

Chapter 7 – Heading Toward the Abyss

Even though wildlife can be a good escape from your daily problems, there comes a point when you realize watching a squirrel eat a nut is not going to grow your bank account. It was early summer and I had just been rejected by a big recruiting firm and a healthcare firm. My bank account was looking rather bleak and I didn't see any hope in sight. I was beginning to lose faith in my career and in myself, and maybe even a little bit in God. I felt like a zombie with pretty much no path or purpose in life. If I couldn't find a job, I would have to take drastic measures. I would have to do something I was really praying to God I would not have to do. I dug up the plan documents for my company pension plan, and started to make some calculations. I had already started using my credit card to avoid taking money out of my pension account, but I simply could not continue down this path. In July 2016, I took out half of my pension account. I was prepared to pay some of the taxes upfront and the rest come tax time. I knew the consequences of my actions, but I had no choice. I figured I'd get enough money into my bank account to cover me through the summer. That way I could look for jobs, do some skill building and rely on the nice weather and watching the wildlife to lift my spirits on down days.

July 2016

So I was "good" financially again for a while, and stepped out onto my deck in the early evening. A few months earlier some young ladies moved into the house next door, and they said I should come on over some time and join them for a bonfire. So on this night, I took them up on their offer and strolled over to their backyard fire with beverage in hand. It was a little odd though because just before I went over there I went inside to make a drink. But when I came back out there was only one girl sitting there, the rest of them had gone inside. So I walked up to the only girl sitting by the fire and introduced myself, but quickly realized she was on the phone. She was not one of the neighbors but was visiting. I said sorry and walked up to the house. I knocked on the door and waved and the girls inside looked really happy to see me. That was an odd feeling, after so many years of bad luck and bad treatment by people, these girls actually were happy to see me.

So we walked outside, sat down and began to chat. Two of them I had met earlier, but the other three I had not. It was a nice little conversation for about ten minutes, and they were clearly enjoying my company, and I was enjoying theirs. Then, one of the girls asked me what I do for a living. I thought, oh crap, the one thing I don't want to talk about! I told her I lost my job a while back and was in career transition. Unfortunately, that wasn't good enough for her. She pressed, asking me how long ago I lost my job. I said longer than I'd like to admit, then tried to steer the conversation elsewhere. I am not kidding you, she immediately got up and walked into the house without saying a word. She never came back out, and I never saw that woman again. Soon after, another girl got up and said she was going out with friends. Understandable, and likely previously planned, but the timing just seemed odd. She went into the house too. So it was just me and one girl left outside, having a drink. Her boyfriend called and they chatted for a couple minutes. At this point I was feeling pretty unwanted and got up and said thanks for the little chat, and politely left. I was pretty down the rest of the night. I had just been rejected for career opportunities again, and now I was pretty much being rejected by my next door neighbors. Not that I was looking for any kind of relationship with any of them, really just friendship. But

the way they reacted to my answer about how long I had been unemployed made it clear that even friendship was probably not going to happen. They lived in that house another year or so, and I never joined them for another bonfire. We said hi and were friendly, but there was no friendship. They moved about a year after that terrible night.

With that debacle behind me, it was time for, you guessed it, another summer of data analytics and computer coding courses and, of course, more biking and swimming. But one day I looked on Facebook and got a little bad news. My friend Jeff, with whom I had been in a couple jazz bands and who ultimately became a very good friend, posted that he was moving to Virginia. Although we had not played music together in over a decade, and we really had not hung out much over the previous few years other than me coming to see him play in other bands once in a while, it was just another piece of news that added a little more sadness to my life. After reading his post I told him I would miss him and that we should get together one last time before he moved. He agreed, but we never had that last get together. I thought to myself, now my biggest connection to my gambling days (my friend Brian) AND my biggest connection to my music days (my friend Jeff) are both gone; one from dying and one from moving. I just felt like my entire life was slowly but surely fading away.

September 2016

Speaking of fading away, my Uncle John had been having health problems over the past few years. Recently, though, things were starting to look a little more grim. He was in the hospital more frequently and was in more pain than in the past. We all started to pray for him, that, one way or the other, he would be relieved of his pain. In early September of 2016, we got the word that John had passed away. He was one of my favorite uncles because he was nice, funny, always at family events and even helped my Dad build parts of his cabin in northwestern Wisconsin. I was very sad to hear of his passing. I had been to six funerals since losing my job, and it was time for number seven.

The funeral was a very nice service, and for once we got to have closure as John was buried instead of cremated, and it was an open casket funeral. I entered the church, gave my cousin and other relatives hugs, and went up to the casket to pay my final respects. I was clearly more emotional than my cousin Matt (John's son), as I think he had a little more time to process his death than I did. Besides, I'm always emotional at funerals, and it pretty much doesn't matter how close to the person I was. To me, death is always sad, but it is more sad for those left behind than for those who die. Death is a relief from pain for most, and for those who believe in Jesus Christ, it is the beginning of eternal rest in Heaven. It is always hard at first to see it that way, but after grieving we must find a way to be happy for departed souls, because they are in a better place.

To that end, John did not want people to be sad at his funeral. Rather, he wanted people to party! So after the funeral we went back to my aunt's house and had a nice little backyard party. It was a very nice late summer day and it was good to see relatives and share stories. In the way back of the yard a little beverage station was set up with various types of alcohol. You see, John loved Scotch, so there were several bottles of Scotch there. Of course, I could not partake in the imbibing due to my lifelong zero tolerance promise to myself on drinking and driving, so I stuck with water and juice. John's family said a few words about their father and we had a nice meal. After the festivities I stayed to help tear things down and clean up. On my way home I made a little pit stop, to the local liquor store. I don't drink Scotch, but really wanted to toast my uncle with some, so I bought a bottle of Scotch and headed home. I went into the house, poured a little Scotch into a glass, stepped out onto my deck, held up the glass to the setting sun, and gave my uncle a toast and guzzled down the Scotch. It wasn't great, but not too

bad. I saw my favorite rodent out on the lawn, scurrying around in search of a snack. I sat down and just stared off into the distance. It was peaceful, but I was still sad.

The next day, while sitting on my deck, I leaned back and stared up at the bright blue September sky, and again just took in the moment. Suddenly, a thought came into my head. Just to “be” is bliss...watching a bird or a squirrel or stargazing without a worry in the world, without a care for what the world offers (joy, pleasure, love, money, wealth, power) or what it demands (responsibility, work, progress, consumption, success, conformity)...then suddenly, that inexplicable bliss rapidly fades as reality rudely bashes you in the face...and you're back!

A few days after my uncle left Earth, something strange happened. My former employer was suddenly embroiled in a scandal. Apparently, some employees had opened fake accounts for people without their knowledge or consent, thereby racking up service fees for the bank. Several people, including the CEO, ultimately ended up quitting and paying fines. I was very glad I no longer worked for the company as they had really lost their moral compass over the previous few years, which is partly why I lost my job. Although I was not basking in my former employer's turmoil, I certainly wasn't sad for them. I felt bad for the victims of the scandal, but certainly not for the company. I did have to laugh a little at the company's misfortune though. They deserved it! Meanwhile, I was still suffering from the effects of their terrible decision making many years prior.

October 2016

A few weeks later it was my father's birthday. I asked Dad if he would be interested in going to an apple orchard for his birthday, and a really big grin enveloped his entire face. So it was off to the local apple orchard. Unfortunately, it wasn't really all that great. There were hardly any people there, they didn't have the food stands running and there were no samples of apples to taste. All the things you want to see and experience at an apple orchard were not there. We walked around the orchard, looked at trees, Dad ate a couple apples from the trees and I took a few pictures. It was a nice, peaceful afternoon, but it did not live up to my expectations.

While we were sitting in the apple orchard, my father mentioned an article about the Minnesota economy written by a non-profit organization. Later that evening I looked up the article online and read it. It was very interesting. I looked at the About page on their website and could NOT believe my eyes. I thought this organization was in Washington, DC, like most non-profits. This one, however, was not in DC, it was in Minnesota! Not only that, it was located literally three minutes from my house!! I read more of their articles and thought to myself, this could be a really neat place to work. Their political views matched mine, I had good writing skills, I had good presentation skills and the place was three minutes away!

So I did a little networking and was able to set up a meeting with one of their contributors. Interestingly, though, before we even met in person, he mentioned there was a job opening at the organization, and I applied. I asked my contact if he could mention my name and pass along my information to the hiring manager. A couple weeks later I got the dreaded rejection letter. Once again, the competition was stiff, as I was up against people with law degrees and doctorate degrees, and I was not experienced enough. Once again, I had found a really good opportunity. Once again, it led to a dead end.

Meanwhile, I was in the middle of a very difficult online econometrics course offered by the International Monetary Fund through an online platform called edX. After finishing the course I really felt like I was in a much better position to apply for some jobs that required this skill. But like in the past,

that enthusiasm would be short lived. I applied to a bunch of data analytics and economics type positions, but heard nothing. This time, though, I didn't even get any rejection letters. No communication at all this time!

I was dejected and disheartened, but the holidays were coming so I was looking forward to seeing my family and celebrating. But before that, there was a little event happening in November of 2016. Yes, it was the presidential election. At this point I just want to say this: I have done my best to keep politics, and to a degree, religion out of this book. Although these are things I enjoy reading and talking about, I know we are a very divided country at this point in time. That being said, I was following the political scene very closely. Moreover, I was really quite stunned to see how one side was so incredibly confident that they were going to win, as if to say there was no chance in hell that a loss was possible. So I started digging into the numbers.

The first thing I did was look at a bunch of different prediction models online and checked out their accuracy. Some were pretty accurate in the past, others not so much. But this time around the majority of them were predicting a Clinton victory, with very high probabilities. But I was listening to the news and hearing a lot of people talking about and supporting Trump. Even so, the polls were heavily in favor of Clinton. I smelled something was a bit off, so I did some more digging. I researched trends on Google Trends to see who was being searched for more, Clinton or Trump. What I found was interesting. Trump was being researched much more frequently than Clinton. I went further. I decided to research past elections and see how Google Trends compared to actual results. What I found was astounding. Google Trends correctly predicted the last three presidential election winners, the congressional elections AND the Brexit election! I couldn't believe it! So I put the numbers together and wrote a little paper about why I thought Trump would win the election, against all odds.

Sure enough, as we all know now, he won by a large margin. Oddly, though, he lost the popular election. This got me wondering. Why did he win the electoral college but lose the popular election? Well, it's quite simple. A greater share of our population lives in big cities, so in those areas Clinton won. But there are also a lot of other areas that are not in big cities, and those people voted for Trump. The founding fathers created the electoral college for this very situation, for fear of voters and power being too concentrated in certain areas. But another thought also crossed my mind. Google Trends had been very accurate in predicting the winner of past elections, so why was it so off this time, at least in terms of the popular vote? Could it be that there was election voter fraud? Could it be that more people voted for Clinton than actually were eligible to vote? My research seemed to suggest that was a very distinct possibility. I tried to get my research aired on a few tv programs, but to no avail. Oh well. It was a neat little research project and I learned some things from it. In the next election, I'll definitely be looking at Google Trends again!

Not long after the election I was in contact with Deacon Thom about setting up another meeting to discuss my career. He was gracious enough to meet with me again. Sadly, just a few days before our meeting, he notified me he had to cancel because his father-in-law had passed away. I felt so bad for him and his wife, I bought a sympathy card and dropped it off in person at their office, which was only a few minutes from my house. They were on bereavement leave so I just left it with one of the employees. I figured I'd wait until after the holidays to get back in touch with him, but I never did. Other things came up, as usual.

A couple funny things happened during the holidays. The first was when I received a voicemail about a job opportunity. It just so happened that the company was one I had previously worked for in the past.

In addition, it just so happened that the actual job was one that I held in the past at that company, 20 years ago!!! I laughed so hard! I just thought to myself, if getting a phone call about a job I held 20 years ago isn't the nail in the coffin for my career, I don't know what is. I was just speechless. A couple days later I got an email saying that the message was in error. I laughed again! Just crazy!!!!

The other funny thing that happened was one night I got a message on Facebook from my cousin. She was a singer and had a friend who was looking for a sax player in a new jazz band she was putting together. My cousin asked if I would be interested, and I was a bit hesitant at first. My music career was dead and I hadn't played in years. Only because it was a referral from my cousin did I ask for the woman's number. I called her and we spoke for a good hour. It seemed like we had some good connections and chemistry right away.

A few days later she gathered the band together in her garage. A couple guys were missing but we were at least able to meet each other and go over the vision and the music and all of that. We played a few tunes, listened to some tunes and then pretty much talked the rest of the time. She had cats and I am severely allergic to cats, so we rehearsed in the garage. But it was cold out there and not very comfortable to play in. So I was thinking that if I joined this band I would have to rehearse in a cold garage half the year. That wasn't too appealing to me. Anyway, we put together a set list and planned to meet again toward the end of December, just before New Year's Eve. At the last minute the band leader decided to postpone the next rehearsal until after the holidays. I was fine with that because I really didn't want to rehearse until after the holidays. I'd rather start fresh in the new year.

Mimi's mother dies (Dec 17)

Of course, it wouldn't be the holidays without some bad news. It just seemed par for the course over the previous few years. While I was entertaining this idea of joining a band for the first time in many years, I got a message from a good friend of mine, who, ironically, was a singer in a smooth jazz/light rock band I was in way back in the late 1990s. She posted on Facebook that her mother had passed away. I felt so bad for her, especially since losing a loved one during the holidays can be so hard because it's a time of year when families gather to visit and celebrate. So for a brief moment a part of my musical past was overlapping with my musical future, or so I thought.

Carrie Fisher dies (Princess Leia!) (Dec 27)

Right before the year ended, more bad news. I am a huge Star Wars fan, and the news that Carrie Fisher, who played Princess Leia, had died was sad. It didn't affect me too terribly, but it was yet another reminder of how short life is. It was also a reminder that I was getting really old! I remember watching those movies way back in the 1970s and 1980s while growing up. The other thing is that after I lost my job, sports and movies, and in particular, Star Wars, became my escape. So when one of the main characters of my favorite movie series died, it was a sad day.

Invitation to speak at AMEC event (Dec 27)

On that very same day, though, I got some good news. Can you believe it? Good news? During the holidays? I hadn't had ANY good news in four years, and my holidays had been pretty somber recently. The good news was a message from a man who coordinated a meeting at which I spoke while I was still with Wells Fargo. That was way back in 2011, and here it was 2016 and he was inviting me to speak again at one of his upcoming meetings. I was absolutely thrilled! So after the holidays I started putting together a ton of economic charts and doing research for my first ever freelance economic presentation.

Also after the holidays, I didn't hear anything from the leader of that new band for a couple weeks. Then I finally got an email from her. She said she had too much going on and was not going to move forward with the new band. The band was done before it even got started. I liked the music we were going to play, but very honestly, I was not super excited about being in a band again, especially if we were going to rehearse in that cold garage. So after years of trying to resurrect my economics career, a brief opportunity to resurrect my music career was nipped in the bud. Absolutely nothing in my life was working. I felt like I was heading toward the abyss. Although I was excited to be invited to give a paid economic presentation, it was not a job offer. It was a little piece of joy during an otherwise miserable time. So besides the presentation, I decided to focus my attention on something else too. I was hoping to start off the new year on a better footing.

Lessons from Chapter 7

Wildlife can bring you peace and joy, but it will not bring you a job.

If you walk up to someone, especially a stranger, check to see if they are on their phone before starting to talk to them. Otherwise it could be a very awkward moment!

When you are unemployed, especially for a long time, the most dreaded question in the world is "What do you do for a living?" The popular answer is to say you are in career transition, as opposed to saying you are unemployed. Still, when people press, it can get quite uncomfortable. This is especially true when you are meeting new people!

It's sad when a good friend moves away. It's almost as if they have died. You can keep in touch with them of course, but it's just not the same as it used to be.

Death is always sad, but it is more sad for those left behind than for those who die. Remember the good times and thank God they were a part of your life. Be at peace knowing that their pain is gone and they are now in a better place.

Just to "be" is bliss!

Doing something that someone else really enjoys, even if it's not your passion, can really make them happy, even if it doesn't go as planned. You made the effort, and that is a true sign of love.

The experts are not always right, especially when there is so much bias in certain industries.

Google Trends is a great website to see what people are searching for online. It can be useful in predicting certain events like elections or economic recessions.

If you get a referral for a job or any other opportunity from someone you know and trust, look into it. It is likely a good opportunity and you already have your foot halfway in the door! Make sure it's definitely right for you though before committing.

When characters from some of your favorite movies or shows die, it reminds you of how short life is, and that you are getting old!

Opportunities can come from out of the blue. You never know what the future holds.