heart.

I resumed reading through Steps Ten and Eleven. They seemed achievable, but the Twelfth Step caused me to pause. It read there would be “a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps.” Would this “spiritual awakening” dispel the darkness and allow me to find fulfillment?

As it turned out, it took less than a year to complete Steps Eight through Eleven. However, nothing turned out as expected in doing so. However, by the time I reached Step Twelve, I had a high degree of certainty of what was to come.

Chapter 12

The rest of the day was spent fretting over what to tell Cynthia. How could I tell her about writing a sequel? She wasn't happy about the first book. In fact, she never read it. Would it be fair to put her through the process again? But, once again, I felt there was no choice. I had to do it.

I decided to wait until later in the day to tell her, right before sunset. The sky was clear now and by then the sky would be a like a beautiful amber blanket spread across the horizon. I wanted to soften the blow by making things as mellow as possible.

It was late in the afternoon when I went to the patio to light the firepit. I went back into the house to grab a bottle of wine and two glasses and called Cynthia to join me outside. After a few minutes, she appeared at the patio door dressed in her long, plaid flannel nightgown and slippers. "So what's the occasion, Will?" She saw the firepit and the wine glasses. "This is unusual, but nice."

"Well, I have to talk to you about something."

"Oh, no." She sat down and eyed me carefully as I poured a glass of wine for each of us. "What's going on? Are you okay?"

"Well, first of all, cheers to you!" I raised my glass. She smiled at my toast as we clinked our glasses. "It's about the book. I received several good reviews, and I want to share one with you to get your opinion."

Her face brightened up. "Well, that's good news! I'm excited for you! Let's hear it."

"Okay. I'll read the whole thing and then we can talk about the part that concerns me. Here goes: *Plot/Idea: This promising plot revolves around conversations between a Vietnam veteran, a World War II German veteran, and an Auschwitz survivor, exploring humankind's*

culpability for evil acts. An allegory about human nature, the book starts off strong ...

Prose: ... the prose flows smoothly and allows for deeper insights—especially regarding the protagonist Will ...

Originality: The novel shows great promise, and using three distinctive characters, each possessing divergent perspectives and life experiences, is a gripping concept.

Character/Execution: ... mimics the trauma aftereffects of war in the novel's partial access to its characters, particularly with Will; readers are allowed unpredictable glimpses into his struggles following his return from Vietnam — and only intermittent exposure to the darkness lurking inside of him. Johann is less relatable, but Lena is a riveting character: an Auschwitz survivor caught between righteous anger while desperately wanting to be at peace, she is a definite standout.

“Well, that sounds pretty darn good, Will. You should be pleased.”

“I am with most of it, but one line worries me, It says I have a *darkness lurking inside*. Do you think there’s a darkness inside of me?”

She looked at me with a deadpan expression. “You know, Will, I never had any desire to read that book. In fact, I was surprised you even wrote it.”

She paused to grab her wine glass. She tilted her head back to take a long swallow while she raised her other hand to signal me to wait. She put the glass down on the table and started. “I agree. There is a dark side to you. And you show it every time you get angry and lose your temper. It shows up whenever you get frustrated and start cursing and banging things. There’s an ugliness inside of you that makes you lash out at someone or something that doesn’t act as you think they or it should. I don’t understand it, Will. You can be so nice otherwise.”

I thought of the recent blowups with Friedrich and Leon. Leon looked at me as if I were unhinged when I railed against what was happening in our country. And then, there was Friedrich. After that blow up with him, I apologized to Auggie, but knew I would never

apologize to his son. I still remember wanting to choke him so he would shut up. Cynthia was right; there was something dark and ugly inside of me.

She shook her head. “You have a real problem, Will, and you have a real tough time letting anyone help you, even me. I don’t know how you can ever fix it unless you get some outside help.”

It was my turn to take a drink. I took a long pull, looked up at the sunset and then lowered my eyes to gaze at the floor. It brought back memories of my time in the monastery. I went there shortly before my conversion to Catholicism.

I was resting on a kneeler with my eyes closed. After a period of time, I envisioned the floor opening, revealing a cobblestone well that I fell into. Every passing cobblestone represented one of my many sins that I had committed during my lifetime. There was nothing below but a pool of darkness.

“Will? Are you all right?”

“Sorry, I was thinking about what you just said. I have to agree with you. After reading this review, I knew there was more work to do and that’s why I wanted to talk to you.” I paused again to summon my courage. “I need to go back and make amends to the people I hurt, Cynthia.”

“What?” She looked concerned and unsettled. “To whom?”

“To Alicia and one other person. Her name is Keiko.” Unlike others who fell into the darkness and were forgotten, the memory of Keiko never went away. “She was just a kid when I last saw her, maybe seven or eight years old. I was stationed in Japan and lived off-base. She was in the neighborhood and visited me whenever I was off-duty. I became sort of a father to her. Her real Dad was American, but he was long gone. When I left Japan, I never said goodbye to her. That always weighed on me. I know how hurt she must have been.”

Cynthia's face expressed shock, then remorse. "That's terrible, Will. How could you do that to a little girl?" She turned away from me as if she didn't want to know me anymore.

"I know it's bad. But, you have to understand, I was burnt out at the time. I was about to be discharged. Everything and everybody I knew from my life before the Corps was gone. And everything and everyone I knew in the Corps was about to be taken away. I didn't know what to expect anymore. And to be honest, I was scared. I couldn't face saying goodbye to one more thing or person. I couldn't take anymore sadness."

I recalled those feelings. They weren't pleasant. "I really couldn't afford expressing my feelings about leaving her. But I really did care about her. I loved living in Japan and the thought of leaving there also tore me apart. In a way, I never wanted to leave."

She turned back to face me with a sympathetic, but worried expression. "You never told me any of this, Will. I wish you had." Her face turned sad while she reached out for my hand.

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, I never talked to anyone about it. I just locked it up. I wasn't proud of how I behaved and the fact that I couldn't deal with it."

"But what about Alicia. Do you really want to open that can of worms?"

Cynthia only knew the bare minimum about Alicia. I only told her the basics of how and why I had left her.

"Well, I think I need to, but I'm not sure how to approach her, much less find her." I drained my glass and set it down on the table. "I hope you understand."

She shook her head. "I don't think I do, but it's your call. I trust your judgment, Will, but please don't get yourself into something you can't handle. You know I'm here if you need me, honey."

My thoughts suddenly turned back to Friedrich. Maybe I should just swallow my pride and apologize to him. After all, I must have hurt him when I got into it with him at his grandfather's funeral. I felt Johann might appreciate it if I did. And Auggie too.