

# On the Right Path

From teenage runaway to college president. One man's remarkable journey.



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Early one cold February morning in 1963, I threw my things into a pair of cardboard suitcases, pulled on my overcoat and sneaked out of my college dormitory. I took one last look back through the gray Georgia dawn, then scaled a wall and hiked through the woods until I got to the highway, where I managed to hitch a ride with a truck driver.

"Where you headed, son?" he asked.

"Away," I said. I didn't care where, as long as it was far from here.

I'd just been kicked out of school. Again. I was too ashamed to go home to my granddaddy, who had raised me, and 'fess up to yet another disgrace. Another failure. He was a minister, and I could just imagine the kind of sermon he'd give me. *I don't need someone telling me what to do*, I thought. *I can take care of myself*.

I had a friend, Dennis, up in Georgetown, Kentucky. I figured I could crash on his couch. That was 300 miles away from Georgia, though. The truck driver took me part of the way, then I hitched another ride that left me on a lonely strip of highway near the Kentucky border. Night fell. Shivering, I buttoned my thin overcoat up to my chin. *Lord, all I need is another ride. Is that too much to ask?* I had been taught that prayer was where I should turn in times of trouble. Well, we'd just see about that.

A pair of headlights appeared in the distance. I jumped to my feet and waved my arms. A big rig roared past me in a cloud of dust. *I should have known*, I thought bitterly. *I'm on my own*.

I picked up my suitcases and trudged along the shoulder of the road. By the next evening I reached Lexington, Kentucky. I went to the bus station and spent some of the little money I had on a doughnut and coffee. Then I checked the schedule. A bus left for Georgetown in an hour. If only I had enough left for the ticket!

"Where you trying to get to?" a man sitting nearby asked.

"Georgetown, Kentucky," I told him.

"You look pretty hungry. How about I buy you a cheeseburger?"

I sized the man up. *A stranger offering to help me for nothing? Right.* He probably wanted to preach at me, tell me how to run my life.

"Why?" I asked.

"You seem like you could use a hand." I hesitated. The thought of that cheeseburger made my stomach rumble.

"No, thanks," I told the man. "I'm doing fine."

"Okay, son," he said and stood up to go. "Have it your way."

As soon as he was out of sight, I let my head drop into my hands. How was I going to get to Dennis's? I glanced at the pay phone in the corner. I was far from home. But one call to my grandfather and he would help me. *No way*, I told myself. *You're on your own.*

Someone tapped my shoulder. I looked up. It was the man who had just offered to buy me a burger.

"Here you go, kid," he said. "Good luck."

He shoved something into my hand and walked away before I could say a word. It was a ticket to Georgetown.

I climbed onto the bus and fell asleep wondering what possessed that man to help out a guy like me. I didn't wake up until the bus pulled into the Georgetown depot. *I made it*, I thought, squinting out the window. I could just imagine the look on my friend Dennis's face when I showed up at his door.

But at his house, the windows were dark. I rang the bell and pounded on the front door. No answer. Nobody was home.

I felt like collapsing right there on the sidewalk. I was about to say a prayer when I remembered my vow. *You're on your own.* I stuck my suitcases under the porch. I'd come back for them later. Then I started walking, more to warm myself up than anything else. I buried my hands in my pockets and stared through the windows of the houses I passed. Family homes. Tears came to my eyes. I had never felt so alone.

I passed a little church, then came to a plain, nondescript building. A line of men had formed out front. The sign over the door read: *The Salvation Army.*

I was about to turn away, fast, when a woman stopped me. "Do you need a meal, son?" she asked. She wore some kind of soldier's uniform, yet her expression was soft and gentle, like a mother's. I opened my mouth to refuse, but the words wouldn't come. I lowered my head. "Yes, ma'am," I said. "I sure do."

Inside, she sat me at a long table with about a dozen guys who seemed down on their luck. Mostly they were older, but younger than they looked, I sensed. Was I staring at my future? Was I destined for their fate? I looked away. Again, I felt the urge to run, to escape. Then came the aroma of food. The meal was nothing fancy—a bowl of soup and a small piece of bread—but it sure tasted good to me. It warmed me and renewed my strength. "Do you have a place to stay tonight?" the woman in uniform asked me. I shook my head. "Well, you do now."

She led me into a room with a cot. *There's got to be a catch*, I thought. But I was too tired to refuse. She handed me clean sheets, a blanket and some meal tickets. "These will get you breakfast in the morning," she said.

I fell into bed. Exhausted as I was, I couldn't fall asleep. Light spilled in from the street through the window grate, casting long shadows on the walls like the bars of a prison cell. That was how I felt—trapped, nowhere to turn. The other night I was alone on a roadside. Tonight I was living on charity. And probably only to be preached at and told what to do in the morning. What options did I have, though? To freeze? Starve? I'd been running...from failure, from humiliation. But what was I running toward?

Here I was, on my own at last, and all I felt was scared. More scared than I'd ever been. More scared than when my parents split up. My dad was a drinker and a yeller. Mom, a preacher's daughter, ran as far away from her troubles as she could. And now I was running, too. I would have frozen by the side of the road if it hadn't been for that truck driver, that man in the bus station, that lady at The Salvation Army.

*Granddaddy.*

*Seems like I always get help at just the right time*, I thought. Something clicked, almost as if everything had suddenly been put in focus for my 19-year-old eyes. Somebody had to be looking out for me. Somebody who wouldn't let me push him away no matter how hard I tried. In fact, the farther I ran from God, the closer he seemed to pull me.

I slipped out of bed and knelt in a patch of moonlight. *Lord*, I prayed, the words finally coming. *Thank you for your patience. Thank you for your love. I don't know what's good for me. Please, I need your guidance.*

The next morning I called my granddaddy. I told him about getting kicked out of school. About running away. Everything. Then I asked his advice, and for once I listened. Granddaddy didn't yell. He didn't even tell me to come home. He suggested I stay in Kentucky and get a job, try living on my own. And he said he'd keep praying for me.

I found work at a hospital and enrolled at a nearby college. I finally stopped fighting the world and opened up to it, asking for and accepting help from the people God placed in my path.

That was the beginning of a long road that led to graduate school and a Ph.D. Today I'm still in school, so to speak. I'm the president of a college—the College of the Ozarks. A funny fate for the kid who ran away from school, I know. Or maybe not. Maybe it was where I was headed all along.