



Heading in the Right Direction

BY BILL VOSSLER

The first time my father died, he was eleven years old and in charge of the family still in the hills southwest of the home farm. As the hot day wended on, he not only grew tired of the monotony of watching the still—he wasn't a reader and the family couldn't afford books anyway, and in 1930 there were no cell-phones—but he grew thirsty. He remembered the lip-smacking satisfaction and the *aaaahs* of

delight of the older generation, so despite the warnings he'd gotten against imbibing, he decided to sip a bit of the brew.

He knocked out the dirt from an old pork and beans can, filled it up and drank. When it was empty, he refilled it. Several times. Late that evening, when he didn't come home for supper, my grandparents took a lantern and a horse and found him, cold, stiff and unresponsive.

They got him home and laid him out on a plank across the living room table while they built a pine coffin and grieved.

In the morning a stream of neighbors came to pay their respects, then afterwards sat in the creaking chairs on the weathered boards of the front porch discussing the hot weather, the poor crops, the suffering animals...anything except the death of a young boy. About noon my grandmother let out a blood-curdling scream, and everybody rushed inside to see what was wrong. Nothing, actually. They found my bleary-eyed future father sitting up in his coffin, a mighty sick and hung over little boy—not dead as they'd thought, but very alive.

My father died once more in 1944 during World War II, leading a troop of GIs to blow up an enemy ammo dump at night be-

hind enemy lines in Belgium. The telegram to my mother from the U.S. War Department said he had been KIA—killed in action—so she grieved for five long days, and then she received a correction—MIA—missing in action, a POW until near the end of the war in 1945, when he returned. If not, of course, I wouldn't be around to tell the tale. Some of the more irreverent members of our family might laughingly suggest that my father and Jesus have at least one thing in common: Resurrection. Though I would never say that. These are not the only near-deaths in our family. We have a history of them.

My younger brother Ron once smashed his bike into the driver's door of a moving car when he was 12, and his life flashed before his eyes. For years afterwards, Ron believed he was supposed to have died in that crash (he was not seriously injured) but clouds blocked out God's vision, and the fact that Ron was supposed to have died was missed, put on hold (much the same as what had occurred in a movie about the time.) For many years afterwards, Ron believed the mistake could be discovered at any moment, and he could be whisked away. He used that concept to condone some outlandish behavior for a couple of decades afterwards.

My older brother, Bob, collapsed

in the jungles of Brazil, and again in his car on the main street of Bismarck, North Dakota. If not for quick thinking by his wife (a nurse), he could have died each time.

After sliding my car into a snow bank on a curve out in the country, I nearly died in a blizzard—foolishly walking a mile on crutches in temperatures below zero. I was a high school basketball coach who would make the final decision on whether an

important basketball game would be played that night, and I had to inform my primarily farm students not to come to town to the bus because the game would be called off. (There were no cell-phones in 1972, either.)

Another time, blood clots broke loose inside my leg, traveled through my heart and lodged in my lungs. My doctor looked at me in the hospital a couple of days later and said, "Mr. Vossler, you should be dead."

Though my father has died, the rest of us are all very much in the land of the living, thanks to the grace of God. These happenstances remind us that we are all mortal and finite. God will not, as a British writer once hoped on his deathbed, "Make an exception (to dying) for me." These experiences help remind us to check our lives and see if we are going in the right direction, a direction pleasing to God—a direction wherein we love our neighbors as ourselves, a direction wherein we strive to make the world a better place—even if it is only in our little corner of the world.

We will all truly die only once, of course, but the good news is that if we believe, we will be reborn to live in the Kingdom of God never to die again. Forever and ever. □

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