

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

Copyright © 2024 Curt A. Canfield

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without the prior written permission of the copyright owner, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This book is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, and all characters with the exception of some well-known historical figures, are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

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

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 over at his father with disdain and then at me with the same expression. 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.”

Chapter 2

Auggie quickly intervened to tone down the rising tension between Friedrich and me. “Friedrich, isn’t that wonderful that your grandfather said that? Isn’t that how you approach this subject in your classes on the Weimar Republic?”

Friedrich cast his eyes back to us and stiffened his back before deigning to give us an answer. “Thank you, Father. Let me tell you how I conduct my classes. At the beginning of each semester, I tell the students that they will have one question on their final exam: What was the ‘special path’ that led the German people to Nazism?”

“I take them through a quick summary of all of the nineteenth-century wars that led to founding of modern-day Germany, the First World War, and the abdication of the Kaiser before we cover the rise and subsequent fall of the Weimar Republic. We address all the social, political, and economic events that happened during that time and how they led to the disaster that followed. I give them everything they need to answer that opening question.”

Auggie was beaming, but I wasn’t. It sounded like Friedrich was saying Nazism arose in a vacuum, that it was exclusively the fault of the German people. I recalled how extremely bitter Johann was over how the Allies imposed the Versailles Peace Treaty on them. I wondered what the professor had to say about that.

“Tell me Friedrich, do you discuss how the Allies treated Germany after the First World War? Do you discuss how Germany signed the Armistice only because they believed that Wilson’s Fourteen Points would be included in the Peace Treaty that followed? Do you discuss how the Allies ignored that promise and replaced them with severe terms for Germany in that Treaty? Do you discuss how the Allies continued an illegal naval blockade after the Armistice causing tens of thousands of Germans to die and wouldn’t

remove it until they signed the Treaty? And, lastly, do you discuss how Germany balked at signing the Peace Treaty until the Allies threatened them with invasion if they didn't sign within three days? Tell me, professor, did Germany take that 'special path' or did the Allies push them onto it?"

I gave him a long, cold stare then looked away. I felt Johann's presence. He was gently telling me to tone it down and rein in my temper.

Auggie swiveled his head back and forth between us. He looked shell-shocked by the interchange. "Please, gentlemen, let's not get into politics here. After all, this is my father's funeral."

Friedrich fired back. But it was not at me. "No, it's not politics, Father. This is exactly the sort of talk that always stood between us, ever since my childhood. You and Grandfather always broke away from the family to discuss the latest findings from his research. You always left me behind as if I didn't count."

His voice became louder and louder until we noticed our wives stopped talking to look at us, as well as the other nearby people. But that didn't stop him. He leaned toward his father and whispered bitterly. "And, you know something, Father, whenever I tried to share what I heard from you and Grandfather with others, I was ridiculed."

He paused until everyone went back to what they were doing and then grabbed his father's arm. "We should go outside, Father. I want to put an end to this."

Auggie's face went cold. I knew he adored his father and would never say anything against him. His face seemed to waver between sadness and anger; he appeared conflicted, as if he didn't know what to say to his son. Friedrich kept staring at him, awaiting a response.

It was my turn to break the tension. "Well, perhaps I should excuse myself."

Auggie looked over at me and pleaded. "No, no. I think you should stay, Willi. After all, you're family as well." He probably wanted me there as a buffer. I was glad to oblige.

Friedrich raised his arm to attract the attention of our wives. “Please excuse us, ladies. We’re going outside. We’ll only be a moment.”

We walked in silence out the door and stopped under a large oak tree.

Auggie faced his son and was the first to speak. “Now, what do you mean by putting an end to this? I don’t understand what you mean, Friedrich.”

I looked Friedrich over carefully. His face exhibited little to no character. A bowl of pablum came to mind, soft and malleable.

“What I mean is you need to stop justifying your father’s views on Nazism. Can’t you see it was antisemitic, racist, and nationalistic, not to mention militaristic? This has been a big barrier between us for a long time now. I’m tired of traipsing around this topic with you.”

My initial impressions of pablum went by the wayside. Friedrich’s face and demeanor took on the expression of a petulant child. I almost stepped in, but Auggie quickly replied. “It’s not Nazism that your grandfather and I were justifying, Friedrich. It was Germany. I was born in Germany. I have German blood. I’m proud of what the German people did to save their country after the Allies imposed that terrible Treaty on them. The signing of that Treaty was all based on deceit and extortion. It’s tragic that it all led to the Second World War. I think the German people understand that and quietly accept it. But it seems you don’t. How can you say such things about me?”

Friedrich stood there, open-mouthed in amazement. “That’s all you have to say? Can you go back into that building and tell everyone that? Nazism was built on hate, Father. That’s what you and Grandfather *don’t* seem to understand. It was hatred and

distrust of the West and the East that drove them to Nazism. That's the 'special path' they were on and that's what my students learn."

Auggie's face grew flushed, and he was about to lash back, but I stepped in. "I don't mean to speak for your father or grandfather, Friedrich, but you are misrepresenting them. Before the war, the vast majority of German citizens supported National Socialism. Unlike the government before them, the party had a concrete program to rebuild the country. The German people voted them into power and enthusiastically supported the party's programs to regain their place in the world. And they were successful at it!"

Friedrich looked ready to explode with a verbal salvo, so I quickly finished my point. "From what I have heard from your grandfather and read most Germans were neither racist nor antisemitic. There's no doubt that key leaders in the party were, but the vast majority of Germans, from what I've read, weren't. And besides, racism and antisemitism was being practiced in the US and in other countries as well."

Friedrich reared back and pointed his finger at me. "You miss my point, Mr. Barnes. We're talking about Nazi Germany. Hitler and his cronies felt the German people were Aryan, superior to everyone else! And unlike those other countries you mentioned, they went to war to take what they wanted. And you should also know that those Nazi leaders profited from their people's sacrifices both while rebuilding their country and during the war as well."

"Wait a minute, Professor. You can't make those kinds of statements without including what other countries were doing to foster those racist feelings. Look at America's track record, for example. We treated Native Americans and African-Americans just as badly. And was Germany nationalistic? Sure! But a lot of other countries were as well during the Depression. They tried to rally their people around the flag to protect their economy from other competitors. They urged their citizens to buy domestic goods and services. They imposed trade tariffs against other countries.

“And militarism? It was the Allies who started the arms race during the late Twenties and early Thirties. Germany had to disarm after the First World War and they complied, but the Allies never did, despite their signing the Peace Treaty that obliged them to do so. Germany grew tired of attending all the disarmament talks while the Allies built up their arms stockpile, so they stopped attending those conferences and started rearming.”

Auggie jumped in. “Willi’s right. You can’t throw out the baby with the bathwater, Friedrich. National Socialism, which started years before Hitler came to power, was good for the country at the time. And the German people are, for the most part, good and strong-working people. Look at how they recovered after both world wars.” He paused to eye his son. “And, after all, you should show more respect and listen to me. I am your father!”

Friedrich was having none of it. “The Nazis took the country into disaster. And the German people followed their leaders, who were criminals. They violated the world order. They were fanatics who tried to overthrow civilization as we knew it.”

I couldn’t take much more of Friedrich’s views or his attitude. There was some kind of hidden resentment or hatred buried deep within him. Was it directed toward his father’s social class or was it just a generational thing? It didn’t matter; it left a bad taste in my mouth. I said a quick goodbye and walked back to Cynthia, thinking about my last visit with Johann.

One of the last things he said to me was, “We shouldn’t let any system separate us from God or from each other.” He felt all wars began because people didn’t trust in God to provide them with justice. Instead, they took matters into their own hands and that’s when conflict begins. And, over time, neither side wins. The defeated party seethes with hatred and resentment and seeks justice against the winning side. As long as men don’t trust in God, that

cycle will continue indefinitely. He left me with that Truth, and I found my peace in it.

But that Truth and the sense of peace that came with it soon left after listening to Friedrich. I grew angry knowing he was teaching his own version of history to our kids and then watching him lambast his father for thinking otherwise. I couldn't accept it and remain quiet. In fact, it was all I could do to hold myself back from grabbing him by the throat to shut him up.

I walked up to the women and told them that Friedrich and Auggie would be back momentarily. Cynthia eyed me quizzically as we took our leave and headed to our car.

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.