

“If you’re alive . . .”

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One of my terrific clients told me yesterday 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 smiled back and thought about a story that comes back to me every July when one of these gorgeous summer days descends on us. I find myself quietly staring out at it, remembering the events and emotions of another July day in Colorado, over thirty years ago now.

I’d spent the day with friends on a ranch at the base of the Big Thompson Canyon, right where the Canyon, and its River, push together into the near vertical cliffs of the Narrows before opening up to the farmlands of Larimer County.

We laughed and played and ate our way through the day. But as we relaxed after dinner, something happened that changed our mood in a heartbeat. In the coming hours, my twenty-something life was reminded that there are forces bigger than me on the planet, and that I was, am, here on purpose.

A few miles west into the mountains, massive thunderstorms had stalled, pounding nearly a foot of water late into the afternoon. With little time to spare, sheriff’s deputies did their best to warn the two thousand people like us up and down the canyon.

One raced into our parking lot 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 west to warn others in what became the last hour of his life.

Sparked by the man’s urgency, we ran to our cars, scrambling to make sure we had everyone. Someone yelled, “Go with the driver you came with!” And the last minute shuffle became fateful for a few.

Driving out of the ranch, we reached a literal crossroads: Do we cross that old wooden bridge to the left and make a dash for Highway 34 heading east? Do we simply turn right up that steep dirt road and reach the immediate safety of a high pasture? The first driver out, I saw a figure in a yellow slicker directing me with a flashlight to turn right. I did, and 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. Other cars, just a few seconds behind us, turned left across the bridge, and two 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 to the Big Thompson River. I remember earlier in the day commenting smugly that in the Pacific Northwest, we would probably have named it the Big Thompson Creek. But as we listened and watched, lightening began to flash and within minutes, a nineteen foot wall of water burst out of the

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Narrows, crushing the old wooden bridge as it roared by below us, carrying on its crest cars, trucks and trailers, some with their lights still burning.

We stood watching for a long time after it passed, both knowing and hoping.

Moments later that crest arrived at a low point in Highway 34 at the same time as our two last cars, just as those nine friends were probably thinking they were safely away.

The Big Thompson Flood destroyed homes, businesses and most of Highway 34. And worst of all, it took 145 lives, including seven of my friends. Two others survived cold hours perched on trees and debris before they were rescued.

Though I had still to learn the extent of our losses, my questions as we hiked out the next morning were obvious: "Why me?" and "Why them?" Later, as my friends were rescued and recovered, I tested the easy theory that maybe God or the Universe had simply taken the most gifted and gracious among us. On further reflection, there's probably more to it.

The questions that have grown to be more important for me through the years have been, "Now what?" And "Now how?" Can I live my life as a stewardship, as a gift? Can I live it with gratitude, generosity, honor and grace? That's my hope, if not my perfect performance. And as my terrific client reminded me yesterday, another abiding conclusion is that my (and your) mission in life rolls on.