

If You're Alive

One of the terrific people I coach told me once that she has a “short, sure-fire test for determining whether your mission in life has been fulfilled.” I looked back, amused and waiting and she said simply, “If you're alive, it hasn't.”

I think about that every July 31 when one of these gorgeous summer days descends on us. I find myself quietly staring out at it, remembering the events and voices and faces and emotions of another July 31st in Colorado. It was the summer of 1976.

I'd spent the day with friends on a ranch at the eastern end of the Big Thompson Canyon, right where that rock-walled Canyon, and its River, push together into the near vertical cliffs of The Narrows before spilling into the farmlands of Larimer County, an hour northwest of Denver.

We laughed and played and ate our way through the day. But as we relaxed after dinner in our ranch house next to the river, something happened that changed our mood—and our lives—in a heartbeat. In the coming hours, my twenty-something self was jolted into lessons and questions that are still with me all these years later.

Several miles west (and a half-mile up vertically), massive thunderstorms had stalled through the late afternoon, pounding nearly a foot of water into the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains near Estes Park where the Big Thompson River originates. And a flash flood was building, with three to four thousand people in its path. With little time to spare, Colorado State Patrol cars raced the length of Highway 34, officers doing their best to warn as many of us as they could.

One off-duty sergeant was at home in Loveland when he received the urgent news from his dispatcher. He got into his patrol car and headed west. Just before 9:00pm, his car skidded into the dusty parking lot in front of our ranch house. He stopped long enough to speak emphatically into his loudspeaker, “Get in your cars and leave. Don't take anything with you. A flash flood is headed down the canyon. Go. Now.” And then he was gone, headed back down the canyon to warn others in what became the last hour of his life. Later, the patrol car of Sergeant Hugh Purdy* could only be identified by a key ring labeled “Colorado State Patrol.”

Sparked by Sergeant Purdy's urgency, we ran to our cars, jostling to make sure we had everyone. The rain had started, along with the thunder and lightning. Someone shouted over it, “Go with the driver you came with!” And the last-minute shuffle became fateful for a few.

Heading down the gravel road out of the ranch, our seven cars reached a literal crossroads: Do we turn left and cross that old wooden bridge over the River and make a dash for Highway 34, heading east? Or do we simply turn right up that steep dirt road and reach the immediate safety of a high pasture? It was dark. I later learned that at the same time, nine hours ahead of me in Jerusalem, an old friend woke up with a start, praying for me. I'll always wonder about that.

As the first driver out, I saw a figure in a yellow slicker directing me with a flashlight to turn right, I followed the direction and headed up that steep dirt road into the pasture. Two cars followed me. No one else that night saw the figure in the yellow slicker with the flashlight, and I still wonder about that too.

Four other cars, just a few seconds behind us turned left across the old bridge. They headed east.

Once in the pasture, we got out of our cars and looked down on the roof of our two-story house, and beyond it up the Big Thompson River. I remember earlier in the day my friend Marilyn commenting smugly that in the Pacific Northwest, we would probably have named it the Big Thompson Creek. But as we listened and watched, lightening continued to flash and rain to fall, and within minutes, we heard it coming. A wall of water burst out of The Narrows, crushing the old wooden bridge and swamping the house as it roared by below us. It carried on its crest cars, trucks, and trailers, some with their headlights still burning.

Minutes later that wall of water swept over a low point on Highway 34 a couple of miles away, taking with it two of our east-bound cars, just as those nine friends were thinking they were safely away. Two women were able to pull themselves out of one car as it sank and were instantly ripped away and tossed down the River.

In our pasture, we stood watching for a long time after the flood passed, both hoping and knowing. The thing is, a flash flood is just that, and then, except for the wreckage, everything becomes calm again.

The Big Thompson Flood destroyed homes, livestock, businesses, and most of Highway 34. And it took 144 human lives, including the lives of our seven friends who had not been able to escape their two cars. The two survivors, after a brutal tumble through the cold, debris-filled flood water, were both able to grasp tree branches and hang on until the headlights of rescuers' cars landed on them hours later.

Through the cold night in a ranch out-building, we listened to the radio, and though we had still to learn the extent of our losses, our questions as we hiked out the next morning were obvious: "Why me?" and "Why them?" Later, our two surviving friends began their recoveries and began to tell us their stories: of the final moments of kindness in the car as the water rose, of the hunch an old rancher had that he should drive down near the river to check on his livestock, only to find in his headlights a naked woman in a tree.

In the days following, my group of friends stayed together. As we talked and cried and prayed and even laughed together ("the flood ripped all your clothes off!"), we tested the easy theory that maybe God had simply taken the most gifted and gracious among us. On further reflection, there's probably more to it.

The more powerful questions that have grown important for me through the years are, "Now

what?” And “Now how?” And “Can I live my life as a stewardship, as a gift? Can I live it with gratitude, generosity, honor, and grace—and even with a light heart?”

You know that woman I mentioned at the start of this story? If she’s right about the gift of still being alive, my mission in life is still being fulfilled now, forty-five years on. Every day I get to ask some version of those powerful questions. I ask the brave people I work with—seems like everyone’s got some kind of flood story. And I keep asking myself too.

* [Click here](#) to listen to a tribute to Sergeant Hugh Purdy.