

The Prisoner's Cross

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THE PRISONER'S CROSS

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For my father whose life and ministry enriched
so many lives, and whose war time journal and
iron cross made made this work possible.

A special thanks to Don Seagreaves whose friendship, support, and input, inspired me to undertake this work.

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The Call

It was the worst phone call of his life. The date May 12, 1993, the time 4:30 in the afternoon were seared onto his heart and mind. Don had just come home from his summer job, a daytime shift at the local Ford plant. His father, Jim Campbell, had worked at the plant, just outside of Boden, Kentucky, for decades. Don had grabbed milk from the fridge and drunk directly from the carton. His mother would teasingly chastise him whenever she caught him in the act, but she was not home. Alberta, or Berta, as everyone called her, often picked up her fifteen-year-old daughter from school, and was usually home by now. “She must be running some errands,” Don thought.

Both Berta and Jim were products of a working-class background. Berta’s father had worked for many years as an auto mechanic. His last job, as he neared retirement, had been at the newly opened Ford plant. Berta’s mother had worked mainly as a homemaker. She had a natural intelligence and reflective nature that she had passed on to her daughter. Berta’s father was a kindly affable man. Alberta had inherited the best of both her parents’ traits. A warm, loving person with a quick smile and an easy, gentle laugh, Berta was also a natural nurturer. Don was close to his mother. The two would often sit and talk at the kitchen table for long periods. Their conversations started with Berta asking about Don’s day. More recently Berta had been asking Don how his studies were going at the local community college, where he was nearing the end of his first year. Their conversations would then naturally flow in a variety of directions. The big questions of life held an interest for both Berta and her son. For Berta this had always been framed by her deep faith and involvement at the First Baptist Church off Main Street in the center of town. Berta had an open-mindedness to hearing ideas that others from her background might find threatening.

Don had taken Intro to Philo his first semester and Intro to Comparative Religion his second semester. What he had learned had both challenged his faith and broadened it. In his comparative religion study he had seen parallels between all the world religions, such as the common values they all seemed to espouse. He had also discovered big differences. He found himself

wondering, "Could the same God be at work in all these religions." If so, he had thought, how would this account for the Buddhist lack of belief in any God. He had shared these thoughts and questions with his mother. Berta would lean forward, cupping her head in her hands as she listened to him. She seemed to eagerly soak up all Don was sharing as if learning vicariously through him. Typical of her responses were remarks like, "Don, God is much greater than we can imagine, and we should not put him in a box," and, "I am okay with other folks' beliefs as long as they're okay with mine."

Berta had recognized Don's intellectual and academic ability during his high school years. She had urged him to consider seminary as an option down the road. Don had grown up in Boden's First Baptist Church, attended Sunday School there, and been active in the youth group. More telling was that he had continued to attend the church each Sunday with his mother and sister throughout his teen years after finishing Sunday School. Although as a young man he did not feel he was ready for adult baptism. During his teenage years Berta had seen him reading his Bible regularly, which he kept on the table by his bed.

Through most of Don's growing-up years his father, Jim, had worked the day shift at the local Ford manufacturing plant. He would often come home from work, walk into the kitchen of their small ranch house, and grab a couple beers out of the fridge. Ignoring his wife and son, Jim would then retreat to the living room where he would flick on the TV, usually to a cop show or a Western, and sit back and watch TV until dinner time. He would repeat this ritual after dinner, making return raids to the fridge for more beer. Jim remained incapable of understanding the close bond mother and son shared and was jealous of it. By early evening, while Berta was cleaning up in the kitchen, Jim had drunk himself into a stupor. Jim and Berta had met in high school in their junior year. They had dated throughout their junior and senior years. In the two years following graduation they had broken up and gotten back together a few times before deciding they would stay together. Soon thereafter Jim decided to join the National Guard and before enlisting Berta and Jim had gotten married. Fertility problems had delayed their having children and accounted for the nearly five-year difference between Don and his sister, Sue. Don had often wondered what his mother had ever seen in his father. Their essential natures stood in stark contrast to each other. Where she was warm and loving, he was often sullen and indifferent. Raised in a working-class family, Jim hardly ever talked about his parents and two brothers, one of whom had done some time in prison.

His father had been an alcoholic ever since Don could remember, and Don had learned from his mother that Jim's father had also been a "drunk," as she put it, and could be physically abusive. Don knew even as a teenager

that his father's decline was due to his dysfunctional family background, and alcoholism and had little to do with his job or working-class background. He knew of too many families from the same economic class as his whose home life was functional and happy. Given a small town's tendency for bad news to travel fast, he knew some of the wealthiest families in town had had more than their share of tragedy and scandal. A son of one of the executives at the plant had been arrested for dealing drugs while away at college. The unfolding drama of his trial and prison sentence had made the local papers.

Jim, when drunk, while never physically abusive, had often been verbally abusive. A bad day at work was all it took to bring out the worst in Jim. By mid-evening the target of this abuse was Berta, who by this time was usually sitting quietly on the couch knitting. His slurred verbal attacks most often focused on some dust or dirt he had spotted somewhere in the living room. Rising to his feet and then stumbling around he would tell her that "she was a lousy housekeeper, that this was her only job, and she couldn't even do that right." Don and his sister, knowing such scenes were almost routine, had by this time retreated to their bedrooms. They could still hear the muffled sounds of their parents arguing behind their closed doors. The arguments always seemed to wind down in the same way, with Berta repeatedly telling Jim to calm down, and go to bed, and with Jim finally waiving his hand dismissively at her as he stumbled off toward their bedroom. The answer Berta had given to Don, whenever he asked what she had ever seen in his father, was that "he was not the man then that he is now," and that "life had worn him down."

Perhaps, Don thought, but the cruel streak his father often exhibited was something he could not forgive. One of Don's earliest memories painfully reminded him of his father's cruel streak. Don was only four or five. He had been jumping up and down on the couch in their small living room. His father had come over to scold him. In his childish exuberance, Don hadn't realized his father's intent. Then the memory comes sharply into focus. As his father stood in front of him, Don had yelled several times, "Daddy, catch me," and then with the impulsive energy of a young child Don had leaped toward his father's arms inches away. His child's trust yet unbroken, Don was sure his father would catch him. Instead, his arms still at his sides, Jim took a step back and let Don fall to the ground. The thick shag carpet broke his fall. As tears flowed, Don's mother came running from another part of the house. Shrugging, Jim walked away, muttering under his breath, "It's better he learn now, that the only one you can trust in life is yourself." Don had no recollection of the physical pain, but this early childhood experience had scorched an emotional scar onto his psyche. The experience became emblematic of many experiences to come where his father exhibited a lack

of caring, often combined with cruel comments and actions. Jim's bitterness toward life most often manifested itself as resentment and anger toward those closest to him. Whatever feelings of love that still stirred within him threatened to weaken the anger and resentment he felt toward life. On some level these emotions were all that Jim felt stood between him and utter defeat in the face of life's injustices.

Don loved his mother despite her denial of his father's alcoholism, but hated his father for the way he verbally abused her. Don's relationship with his father, apart from an occasional exchange about sports or cars, was devoid of any depth or outward signs of affection, much less love. When Don was younger his father had never taken advantage of these common interests to build a closer relationship. He had never invited Don to join him when he worked on his car, or taken Don to a regional minor league baseball game, or participated with Don in any of the father-son activities common at that place and time.

Don had adored his younger sister ever since Berta brought her home from the hospital. He loved playing the role of big brother. When he was in high school, and Susie, as the family called her, had been in middle school, she would most often come into his room, throw herself across his bed, and ask what he was doing. She of course could see that he was studying at the desk next to his bed, but this was her teasing way of interrupting his studies to get his attention. Don would smile, turn toward her, and say, "Not much, how is my baby sis doing?" or some variation of this counter inquiry. Susie would then most often tell Don about some incident that had happened at school. Many of these had to do with a teacher she didn't like, or some social interaction among her girlfriends, most of whom Don knew. Susie steered clear of sharing any interest she had in a boy, as she knew she would automatically get a mini lecture from Don. He would start by telling her, echoing their parents, that she was too young to date. Depending on whether he knew and liked the boy or not, Don might also threaten to tell their parents. He would then often add for good measure that if he heard of any boy mistreating her "he'll wish he was dead." Even though Susie did not tell Don very often about her latest boy crush, she did so occasionally just to tease Don, and because she secretly enjoyed her big brother's protectiveness. Susie had not inherited her mother's more reflective nature. Nor did she share Don's academic aptitude. Neither had she inherited the sullen emotionally detached nature of her father, vivacious and socially extroverted she got along well with everybody.

Don had heard the phone ring, in its loud slightly jarring way. He slowly started to lay down the newspaper he had been reading at the kitchen table and began to turn in his chair to get up and answer the phone. Before

Don could stand up, he heard the footsteps of his father coming from the living room. Due to a shake-up at the plant his father had recently been put on night shift, and had to be at work in an hour. Jim came around the corner from the living room into the kitchen and grabbed the phone off the wall. "Campbell residence," he barked in his usual flat affect businesslike tone. A long silence followed as Jim listened to what the caller was saying. Don looked up at his father, the blood had drained from his face. His expression was one of stunned horror. "What's wrong, Dad?" Don asked with a growing sense of dread in the pit of his stomach. Jim, who now appeared to be in a state of frozen shock, ignored his son. "O dear God," Don then heard his father say in an anguished tone. Another briefer period of silence followed. "I'll be right there," Don's father then said in a hushed tone, his voice breaking. Jim hung up the phone and turned slowly toward Don with a look of horrified disbelief. "What's going on, Dad?" Don said with an increasing tone of urgency and dread. Jim fixed his gaze on Don and the horrified shock on his face softened a little. With an expression of depthless despair, he softly said, "Your mother and sister were just in a bad car accident." "Are they okay, Dad?" Don asked, terrified to hear the answer. Jim spoke haltingly, "A young man, he was driving very fast, ran a stop sign just outside of town, he T-boned your mother's car. Don, your mother and sister were killed instantly." His father's words threw Don into a state of shock. He had heard his father's words, but his mind couldn't process what he had just said. The whole thing seemed surrealistic to Don. He stared at his father with a look of disbelieving horror. What Jim said next hit Don like a second massive knock-out punch. "I have to go and identify . . ." he said, his voice trailing off. Then standing in frozen silence, his back to Don, Jim remarked, "It would be best if you stayed here."

After his father left, Don remained seated for a time. He remained unable to absorb the news he had just heard. To do so would be to admit that he would never again see the two people he loved most in the world, who made his life worth living. Time seemed to stand still as Don sat frozen at the kitchen table, his head in his hands. Finally forcing himself to take some action, any action, he called the pastor of his church to alert him. The pastor's wife answered. Clutching the phone and speaking in an obviously traumatized tone, Don asked to speak to Pastor Tim. Sensing how upset Don was she responded in a gentle caring way, "I am so sorry, Don, Tim is not in right now, I will have him call you as soon as he gets home." The pastor did call a short time later, but Don was in no condition to answer the phone call. His father later made the phone call to the pastor to make the necessary arrangements. Don had mumbled, "Thank you," to the pastor's wife, and then said, "I am sorry I have to go." Don had only a blurred, hazy recollection of

what he did after hanging up the phone. He vaguely recalled stumbling into the living room, grabbing a bottle of Jack Daniels out of his parents' liquor cabinet, and then stumbling back to his room. He drank until he passed out, wanting to escape the nightmare his life had just become. Don awoke in the middle of the night feeling extremely nauseous. He stumbled into the bathroom and began to throw up violently.

The shock and numbness Don continued to feel allowed him to function on autopilot through the memorial service at the church and in the days and weeks that followed. During the week after the accident he saw his father cry for the first time. Sitting at the kitchen table, head in his hands, his father had sobbed in a convulsive, uncontrollable way. The emotional distance that separated Don and his father had prevented him from approaching or offering his father any comfort. Don too had felt the full reality of the loss hit him a couple of times during the weeks following the accident. Still he did not allow himself to break down until he was alone in his bedroom at night. When he did, he threw himself onto his bed and muffled his sobs by sinking his face into his pillow. Pills the family doctor had prescribed for Don dulled the pain and deepened the numbness and zombie-like behavior that lasted most of the summer.

With only a month left before Don's second year at the community college was due to start Don had seriously considered dropping out and just working at the plant. Deep down, though, he feared that if he did this he would just end up like his father. This would not have been because of the job, but because of any inherent tendencies Don too might have toward depression and alcoholism. He felt a deep anger toward his father not for having these tendencies but for his denial of them and the destructive consequences this wrought. It was his resentment of his father that finally drove him, still in a shocked haze, to make the decision to continue his education. As the beginning of the fall semester approached, and the harsh reality of the accident came crashing down on him, Don's shock and numbness slowly began to give way to a raw anger. Don began to feel a deepening anger, even rage, toward the young man who had walked away nearly uninjured. He felt a growing anger toward the senseless injustice of the accident, and the God who had seemingly allowed it to happen. Before long he began to feel an anger toward a world that seemed to be filled with so much senseless suffering, loss, and injustice. Somewhere, though, too, in the back of his mind, Don knew that anger, turned inward, had caused his father to spiral into a bitter shell of a man.

Don was already aware he had an anger problem. It had its roots in middle school when a group of boys had singled him out as a target for bullying. For most of seventh grade he had been pushed, shoved, and hit from behind.

The boys had sought him out and harassed him in the hallway, at recess on the playground, and after school. In groups of three or four they would surround him and begin pushing him around. "Hey faggot, you want to fight," one would say. Another would then say, "He's not going to fight because he's chicken," in a mocking disdainful tone. The abuse would only end when a teacher would approach, or the school bell would ring. Don would then take advantage of this to push his way through the circle of bullies.

Don, who was now a wiry, muscular five foot ten, with chiseled good looks and sandy blond hair, had, in his middle school years, been small for his age. Later, trying to understand why he had been singled out he suspected it was due to his more sensitive nature, inherited from his mother, and his studious ways. Don's academic ability had placed him in the "A Track" classes that offered college preparatory courses. Both Don and the bullies came from the same working-class background, but the boys that had bullied him were all in the "B Track." This was the track for the students less academically inclined, who were expected to graduate high school but then pursue working-class jobs. Many would no doubt end up working for the town's largest employer, the Ford plant. Others would work at a variety of skilled-labor jobs. Jobs that involved intelligence and ability but were often not given the respect they deserved by schools that prized academic achievement above all else. Don came to dislike the academic tracking system, for while it might be a good fit for some students, it could also pigeon-hole other students who might not realize their full academic potential until later on, sometimes not until college. Don had often wondered, given that he and the bullies came from the same background, if there had not been some jealousy or resentment of his placement in the academic track. Never fully understanding why he had been singled out for bullying left Don with a deep underlying insecurity about what had made him different. Had he in some way brought the bullying on himself? What had made him different and so vulnerable to such abuse and ridicule. The feelings of guilt and shame over his inability to fight back, were issues he would struggle with for years to come. His mother, finding bruises on Don's back and realizing what was going on, wanted to go straight to the principal. "That will only make things worse," Jim had said. "The only way for this to stop is for Don to stand up for himself." "But Jim," Berta had responded, "they always attack him as a group, he'll just get beat up." "Maybe that's what needs to happen," Jim would retort in a discussion-ending way. Berta had then whispered to her son to "tell the teachers," but Don's father, by this time, had already indoctrinated him into his narrow view of how a man should act, or at least what led to becoming a man.

Don did not tell his teachers about the bullying, nor did he fight back during the rest of middle school. He just endured the abuse as best he could

by avoiding the bullies in whatever way he could. By his second year of high school Don had shot up seven inches, and he had grown a thick skin over the insecurity that had arisen in him because of the bullying. Much of this thick skin arose because of a decision Don had made soon after his growth spurt began, to never let anyone bully him again. By his sophomore year of high school this resolve had become fully internalized. The thick skin that had developed around his insecurity took the form of anger, and at times rage. When one of the former bullies during his sophomore year passed him in the hallway, shoved him and then said "excuse me" in a mocking tone, Don had shoved him back. When the bully turned back around and said, "Do you want me to put you six feet under," Don stood toe to toe with him, and in a rage cursed him out. The other boy, caught off guard by Don's behavior muttered, "You're crazy," and walked away. Another altercation occurred later that year when two former bullies began harassing him after school in the hallway as he was walking to the busses waiting outside. One shoved him from behind toward the other bully who was facing Don. A rage instantly welled up in Don that caused him to turn around, run at, and tackle the bully who had just shoved him. Then, as a crowd of students gathered round, Don straddled the bully and rained down punches on him, mostly to his face. A teacher, seeing the commotion, raced over and pulled Don off the boy. The principal suspended all three boys for a couple weeks. From that time on the bullies left Don alone. Don justified his rage by telling himself that his father was right, that this was the only way to handle people that tried to bully him now, or in the future. Deep down, though, Don knew that he had overreacted and that the rage he had felt would create more problems for him in the future than it would solve. He also knew that what had made it possible for him to fight back was a leveling of the playing field, essentially his growth spurt, and the fact that only two of the former group had bullied him in this case.

Now another layer of anger had been added. His anger at the world and God for the senseless loss of his mother and sister had expanded the cauldron of anger that roiled just beneath the surface. Without realizing it he had also begun developing a secondary defense. Don increasingly projected a cool, detached persona. If others shared in conversation something of their personal life, Don remained serious, cautious, and guarded, and would not reciprocate by sharing anything personal, particularly about his past. It kept people at an emotional distance, and could also be used in an amplified way to chill out people he wanted nothing to do with. This defense was a double-edged sword as well. It was making him into something of a loner, which again, deep down, Don knew was not who he was. He also knew that while his cool reserve might limit interactions that aroused the rage within him, it could not

prevent such instances from arising altogether. Once such a provocation occurred the cauldron of anger seething, then erupting from within Don could easily overwhelm any self-control. Two such provocations had happened toward the end of Don's summer job at the plant. On one occasion, when Don had arrived five minutes late. A normally brash coworker had chided him for being late. Don had immediately gone toe to toe with him and screamed into his face, telling him to "shut the hell up." Fortunately, three other nearby coworkers were able to separate the two before their conflict escalated. In another instance, a coworker, not knowing of Don's loss, had teasingly said, "Why don't you smile once in a while." This had prompted Don to tell him to "leave me the hell alone." Fortunately, in this case, the man had backed off, saying repeatedly, "Chill out man, I didn't mean anything by it." By summer's end Don had already begun shunning friends from high school. He didn't consider this to be much of a loss as they had primarily just been drinking buddies. Don simply told himself that he had outgrown them.

All through his second year at the community college Don stayed increasingly to himself. He submerged himself in his studies as a way to distract himself from the raw grief that lay suppressed just beneath the surface of his consciousness. Despite this, some memory would occasionally be sparked that tapped into these feelings, bringing them to the surface and causing him to spiral into depression. What Don could not have known at the time was that his grieving process had stalled out. The feelings of vulnerability, helplessness, and the worthlessness, of no longer feeling loved, were so painful that any distraction was preferable, be it his studies or, when a provocation arose, anger. Not being able to come to any understanding of the injustices in his life, his anger, not unlike his father's, was being used to project the negative energy that consumed him out onto others and the world. Don had found some consolation, though, in the two higher-level philosophy courses he took in his second year. The ethics course he took in the spring semester had enabled him to wrestle with questions about suffering and injustice, even if they didn't offer him any ready answers.

Midway through the fall semester Don made the decision to apply to the seminary. Don came to believe that his mother and sister had become like guardian angels, their spirits watching over him. This helped him to recapture something of the unconditional love his mother had given him in life, and offered some much-needed comfort. He had applied to seminary as much to please his mother's spirit as any other motive. Don couldn't imagine himself as a pastor. He was too broken, too angry, his faith had been shaken to the core. Perhaps, he told himself, given his academic aptitude, he could use the seminary degree to teach, to help others wrestle with the deeper questions of life. Don did not want to apply to any conservative Christian

seminaries. The comfort Pastor Tim had offered him had been peppered with religious platitudes: "It was God's will, Don," "You just have to trust God at this time," and "They're with the Lord now." Don knew that there might be some spiritual wisdom in these words, but at the time, he was not ready to hear it. The emotions he was feeling, that were seething just beneath the surface, needed to be affirmed and expressed, even if he wasn't ready to have this happen yet. Don also wanted the freedom to ask deeper questions and seek deeper answers than he thought his tradition could offer. Don had applied to a prominent seminary in the northeast, a mainline Protestant seminary in New England. He had reviewed the application materials they had sent him. They promised an academically rigorous curriculum and counted top-notch biblical scholars among their faculty. At the time this appealed to the side of Don that hoped to find rational biblical and theological explanations for the sufferings and sense of injustice he was experiencing. The seminary was also connected to a major university and presented itself, in the application materials, as both a seminary which trained its students for the pastorate and one of the university's graduate schools, which appealed to students who hoped to become college or seminary professors.

In early spring Don had received a letter in the mail from the seminary. He had been accepted despite the bold gamble of applying. Don had not thought his chances of acceptance were very good. While the school's minimal educational requirement was two years of college, the application materials indicated that consideration here was contingent on compensatory life experience. Don knew this usually referred to students older than him with more life experience. The seminary generally preferred student applicants with a four-year college degree. Don's essay had, he assumed, turned the tide with the admissions committee. He had fabricated his reason for attending the seminary. Citing the accident, he had written that he now had deep empathy for all who suffered. He explained his call as a desire to utilize that empathy through ministry.

Once the school year was finished, Don had once again worked over the summer at the plant. The cauldron of anger within him had settled down somewhat, although this was largely due to the wide berth his coworkers now gave him. Don had, in the past, owned a couple of beat-up old cars that he continually had to fix up to keep on the road. He had bought the latest one, a 1979 Pontiac Catalina, off a friend for a few hundred dollars. Its suspension was shot, and it belched smoke, but it still got him from point A to point B. It would now take him to the seminary, where he was due to start in early September. Soon after, it would break down again.