MY

TOP FORTY

LIST

OF

MISTAKES

**Sky Allen**

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#

# Introduction

Psychologists say that people remember their failures more than their successes. I firmly believe this is true because I am a prime example. I have had many successes in life. But as I lie here in bed typically for twenty-two hours a day, I find myself ruminating over my many past failures. I have made many mistakes, which I will name in chronological sequence with the exception of the first one explaining why I require a hospital bed and wheelchair. I am writing this autobiography in the hope of exonerating myself in the court of my own mind, or at least calming the negative thoughts that so easily preoccupy my thinking and at times invade my dreams. I also am taking a spiritual inventory with ongoing petitions for God to forgive those mistakes that were the result of poor decision-making and/or outright sin, for which I take full responsibility and repent. I will try to end each section with the lesson learned.

My mind is like a meandering stream in that every memory seems to spark two or three new ones, leading me to follow the path of least resistance toward exploration of those moments in time. I may not get every detail exactly right, or spell everyone’s name correctly, but these are past events as I remember them without the benefit of consulting old yearbooks or photo albums. This is my history as written by me for me, the gospel according to me. In truth, there were many happy times and good decisions that took place in my lifetime. Maybe I’ll write another narrative about those some day. But for now, this is what is on my mind as I battle cancer, transverse myelitis, chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy, and a host of other random maladies on this journey to the end of life.

##

# BIRTH THROUGH AGE NINETEEN

## MISTAKE #1 – GETTING THE JAB

Though I almost choke on the words, I am a paraplegic. Nobody seems to know why. I have been to five hospitals and have seen at least seven neurologists, some supposedly among the best in the world. Yet all I have received is speculation and assumption, including four prominent theories. Paralysis is like a prison to me. I am confined to a small space approximately eight feet by six feet, about the same size as a cell. I eat my meals in bed. I enjoy recreation a few hours a day. I am transported in a van. Visits to the doctor require special arrangements. Instead of bars on the door, I have railings on the bed. Perhaps people who work in cubicles can relate (humor intended).

I’ve gone from knee braces to canes to crutches to walkers to rollators to standup walkers to manual wheelchairs to power wheelchairs. Sometimes I feel like Mr. Potter from the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life,” asking to be pushed here or there. I’ve been in outpatient physical rehabilitation once and inpatient rehabilitation twice. I require a hospital bed to sit up and lie down, a Hoyer lift to get in and out of bed, a power wheelchair to move from room to room, a stairlift to go up and down steps, a BiPap to sleep, a wound vac to suction drainage, and even more equipment to scan and monitor my medical conditions. My wife has two herniated disks in her back, and frequently injures herself trying to position me for transport to destinations inside and outside the house. It’s embarrassing to ask people for help, especially when they notice the tubes and wires attached to me, and the atrophied legs. I used to help my neighbors. Now they’re helping me with the most basic challenges. There’s living and there’s existing. Right now, I feel like I’m barely surviving, suspended between living and dying, with my total reliance on medical devices and the beneficence of kind people.

For background, in 2012, a scan revealed a lesion on my left kidney, and I underwent a partial nephrectomy to remove it. The surgeon said he believed he had removed all the malignant tissue and that there was no indication the cancer had spread. The only recommended follow-up was an annual scan. In 2016, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer and underwent a prostatectomy, no known connection to the kidney issue. In 2019, a scan showed that my entire left kidney was diseased and I underwent a radical nephrectomy to remove it. Again, the surgeon was confident he had excised all malignant tissue. However, a routine scan at the end of 2020 indicated the cancer had spread to the bones, most notably shoulders, spine, and pelvis, and I was diagnosed with metastatic renal cell carcinoma to be treated with targeted therapy and radiation. After some troubling side effects, I met with the radiation oncologist who oversaw the treatments, and he said it would have been malpractice *not* to radiate as a lesion was within a quarter-inch of my spinal cord and, left untreated, likely would have invaded and compromised the nerves that control lower body movement, producing the same outcome. He predicted that some day I would be in a wheelchair, but I didn’t believe him. I thought that, with prayer, God would prevent anything like that from happening. I asked many people to pray and was added to the prayer chains of several churches, including some megachurches, leading me to believe that I have or have had over a thousand people praying for me. Yet I still cannot stand or take a step. Radiation induced transverse myelitis is the first theory, and it seems to be the preferred one by most of my specialists.

Or my spinal cord may have been damaged by immunotherapy (Opdivo). After eight months of targeted therapy in the form of a pill (Cabometyx), the cancer was continuing to advance. After four months of immunotherapy, the cancer was deemed stable, but after just two months I noticed that the soles of my feet were numb. I didn’t think much about it as my mother often complained of neuropathy in her feet, and I presumed I had inherited the same malady from her. However, after mentioning said symptoms to my oncologist, she replied that she had seen immunotherapy “do crazy things” such as damaging internal organs, and that it was possible my own immune system was attacking the myelin surrounding the nerves. That’s the second theory.

Or it could be that a combination of vaccines caused the damage. I was working in a hospital at the time the pandemic exploded, and all employees were required to receive the COVID vaccine. The Pfizer vaccine I received was delivered in two doses with minimal side effects (a sore arm each time). However, shortly before beginning immunotherapy, the government was promoting the COVID booster, and I thought to myself that with all my other physical ailments, I did not want to contract COVID. So, I volunteered to receive the booster. And while I was driving home from getting the vaccination, I reasoned that while I was thinking about it, I might as well get the flu shot. The nurse practitioner at the Minute Clinic was reluctant to give me the shot after learning that I had received the COVID shot earlier that day. But she called my oncologist who assured her that if I had no reaction to the COVID vaccine, I likely would not have a negative response to the flu shot. One medical professional speculated that it is possible the three vaccines supercharged my immune system to the point that it began destroying healthy tissue. And that is the third theory.

Or here’s the fourth theory. It could be that the COVID booster alone caused my paralysis. As I write this, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is running for president. He has taken some controversial positions on vaccinations, which led to him being labeled “anti-vaccine” with little chance of winning the election. However, he has clarified that he is not anti-vaccine, but rather opposed to vaccines that have not been thoroughly tested, such as the COVID vaccines that were rushed into the public sphere in less a year, leaving no time for studying the long-term side effects. There are reports of other people developing transverse myelitis after receiving a COVID shot, but apparently the cases are so few and far between that only individual case studies have appeared in the literature, which the government seems willing to accept as collateral damage for the greater good. I may be one of those rare cases, thus I filed an unusual incident report with the government.

Okay, maybe there’s one more. Doctors have said that all this could have been the result of an autoimmune disease or simply “bad luck.” In the end, one neurologist stated that “the only way we could know for certain is to perform an autopsy, cut into your spine, send a sample of your spinal cord to the lab for analysis, but you probably don’t want that right now, do you?” I think they call that “gallows humor.” My mistake was getting the COVID booster, which was not required, and especially getting it the same day as the flu shot. Though this may not have caused my paralysis, I certainly wish I had not added one more option to the list.

## MISTAKE #2 – NOT LISTENING TO MY PARENTS

I was born in Beardstown, Illinois, a short distance west of Springfield. Thereafter, I lived in a series of small Illinois towns including Perry, Kinderhook, Hardin, and Griggsville. We seemed to move every few years as my father climbed the career ladder, mostly staying in Pike County with one foray into Calhoun County. Counties assume greater importance when few people know where the small town in which you live is located. My first memory is in Kinderhook, which is Dutch for “children’s corner.” I was a preschooler, probably around the age of three or four, and I wanted to play outside. My mother said I could play in the front yard, but emphasized that I was not to leave the yard. Mind you, the front yard was not much bigger than a postage stamp with little there of entertainment value. My mother, who remained in the house, likely became distracted by my younger sister, Sally, who would have been a toddler at the time. My older sister, Sandi, was in school. Scott and Susie had not yet been born.

As I was playing, suddenly my ears detected beautiful music wafting on the breeze, and I couldn’t resist. I had to find the source of that music. I left the front yard and ran to the end of the street. One does not need to worry about traffic in a such a small town. I turned right and ran down another street to discover the high school marching band practicing in the middle of the street, presumably for an upcoming event. I followed for a few moments when apparently the drum major called for an about face and the entire band began marching toward me. But in my undeveloped young mind, I thought the band was rushing RIGHT AT me. I panicked, turned and ran tearfully home where my mother had been looking for me. I ran into her arms, weeping uncontrollably. She was so relieved to have me back safe and sound that she did not dole out any punishment. However, let it be known that no good can come from disobeying one’s parents.

I had a baby blanket in those days. It had a satiny silver border that I liked because it felt smooth and soft to the touch. I rubbed it between my fingers so much that I started calling it my “rubber.” I used that blanket to the point that it turned into a lump of fabric and cotton, but it never failed to provide some measure of comfort. I remember being in the playpen with Sally, my blanket, and Sandi’s doll when Sally accidentally stepped on the doll’s face. I had a bit of trouble with my vowels in those days and scolded her by saying, “Saally Aallen, that Sandi’s dowel.” I’m not sure she knew what I meant, because she continued the podiatric assault.

My parents had a knack for living in homes too small for our family. Our house in Kinderhook had two bedrooms, and I slept in one of the bedrooms on a double bed with my two sisters. Sally was the youngest and smallest. Therefore, she slept in the middle. Inevitably, we would get the giggles right after going to bed, and the snickering would let my father know we were not falling asleep any time soon. He would warn us by yelling from the family room, “If you don’t go to sleep, I’m going to come in there swinging.” The image of him entering on a swing set made us laugh even harder, but I don’t remember him ever following through on that threat.

Corporal punishment was the norm in those days. On one occasion, my father broke a yardstick over my backside. Even teachers were restless to get in on the act, and some displayed the classroom paddle like a priceless portrait on the homeroom wall. I only received one swat in school, and that was as an eighth grader when a student threw a gum eraser at the chalkboard, ricocheting briskly mere feet from the teacher’s head. The teacher spun around and demanded to know who had thrown the projectile. Of course, no one was willing to unload that burden of guilt so effortlessly. Then the teacher upped the ante by threatening, “If no one confesses, I’ll paddle the whole class one by one.” It didn’t take the offending party long to realize there was no benefit to admitting culpability at that point, so into a long line I went to share the misery. It did seem to me, however, judging from the sound of the THWAP, that the teacher took a little extra pleasure and put a bit more muscle into my swat, perhaps due to some dissatisfaction with my father, who happened to be his administrator (more on that later). But the ultimate punishment was disappointing my parents. They always seemed so hurt when I went astray.

## MISTAKE #3 – MISSING THE POINT

In first grade, I had a crush on a young classmate by the name of Vickie. I remember her name because she always smelled like Vicks VapoRub. I think I started liking her after she and a group of girls chased me around the school playground, tackled me, and forced me to look at the sun. Fortunately, there was no permanent damage to my eyesight, only my pride. I was reminded of this as I watched the solar eclipse in April of 2024. A neighbor came across the street and asked to use my eclipse glasses. I had been looking at the sun through them, and without thinking ripped them off my face and handed them to him while still looking up. Wow, is that ball of fire ever potent? My optic nerve saw a dark spot for a long time after that. My affections for Vickie dimmed a little when I told my parents about her and her constant fragrance, and they said it likely was the result of her parents smoking menthol cigarettes. That would have been a pretty good guess as approximately fifty percent of the adults in this country smoked back then. I learned to avoid girls that carried the scent of anything out of the ordinary.

For example, in my freshman year of college, there was a girl named Tess who seemed to be following me around during freshman orientation. She had an unusual scent, but I couldn’t identify it. When I went home that weekend, I asked my sister, Sally, about it and she speculated it probably was from medicated makeup. I didn’t really like Tess that much, but I definitely began avoiding her after that. I was learning to pay more attention to red flags when they were being raised.

## MISTAKE #4 – PUSHING THE LIMITS

I used to love watching my father with his reel push mower, the kind with the mechanical blades that whirl to trim the grass. One summer afternoon, I wasn’t feeling well and my mother told me I needed to stay in the house. But I wanted to watch my father mow, so I began watching him from the living room screen window as he maneuvered back and forth across the lawn.

At one point, he was very close to the house and at the far reaches of our property. I leaned hard against the screen to get a better look. Suddenly, the latch on the screen broke loose and I fell head first out of the window and onto the concrete basement window well below, splitting my forehead just below the hairline. Next came a trip to the doctor to get my first set of stitches. The scar provided a reference point for my receding hairline the rest of my life. Sometimes it’s better not to lean into opportunities.

On the fun side, my father was the principal of West Pike High School in Kinderhook. Behind the school was a large dump where townspeople had disposed of all kinds of refuse. This is in the days before garbage toters and landfills. One Saturday morning, my father took me to the dump and challenged me to find an item that I could repurpose into something useful. I found an old red tricycle where the rear wheels were missing but the front wheel was intact. We took it home and I turned it over, tacked some felt onto the rubber wheel, and demonstrated to my father how it could be used as a knife polisher, turning the peddle with my hand. I don’t know if a knife polisher would be considered a household necessity, but my father commended me on my creativity.

Another time, I decided to open an auto repair shop in our front yard. With my mother’s help, I made a sign that read “auto service,” nailed it to the big tree in front, and waited for cars to arrive. Moments later, my father came around the corner of the house pushing my green pedal car. I enthusiastically grabbed an oil can and lubricated the axles and other moving parts. Satisfied, my father pushed it around the other side of the house. A few minutes later, here he came again with that green pedal car and I performed the same service. Away he went, but after he left, I went inside the house and complained to my mother that I wanted to work on “real” cars. After a while, my mother told me that a car was waiting to be serviced, but I balked saying, “I want to work on real cars.” She replied, “This is a real car.” I went outside to discover that my father had driven the family car under the big tree. I still get a lump in my throat when I think about how my parents indulged my youthful fancies. Never ignore a child’s heart. One never knows when a sprout of ingenuity is being cultivated.

One dark night, a tornado was heading from west to east toward our house. My mother was in a panic as she gathered us children into the dining room as far away from the western wall as possible (not to be confused with the shrine in Jerusalem). They say that a tornado sounds like a freight train as it passes, and I can vouch for that. It definitely sounded like a locomotive was roaring right through the windows. No harm was done except for a little damage to the roof, but the next day our yard was filled with dead limbs that had blown off some of the more mature trees. My father handed me a hammer and long nails and asked if I wanted to make something with the free timber. I went to work building some wooden airplanes that I really thought might fly. In those days, it wasn’t unusual to hear sonic “booms” as aircraft exceeded the speed of sound (until laws were passed making such speeds illegal over residential areas), and those sonic convulsions never failed to attract my attention. I hoped my planes would fly at least Mach I, but no luck as they never lifted even a millimeter off the ground.

That house in Kinderhook had a basement, and I’m not sure why our parents didn’t take us down there during the tornado. It could be that such safety protocols had not yet been established. In the corner of the basement was a small school desk, probably retired from West Pike. I remember sitting at that desk organizing some papers and suddenly feeling like a real adult. I tried several times more to recreate that feeling by shuffling and reshuffling those papers, but I never could duplicate that perception of importance. Little did I realize how annoyed I would be later in life trying to organize a desk covered by reports and spreadsheets. Such is the circle of life, I guess.

## MISTAKE #5 – FLUBBING MY ACTING DEBUT

In second grade, I was in a school play. It was about the “three billy goats gruff,” and I was the troll. My character was to guard the bridge the billy goats wanted to cross and to sing the song, “I’m a troll, fol de rol roll, I’m a troll, fol de rol, I’m a troll, fol de rol, and I’ll eat you for supper.” When the last billy goat wanted to cross the bridge, I sang my song and tried to stop him, but he butted me and crossed anyway. I took great pleasure in delivering that prat fall during rehearsals, rolling on the floor in a way that would make a professional wrestler proud. The night of the performance, I couldn’t wait for that scene with the prat fall. But when the time came, I was so nervous that I did the splits and keeled over rather than tumbling the way I had in rehearsals. There was no Tony Award that evening, and I never again had much of a taste for acting. I should remember that I did the best I could and I’m sure my parents loved every second of it. Even my sister, Sandi, can recall the troll song to this day.

I was in some sort of Christmas program every year, but three of them remain prominent in my mind. About the same time as the troll production, I remember wearing a green construction paper Christmas tree for a school program. Imagine that, a public school hosting a Christmas program, not a holiday program. I also remember being in a Christmas program at Akers Chapel Church of Christ. I memorized a short poem, as follows:

“I’m not so very big you see, but you just watch me bow” (exaggerated bow).

“And here’s an announcement I must make, it’s time to take the offering now.”

I don’t recall whether my mother wrote the poem, but it kind of sounds like something she would have authored. Much later, as a teenager, I sang with my youth choir for a Christmas program. Our song was about Christmas around the world, and featured the way the words “Merry Christmas” are proclaimed in different languages. We worked really hard to learn and memorize that song, with many of the dialects sounding rather strange to our American ears. During the performance, with my mother directing, someone in the front got the giggles, and as the piano accompaniment continued, the giggles spread like wildfire through the singers, including me in the back. I’ll never forget the look on my mother’s face, a combination of amusement and disappointment as all that hard work went right down the drain.

I also was in a church play my senior year of high school about the crucifixion of Christ. I played the carpenter who constructed the cross, and I had a big emotional line at the climax. “I made his cross, the Master’s cross. Oh God, what have I done?” We took the play to a talent rally, but my fellow thespian, Phil Waring, hadn’t learned his lines. During the contest, he compensated by breaking into tears, wandering to the back of the stage where a prompter gave him his next line, and then delivering the line with great dramatic flair. After the fact, the judges wrote that most of the acting was wooden except for the illustrious performance of the young redheaded ingenue named Phil. Rote memory can be overrated.

Ironic that I would go on to produce, direct, and play the lead role in church musicals such as “The Boy Who Caught the Fish,” and “Music Machine,” and “Sir Oliver’s Song,” and “His Last Days.” One time, Scott and I dressed in literal plastic garbage cans and danced the can-can for our fall youth kick-off. One has no idea how hot it gets inside a garbage can until dancing like a fool in one. I would direct the youth choir that won first place in the talent rally at South Side Christian Church in Munster, and even more ironic that even later I would become the senior minister there.

All this reminds me of how grueling Sundays were at the Allen household. I had responsibilities for early worship, followed by Sunday School, followed by late worship, followed by youth groups, followed by evening worship, followed by youth choir practice, followed by a few kids asking for a ride home. One bitterly cold winter night, a teenager named Jackie Nevinger asked me to drive her home a significant distance from the church. I didn’t have much gas, and I had zero money in my pocket. I hoped I could make it, but ran out of gas a few blocks away from my home. Not knowing what else to do, I decided to push the car home and somehow deal with it in the morning.

Pushing a car by oneself was much harder than I anticipated, and I was sweating profusely even though I didn’t have a warm coat or pair of gloves. Suddenly a police car pulled up behind me and the officer asked what I was doing. I explained that I had run out of gas, and he said, “Jump in the cruiser and I’ll give you a ride to a gas station.” I further explained that I didn’t have any money (this is before everyone had a credit card or two), and he responded, “I’ll give you a couple of bucks.” He drove me to a gas station and asked to borrow a gas can, but the clerk said there were no cans in the store.

That diligent public servant then rummaged through a dumpster until he found an empty antifreeze jug, went back inside, and asked for a gallon of gas. He was none too pleased when the clerk told him that all the pumps were frozen, making a few snide remarks about the intelligence of gas station clerks. Next, he drove me to the fire station and said, “We’re not supposed to do this.” He went inside and came back carrying a five-gallon can of gas, reporting that every fire station has a stash of gasoline in the event of an emergency. He dumped the fuel into the tank and away I went. As soon as I arrived home, I took off my sport coat and felt the weight of an envelope containing probably close to a hundred dollars cash I had collected for an upcoming youth trip, from which I could have borrowed until my next paycheck. I had forgotten all about it. That was the only time I ever sat in a police car, and it was a good experience. Refund the police!

Another hazard of youth ministry was transportation. How do you get dozens of kids to a location? As a youth minister at South Side in Springfield, I had access to two church buses. I had to get a commercial driver’s license to operate them, but the leadership didn’t trust that either one would make it to a Christ In Youth Conference in Kentucky. Church buses were old school buses that school systems deemed too unreliable to continue using. So I chartered a new bus, but it broke down halfway there, requiring a mechanic to drive another bus overnight that we could use the next morning to continue on our journey. After that I was stranded on a youth trip to Colorado with a fouled fuel filter. We were invited to bring our youth choir to Whiting and used both buses, but one ran out of gas a mile short of the gas station where we had planned to stop. I was stranded by a blow-out in Ohio, a brake failure in Georgia, and even another fouled fuel filter on the way to see Susie perform with the Continental Singers, all on church buses. In fact, the only uneventful trip I can recall is when the Catlin church and our church combined youth groups for a trip, and that old rattletrap of a church bus from Catlin where the floors were so rusted one could see the pavement streaming underfoot, ran like a top.

## MISTAKE #6 – CONFUSING CAUSE AND CORRELATION

During our residency in Kinderhook, I suffered my first health crisis. On occasion, my father would bring home a juicy watermelon which the family would carve and enjoy on our screened-in front porch. One summer afternoon, he walked in the front door with an ice-cold watermelon, and that evening I ate as much as I could. Later that night, I developed a splitting headache, which persisted the next day. Eventually my parents took me to the hospital where I stayed for a few days. Each day I would receive a shot in my backside, causing me to cry until I was comforted by my mother. But after a while, I became so courageous that I could take the shot without crying.

One dark day, multiple nurses entered the room, turned me over on my stomach, and held my arms and legs for what I thought was going to be a routine injection. I braced myself and prepared to be brave enough to hold back the tears. But instead of a shot in the backside, I felt excruciating pain in the small of my back as they administered what turned out to be a lumbar puncture, commonly known as a spinal tap. I screamed bloody murder, wailing with sobs and tears, while my mother shed tears of her own in the hallway. I was diagnosed with aseptic meningitis, and somehow associated the watermelon with meningitis. For years, I claimed I didn’t like watermelon and refused to eat it until I was at church camp as a junior higher. The faculty served cold watermelon one afternoon, and I said I didn’t want any. But everybody seemed to be having so much fun, spitting seeds and commenting on how sweet the watermelon tasted that I decided to give it another try. Guess what. I liked watermelon…a lot. And I didn’t have any headaches. Watermelon was not the cause of meningitis, but someday it may prove to be the cure.

Another family memory I have in Kinderhook is the time when my mother said she had fried some chicken for us. We all came to the dining room, but when I went to take a piece off the serving platter, I remarked that the cuts didn’t look familiar. Mother continued to insist that it was chicken, so I began eating my share. Suddenly, I bit down on something hard. Spitting it out of my mouth, I noticed that it was small, round, and black, also known as buckshot. At that point, Mother broke down and admitted that it wasn’t chicken after all, but squirrel that a friend had shot and offered to our family. This was the only time, to my recollection, that my mother ever lied to me, and she felt so guilty afterward that I don’t think she ever was tempted to try again. In addition, she ended up divulging the truth so quickly that I don’t think she would have made a very good liar. The lesson I learned is that I do like squirrel when it’s prepared with my mother’s recipe, though I’ve never eaten it since.

## MISTAKE #7 – LIVING ON THE EDGE

One cold and snowy Saturday morning, my father took Sally and me to the local high school, West Pike High School, home of the Cardinals, to go sledding. Because of West Pike, I was always fond of cardinals. In a few years, I would become a fan of the St. Louis Cardinals and would attend several games at Busch Stadium, usually as a reward for perfect attendance at our church’s Vacation Bible School. After one game, I brought home an 8x10 glossy of Stan Musial, which I put in my scrapbook and still have. Much later, I would become a Cardinal again while attending graduate school at Ball State University.

When Sally was born, my grandparents, Charles and Lenna Beatty, came to stay with Sandi and me while Sally and my mother were in the hospital. Grandpa and Grandma Beatty never owned a car. They traveled everywhere by train or by bus. When they arrived at our house, I had not yet started speaking. All I would do was point at something and grunt, “Uhhh.” My mother always knew what I meant, but Grandma and Grandpa didn’t. By the time my grandparents left, I was speaking. . .out of necessity, I guess. Hunger can be a great instructor. Only recently did I learn that Grandpa Beatty went by his middle name, Lockwood, most of his life. A historical record indicates that an attorney with the last name of Lockwood signed some documents back in the 1800s. I believe that may have been Grandpa Beatty’s grandfather. I know one of Grandpa’s brothers was an attorney in Beattyville, Kentucky. My wife and I visited the courthouse there and were impressed by a large bronze plaque in the foyer commemorating “Uncle Emile” (actually, great uncle). I have such a rich legal pedigree, I think I should have been a lawyer.

Getting back to West Pike, the school had a long sloping driveway that dropped all the way down to a two-lane highway. It appeared that a few cars had driven on the approach to the school because the snow was packed hard where tires had crunched. My sister, two years younger, went first and made her way about a hundred feet down the hill. I went next. Determined to go farther than she had, I pushed off and allowed gravity to do its work. When my sled started to slow, I used my arms to propel myself a few yards more. I could hear my father and sister yelling at the top of the hill, and I thought they were cheering for me to set a long-distance record. After carrying my sled to the top of the hill, I learned that they had been yelling for me to stop, fearing that I would slide all the way to the highway. Defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory.

## MISTAKE #8 – BEING CARELESS

In second grade, still living in Kinderhook, I asked my father if I could take trumpet lessons. I’m not sure why I picked the trumpet, but that was the only instrument that interested me at the time. My father, as principal of West Pike, asked the high school music teacher, Mr. Estes, to give me lessons. I don’t know if Mr. Estes was paid or merely volunteered, but I was excited. I imagined that I would be playing trumpet by the end of the first lesson. But instead, all Mr. Estes handed me was the mouthpiece, which he allowed me to take home after instructing me to use it as much as possible in order to strengthen my embouchure. I about drove my family crazy blowing that thing, which they all thought sounded like an ear-piercing duck call. But after a few weeks, Mr. Estes trusted me to take home a cornet. I felt like a million bucks walking out of that school with a real instrument, but soon was confronted with a dilemma. How was I going to get it home? I had ridden my bicycle to the school, and had no option other than to thread the handle of the case through the left handlebar of my bike, and away I flew.

All was well until I made my last turn headed toward home, which was to the left. As I made the turn, the weight of the cornet pulled me to the left and I fell into the ditch, or technically the culvert at the end of the ditch. I landed on some jagged concrete, with the bike on top of me and my prized cornet, and couldn’t help but notice a nice new scrape across the front of the case, never mind the scrapes on my knees and elbows. I thought Mr. Estes would be angry when he saw the damaged case, but at my next lesson, nothing was said, presumably because it was a loaner with little value. However, never underestimate the power of gravity when transporting cargo.

One time, my father and I went to visit his mother, Grandma Evans, in Granite City. My paternal grandfather, Leonard Allen, died when my father was only three years old. Grandma remarried, but Arthur Evans also expired. Grandma supported herself by doing ironing for neighbors during the Great Depression and by hosting “roomers” in her tiny home. The roomer rented a space such as a small bedroom and bathroom, and typically worked in the steel mill where my father’s brothers, Uncle Leonard (Lynn) and Uncle Truxton (Truck), also worked. My father could remember delivering laundry with his toy wagon during the Depression. I asked why neighbors would pay someone to do ironing when they could do it themselves, and he explained that this was “welfare,” neighbors taking care of neighbors without the embarrassment of a handout. I took my cornet with me when we went to visit Grandma, and that night took it out of the case and just for fun was blowing warm air through it. Alarmed, my father scolded, “Don’t do that. You’ll wake the roomer.” But Grandma corrected him, “No, no, that’s fine. Let him do it.” “You mean, it’s okay if he plays his cornet here?” “Oh, I thought he was blowing his nose.” Communication is key in such circumstances.

Grandma Evans was born in 1888 and died in 1985 at the age of ninety-seven. She loved quilting circle at her church, and faithfully walked there every week. I have a keepsake quilt that she made, and I think she made one for all her grandchildren. One quilting circle day was extremely windy, so much so that her minister called and begged her not to try walking to church. She responded with something along the lines of “I’ve been walking to that church since before you were born,” and proceeded to walk there anyway. The minister was right to warn her, because a strong gust blew her down and she broke a hip as she landed on the sidewalk.

On the way to visit her in the hospital, it occurred to me that she had seen everything from the horse and buggy to the space shuttle, and could remember her own father wearing his Civil War uniform for a parade. I wanted to learn everything she could recall, but she developed a staph infection at the hospital and didn’t feel well. I did ask her why she stopped being a school teacher and she replied, “Wasn’t allowed,” explaining that married women were prohibited from teaching school in the early 1900s, hence the expression “old maid school teacher.” The next day she died. I never had the chance to ask her the other million questions I had.

## MISTAKE #9 – BEING IN THE WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME

My father joined a church softball league, and the team wore black jerseys with white lettering. They asked me to be their bat boy, and I willingly accepted. Do you know why? Because I would be wearing the same jersey as the big boys. In fact, I still have that jersey.

One night, the game was being played under the lights. There was a climatic gambit involving our batter, a long fly ball into center field, a player rounding third and heading for home. But I noticed that the bat had been dropped by home plate. My mind raced. What if our player tripped over the bat trying to slide into home? It was my job to retrieve the bat. I had to get that bat. I thought I had enough time to grab the bat before the runner reached home plate, but I was wrong. Three of us were on a collision course in a battle of time and space—the runner, the catcher, and me. Just as I reached for the bat and the runner began his slide, I felt a huge hand grab my arm and yank me high into the air. It was the umpire plucking me from the brink of disaster. I don’t remember if our runner was safe or out. All I know is that it’s not always a good time to try to be a hero.

## MISTAKE #10 – SPYING ON MY MOTHER

When my brother, Scott, was born six years after me, my father took my sisters and me to the hospital in Pittsfield to visit my mother and newborn sibling. After visiting, we were hungry and looking for a place to eat. I pointed to a sign at the end of the street and suggested that we could eat there. “Where,” my father questioned. “There,” I replied, pointing to the sign. Again he asked, “Where?” “Right there,” I repeated, “That sign says ‘Food.’” My father laughed uproariously, “The sign doesn’t say ‘Food.’ It says ‘Ford.’” Lamentably, I had not yet learned to read cursive. Lacking an appetite for carburetors or mufflers, we found another place to eat.

After Scott came home, my mother and father said they were going into their bedroom and that under no circumstances were they to be disturbed. We lived in a two-bedroom house with Sandi and Sally occupying one room, and my mother and father, along with Scott in a basinet, occupying the other. But where was my room going to be? As one walked in the front door of our house, there was a living room on the left and a family room on the right. So, the family room became my bedroom. There was not much privacy, but I had a closet that passed through to my parents’ bedroom, one of the unique features of a craftsman home. Mother’s coat with a mink stole hung in the closet, and those beady eyes of that mink seemed to stare right through me.

I couldn’t imagine why I was disallowed from the bedroom where all the action was, so I decided to sneak through the closet and take a peek into my parents’ room. I saw my father sitting on the edge of the bed and my mother lying beside him. And there was Scott lying between them. What was going on? All of a sudden, my mother sat up and I saw that she was not wearing a top. I felt so guilty and ashamed that I had seen my mother naked, but I now know she was nursing. After that, I tried not to let curiosity get the best of me.

Beyond curiosity, I had a vivid imagination. One Christmas Eve, my parents took me to the town square to sit on Santa’s lap and receive a bag of assorted hard candy. As we were leaving, I looked up and thought for sure I saw Santa’s sleigh fly directly overhead. Logic should have informed me that I had just seen Santa sitting on a chair a few minutes ago, but I wasn’t thinking rationally. Or I might have assumed he needed to make a hasty exit to deliver presents to the millions of children around the world. About the same time, there was a vacant house on our block. One day I was convinced I had seen a ghost in the front window. I was pretty “spooked” as I ran home in a state of panic. My mother talked me off the ledge by persuading me it probably was the wind blowing the shade, and I was soothed despite the fact that the window was closed and there was no wind. My family attended Sunrise Service every Easter, which meant awakening before dawn and driving home just as it was getting light. I saw a rabbit in our front yard that I immediately identified as the Easter Bunny. Mother gave me a pass on that one and just nodded in agreement. I still have the gift she gave me that Easter—a bean bag clown not coincidentally made from the same fabric as my sister’s dress. Also from my childhood, I have a lion pajama bag that, when used correctly, looked like a decorative pillow on my bed, and my favorite doll, a rabbit inexplicably named James. Oh, and I have Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy dolls made by aunt Josephine (Josie), and a satin letterman’s jacket with my name on the back. Some day, my children, all this will be yours (mischievous smile).

Other Christmas Eve memories include hearing the rustling of plastic bags as my parents began dragging presents out of the attic after they thought we were fast asleep, the attic door being in my room. Or having my mother awaken me late on Christmas Eve to figure out how to operate a toy rifle she was giving Scott. The gun had a speaker grill in the stock with a small plastic “record” that spun and made a “blam” sound followed by the drawn out “pew” of a ricocheting bullet when the trigger was pulled, but only after it had been cocked fully. My mother, who probably never fired a gun in her life, was not cocking it correctly. Or staying in the girls’ room trying to fall asleep by watching the blue flame of the space heater. There was a vent between the downstairs and upstairs levels in the girls’ room, and I could hear my parents arranging things around the Christmas tree in the living room below, making my mind race with excitement. The next thing I knew, my father was calling “Merry Christmas” from the bottom of the steps.

## MISTAKE #11 – TRYING TOO HARD

On a bright summer day my parents said we needed to go to a nearby small town to purchase some formula for Scott. I didn’t know why we couldn’t go to the grocery store in our town, but I thought nothing more of it. We all jumped in the car and drove a short distance to Barry. The parents instructed us children to wait in the car and said they would be right back. After about fifteen minutes, I looked out the back window to see my father pushing a pink bicycle across the street. It so happened that the formula for Scott was a cover story, and my mother and father, in fact, had gone to a second-hand store to purchase a larger bicycle for me, a real grown-up bike to replace the beginner bike I had been riding. Never mind that the bike was pink. It was love at first sight.

I couldn’t wait to get home and take that Schwinn Monarch on its maiden voyage. The whole family gathered outside to watch me zoom down the street. But as soon as I pushed off and pedaled a couple of feet, I tried to settle onto the seat. Instead of plopping onto the cushy padding of the supple seat, I landed hard on the top tube, causing the kind of pain that only a male can experience. I found myself drifting toward that dreaded ditch again, and right before crashing I heard footsteps coming from behind. My father rescued me just before I hit the dirt. Daddy, as I called him then, was a track star in college and was known as Flash. I suppose this was about the time a comic book character by the same name had been introduced to the public. All I know is that Daddy earned his nickname that day and saved me from certain pain and suffering. I had that bike until Junior High when my parents bought me a brand new three-speed from Western Auto. Later in life I would own five consecutive motorcycles—two Yamahas, two Ducatis, and a BMW. I learned to abide by the motto: “Never ride faster than your guardian angel can fly.” I still wonder whatever happened to that old Monarch.

I do have a couple of recollections about the three-speed bike. It had a shifter on the handlebar grip, which was very cool, but I wanted a stick shift like a sports car would have. So, I bought a stick shift and mounted it on the top frame. I also installed a speedometer, but to this day have no idea how I did either one with the limited tool selection we had at home, stored securely in an old metal tackle box. One night I had a sleepover at Greg Becker’s house. We spent the night on the screened-in front porch as such amenities were very fashionable in those days, not so much anymore. However, before falling asleep, we began to notice lights flashing outside. Greg said he didn’t know if the flashes were lightning or the neighbors walking around with flashlights. Naturally nervous about the neighbors, I didn’t sleep well that night, and the next morning fell asleep as I was riding my bike home. I was jolted awake by hitting the rear bumper of a parked car. I could see no damage to the bumper, but the first two inches of the front fender of my bike were curled under. Yet the bike was rideable and I make it home.

When riding on Main Street, I always tried to see how fast I could peddle, sometimes getting up to thirty or thirty-five miles per hour with a goal of forty—without doping, I might add. Just ask Lance Armstrong. One day I was feeling strong and pushing myself to get to forty, apparently peddling a little too fast. I turned right onto Childs Avenue, the street on which our house was located, but I was carrying too much speed rounding the corner. Also, I wasn’t expecting a young couple to be sitting in a late model Mustang at the stop sign. I braked as hard as I could but couldn’t stop. I hit the front driver’s side bumper of the car and went sprawling onto the hood. I’ll never forget the look of horror on the young woman’s face as she covered her mouth with both hands. The driver asked if I was okay. I assured him that I was, even though I wasn’t, and we went our separate ways, never to interact again.

When I was around thirteen and Susie four, I took her for a ride on my bike. I’m not exactly sure how this plan was hatched. I seem to remember that Susie asked for the ride and I didn’t really want to give one to her, but how persuasive could a four-year-old possibly be? At any rate, she sat on the top tube while I pedaled away down the street. We reached a little dip in the road, and I started peddling faster, thinking that the wind in her hair would give her a nice thrill. I can recall her straight light brown hair rippling like a flag in the breeze. The next thing I knew, the bike came to a sudden stop, flinging me over the handlebars facedown onto the pavement. Susie was pinned under the bike, bawling loudly. When I ran to her, I noticed that a bloody chunk of skin about the size of a half dollar was hanging from her ankle. I threw the bike into the ditch, picked her up, and carried her home. My parents rushed her to the doctor, who warned that if the wound didn’t heal soon, she would need a skin graft. However, the wound did heal, though it left a hard brown spot as a reminder that cheap thrills usually are worth exactly what one pays for them.

## MISTAKE #12 – TAKING BRIBES

When I was going into third grade, we moved to Hardin, a small town in Calhoun County where Daddy took a job as Superintendent of schools and Principal of the high school. One of the attractions for Daddy was a new school building designed with a native American motif such as triangles representing teepees on all the exterior walls. The high schoolers were Warriors, while we grade schoolers were Braves. When contractors began excavating for the school a few years earlier, they discovered truckloads of Indian relics such as arrowheads, ax heads, hide scrapers, and more. A teacher at the school, whose name was Mr. Kamp and whose ancestors had settled Kampsville a few miles north of Hardin, claimed many of these trophies for himself and, according to Daddy, had a first class display in his garage. I was fascinated by the folklore and mystery of the environment, such as Indian burial mounds that were visible in the middle of fields and a bald eagle that was mounted in a display case at the entrance of the school. Rather than being felled by a warrior’s arrow, the eagle had met an inglorious end being hit by a school bus.

Mr. Kamp was such a fastidious collector that he gave Daddy, who in turn gave me, some rejects from his collection, such as broken arrowheads and spear heads. Apparently, if indigenous people were making a weapon from stone by chipping it with a harder stone, and the weapon cracked in an unintended spot, they just would throw it on the ground and start over. I hid some of these “seconds” in the crawl space under our house thinking that in the future, an archeologist would find them and wonder how they got there. One day I was exploring the crawl space, and I saw something that gave me goosebumps. I slowly backed out and told Daddy that I had just seen the biggest mouse ever. He asked what color it was. I answered, “brown.” He said, “That isn’t a mouse. Mice are gray. That’s a rat.” I never went back under the house again. By now the house is gone and I suppose the relics were added to a pile of rubble, totally escaping the notice of scientists.

The main problem with the house in Hardin, other than rodents, was that it once again had only two bedrooms. With our family of seven, Mommy and Daddy slept on “Hollywood” beds and Susie inhabited a basinet in what might be considered an office. Sandi and Sally shared one upstairs room, and obviously I would occupy the other. But by now, Scott also needed a room. Where was he going to sleep? Mommy and Daddy had a proposal. They approached me and asked, if they let me pick brand new furniture, would I share my room with Scott? Of course, I jumped at the chance.

We went to a furniture store with all kinds of luxurious outfits. But one bedroom set caught my eye. It included a bed, a chest of drawers, but most importantly a dresser with three large drawers on one side, three on the other, and six small drawers in between. I thought those small drawers would be perfect for storing my nicknacks, of which there were many. The inconvenience of sharing a room with my brother was a small price to pay for that lovely new furniture with those small drawers. Little did I realize that I would be sharing a room and that furniture with my brother until the day I got married, and my parents would continue using that furniture until they died. And the biggest reveal of all—those small drawers were fake, created by painting black lines on the facades of the large drawers. Beware aesthetic adornments.

## MISTAKE #13 – SPLITTING HAIRS

Also in third grade, I remember working in class on a crossword puzzle about synonyms. The word in question had three letters starting with “s” and ending with “y,” and the clue was “a synonym for bashful.” No one could solve the riddle, so the teacher, Mrs. Walsh, said in the loud voice, “I would think that of all people, SSSKKKYYY would know the answer.” So, I gave it my best shot. I guessed, “sty?” Mrs. Walsh laughed heartily.

Truthfully, I was pretty shy back then. For some reason, I didn’t like people calling me shy, but I didn’t mind them saying I was bashful. In a similar manner, I didn’t like people calling me skinny, but I didn’t mind them saying I was thin. Both conditions I was able to overcome later in life. With my ability to ascertain the distinction in those words, I know I should have been a lawyer.

One of the most popular shows on television during my childhood was “Sky King,” a show that previously had been on the radio. Of course, people called me that, which I hated. Sandi called me “Skeezix” from the cartoon strip “Gasoline Alley,” which I equally hated. At times, Daddy jokingly would call me “Rob Roy.” In high school it was “Skybo” or “Skyball,” and by college it was Skyer or “Skybird,” which was shortened to “Bird.” I had no problem with Bird, which was milder than the nicknames given to many of my friends. My Whiting classmates, whose family trees typically stretched back to Eastern Europe, thought my name was too short and began calling me “Allenski.” Probably the worst was when Mommy would introduce us children to strangers. My name was not in use then as much as it is now, and people sometimes would mishear and ask, “Why do you have two sons named Scott?”

I was in third grade when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, I remember Mrs. Walsh rolling a television into the classroom so we could watch the funeral procession. Mommy and Daddy weren’t that politically active, but I do remember them expressing concern that if a Catholic were elected president, would he take orders from the pope, making the pope de facto president of the United States? In that moment, I was more fascinated by the fact that I was watching television in school, a breakthrough in technology that I never dreamed possible. Filmstrips were the norm in those days. Equally amazing was watching the moon landing at church camp in July of 1969.

I was enthralled with the Navy Hymn performed during the Kennedy funeral procession, realized it was in our church’s hymnal under the title, “Eternal Father, Strong to Save,” and asked if I could sing it as a special in the small Jerseyville church we were attending. The minister agreed, so I practiced with Mommy’s accompaniment until it was more perfect than even Elvis could have performed it. That morning, when I stood on stage to sing, I felt the nerves of having an audience in front of me, and my voice began to quiver, not in a sweet vibrato sort of way. I felt that I had ruined the song, and ran to the church basement in tears. Mommy came down to console me and assured me that it was wonderful, and besides, it was for God and she was sure he was pleased. I was consoled by that. Later I asked to join the church choir, but the minister said I was too young, which really hurt my parents’ feelings as I was coming with them to midweek choir practice anyway. Not long thereafter, we left that church.

Speaking of the church basement, the congregation recently had purchased an old building that the members were trying to renovate themselves. I recall going there several times for work days and trying my hand at painting walls with a brush, which Daddy quickly covered with a roller before the streaks dried. The building had a small front lawn, but instead of planting grass, someone decided it was better to plant wheat, supposedly because it grew faster and provided better ground cover than grass.

I don’t know the pros and cons of the grass versus wheat debate, but I do know there was a large burlap bag of wheat kernels in the church basement, waiting to be planted. One of my friends suggested that I eat a handful. He sweetened the invitation by eating a handful himself, and continued to look strong and healthy. So, I ate a handful. It tasted pretty good, like a slice of bread. Thereafter, any time I passed that bag of kernels, I would scoop up a handful and pop them in my mouth.

One Sunday morning, Mommy was in the church basement, observed me eating a handful of wheat, and shrieked in horror. Didn’t I know those seeds had been soaked in fertilizer and could make me deathly ill? Mommy and Daddy monitored me for the rest of the afternoon, but I remained as strong and healthy as the friend who initially had enticed me. Maybe I grew a little taller because of the fertilizer.

## MISTAKE #14 – NOT BEING AWARE OF MY SURROUNDINGS

Miss Mortland was my fourth grade teacher, and she was a strict disciplinarian. The class was completing a worksheet, but I was distracted by sweet little Jerilu, who sat two desks in front of me. Between us sat Joellen, a girl I also thought was kind of cute. When the teacher wasn’t looking, I bopped Joellen on top of the head and said, “Pass that on to Jerilu,” which she eagerly did. I went back to my worksheet, when a few moments later, Joellen bopped me on top of the head and said, “That’s from Jerilu.” Back and forth we went until finally Joellen and I were just slapping each other’s hands like high fives on steroids. The next thing I heard was Miss Mortland’s indignant voice proclaiming with theatrical breathiness, “WWWEEELLL, the last two people I would have expected. You both are in big trouble.” I did not realize Miss Mortland had been standing right behind me.

With Daddy being the school superintendent, getting in trouble at school meant being in trouble at home. The next day, with my parents’ urging, I had to apologize to Miss Mortland, and she graciously accepted my apology. I think she felt sorry for me because a few days later we were completing a worksheet on homonyms, and a question was about what part of the cow a butcher would not use, waist or waste. I couldn’t understand why I got it wrong, so I went to Miss Mortland’s desk and tried to make the case that a butcher would never use the cow’s waist, gesturing with a motion like Aaron Rodgers’s championship belt taunt. She laughed and taught me the meaning of waste products, but then gave me credit for the question anyway. I definitely should have been a lawyer. Funny that Miss Mortland taught music class where we mostly sang patriotic songs and spirituals as Miss Mortland couldn’t carry a tune.

One day I happened to walk home from school with Jerilu after a fresh snowfall. There was a patch of virgin snow lying ahead, so Jerilu suggested that we turn away from each other and write the names of our childhood crushes in the snow. Then we revealed our answers. Of course, I had written Jerilu, but to my dismay she had written some other boy’s name. That was the end of my infatuation with Jerilu. I saw both Jerilu and Joellen at the fiftieth high school reunion and they both looked a little ragged. But they probably thought the same of me.

The highlight of my summers was attending church camp—MacGomery Christian Service camp near Carlinville (where I was box hockey champion and had the blisters to show for it) and later Mississippi Valley Christian Service Camp near Pittsfield (where I saw the moon landing on a portable television Dad carried to the chapel on his shoulder). The best part of camp was the two afternoons we were taken to a body of water for swimming. At MacGomery, we loaded into the back of pickup trucks and bounced haphazardly to nearby Bullard Lake. But, as always, there was a problem. I couldn’t find my swimsuit. I tore my suitcase apart, but it was nowhere to be found. I don’t think I even had a pair of shorts I could wear, and likely had only one pair of jeans that I had to wear all week. The entire faculty was going to the lake, so I was told that without a suit, I would have to stay on my bunk in the dorm the entire four hours while everyone else was away. Those were miserable and lonely hours. When my friends returned, they were pumped and talked endlessly about how much fun the lake was, deepening my sorrow with each exciting recital.

Two days later, when it was time to go swimming again, a faculty member by the name of Charles Boatman noticed that I wasn’t getting ready. He asked why not, and I told him I couldn’t find my suit. Graciously, he asked if I would like to borrow his. The suit was about three times too big, but I eagerly accepted. At the lake, everything was going “swimmingly” (eye roll) until I swam to a raft about twenty yards from shore. I pulled myself out of the water, but my (I mean, Mr. Boatman’s) suit slid off my slender pelvis and remained at the surface. Mortified, I plunged back into the water, tightened the strings on the waistband, and surfaced, looking around to see if anyone had observed my naughty exhibitionism. There was not a single reaction. Upon returning home, I told Mommy about the whole scenario and she asked, “Didn’t you remember I packed your swimsuit in your knapsack?” Sure enough, there it was, dry as a bone. My bad.

Also at MacGomery, every night featured some special programming (such as Stunt Night on Friday), and Thursday was Bible Drama Night. I was chosen by my team leaders to play the part of Christ and to be crucified in an impactful somber scene. Everything was going great until my teammate, playing the part of a Roman soldier and wearing nothing but a towel around his waist, stepped across me as I was lying prone on the floor. The soldier “nailed” my right hand, but as he stepped over my face to “nail” my left hand, I looked up and noticed that he was wearing nothing under the towel—no undies, no tighty whities, nada, zilch. I couldn’t help it. I started laughing, and soon my whole team was laughing during what was supposed to be the climax of the performance. Needless to say, we didn’t win and were admonished vigorously by the team leaders for making a mockery of the cross.

Decades later, I would play the same role again, both at church and on a youth mission trip to New York. We transported the life-sized wooden cross by laying it down the aisle of the church bus. But after dozens of teenagers had walked on it, the bottom splintered, making it fit a little looser in the metal base. We performed our passion play for a storefront church in Syracuse, but the cross was too tall to fit inside. So we performed the crucifixion scene on the sidewalk right in front of a huge plate glass window. As I (Christ) was lifted on the cross, it pitched forward and I thought I was about to plunge headfirst right through the window without even the possibility of protecting myself with my hands, which were securely “nailed” to the cross. The scenario that unfolded in my mind was not only unbiblical, but terrifying. I told the Roman guard to my right, Robbie Daniels, to keep tension on the rope so the cross would not lean ever closer to the window, hoping that the audience would assume I was sharing one of the well-known “sayings” from the cross. Just then, a drunk staggered by on the sidewalk and asked Robbie what was happening. Robbie said something to the effect of, “We’re killing Christ but we don’t want him to be slashed to death.” The inebriated man mumbled that he understood and kept weaving down the sidewalk. The thought crossed my mind that this chain of events probably was not too dissimilar from the actual crucifixion as there may have been some boozers roaming around the foot of the cross that day, trying to make sense of it all.

## MISTAKE #15 – POKING THE BEAR

I loved sledding back in those days. We had a nice hill right behind our house, and I probably skidded down that slope hundreds of times. In fact, I traveled down that bank so many times that I grew bored with it and decided to make it more challenging by not watching where I was going. My Flexible Flyer was the old school type made of a birch wood deck and steel runners. It was steerable and could be used with either seated or prone positions. That day I decided to lie face down on it, arms by my sides, head down, eyes closed. As I reached the bottom of the hill, I didn’t know I had drifted to the left. The sled struck a white picket fence and stopped. I kept going, jamming my head and neck into my shoulders. My parents took me to a local chiropractor who performed the stereotypical neck cracking technique. I’m not sure about the wisdom of manipulating the cervical spine of a patient that young, but my neck did feel better after a couple of sessions.

Not long thereafter, I went with some friends to sled on an unfamiliar hill. This hill had a lot of long, spindly weeds that were hitting me in the face on the way down. Not having learning my lesson from the picket fence, I again lowered my head and closed my eyes. When I finally looked up, I was heading straight for a tree. I tried to abort and had shifted ninety degrees off the sled when I hit the tree. The sled stopped. I did not. My right thigh slammed into the tree trunk and I was in such agony that I stopped sledding and left for home, much to the amazement of my friends who knew I would never stop sledding without a good reason.

My sister, Sandi, was dating a young man she met in college named Gene Branson. Gene was known for having a quick temper, as I was to discover that day. He also was training to be a martial arts expert. Gene was lying on Sandi’s bed, and Sally and I playfully were trying to take his socks off. Gene suddenly gave me a karate kick right on the same spot that had impacted the tree a few hours earlier.

Days later, my thigh still was hurting, and my grade school coach noticed that I was having trouble walking up the steps toward the front door of the school. He told my parents who took me to the doctor. I climbed onto the exam table and lay back. The first thing the doctor did was try to bend my knee, which caused me to scream and sit bolt upright. An x-ray revealed a calcified muscle, which the doctor said was the result of repeated blows to the same tissue. I had to go to the hospital in Jerseyville three times a week until the calcium relented. The lesson learned is fairly obvious.

I almost had my revenge against Gene. Daddy had a hunting rifle that fired a .22 short, probably one of the smallest rounds of ammunition on the market. I remember how excited I was when Daddy announced he was going to fire that rifle exactly at midnight on New Year’s Eve. The whole family gathered in the frigid darkness as the countdown began—five, four, three, two. At the count of one, Daddy pulled the trigger and. . .POP. I was expecting a loud CRACK like in the movies or television. Instead, the muzzle blast sounded more like a cap gun—how disappointing.

Anyway, one day Sandi asked if I would like to join Gene and her on a hike through the woods of a nearby state park. Almost unbelievably, Daddy said I could take the rifle and enjoy some target practice while I was there. As we were walking through the trees, I was loading and unloading the chamber, cocking and uncocking the hammer, clicking and unclicking the safety. I didn’t realize that if I opened the bolt while the rifle was cocked, it would fire, and that’s exactly what happened. The rifle discharged and the round went slicing through the trees just to the left of Sandi and Gene. For some reason, they didn’t seem to mind that much, and we kept walking.

When we came to a river, I asked Gene to throw an empty bottle into the water, and he threw it as far as he could. I took four or five shots at that bobbing target, with no success. I thought I had been a pretty good marksman with my BB gun, so I told Gene that the sights must be off. He took the rifle from me, and with his very first shot, shattered and sank the bottle, remarking dryly, “The sights are fine.”

## MISTAKE #16 – OVERDOING THINGS

In fifth grade, with Mrs. Rose as my teacher, I became obsessed with driving. When I was riding in the car with Daddy, I used to fantasize about him having a heart attack and me having to take the wheel and drive him to the hospital. Thankfully, this never happened. But one afternoon, Daddy and I were walking around the grade school building and saw a group of boys taking a homemade go-kart down the driveway of the school. As a reminder, in those days small towns didn’t have underground sewer systems. Instead, rainwater was managed with a ditch alongside each street. When the ditch wasn’t busy causing me pain and suffering, I had great fun merrily floating improvised boats down the stream.

On this occasion, when Daddy and I approached the boys, they had a guilty look on their faces, evidently thinking they were going to be in trouble with the Superintendent of schools for engaging in extracurricular activity on school property. To their surprise and mine, Daddy asked if they would let me take a turn navigating the go-kart down the hill. I was elated. I took the driver’s seat, and the boy who built the contraption gave me some brief instructions. He said that if I start drifting a little to the right, then turn the steering wheel a little to the left. If I drifted to the left, just turn a little to the right.

I use the phrase “steering wheel” metaphorically. It did not resemble a wheel at all. Rather, it was a metal rod with a spinner knob attached to each end. Confirming that I had understood the instructions, I was given a mild push and away I went. Everything went great for the first few feet. Then I began drifting to the right. Instead of turning the wheel “a little” to the left, I yanked it hard, and began careening toward the left side of the drive. I jerked it to the right, and now was going toward the right side of the drive. I believe the professional racing term for this error is OVERCORRECTING. Zigzagging my way down the drive, I was almost to the bottom of the hill and prepared to go into that dreaded ditch again where the beloved vehicle would be demolished forever when I heard footsteps from behind. The boy caught up with me just in time and saved me from certain disaster.

I felt embarrassed and ashamed, and waited for the boy’s admonishment. He looked me straight in the eye and said, “Do you know what you did wrong? Nothing. You did exactly what I told you to do.” I guess at times angels wear blue jeans. Later in life, I had similar problems with overdoing things, such as overtightening bolts and rounding off the heads of screws. My mantra in those days seemingly was, “Why do it when you can overdo it?” Sometimes I would use my non-dominant hand to tighten things so I wouldn’t, say it with me, overdo it.

## MISTAKE #17 – WAITING TOO LONG

For some reason, all the outdoor chores fell on me—mowing, washing the car, raking, etc. I probably started mowing around the age of seven, using a reel push mower. To begin mowing, I would flip the mower over with the blades spinning on top to prevent contact with the grass. One day, Sally started walking next to me as I pushed the mower to the starting point. I warned her not to get too close because if she lost her balance, she could fall into the whirring blades and cut herself. Of course, she wouldn’t listen. She lost her balance, fell into the blades, and cut her finger. Looking back, I had a lot of responsibility for such a tender age. And Sally had the bloody finger to show for it.

Soon thereafter, I began to notice that some lawns had a nice edge along the sidewalk. Not knowing how to produce such a pristine look, I decided to improvise by running into the house, grabbing Mommy’s pinking shears, and slicing away. She was happy to see the edging until she noticed her scissors lying right there on the sidewalk. She was not so happy anymore.

Later, Daddy bought a gasoline-powered mower from Western Auto, and I used it for several seasons until one hot afternoon when the engine suddenly stopped. Daddy was perplexed by this development as the mower was fairly new, and I went with him to take it back to Western Auto where he demanded an explanation. The salesman asked Daddy when he had last checked the oil. And Daddy responded, “You mean, a lawn mower has oil in it?” Needless to say, there was no refund. Much later in Griggsville, the house there was situated on a hill and I was mowing the side incline next to the ditch. The mower turned completely over with the blade spinning just inches from my appendages. I flipped it back over upright and it still kept running. So maybe lawn mowers really don’t need oil after all.

One day I was washing the car in our front yard. Another car pulled up and parked at the house directly across the street. The mother went inside, leaving two young children, a boy and a girl, inside the vehicle. As soon as the mother was out of sight, those two kids began playing with the controls, honking the horn, turning the steering wheel, etc. We did not live on a big hill by any stretch of the imagination, but we did live on a slight decline. And that car started to roll backwards. At first, I tried to convince myself that the car wasn’t really moving. But then I noticed that it was ten feet farther away than it was when it was parked. My mind started racing. If I jumped inside the car, would I know how to stop it? Would the mother think I had something to do with it? How would I get anyone’s attention? The car began to pick up speed, rolling closer to the main street at the end of the block. Almost on reflex, I dropped the hose and began sprinting as fast as I could, opening the car door just as, WHAM, it crashed into a parked car on the opposite side of the street. Hurley Dodge had a dealership on that corner and often parked new cars there. It was a brand new Dodge that had been struck, and there I was holding the door open. Nothing more came of it, but don’t hesitate if you ever have the chance to be a hero (which I admit contradicts an earlier lesson I claim to have learned).

## MISTAKE #18 – ALLOWING MYSELF TO BE ROBBED OF JOY

The boys in my small town banded together to form a wiffle ball league. We weren’t the major leagues, but it sure seemed like we were pretty close. We chose team names, kept statistics, selected our favorite bats, and grew very competitive. At first, we played our games on the school playground. But then, someone discovered a new venue. There was a construction site nearby where excavators had dug into the hillside, forming a natural stadium. Oddly, we never saw any contractors or property owners to tell us we couldn’t play there. On game day, we would chalk the baselines, batter’s box, and on deck circle. And we made rules. One rule was that if a boy hit a fly ball over the top of the wall, he would climb to the top and scratch his name on the dirt where the ball had landed, surrounded by his entire joyous team.

One day, it happened for me. I swung that plastic bat as hard as I could, connected with a fast ball, and the white plastic sphere whistled over the wall. . .rolled around a clump of dirt, and fell into the outfield. The team and I immediately ran to that spot to celebrate my homer. I couldn’t wait to immortalize my accomplishment by signing my name in the dirt. But the other team followed us and began arguing that if it didn’t stay over the wall, it wasn’t really a home run. Words were exchanged, but the dispute never was resolved. By now, we all know that if a player hits a ball over the wall in fair territory, it’s a home run even if it bounces back onto the field. On that day, however, no one had encyclopedic knowledge of the game and there was no joy in it for me.

It reminded me of when I joined Little League. During practice one afternoon, the coach was teaching us how to bunt. Obviously, this was way before t-ball and we were using real wooden bats with regulation baseballs. The coach showed us how to hold the bat, how to keep an eye on the ball, etc. It was my turn to come to the plate, and I was really hoping to bunt successfully on my first attempt. No such luck as I whiffed on the first pitch, and the second, and the third. On the fourth pitch, somehow my fingers had wrapped around the front of that Louisville Slugger and I laid down an excruciating bunt with my bare knuckles that scampered lazily back to the pitcher. As they say in sports, “no pain, no gain.” I was relieved just to be on first.

Years later, Daddy took me to a high school baseball practice, and as principal, asked the boy on the mound to throw me a pitch. I had never seen a curve ball before, and after the windup came a sizzling rocket that seemed to be laser guided straight to my head. I jumped about halfway to third base as the ball sailed right over the plate. Looking back, it seems a bit curious that a high school pitcher would throw a curve ball to a young kid, as if a strike mattered in that instance.

In college, I joined a pickup game of baseball in front of the boys’ dorm. When it was my turn to bat, I stepped up to home plate, which was the stereotypical shape crudely drawn with a rock on the sidewalk. The first pitch was right down the middle. I swung as hard as I could, but in sheer defiance of the laws of physics, that ball clipped the top of the bat and seemed to accelerate as it careened backward toward the dorm. It sounded like a gunshot as it, THWACK, punched a baseball-sized hole in the dorm’s frosted bathroom window pane. There went another unexpected contribution from my college fund as frosted windows were even more expensive that clear glass to replace.

A worse situation arose many years later. I received a call from the coach of our church’s coed softball league, Steve Frye, asking if I could play just one game. He explained that it was the playoffs, and that too few of the regular players were able to make it. I responded that I had not played softball in a long time, and probably was a bit rusty. But he pleaded with me that he would have to forfeit the game and allow the other team to move forward in the bracket unless he could find one more player. He offered to give me a ride to the game, so I relented.

The game was a fast-paced version of softball where each batter received only one pitch. A ball was a walk, and a strike was an out. If there were two outs, the team could bypass a female and bring a male to the plate. I actually was having fun until the bottom of the ninth inning. The other team was ahead by one run. Bases were loaded, two outs, and the next batter was a female. I was the batter after her. In his infinite wisdom, the coach elected to bypass her and bring me to the plate. To recap, bottom of the ninth, bases loaded, two outs, behind one run, one pitch, and yours truly at the plate.

The coach reminded me that if the pitch is a ball, I should let it pass and take the walk to first. But the pitch was perfect, right down the middle and over the plate. I swung, hoping to drive in at least one run. But I must have swung a little late because I thumped an easy grounder that skittered to first base. The game ended. We lost. Again, no accolades for me. And the worst part was that I had to ride home with the crestfallen coach.

I also played basketball beginning in fourth grade. We had an exhibition game, before which Mommy had to take up the straps on my jersey because on my slender frame it hung like a sail billowing in the breeze. Thanks to Mommy being such a conscientious saver, I still have that jersey. I was high scorer on our team with a grand total of four points. Later, Otto Arnold, my seventh grade teacher, was my junior varsity coach. In one game, he took me out right before the half. When I went back in the game during the second half, I committed the cardinal sin of stealing the ball, driving all the way down the court and scoring a basket for the other team. I guess it was a good thing it happened then because I never again made that mistake.

A few years later, Mr. Arnold was dissatisfied with my lack of aggression. During a time out, he told me in the huddle to become more aggressive by saying, “Get in the game and be forceful. I don’t care if you commit a foul.” That was a breakthrough for me because I always had tried to avoid fouls. The game resumed and I tried my best to foul the player I was guarding, but ended up with a jump ball. I then realized I did not have to worry about fouls and could get away with attacking the ball. My defensive and even offensive skills improved after that.

Other joy-robbing experiences followed. I can hardly remember my parents taking me shopping for clothing. Typically, I wore hand-me-downs, especially from my cousin, Larry Allen, who was ten years older. Fortunately, Larry’s school colors at Granite City High School were the same as mine—red and black. One time, he gave me a black satin jacket with red accents that I would wear to basketball games. Friends often would ask where I got it, and I truthfully would answer, “From my cousin Larry.” Other times Larry gave me Converse All Star tennis shoes, which I loved. Unfortunately for me, my dear Aunt Dee (short for Delores) dutifully had stenciled “L ALLEN” in block lettering on the side of every pair. I don’t know why it never occurred to me to take a black magic marker and turn that L into a square or triangle, because friends invariably would ask the meaning of the L.

I think I was a bit jealous of cousin Larry. He was an only child and his parents doted on him. He possessed a club house in the basement having a door with a string attached to turn on a radio whenever anyone ventured inside, and a sign that read, “No Girls Allowed.” He also had a ping pong table, shuffleboard, and darts. I remember throwing a dart at the board when I was very young. My aim was way off to the right and almost hit uncle Truck in the head. He ducked and instead the dart hit the basement window, fortunately without breaking it.

During my pre-teen years, I would be so hungry that I would make a ketchup sandwich or a mayonnaise sandwich or a sugar sandwich, or I would drink a glass of milk with a spoonful of vanilla. Saturdays were cleaning days when we each had to clean our own room and another room in the house, after which we would go to the kitchen for what we called “dog eat dog,” code for no prepared meal but we could eat whatever we could find, the phrase eventually reduced to “dog it.” I usually ate a can of sardines which, fortunately for me, no one else seemed to want. One day, I asked Daddy how much money he made as a principal and superintendent, and he answered, “$12,500,” a decent salary in the late Sixties, probably a monthly salary for a similar position today.

Yet we never seemed to have enough money. Having five children was one explanation, and I’m sure my parents tithed at least ten percent to the church. I have a feeling they also supported other families, and maybe even my grandparents. I remember taking generous supplies to Grandpa Beatty at the nursing home in Saint Louis, Missouri, such as a television or radio or fresh pajamas. The next day everything would have been stolen by the staff, leaving nothing for a man who had been diagnosed with hardening of the arteries and had no recollection to identify the thieves. When Daddy started filling the pulpit at a small church on Sunday mornings and evenings, we would stop at a restaurant on the way home, a rare treat. Donahue’s had the best buffalo fish sandwich in the world, and I think I ordered it every single weekend. Looking back, I have a feeling Daddy was paid cash from the offering plate and had a few extra dollars in his pocket on Sunday nights, which likely was completely gone after buying dinner for the family.

To clarify, Daddy was an elder at the church in Pearl when the minister unexpectedly left. The elders decided to take turns preaching while they searched for a new minister, but Daddy was so much better at public speaking that the others asked if he would preach every Sunday. Eventually, they asked if he would preach permanently and they discontinued the search. A couple of years later, that led to a full-time ministry at Griggsville, meaning that he served in the school business for twenty-four years, and the church business for twenty-seven years, just the opposite of my career progression from theology to psychology.

Sometimes neighbors would give us food. Wiley and Ruby Crum offered Mommy two chickens, and Mommy sent me across the street to get them. The chickens were alive when I got there. One by one, Wiley stepped on the head and pulled on the feet. I suddenly understood the phrase, “running around like a chicken with its head cut off,” as those chickens did exactly that before my very eyes. I carried them home, after which Mommy put them in a pot of boiling water, explaining that it would make them easier to pluck. I’ll never forget the sight of those four claws sticking out of the pot and swirling with the currents. Seeing them slaughtered and boiled and plucked certainly took the edge off my appetite, but I ate my share anyway, along with a few bristles that survived the amateur plucking process, of which I was an active part.

Yes, we were poor, but I didn’t know that then. Everyone else in town seemed to have the same financial struggles we faced. Imagine the joy one day when my parents took me shopping at Roth’s department store to choose a pair of shoes. The name “Roth” will occur later as Sandi began to date the owner’s son. I picked a pair of orange leather work boots with rubber soles and strings that laced on eyelets up the front. These were very trendy in that day and I couldn’t wait to show them to my friends. Because my feet were growing so fast, my mother recommended that I buy the boots a couple of sizes bigger so I could grow into them.

I wore them to school on a Monday morning, and while walking in, the first person I saw was Benny Lane, the eighth grade teacher and varsity basketball coach. Mr. Lane was a sharp dresser and always wore pants that today would be comparable to “skinny jeans.” He also drove a sweet Ford Thunderbird similar to the one featured in American Graffiti. That morning, Mr. Lane took one look at my oversized orange-colored boots and snorted with his best Midwestern accent, “Sky, where did you get those clodhoppers?” I didn’t know what a clodhopper was, but I deduced he wasn’t paying me a compliment. Again, joy was robbed.

On another occasion, I was enjoying lunch in the school cafeteria. My family always lived close to the school and every day I would go home for lunch. Eating in the school cafeteria felt like dining in a fancy restaurant with all kinds of delectable food choices I never had tasted before. On this day, the main course was goulash, and I was shoveling every morsel into my mouth as fast as I could. Mr. Lane, whose tastes were far more sophisticated than mine, noticed the frenetic activity and huffed, “Sky, you must have a cast iron stomach.” Somehow that food just didn’t taste as good.

## MISTAKE #19 – ENDANGERING MY BROTHER

I never had any ill intentions toward my brother, but mysteriously, I always seemed to be there when he got hurt. When I was around the age of nine and Scott three, we were trying to make the bed in our shared room, which actually meant that I was making the bed. Rather than helping in some obscure way that a three-year-old might be capable, Scott was making things more difficult by standing on the bedspread. I asked him nicely to move. He didn’t budge. I asked him again, more forcefully this time. He stood his ground with an impish grin on his face. It is not too difficult to imagine what happened next. I jerked the bedspread, not anticipating that his feet would fly up in the air and he would land on his forehead, causing a big black and purple goose egg instantly to appear. My parents took him to the doctor, who suggested that his older brother may need some instruction in anger management.

A little later, I had a Daisy BB air rifle and imagined myself to be like Ralphie in “A Christmas Story,” commissioned to protect the family with my version of “Old Blue.” Our house had a brick chimney with a silver metal cap, but a big black bird had built a nest inside. I took it upon myself to save my family from certain carbon monoxide poisoning or even a house fire by eliminating that bird. Every chance I got, I would shoot that metal cap and the bird would come flying out, but inevitably would fly away before I had a chance to reload. I had an idea. I asked Scott to climb a tree onto the tin roof, knock on the cap, and slide to safety while I had a BB locked and loaded in the chamber, so to speak. He did exactly as I instructed, climbing the tree, slapping the metal cap, and sliding away while I took a shot. Oops, I missed again. But a few moments later, I heard Scott crying feebly, “Sky. . .Sky.” I ran around to the other side of the house to find Scott flat on his back, bleeding from the back of his head. He thought he was sliding onto the flatter bathroom part of the roof, but actually had slid right over the edge. Again, my parents took Scott to the doctor who said he could see Scott’s skull through the gash. Of course, he needed stitches.

What happened to the bird, one may ask? After school on a sunny afternoon, I came out of the house and spotted that bird sitting on a branch beside the chimney. I ran back in the house, grabbed my trusty Daisy, ran back outside, took aim, and pop, I hit the bullseye. The bird fell off the branch, slid down the tin roof, and landed just a few feet from where Scott previously had touched down. But there was a problem. The bird wasn’t dead. I pumped a couple more BBs into the back of the bird’s head, but it wouldn’t kick the bucket. I brought Mr. B (short for Mr. Black), our cat, to the bird thinking he would love a free meal, but Mr. B wasn’t interested. So, I walked away. . .and never killed another living thing after that.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I did try to catch animals. I was a firm believer in the myth that if I sprinkled salt on a bird’s tail, the bird wouldn’t be able to fly. Grasping a salt shaker, I chased quite a few birds around the backyard before discerning the punch line of that cruel joke (later in life I would know better when invited to go snipe hunting). And as a Cub and Boy Scout, I wanted to be an outdoorsman. So, I asked my uncle Charles, Mommy’s brother, for plans to build a rabbit trap. He mailed me a hand-drawn diagram that Daddy gave to Greg Becker’s father, the grade school custodian, and asked Mr. Becker to build it for me. Being in the school business has its perquisites, one of which is asking favors such as this. Mr. Becker built me, not one, but two traps out of wood, and Daddy took me to a nearby cemetery to set them.

I baited them with carrots, which any Bugs Bunny fan will know is a rabbit’s favorite food, and raised the trap door which was designed to fall shut once a rabbit took the bait. Then Daddy drove me home to wait. We went back to the cemetery several times, but I had no more luck with rabbits than I had with birds, until one windy night. Driving to where the traps were set, I noticed that the door of one of the traps had been sprung. Suddenly, my mind began to race. What would I do if there were a rabbit inside? Would I have to kill it? Would we eat it? I actually was relieved that it was a false alarm. Evidently the wind had blown the door closed, for there was no wild game inside. After that I lost interest in rabbit trapping, and Daddy gave the traps back to Mr. Becker, who said that his family ate rabbits and would love having the traps. I still have the letter from Uncle Charles, though.

On another occasion, Scott told me he would pay me fifty cents if I could climb the rope on our monkey swing all the way to the branch where the rope was attached (I will explain the composition of a monkey swing later). I usually couldn’t climb that high, but being offered the opportunity to make a half dollar, which would buy a lot of candy in those days, I found an extra gear, made it to the top, and shimmied back down the rope. Scott held out his fist as though he were going to pay me, but when he unfurled his clenched fist into my hand, all he dropped were a few small rocks. He laughed maniacally and ran away as fast as he could. I promise that I was not trying to hurt him in any way and didn’t imagine that I could strike a moving target running as fast as he could through the backyard, but I flung those rocks hoping the noise of the stones hitting the ground nearby would be a warning not to commit financial fraud ever again. Instead, against all odds and with precision that would make Tom Brady envious, one of those projectiles landed right on top of Scott’s head and I was in trouble again.

Firecrackers were illegal in Illinois. Many of my friends would beg their parents to drive the short distance across the Mississippi River to buy firecrackers in Missouri, and then gleefully detonate them around the Fourth of July. But my parents were law-abiding citizens, and would never tolerate such flaunting of the legal system. My sister attended college in Missouri, and stayed there one summer while she worked in nearby Saint Louis. When we went to visit her, my parents allowed my brother and me to purchase a package of firecrackers and then set them off on the mostly deserted campus. As we were enjoying the splendor of these explosive devices, a tall elderly man began walking toward us. As he grew closer, I recognized him to be Pop Bourne, the head resident of the boys’ dorm. It was one thing to be in trouble at home and at school, but now was I going to be in trouble at a college? To the contrary, Mr. Bourne whipped a brown paper grocery bag from behind his back half filled with firecrackers, explaining that though fireworks were legal in Missouri, they were not allowed in the dorm, and that he had confiscated these from the residents. He asked if we would like to have them? What could we do but accept such a generous offer? We had a blast, both literally and figuratively.

The Chiatello family lived just south of Pearl, where we attended church. Word came to Mommy and Daddy that one of the Chiatello children, a young boy named Joey, was having some behavioral problems. My parents took him in to our home, hoping that a little tough love would turn him around. No dice, as he soon found a new outlet by tormenting Scott, who was around the same age. We also tried to house Grandpa Beatty after he began to show signs of dementia. He would rise at the crack of dawn thinking that he had to get to the train station, where he had worked for years as a dispatcher. He became a bit cross with Scott who was very active for his age. Scott eventually grew taller, stronger, and faster than any of us, and fully capable of defending himself if ever attacked by a sibling, grandparent, or foster child.

Before I left for college, I purchased a used 1970 Chevrolet Chevelle with rear wheel drive. That winter, probably over Christmas break, Scott and I decided to go to Whiting Park. It was extremely cold that day, and I parked in a vacant lot near the football field on what evidently was black ice. When it came time to leave, I tried to drive forward, but there was absolutely no traction. I tried reverse, but the wheels just spun. I asked Scott to get out and push, with no success. I looked around and all I could see was a big piece of cardboard wide enough to go under both tires. Evidently, someone had received something big like a refrigerator for Christmas. I positioned the cardboard under the rear tires thinking that maybe it would create enough traction to build some momentum. Again, I put the car in gear, but in my rearview mirror, I saw the cardboard fly away like a frisbee. Then came an epiphany. Maybe I should put the cardboard under the tires one more time and tell Scott to stand on it. Surely his added weight would keep the cardboard in place long enough to get moving. All I saw this time were Scott’s feet flying in the air, reminiscent of the time he was standing on the bedspread. How he survived me I’ll never know. I also don’t know how we got out of the parking lot, but obviously we must have.

Scott and I finally became friends when I was in college. I would come home almost every Friday night with a liter of pop (liters were sold in glass bottles before two-liter plastic bottles became ubiquitous), and he and I would lie on the floor in the basement to drink pop and watch Creature Features on late night broadcasting. My parents had an old black-and-white television that had been remanded to the dungeon, and it was perfect for this type of use. It was one of those boxy old timey sets with giant knobs that simply refused to die. Creature Features televised old black-and-white horror movies that were more humorous than scary, and were hosted by a half serious character called Svengoolie and his rubber chicken. I had the opportunity to meet the Son of Svengoolie when he came for a meet-and-greet near my hometown. Maybe there’s a little Svengoolie in all of us.

## MISTAKE #20 – SPYING ON MY SISTER

My sister, Sandi, is seven years older, and when I was in grade school she was in high school. She dated a few boys, and one day a nice young man by the name of Mike Roth (of Roth’s Department Store notoriety) offered to walk her home from school (actually from the school bus). Having not learned my lesson from spying on Mommy, I decided to spy on my sister. I crept around the garage trying to overhear her conversation with Mike. Unable to hear well enough, I ran along the side of the garage to get a bit closer.

The terrain around the garage was littered with flat, sharp rocks, pieces of quartzite that had broken away from the mother lode centuries ago. Somehow, I kicked up a rock with my left foot, and with my next step punctured my right calf about a foot off the ground just an inch or so left of the shin. The gash started bleeding profusely, so I ran inside calling for Mommy, who determined that I needed immediate medical attention.

She took me to the local doctor’s office about a block from our house. I didn’t know about such things then, but looking back I’m pretty sure the physician was an alcoholic and chain smoker judging from the items on his desk. Apparently, this was before the medical community knew such things were bad. But instead of three or four stitches, he pulled a metal clamp out of his drawer, inserted the prongs on each side of the wound, and squeezed. Let me tell you, that clamp hurt worse than the gash. But somehow the wound healed and now I have a permanent division sign that I can see when I cross my legs—a line with a dot above and below. Maybe that’s why I was so good at math.

On a side note, around that time I decided that I was too mature to call my parents Mommy and Daddy, and started calling them Mom and Dad. This made my mom a little sad, especially because Sandi always called her Mother. Her little boy was becoming a man. At least she didn’t expect to be called “Mommie Dearest.” Also, I decided to invent a new word—franshockaloco. I don’t know what it was supposed to mean in any vernacular, but I would walk through the house shouting it at the top of my lungs. That, combined with practicing the trumpet a mandatory thirty minutes a day, must have delighted my family.

That’s right, I was required to practice the trumpet thirty minutes a day, and my parents had to sign my practice chart which the teacher dutifully checked. Our band teacher, Sandra Reichman, was hired by my dad for her first official position out of college, and she was demanding. I remember her throwing her baton at a drummer when he wasn’t keeping proper rhythm. She stomped on my sister’s toes when she played a wrong note on the flute. Flautists had the misfortune of sitting on the front row, in very close range of her wrath. My friend, Greg Becker, played trombone, but he had to quit because he was having nightmares about band. And this was just grade school band. Dad always had a lot of patience for Miss Reichman as he knew she had found her father suspended in the garage after hanging himself. Any other details about that I know not. Also, this was Miss Reichman’s first teaching position fresh out of college, which explains why she seemed about my age when I saw her again at a class reunion decades later.

But all that practice must have paid off because we were good, even in grade school. Three of us were so good that in eighth grade, Miss Reichman had us join the high school band for contests. She would take us in her new Mustang convertible, which I thought was so cool, to the high school for rehearsals. She previously had given us the sheet music to practice, and I thought I had it mastered. Imagine my surprise at the first rehearsal to learn that one song was in cut time, and moved twice as fast as I had practiced. Uh oh, I must have missed that. I quickly learned that high school moved at a much faster pace than junior high. And of course, we won a blue ribbon, in part because Miss Reichman cheated by giving us a subtle countdown for the sightreading challenge, which was against the rules.

Later Miss Reichman married Mr. Lane, my basketball coach, and they came to visit me while I was working my way through college at a truck stop. They were upset because I could only pump them two dollars’ worth of gas due to the OPEC embargo, and even then, I was intimidated by her and him. Eventually, she divorced Mr. Lane, but kept his last name and was Sandy Lane, which I always thought sounded like a street in Florida.

## MISTAKE #21 – CHALLENGING AN OLDER CLASSMATE

Miss Reichman had a system for keeping band members on their toes. At any time, a lower chair could challenge a higher chair for the position. I was second chair cornet in sixth grade when I challenged Bo Arnold, an eighth grader, for first chair. The way it worked was both musicians would prepare a song. On the day of the challenge, they would go into the hallway, play the prepared song, and then sightread a new song. The band would vote on which was better. Guess what. . .I won. All of a sudden, I was first chair. And Bo was a bitter second chair.

One day during recess, I was playing basketball with nine other players including Bo. It was during an election season and my parents supported one candidate while Bo’s parents supported the other. I don’t remember who the candidates were or what their political affiliation may have been. All I know is that at some point during the game, Bo and I began arguing about who was the better candidate, though to this day I wonder why we were so passionate about politics before we could even vote. We got in each other’s faces and squared up with fists clenched, ready to fight. All of a sudden, the thought occurred to me that it wasn’t worth the effort and I just walked away. Maybe it was pent-up hostility about the trumpet section because a few days later, Bo challenged me for the chair and this time he won, perhaps due, at least in part, to the distinction in tone between a trumpet and a cornet.

Not long thereafter and possibly prompted by the musical duel, my parents decided to buy me a new trumpet. A salesman came to the house with three trumpets—good, better, and best. The best was a two-tone glittering masterpiece with a trigger for the first valve because trumpeters like Doc Severinsen tend to go sharp on those super high notes. As I recall, the price for the best one was $275, a lot of money in those days. But I wanted it and my parents bought it for me, even though I never once used that trigger. Much later in life, when my son, Jason, wanted to take up the trumpet, I had it reconditioned and he used it for several years before switching to tuba. To this day, he prefers the bass clef, and has made incredible music with the Purdue marching band and other groups. The trumpet came back to me and I still have it in the basement.

Getting back to Bo, his father, Otto Arnold, was my seventh grade teacher, and Mr. Arnold noticed that I made straight As in every class except history. For some reason, I just couldn’t seem to remember all the fine details and I didn’t have that much interest in the subject matter. One day, he told me that there would be a test tomorrow, to study hard, and that the whole class would be cheering for me to get an A. I did study, and when I took the test, he graded it in front of the class, announcing each answer and whether I got it right or wrong. I missed an A by one question and I’ll never forget the audible moans and groans from my classmates. Fortunately, I cultivated an interest in history later in life and most enjoy movies with a historical theme.

## MISTAKE #22 – DEFENDING THE INDEFENSIBLE

One of my best friends in grade school was Verrell McKinnon. He lived with his alcoholic father, very unusual in those days. I don’t know what happened to his mother. Verrell and I took many excursions together, such as hiking to the top of a bluff overlooking the Illinois River and the lift bridge that spanned it. Verrell walked right out to the farthest point on an outcropping of rock, and invited me to follow, but I was too afraid. One wrong step would have resulted in certain death, and I didn’t have the nerve. Another time Verrell and I were exploring a semi-dry creek bed that boasted a trickling stream and small pools of water. He was a few steps ahead of me when I spotted a water moccasin in a puddle, coiled and ready to strike. It wouldn’t have been good if Verrell had taken one or two more steps. Verrell’s nickname was “Speedy,” after the cartoon character Speedy Gonzales. But it was a well-earned moniker because he really was fast. One afternoon during recess, our teacher announced that we would be having a race. The whole class was to participate, and the teacher brought a high school athlete named Joel Berry to help supervise the competition. I think it may have been part of some government fitness program.

Joel explained the rules to us. The starting line was the sidewalk on the west side of the playground. The finish line was the driveway (that’s right, the same driveway where I almost wrecked the go-kart) on the east side of the playground. He said that he and the teacher would be standing on the finish line. He would put his hand in the air, and when he dropped his arm, we were to go.

Joel raised his hand. Now, for the most part, I was a very compliant child. When that arm dropped, I waited for that hand to go all the way down to the knee, but not Verrell. As soon as Joel’s hand moved a millimeter, Verrell was off and running. He had a huge head start, but as the race unfolded, I started catching up to him. About ten yards from the finish line, I kicked into overdrive and finished about a foot behind Verrell. I was told by Joel that if the race had been five yards longer, I would have won. But that’s the kind of consolation one offers to the person who came in second.

At the end of my eighth grade year, I joined track. I came in fifth in the 440-yard dash, but won the high jump competition by clearing four feet, ten inches, a height over which today’s Zach Edey practically could step. The coach and even the officials wanted to see me clear five feet when suddenly the clouds opened and rain started pouring like thick liquid sheets. One fault, two faults, three and it was over. One of the judges remarked, “If it hadn’t rained, you would have cleared five feet for sure.” I guess we’ll never know.

A similar thing happened during my freshman year in college. I went out for basketball, and during the organizational meeting before the first practice, our coach, Lynn Laughlin, told us that before the season began, we should go to the track every afternoon and run laps. He said that he would be there on occasion to watch, and that he would give preference to those who trained the hardest. I went to the track every afternoon, and I thought it strange that no upperclassmen were there. It was only freshmen and a smattering of sophomores.

Not being a man of his word, Mr. Laughlin only showed one day, and it was one of those blistering hot and muggy Midwestern September afternoons. There were only a couple of us running, and Mr. Laughlin had the idea that Mike Gaston and I should race halfway around the track—220 yards. Mike and I took our places at the starting line, Coach Laughlin yelled go and I tried to pace myself, keeping a position just a few feet behind Mike for most of the race. As we approached the finish line, I kicked it into high gear and began my final push, finishing just a foot or so behind Mike. Mr. Laughlin commended me on the comeback, but advised that I should start my final burst just a little sooner. Oh wow, thanks Coach. I never would have thought of that (dripping with sarcasm).

Back to Verrell, one afternoon after school, Verrell, Sally, and I were on the swing set in the school playground. Sally said something bossy to Verrell, and Verrell dropped a ruthless grade school insult by saying to me, “Your sister is too big for her britches.” I felt like I had to fight to defend my sister’s honor, so we went at it. At first, Verrell had the upper hand as he threw me to the ground and almost had me pinned. But as I was pulling his shoulders to the left in what would have been a triumphant counter-move, suddenly a booming voice commanded from above, “You boys break it up.” It was Mr. Berry, Joel’s dad, the funeral director from across the street. We complied and stopped fighting immediately. In my mind it was a draw, maybe five seconds away from victory. But definitely not a win. That was the only physical fight I had in my life, even though I actually agreed with Verrell that Sally at times was too big for her britches (sorry, Sally). I saw Verrell’s picture on the “In Memoriam” table at a class reunion, and asked what happened. I learned that Verrell had been drafted into the Army, had seen action in Vietnam, and was “not quite right” by the time he came home. Sadly, I was told he committed suicide. Even though I hadn’t seen him since grade school, I still grieve his loss.

Another playground incident involved myself and several of my friends on the monkey bars after school. James Ringhausen was our grade school principal, and he and Daddy were close friends, even though on a professional level he answered to my father. There was a little nickname for Mr. Ringhausen, and that afternoon it slipped past my friend’s lips. As Mr. Ringhausen walked past the monkey bars, my friend yelled, “See you later, Mr. Ring-A-Ding-Ding.” Mr. Ringhausen spun around and demanded, “Who said that?” Of course, no one confessed. I never heard anything else after that, which led me to believe that he didn’t suspect I was the culprit. Mr. Ringhausen lived to a ripe old age, and after his demise the high school gym was named after him.

## MISTAKE #23 – NOT LETTING AN INJURY HEAL

Benny Lane was my eighth grade teacher and varsity basketball coach. Midway through the eighth grade season, I went for a rebound but was knocked to the floor. Running to the other end of the court, I rolled my ankle and took a hard step on the side of my right foot in front of Mr. Lane and the home bench. The pain was so excruciating and I was limping so badly that Mr. Lane took me out of the game. In the locker room after the game, Mr. Lane and junior varsity coach Mr. Arnold looked at my foot and tried to assess what was wrong with it. They both mistakenly thought I had injured it when I fell to the floor, and I could not convince them otherwise. They advised me to go home and soak my foot in Epsom salt. Never having heard the word “Epsom” before, I told Mom that I was supposed to soak it in “some salt.”

Mom teased out the actual meaning of the recommendation, purchased Epsom salt at the drug store, and created a salt bath for me. After a couple of days of soaking with no improvement, Mom and Dad took me to the doctor. An x-ray revealed a hairline fracture, prompting the doctor to wrap my foot in an elastic band, put me on crutches, and advise me not to walk on my foot for three weeks. But there was a problem. A tournament was scheduled for the following weekend at Kampsville where we expected to face our cross-county rivals—Kampsville. What was I to do? Coach Lane called my dad and asked if Dad would call the doctor and see if my course of treatment could be accelerated. The doctor relented and suggested that perhaps three days of immobility might be enough.

After three days, I tossed my crutches aside and ran onto the court for practice. Not surprisingly, the foot ached as much as it did at first. So, I took it easy, shooting free throws and favoring my injured foot. My teammates said it was weird watching me go for a jump ball or rebound by launching off my left foot.

The night of the tournament, I got off the team bus and started hobbling on the crutches. But as soon as I walked in the gym with my team, I began to carry my crutches by my side to show that I didn’t need them anymore, trying hard not to wince. My coach confronted me and said, “Are you crazy? Keep using your crutches. We want Kampsville to think you’re still injured.” Having gone to some grade school basketball games since then, I realize how insignificant those competitions were, especially in towns so small that the grade schools aren’t even there anymore. Years later, as an adult, I developed plantar fasciitis, went to a podiatrist, and had an x-ray of my right foot. The doctor could not see any evidence that my foot ever was broken. No long-term harm was done, I guess, with the exception of Kampsville winning the tournament.

## MISTAKE #24 – FEELING LIKE THE NEW KID

At the end of my eighth grade year another bombshell dropped. My dad decided to leave the school business and enter the ministry. I soon found myself migrating from the principal’s son fishbowl to the minister’s son fishbowl, which felt eerily similar. We packed up the house and prepared to move to Griggsville, where I became a Tornado instead of the Warrior I thought I would be. I always felt like the new kid at Griggsville. It was a farming community and most classmates had been born and raised right there in Pike County. If I felt like I was in a fishbowl as the son of a school administer, that word picture amplified into a fifty-gallon aquarium as the son of a minister.

Years later, I went to Lincoln Park Zoo with some relatives from the Baptist side of the family tree, including a pre-teen boy. Any time the boy began to act like a normal kid, his father would reprimand him by saying, “Remember that youth conference you attended last month? Remember what was said? Be an example. You’re an example. Don’t forget it.” It reminded me of how I felt at that age. I was to be an example. There’s nothing wrong with being a role model, but that’s a lot of pressure on a young boy who’s just trying to be a regular kid. I’m not sure what to make of all this now, as I feel that I’m still trying to be an inspiration to others. But I also wish I had had more fun as a child, and I definitely wish I could enjoy life more now, in spite of my disability.

Back to my new school, I joined the basketball team, and on the first day of practice felt even more like an outsider. Larry Bennett, our coach, had to submit a roster of all the players to the Illinois High State Association sharing basic information, such as each player’s county of birth. The answers were “Pike County, Pike County, Pike County, etc.,” until he came to me and I said, “Cass County.” The response was almost unanimous, “Where’s that?” Even though Cass County is only fifty miles northeast of Griggsville, nobody seemed to have heard of it.

If there was one benefit of moving to Griggsville, it was playing Calhoun in basketball. I knew some of the plays. When we played the Warriors, some of the plays were very similar to the ones I had learned as a Brave, and I took advantage of that. I was able to anticipate where the pass was going next, and had quite a few steals that resulted in fast breaks. Typically, as I was going for the layup, I would slow my approach, focus on the shot, and be fouled, which I thought was just as good as making the basket as the result was two free throws. However, my free throw shooting was a bit inconsistent in those days. Later, I would come to make more than ninety percent of my free throws. Then I was scoring far less, making a farce of the word “free” in said throw. To his credit, James Holste, the Calhoun junior varsity coach, called my dad, as they had been friends when they worked together at the school, and advised Dad that I should practice powering through the layup, which turned out to be solid counsel.

My sophomore year, I was warming up before basketball practice. A teammate by the name of Mike Allen (no relation) was exercising with some chest pulls, consisting of elastic cords connected to plastic handles at each end. In nothing less than a freak accident, I was dribbling toward him when one of the chest pull handles broke, and the metal hook on the elastic cord struck me just above the right eye. My dad was called, rushed me to the doctor, and I received more stitches with a permanent scar on my right eyebrow, my second facial scar. A third scar would appear when, during practice, I was elbowed by a teammate, punching a bottom tooth all the way through my lower lip. A fourth facial scar resulted from a winch cable breaking as I was attempting to lift and empty a heavy metal garbage can into a dumpster while working my way through college. And I earned a fifth facial scar by taking a young Melanie to the park and attempting a Cirque du Soleil stunt on a merry-go-round.

Somewhere around my freshman or sophomore year of high school, Mom and Dad took me to a clothing store to buy a sport coat for me to wear to games. I picked a blue corduroy Nehru jacket with fabric covering the buttons. I wore a white mock turtle neck under it, and felt like a rock star whenever I wore it, even without the gold chain accessory most celebrities added to the outfit. Not long thereafter, it went out of style and into storage. My mom, who was an avid collector, shipped it to me when I was middle-aged, and I thoughtlessly threw it in the dumpster. As fate would have it, for a subsequent high school reunion, the class president sent an email blast stating that she was working on a display and asking if anyone had a Nehru jacket. I guess I should have kept that one.

I felt like the new kid again when I transferred to Whiting High School and every article in the paper about our basketball team referred to “transfer Sky Allen.” And the feeling returned when I drove to college for the first time. Lynn Tasso was a member of our church and a consistent passenger in my car going to and from college. I always felt sorry for her because when I picked her up from her apartment in Chicago, she always smelled like alcohol and tobacco, thanks to her addicted mother. That first day, I dropped Lynn off at the girls’ dorm, and drove around back to the boys’ dorm. Suddenly, I had that sinking feeling again that I was all alone and knew nobody except Lynn. As I found a space in the parking lot, a group of boys playing a game of touch football interrupted the game to help me unload my car. They then invited me to play with them. I didn’t feel so lonely anymore. I had a chance to return the favor at the beginning of second semester when Randy Storm, nicknamed “Aardvark,” arrived at the dorm, having transferred from another college. I helped him carry his boxes and get settled, not realizing that he would be a long-term member of the faculty with a new nickname of “Mr. Books,” manager of the campus bookstore.

## MISTAKE #25 – QUITTING PIANO TOO SOON

For as long as I can remember, I was good at music. Growing up, we drove long distances to attend church, thirty minutes east to Jerseyville Christian Church, and then thirty minutes north to Pearl Christian Church. In the car, Mom would occupy us with singing, and taught us to harmonize. At one point, Mom thought about organizing us into a traveling family musical group and calling us “The Singing Essays,” since our initials were all S.A. At school, I was in chorus and band, and was selected to sing in the Illinois All-State Chorus along with an All-State Orchestra, conducted by top local talents. We were really good, and even cut a double album, which I still have in the basement. At college, I sang and played trumpet with a men’s chorus on the United States Capitol steps, and my name was entered into the congressional record. I also played in an orchestra for theater productions. At home, Mom taught us all the piano, starting about third grade, and I became pretty good at that, too.

A few summers, I would stay with my aunt Josie and uncle Joe Avery on their farm in Missouri (aptly named Averydale) for two weeks at a time. I call it a farm, but actually it used to be a thriving dairy farm along Route 66 until the federal government built Interstate 44 right between the farmhouse and the dairy barns. One thing about dairy cows is that they must be milked twice a day, no matter what. Invoking eminent domain to construct a four-lane highway between the residence and the commodity they were producing, the feds essentially drove my aunt and uncle out of the dairy business due to having no easy way to access the barns. All that was left for them after the Interstate construction was a large farmhouse, one large garage, a small shed, and a fenced-in pond. They used the fenced-in area as a pasture for raising a series of beef cows which they always named “Butchie” to remind themselves that it was not a pet, but livestock to be butchered.

One summer, Grandma and Grandpa Beatty came to Hardin in order to escort me to Pacific, where they, the Averys, and another aunt and uncle, Liz and Bill Parrott, lived. As an aside, Interstate 44 also put the Parrotts out of business. They owned and operated a restaurant on Route 66 that was one of the first, if not the first, on the “mother road” to remain open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred sixty-five days a year. Uncle Bill was a cook, and aunt Liz was a server. When Interstate 44 was completed, all the traffic was diverted a stone’s throw to the north, and the restaurant lost most of its customers. The last time I visited Pacific, the building had been turned into a dentist’s office.

Grandma and Grandpa Beatty built their house with their own hands. When they decided they needed a basement, they dug one under the house. They never owned a car. They traveled exclusively by train or by bus, and on this occasion by Greyhound. On the way to Pacific, we stopped at a Greyhound terminal in Saint Louis and had lunch at a smorgasbord. I had never been to a buffet before, so I filled my plate with everything that looked good to me—chicken, fish, mashed potatoes, etc., and then proceeded to take a few bites before I was so full I could eat no more. My grandma gazed at my plate and said, “Looks like your eyes were bigger than your stomach.” Even though I was young, I still caught the meaning of that saying. Then I spotted a pinball machine and asked if I could play it. “Oh, no, no, no,” Grandma retorted, “that’s gambling.” Surely, she was right, as I was no pinball wizard and would have lost my nickel in no time.

On one excursion, Sally and I visited uncle Charles at the Pacific train station. He had followed in his father’s footsteps to become a dispatcher for the Union Pacific railway. I remember him demonstrating how to manipulate a telegraph. Although it wasn’t used much, Uncle Charles sure knew his Morse code. After a while, he reached into a desk drawer, pulled out a bag of horehound candy, and offered us each a piece. I found the flavor a little strong, so when he asked if we wanted a second piece, I declined but Sally accepted. He then pulled out a full bag of horehound and handed it to Sally, remarking that “I always know when people really this candy after they accept a second piece.” Instantly I was filled with regret. Having a whole bag of candy to myself in a family of seven was a luxury almost beyond imagination. Had I known that was the bargain, I certainly would have accepted. Sally has made it up to me many times over the years by occasionally giving me a bag of horehound for laughs, and I still find the flavor a bit off-putting.

There wasn’t much to do during those visits for childhood play. The Averys had several massive trees in the front yard on which they had hung a conventional swing and what they called a “monkey swing,” consisting of a disk with a hole in it and a robe threaded through the hole and tied to a tree branch. Sometimes I would go fishing in the pond, and one day noticed a black belt by my foot. I pondered who would have left a belt there when suddenly the belt moved. It was no belt, but a snake. I dropped the pole and raced into the house, and only went back to the pond to retrieve the pole. My fishing days at Averydale were over.

My aunt and uncle also had a piano. In fact, aunt Josie had taught Mom to play piano the old school way, by rapping her knuckles with a ruler any time Mom happened to hit a wrong note. There was no such corporal punishment for me, but aunt Josie did teach me a new song each time I visited there. Looking back, I can’t believe how difficult those songs were, and I not only learned to play them, but memorized them without much difficulty. I think aunt Josie took quite a bit of pride in having me perform that song for Mom and Dad every time they arrived to take me back home.

One day during freshman high school chorus, the director announced that she would like to have students accompany the singers on some melodies, and she asked who among us played piano. Now, the last thing I wanted to do was accompany the chorus. I thought I had reached a plateau with my talent, and I didn’t want the pressure of learning a new song. Plus, it didn’t seem like a particularly masculine thing for me to do. But that didn’t stop my friends from volunteering me. They all pointed at me and shouted, “He plays. He plays,” to which I responded, “I don’t play anymore. I quit.” After school, I walked home and told Mom that I didn’t want to play piano anymore. She was disappointed, but said that she was happy to have gotten me to a certain level where I could decide what I wanted to do with it.

Fortunately, I picked it up again in college, accompanying myself on solos such as “You Should Have Come Sooner” and “More Than You’ll Ever Know.” I purchased a used Fender Rhodes keyboard that I would play during youth choir concerts. Such keyboards were featured heavily in Seventies music, and currently are very desirable instruments for collectors, commanding thousands of dollars. Later in life, I composed a theme song for Standard Publishing’s Vacation Bible School program. The song came to me in a dream and was similar to a college fight song. It wasn’t selected for publication, but Mom used in her VBS lineup and my sister, Susie, can remember singing it. I wrote an entire musical that Susie used for her VBS closing program, accompanied by Jason’s mastery of the recording studio. I transcribed piano accompaniment for “God Gave the Song” from a record album, which Jason later played when I sang it in church one Christmas in Richmond. I just wonder how much more I might have accomplished had I stuck with Mom’s instruction for a few more years. Sadly, I’ve lost most of my musical abilities due, in part, to lack of practice. I suppose Miss Reichman was right.

## MISTAKE #26 – POKING THE BEAR AGAIN

Sam Tedrow was the meanest guy in school. He was tough, athletic, and had a high tolerance for pain. On a sunny Spring afternoon, our gym teacher took us to the Pike County Fairgrounds for some time trials, once again, I believe, to measure progress toward national fitness goals. The fairgrounds had a large oval cinder track where previously I had seen the Chitwood Thrill Show, race car drivers performing some amazing stunts.

For the time trials, we each took part in a group race around the track, then had a large amount of downtime while other students raced. The gym teacher stood at the start/finish line to record lap times, so there was no adult supervision of the non-participants. A friend and I were walking around the infield when we came across a long piece of kite string. I came up with an idea for a prank. Wouldn’t it be funny if we stretched that string across the track and watched everyone jump over it?

That’s exactly what we did. We tied the ends of the string to the guardrails on either side of the track. We were afraid that it might be too obvious and that the runners wouldn’t even approach it. So, we rubbed a little dirt on it to make it blend in with the surface of the track, hid in the bushes, and waited. After a couple of minutes, the next group of runners rounded the turn and headed toward the string. But my giddiness turned to dread when I saw that Sam Tedrow was in the lead.

The next thing I saw was Sam tumbling head over heels in a cloud of dust. Everyone else kept running, and eventually Sam got up, dusted himself off, and continued the race, presumably in last place. I don’t remember how he knew, but in the locker room back at school, Sam got in my face, stared me in the eye, and said, “I heard you were the one who tied that string across the track.” Without even trying to blame my friend, I admitted my involvement. “And I heard you rubbed dust on it so I wouldn’t see it.” Again, I acknowledged the truth of what he was saying. I readied myself to get punched in the face, Instead, Sam looked at me with those steely blue eyes and said, “Don’t ever do that again.” Rather than calculating the likelihood of those circumstances ever again arising in such a way to make that prank possible, I apologized profusely and promised I would never do such a thing again.

## MISTAKE #27 – PLACING TOO MUCH STOCK IN RUMORS

My sophomore year, I began dating a girl named Elizabeth Hoover. She was from nearby Milton and was a cheerleader at East Pike High School, not to be confused with my dad’s West Pike. Many people called her “Liz,” but I had an aunt named Liz and I never found that nickname fitting for Miss Hoover. I had purchased my first motorcycle, a Yamaha 80, at the age of fifteen, but after acquiring a driver’s license, was interested in upgrading to more horsepower. One bike that interested me was a Kawasaki 350 Mach III, but I soon realized I could purchase a used Volkswagen Beetle for about the same price. I also could use a car for dating.

I don’t remember the exact year, but I think the model I purchased it was a 1965 baby blue four-speed manual with only three hub caps. I began to customize it by removing the remaining caps, painting the rims black and hubs orange, adding woodgrain to the dash, and replacing the steering wheel with a deep dish chrome installation including the matching horn button. I also had a friend named Danny Dunham fashion a T-shifter out of wood, which I thought was very cool. One afternoon, as I was taking Elizabeth on a date, we began traveling away from her farmhouse down her long driveway when she asked if she could drive. She stated that she always wanted to learn how to drive a stick shift, and wondered if I would teach her. Reluctantly, I agreed.

We switched sides with her taking the driver’s seat and me the passenger. After killing the engine a few times, she gave it some more gas, feathered the clutch, and gained a little speed in first gear. When shifting to second, she pulled back so hard on the shifter that she yanked the “T” right off the mounting hardware, leaving it looking more like a lower case “l.” The driving lesson ended abruptly and I assumed driving duties with just the nub of a shifter as we proceeded to the Zoe Theater in Pittsfield to watch the most popular movie in its day— “Love Story.”

Months later, the relationship faded in typical high school fashion, and a classmate of mine asked if Elizabeth was still my girlfriend. I answered in the affirmative, then asked, “Why?” She said, “Because I just saw her with Eric Girard, and they looked like they were an item.” Eric reportedly was a student at East Pike. I never called Elizabeth after that. Our paths crossed a few years later in college, but I paid no attention to her. She ended up marrying a classmate of mine that a lot of colleagues said resembled me. I never learned if the rumor was true or if there even really was an Eric Girard. But it sure seemed plausible at the time.

As an aside, before I had my own car, I borrowed my dad’s car for dates. One afternoon, before leaving for Milton, he asked me to take it to one of those automated car washes where the car pulls in on a track and the sprayer circulates around the car. I must have missed the track, because when the sprayer started, it stuck on the front driver’s side bumper and stayed there. As I tried to back out, the sprayer fell with a clatter and the tire slid off the track and pushed the car into the coin accepter, leaving a nice little scrape on the driver’s side rear fender. I told Dad about it, but he didn’t seem to mind. Maybe I should have been more gracious toward Elizabeth.

Kathy Shelton was a classmate and member of our church. One day, she knocked on the back door of our house and made me an offer with what seemed like a well-rehearsed pitch. Would I take five hundred dollars for my Volkswagen? I hadn’t really thought about selling it, but since I had paid only six hundred dollars for it, her offer seemed reasonable. Plus, the car had some niggling problems, such as a faulty starter. Sometimes I would turn the key and nothing would happen. I would turn the key over and over again, maybe five or ten times, and eventually the starter would catch and away I would go. In my haste, I failed to disclose this issue to the buyer. Because she did not know how to drive a stick shift, she asked our driver’s education teacher, Mr. McCormick, to teach her, and he drove her out to a quiet country road for her first lesson. The next day, Kathy was at my back door demanding a refund. Her face was almost as red as her hair as she explained that she had had a flat tire on the gravel road, which Mr. McCormick begrudgingly changed. And then that pesky starter decided to announce itself, and they had to hike to a farmhouse to call for help. Without a word of protest, I handed her the five one hundred dollar bills and found myself back in possession of the car I didn’t really want to sell in the first place. Oh, and I had the starter fixed a few weeks later.

Another girl I liked in high school was Marsha Beemer. She came from a large family, and I was in the same class as her twin sisters, Lois and Lydia, and played basketball with her brother, Bruce. Years earlier, my father had the somber duty of going with police to inform the family that Mr. Beemer had died in a tragic car accident. Such fatal accidents were far from rare in those days before automobile safety equipment such as air bags had been invented. Marsha was a sweet girl with long dark hair parted down the middle like a supermodel. One day, I offered her an unsolicited beauty tip. I suggested, “You know, you’d be cuter if you had bangs.” I really thought I was helping. Later that day, I told Sally about our conversation, and in horror Sally screeched, “You never tell a girl how to wear her hair.” I was stunned by my apparent lack of etiquette, but ironically the next day Marsha arrived at school with…wait for it…bangs!!! She was a cheerleader, so we sat together and held hands a couple of times on the team bus before the relationship fizzled. She did marry an Allen, however—Mike Allen of chest pull fame. And according to her Facebook page, she still has bangs.

## MISTAKE #28 – SNITCHING ON MY TEACHERS

I learned to drive at the age of fourteen. My first driving experience was at Ronnie Dunham’s house. His cousin, Steve Dunham, also was there. Both families were members of our church. Ronnie had a Yamaha 250 motorcycle and Steve had a Honda 50 minibike which they drove like crazy all around those country roads. Ronnie asked if I wanted to drive his motorcycle and I eagerly assented. There was one problem, however. The bike had a clutch. Ronnie offered to teach me how to feather a clutch which involved giving the bike some gas and releasing the clutch SLOWLY. On the first attempt, I thought I did what he said, but I killed the engine. Several more attempts ended with identical results. Ronnie and Steve kept insisting that I give it more gas, so the next time I pegged the throttle, popped the clutch. . .and plowed right through the hedges lining the front sidewalk. I thought they would be mad, but Ronnie and Steve almost split a gut laughing so hard.

I learned to drive a truck the same unfortunate way. I worked many part-time jobs during my teenage years—mowing lawns, putting up hay, working at a campground, castrating hogs, making apple cider. Dad advised me always to do a bit extra, like sweeping the sidewalks with a broom after I mowed. I told him that I could do it a lot faster by pushing the mower over the sidewalk and letting the blade do the work, but he assured me that people would notice the extra effort. He was right. People would call to solicit my services by saying, “I’ve had other lawn services before, but he’s the only one who took the time to sweep the sidewalk when he was finished.”

My first real job was working as a farmhand at the age of fourteen for Paul Cadwell. Mr. Cadwell was a member of our church and a very devout Christian. He knew that working on a farm involved a lot of driving, so my first day he taught me how to drive a truck. It was a blue Ford four-speed with a clutch and stick shift on the floor. He drove to an open field and told me to switch sides. Inconveniently, the truck was parked crossways on a plowed field and the tires were situated in the bottom of the furrows. I must have killed that engine fifty times before I found the sweet spot of just the right amount of gas and clutch, and suddenly I knew how to drive.

Next, I needed to learn how to drive a tractor. Mr. Cadwell owned two of them, a handsome green Oliver and a smaller more modest orange Allis-Chalmers. I operated the Allis-Chalmers most times while he, of course, maneuvered the Oliver. Learning to drive a tractor didn’t go much better than learning to drive a truck. Many of my friends had been driving tractors since they were old enough to see over the steering wheel. Driving often required great skill, especially when backing up with an implement attached. That day, I followed Mr. Cadwell to a field that recently had been plowed and needed to be disced, both operations that have become almost obsolete due to modern farming methods. Mr. Cadwell instructed me to leave the tractor in third with the throttle wide open, and he stood on the other side of the fence to watch.

Everything went well on the straightaways, but I swung a little wide making the turn to go down the next straightaway. To make a long story short, after about two or three passes, I couldn’t make the turn at the end of the row and rolled right up on the fence. Mr. Cadwell came running and calmly remarked, “It’s okay to slow down for the turns.” Honestly, that thought had never crossed my mind. Later, I was following him as he drove the Oliver and I drove the Allis-Chalmers. We both had plow implements attached, but mine did not have a wheel at the end, swinging wide when I made a turn. We drove through a gate and were following along a wire fence line. Evidently, I was a little too close because I found myself in a situation where if I turned to the left the tractor would contact the fence, but if I turned to the right the plow would contact the fence. I looked behind me for a solution and the next thing I knew, the front left tire was climbing the fence. Mr. Cadwell was none too pleased, but to his credit he didn’t become angry. Having had grandchildren that age, I now realize how much responsibility this was for a young man barely into adolescence.

Another time, I drove the truck to a pasture to feed the cows. I had a load of corn in the bed and the cows knew it. Before I even came to a stop, one cow jumped on the back bumper and got its hoof caught between the bumper and the bed of the truck. Frightened, the cow began thrashing madly, but that hoof remained stuck. There was nothing I could do to help. Cell phones had not yet been invented and I couldn’t drive the truck to get help. It was too far to walk back to the farmhouse. I tried singing to the cow to calm it. All I could think to do was pray. I sat on the bumper next to the traumatized cow and prayed out loud. Whether it was the prayer or my weight on the bumper I’ll never know, but somehow that hoof came loose and the cow walked away with only superficial injuries.

Sometimes I would carry two five-gallon buckets of water, which are extremely heavy, to a watering trough and play a basketball game later that evening. I cut the middle finger of my shooting hand on a corn plant. Yes, those leaves are sharp. But any challenge on the farm was massaged by lunch in the dining room. While Mr. Cadwell and I were working the land, his wife, Ada, and daughter, Helen, would be cooking lunch. There is nothing better than fresh food, as they say, “from farm to table.” I would be served beef, pork, potatoes, and vegetables so tasty that I don’t think they ever will be matched, even in the finest restaurant, though I’m told that some of my Pike County friends now sell their products to very fine restaurants.

I saved my money until I had earned enough to purchase my first motorcycle, a used black and chrome Yamaha 80. It was more than a minibike, less than a street bike, but I loved it dearly. I took one picture of it that has since disappeared. I couldn’t wait to drive myself to work on the farm that first time. I rehearsed what I would say when Mr. Cadwell noticed it, and decided that the only thing I did not want to say was, “You bought it for me.” I was about a quarter mile from the Cadwells’ house when the bike suddenly stopped running. It didn’t have a fuel gauge and the petcock had broken a few days after purchase. I pushed it into a ditch and dejectedly walked the rest of the way. Mr. Cadwell graciously offered to drive the truck and take me to where I had left the bike, where he loaded it into the back of the truck. Back at the farm, he looked into the tank, decided it was empty, and filled the tank, after which the bike started immediately. I was so discombobulated by the whole escapade that when he complimented the bike, I responded, “You bought it for me.”

I put up a lot of hay for several farm families, earning an illustrative dollar an hour. Putting up hay was a labor intensive endeavor. Nothing smells better than a field of hay that has been mowed and raked. But the hard part is loading the heavy bales onto a trailer or the bed of a truck. It’s hot, dusty dirty work. The bales scratch the underside of your arms. If you wear long sleeves to protect your arms on those sizzling muggy days, you overheat. Some industrious farmhands had gloves with long sleeves that protected their forearms, but I never sprang for the extravagance. All of this is done by machines now, I’m sure.

One day, we had loaded an entire wagon as high as we could, and I was on the top of the load probably fifteen feet off the ground. As I walked to climb off, my foot caught a string binding the bales, and I plunged face first over the side. I stood up, dusted myself off, and looked around to see if anyone had noticed. Such a fall now would send me to the emergency room if not the morgue. This is what I learned from working on the farm. Electrical cattle prods really hurt (don’t ask me how I know). Hay itches and bales scratch. Animals are unpredictable. Farm food is the best.

My favorite job was working at an apple orchard. Carl Penstone, who owned the orchard, always hired five or six strapping young lads to work there. We pruned trees and loaded trucks, but our primary function was to make apple cider, which involved loading apples onto a conveyor belt that dropped them into a grinder where a press squeezed juice out of the pulp. Mr. Penstone told us that we were welcome to drink as much cider off the press as we wanted, “But” he said with a grin, “I guarantee after two weeks, you won’t want anymore.” Was he ever wrong about that. We never grew tired of that cider and, in fact, pitched in together to buy a large box of salted peanuts in the shell. We would eat those peanuts and drink that cider while the press did its work. I would venture to say that cider and peanuts are a winning combination for any adolescent’s snack. One day, Phil Vinnedge needed to use the outhouse. He said he might be in there for a while. He stepped inside, sat down, and closed the door. His best friend, Mike Evans, organized a prank. On Mike’s signal, he flung open the door where Phil was seated, and we all pelted Phil with rotten apples. The next thing I remember was Phil chasing Mike with a can of used oil that came from the press’s motor. Those were great times.

Mr. Penstone had a daughter by the name of Julie, who apparently had a crush on me. Whenever Julie came to visit the jobsite, my friends would take great pleasure in spontaneously breaking into a song popularized by a teen heartthrob named Bobby Sherman entitled, “Julie, Do Ya Love Me?” I can still hear them singing in the background while they were working, “Julie, Julie, Julie, do you love me,” to my great embarrassment as I had no interest in the girl. Mr. Penstone announced that he was going on vacation over Christmas break, and would pay us fifty cents for every apple tree we pruned while he was away. We could prune as many as we wanted. My mind swirled with how much money I could make—twenty, thirty, maybe even fifty dollars! Not only was I distracted by all the fun we were having playing with newly opened Christmas presents, but it was bitterly cold and windy that winter, a terrible time to be climbing trees with a hand saw. I only managed to prune five in that frozen arbor, but Mr. Penstone dutifully handed me two dollars and two quarters in hard cash. At least the currency was warm.

One sunny Saturday morning, we jumped in the back of Mr. Penstone’s truck to go to a warehouse and pick up some apple crates. The warehouse was located in a part of town I seldom visited, next to a trailer park. Here’s the backstory. Rebecca Trask was our high school Spanish teacher, and her husband had been deployed to Vietnam. Her trailer was right by the driveway to the warehouse. Charles McCormick was our Biology teacher, and he had a reputation for being a bit of a pervert. He kept a large piece of Plastitak in the shape of a sperm on his desk. He was said to become handsy with female students in the dark room. He taught driver’s education and showed us a full frontal movie on childbirth, explaining that one never knows when such an emergency may arise. Mr. McCormick also was married, and it was rumored that he and Mrs. Trask were having an affair.

That Saturday morning, as our truck turned into the drive, what should my eyes behold but Mr. McCormick walking toward Mrs. Trask’s front door, knocking on the side of the trailer as he made his way along the front. For some reason, he was dressed in a sport coat and tie. When I returned home, I couldn’t resist telling Mom and Dad what I had seen. Dad was friends with Donald Zabel, our high school principal, having worked together in Kinderhook. Dad had a long conversation with Mr. Zabel about the importance of teachers setting a good moral example for their students, and that’s all I know.

In a case of bad timing, at the end of my junior year I decided to run for student council president. I had been the student council vice president my sophomore year, for which my primary duty was changing the school sign. Every few days, I got to leave study hall and take a friend with me to the basement where the letters were stored. It felt like we had been granted access to the inner sanctum of the whole educational system. I mentioned bad timing because Mrs. Trask was the student council sponsor. Several strange things happened.

With Dad’s help, I chose the campaign slogan, “Sky’s the Limit.” Dad helped me design and print a poster that Sally and I went to school early to hang in every locker. By the time school started, about half those posters were missing. I never knew whether some bus rider (bus kids arrived at school earlier than walkers) or even Mrs. Trask herself removed them, but that was a disappointment. Dad also advised me on my campaign speech, and having benefitted from his sidewalk sweeping tip, I followed his suggestions to the letter. The campaign speeches were delivered in the girls’ gym, which was smaller than the boys’ gym, with bleachers on one side and a stage on the other. When it came time for my presentation, Sally, some supporters, and I threw penny candy to the students. Dad thought it was important for my classmates to know I played guitar, so the same team joined me in a silly song adapted from television. Then I gave my speech, promising as most politicians do, to make everyone’s life better. We really raised the energy in that room.

My opponent’s name was Joe Crews, and his speech was much more organic. All he said was, “Well, I can’t compete with that. All I can promise is, whether you vote for me or not, I’ll still be your friend.” That was it. He seated himself on the front row. Later that afternoon, an announcement was made that Joe had been elected president. My friend who helped count the ballots told me that Joe won by three votes, but that Mrs. Trask suspiciously had disqualified several ballots that might have made a difference. It didn’t matter because we moved a few months later in October of my senior year. Around the same time, Joe was suspended from school for fighting and went on to become. . .wait for it. . .a minister. I plagiarized Joe’s speech to become vice president of the band at my new school.

## MISTAKE #29 – NOT VETTING THE BARBER

I started my senior year of high school at Griggsville and was on track to become valedictorian and quite possibly leading scorer of the basketball team. Actually, one year prior I was on track to be salutatorian with a GPA just a bit lower than Sophia Hyk until she graduated a year early, opening the door for an academic promotion. Sophia’s father was a physician, and Sophia was the only one in my class who could afford braces. I was in All-State Chorus, was recognized as an Illinois State Scholar, and was in an edition of Who’s Who. I was the ping pong champion of my high school. I was in the National Honor Society. I was a triple threat with the trumpet, piano, and guitar. I had a stack of medals from band and chorus contests, mostly blue but a few red. I was athletically and musically inclined. I was on a roll. I was in Bible Bowl, which was based on a television show called “College Bowl” and similar to Jeopardy. Contestants basically had to memorize four or five chapters of the King James version of the Bible and buzz in faster than anyone else. We went into a playoff bracket at the nationals held as part of the North American Christian Convention. The first question was “a little leaven leaveneth. . .” I knew the answer, “the whole lump.” I frantically began pushing my signaling device to no avail. The judges had forgotten to plug in the system. Once power was restored, we started again. . .and I didn’t know another single answer the rest of the round. Needless to say, my team did not advance. I was friends with almost everybody in the school and many in the county when another pivotal moment occurred. Dad was invited to preach a trial sermon at a church in Indiana looking for a minister.

Our introduction to Northwest Indiana was a brutal one. We drove to the south suburbs of Chicago and stayed with a minister friend serving in Harvey, Illinois. He offered to take us on a driving tour of the city, which I had never before visited, the highlight of which was when he was hassled by a Chicago police officer after being pulled over for some minor infraction. That night, the minister’s children filled our heads with stories of race riots in the schools, random violence, and the need for hypervigilance. We took a family vote and among the siblings it was one hundred percent against moving to this dangerous environment.

The drive to Whiting also failed to impress. We drove past the Standard Oil/Amoco/BP refinery encircled with a dingy gray chain link fence. Everything seemed to be coated in soot from the nearby steel mills, and there was the smell of rotten eggs in the air. The industry of Northwest Indiana was a far cry from the agrarian environment we had left in Pike County, but I think Dad might have more comfortable due to Whiting’s similarity to Granite City with U.S. Steel as its primary employer. The church building at Whiting was an odd structure where we had to climb innumerable stairs to reach the sanctuary. But Mom and Dad had a plan. They decided to give God a vote by laying out a fleece, based upon the Old Testament story of Gideon. Their fleece was that if there were some kind of decision during the invitation, they would take that as a sign God wanted them to serve there.

Dad preached his sermon. I don’t remember what it was, but the nature of a trial sermon is that a minister is demonstrating his preaching skills to the congregation before a vote. It isn’t typically an evangelistic appeal of any kind. But, sure enough, as that invitation song was being sung, here came a woman down the aisle to transfer her membership to First Church of Christ. God had spoken. We were moving to Whiting. Of course, I grew to love Northwest Indiana with its proximity to a major city, a large body of water, and lower taxes.

The move to Whiting was not without drama. Sandi was in college. The rest of the familial troops piled into the capacious car, and I drove my little Beetle. A few weeks earlier, I had tried to perform some routine maintenance on the car by changing the spark plugs. Whether due to ineptitude on my part or the rudimentary tools I was using, I was able to change three plugs without incident, but the fourth and final plug put up a fight. I got it about halfway out, but then it would neither unscrew nor wrench back into place. After wrestling with it for a while, I finally admitted defeat and tried to start the car as it was. To my surprise, it started, though it was running a bit rough. I drove that car the five hours from Griggsville to Whiting, and when rounding the last turn onto Central Avenue, I heard a loud BANG coming from the engine bay and the car limped the rest of the way to its parking space in front of our new home. I now knew what it meant to “blow a plug.” A couple of weeks later, Dad and I took it to a repair shop which charged me a whole five dollars to replace the spark plug, how I do not know. As fate would have it, none of my friends in Whiting owned a car as everything was within easy walking distance. A while later, I put an ad in the paper and sold it to another aspiring teenager. I asked if he wanted me to put the remaining three hub caps back on, and he declined, stating that he liked the orange “flowers” just the way they were.

My first day at Whiting High School was a little rocky. Sally and I arrived early that October morning and registered for classes. I had taken several weeks of chemistry at my old high school and had memorized the periodic table. For some reason, administrators were unable to fit chemistry into my schedule, so all that effort was wasted. My first class was to be Senior English, and the school secretary was looking for someone to show me where the classroom was. At that moment, a senior by the name of Terry Demeter happened to walk by the school office, and the secretary asked Terry if he would take us on a tour of the school and eventually to our classrooms. Terry readily agreed. It turns out that Terry was killing time by using a phony excuse to request a hall pass, and he jumped at the chance to have some purpose for roaming the halls.

I said his name was Terry, but I never called him that a single time. His nickname was Beef, assigned to him one afternoon as he was volunteering for a work day at his church and took a break for lunch where he eagerly devoured three roast beef sandwiches. Beef took us around the entire school, showing us the cafeteria, auditorium, and athletic facilities. He took Sally to her class and then me to mine. I walked alone into the room, found an empty desk, and took my seat. I felt like I was a model walking down the runway as every eye was fixed on me, including the teacher’s. Mr. Ullrich was known as the most hardnosed instructor in the institution, teaching English and German, so it came as no surprise when he challenged me by saying, “Why are you so late?” I replied, “We just moved here from Illinois.” His eyes narrowed as he clarified, “I mean, why are you so late to my class?” I had assumed that the school tour had been cleared by all involved, but obviously that was not the case. I stammered and stuttered my way through an explanation when he interrupted me and resumed teaching. But he wasn’t finished with me quite yet.

The next day, we were studying poetry, and we landed upon a Scottish poem written, as I recall, by Robert Louis Stevenson. Mr. Ullrich asked for a volunteer to recite the poem aloud, and to read it with a Scottish brogue. Unsurprisingly, no hands popped into the air. “Mr. Allen,” he ventured, “how would you like to read this poem?” Eager to get on his good side, but never having been much good at impersonations or accents, I stumbled through the reading the best I could, waiting for his analysis at the end. “Must have been from southern Scotland,” he sniffed. Having been mocked for my southern accent on the second day of school was not a great way to start, but I tried my best to acquire a Chicago accent. Years later, when I visited Pike County again, I ran into a lady who had known my family back in the day, and I asked her if it sounded like I had a Chicago accent. Her response in the affirmative assured me that I must have made some progress toward my linguistic goal, though personally I think I sound like I belong more from some region between North and South.

Whiting High School spent more money per student than any other public school in Indiana due to the whopping tax dollars generated by the refinery, and in return the school mascot became an oil can with a drop of oil oozing from the spout. It wasn’t easy being an Oiler. I was used to names that conjured some image of force or power, such as Braves, Warriors, Tornados. The sight of a human oil can running around with cheerleaders at football games was less inspiring. Plus, the Seventies was a time of pining after the Fifties, when teenagers were known affectionately (or not so much) as Greasers. It was all too easy for opposing teams to hurl that epithet during games. In addition, the oil can mounted on top of the concession stand at the football field proved an irresistible target.

Whiting High School and Clark High School were situated mere blocks from each other on 119th Street, and became instant rivals. Competition between the two schools was known as the “Battle of 119th Street,” and generally reached a fever pitch. During one clash, a gallon of green paint (Whiting’s school color) was splashed on the Clark gymnasium exterior wall (Clark’s school color was blue). Soon thereafter, the Whiting oil can was blown off the concession stand roof. Eventually, somebody burned down the visiting side wooden bleachers at the Whiting football field, and the administration took the opportunity to spend some of those tax dollars on a college-worthy concrete stadium slash athletic center. I guess we showed them.

The first day of school also was the first day of basketball practice. I was amazed that all practice gear, right down to the shoes and athletic supporters, was provided and thrown into a bin at the end of practice, mysteriously to be laundered and returned to the locker room the next day. The jerseys were reversible, green on one side and yellow on the other, to be switched as needed during scrimmages. I was used to bringing my own clothing to practice and taking it home in a duffle bag drenched in perspiration, which Mom not so mysteriously laundered for me. We also were issued game shoes, endorsed by Bob Wolf, whoever that was, purchased at nearby Woodmar Shopping Center. Speaking of which, the six foot, five inch center on our team, Mike Mikula, called them the worst shoes he had ever worn. Admittedly, they did have a hard rubber soul and paper thin cushion, a far cry from today’s offerings.

Basketball practice was going well and I was exerting my leadership on the team until one day everything changed. Football season ended and suddenly there were six or eight additional chiseled athletes on the floor. I had never before played in a high school that had a football program. Griggsville High School only had baseball and basketball. I was not anticipating these new players, and in fact, one of them wanted my position. Every practice started with drills, and my head coach, Ron Divjak, would announce, “The first five, turn your jerseys to green, second five to yellow, and so on.” I always had placed myself in the first five. But when the football players arrived, a junior by the name of Phil Mateja turned his jersey green and stepped right in front of me for the drill. Evidently, he was expecting to be one of the two starting guards that year, When I told Dad about the incident, he said, “That isn’t going to happen tomorrow. You’re going to wear green and make Phil wear yellow,” and that’s exactly what I did. I left my jersey green and jumped in front of Phil. After practice, Phil argued with Coach Divjak. Some choice words were exchanged and Phil was kicked off the team. Ironically, Phil ended up in one of my addiction groups later in life. All these years later, I still was influencing his life.

But a problem remained even with Phil off the team. Coach Divjak told me I was too short to play forward, the position I had played since fourth grade. He said that forwards in Northwest Indiana needed to be at least six feet, four inches tall, and I was only six feet, two inches. He said he was making me a guard, a position I had never played in my life. I tried my best, but never was that good as a ball handler. And I had perfected a shot from what soon would become three-point range on either side of the court. Pete Maravich and I both would have scored a lot more points had that three-point line existed in our day.

Another major difference in the game of basketball was that dunking was prohibited in high school and college sports, though still allowed (and a major highlight) in professional games. The breakaway rim had not yet been invented, and dunks were known to shatter fiberglass backboards. We were “No Dunks” before my nephew Trey Kerby ever coined the phrase for his podcast. Nevertheless, just for fun one day in practice, Coach Divjak told us to line up and see how close we could come to dunking the ball. Mike, our center, dunked it pretty well. When my turn came, Coach as well as my teammates were amazed that I could get above the rim and push it through with my fingers, due to the fact that I never was able to palm a basketball. I could palm and dunk a volleyball for kicks, and I was hoping Coach would notice that my jumping ability more than made up for the two inches I supposedly lacked to play forward. I think he did take notice.

We played Clark High School at Clark, and the atmosphere in that gym was electric. During warmups, I was so pumped with adrenaline that I was getting about thumb level above the rim for a pretty classy dunk. Running back to my place in line, I was planning on achieving my best dunk ever on the next layup when a teammate said, “Stop doing that. You’re going to get us a technical.” Alas, dunking even before the game could be called by the referees for a technical foul, and I dreaded the thought of giving the other team a one-point lead before the game had started. Little did I realize that the Clark game would be my last opportunity for a world-class dunk. Those same dynamics never again occurred, though there is a picture of me sort of dunking during a pickup game in college.

Halfway through the season, I became so frustrated with my lack of production that I talked to the coach after practice and told him I would rather sit on the bench as a backup forward than start as a mediocre guard. To my amazement, he listened. The next game I started as a forward and my performance dramatically improved. I started scoring in the double digits and often was the top scorer for our team. My final game, I know I had a double-double with points and rebounds, and probably achieved a triple-double with assists. Statistics on assists were kept, but that information did not make its way to me. After the season, during the awards ceremony, Coach Divjak presented me with the Mental Attitude Award, announcing that “he would have played any position I asked, even water boy,” as he presented me with the trophy. Later, I asked a teammate, “What’s the Mental Attitude Award?” He responded, “That means you weren’t good enough to be Most Valuable Player,” an award that went to Jerry Oblon. Coach Divjak is deceased, and Clark no longer exists. My name was engraved on a plaque and mounted on a wall in the gymnasium lobby. Not only is the plaque gone, but the whole wall has been demolished. The winds of change were blowing.

Another impact Whiting basketball had on me was a blow to my vanity and self-confidence. I had been growing my hair for over a year into what might be called a “mop top” (popularized by the Beatles). Sally was trimming my hair for me as needed, but I didn’t want it trimmed very often as it all pretty much was one length. I was quite proud of the senior picture I had taken before moving from Griggsville. In fact, my hair became a bit of an issue at Griggsville when a picture was published in the local newspaper showing me coming down from a rebound with my hair suspended in all its glory. Coach Bennett told me to get it cut, and I had Sally take off about an eighth of an inch in case he asked, which he never did. But on the first day of basketball practice at Whiting, Coach Divjak proclaimed, “You all will get a decent haircut, no more than two inches on top and shaved on the sides.” He said he didn’t want any hair in our eyes or in the way when we took a jump shot. This was before Pistol Pete Maravich demonstrated a player could be phenomenal on the court even with super long hair.

A barber shop was located conveniently on the corner of 119th Street and Indianapolis Boulevard, so I walked there for a cut. I should have been warned by the barber’s name—Max Schlak, which sounded like a mashup of “maximum slash” and “whack.” I gave the barber the coach’s instructions and he went to work snipping and shaving the locks I had tried so hard to groom. After a few minutes, he spun me around so I could look in the mirror and pronounced, “There, now you look more like an All-American boy.” I was mortified. I don’t know if he was drunk or just having a bad day, but the top of my hair was about an inch long. The sides had gouges in them. I didn’t want to go to school the next day. To complicate matters, the chairperson of the yearbook committee said she needed a portrait for the yearbook. She said I could go to a photographer and just keep one proof without buying anything. But I didn’t want to have my picture taken, much less published in the yearbook. I procrastinated, until one day I had a brainstorm. Maybe I could use the photo that had been taken at my old high school. The next day, I proudly handed that picture to her and an audible sigh of relief filled the air. The day after, she informed me that it was too late. The deadline for senior pictures had passed and those yearbook pages already had been set. With Allen being one of the first names in the alphabet, the whole section would have to be redone, and the yearbook company wasn’t willing to do that. If only digital photography were available back then. Every class reunion since then I’ve had to explain why my picture isn’t in the yearbook.

Another memorable moment occurred when playing Hammond High School in basketball. This was before the class system in high school sports, meaning that our school of five hundred students played much larger schools, such as Hammond, and some schools of over three thousand students, such as Morton. In addition, we played two East Chicago schools, Washington and Roosevelt, that had won the previous two state championships. The Hammond High game went right down to the wire with us behind by one point and five seconds left. Someone would have to take the last shot, and I was hoping I wouldn’t have to do it. But, sure enough, the pass came to me. The clock ticked four, three, two. I dribbled twice, went up to take a fifteen foot jumper, and suddenly noticed Mike Knish cutting across the lane. I passed to him. He pivoted and took the shot, and it was good. We won against a much larger school by one point. Mike was celebrated as a hero for a long time after making that winning basket, and I often wonder what would have happened had I taken that shot. Would I have become a sports legend for making it, or would I have been despised for missing it? We’ll never know. By the way, Mike also is deceased. Later that year, my best high school friends, Jerry Oblon, Jamie Hapak, and I went to Indiana University to watch another Cinderella team win the state championship as Connersville defeated Gary West, triggering race riots during and after the game.

Other high school memories include my coaches, Ron Divjak, Tim Kompier, and Jerry King, challenging three of us students, Jerry Oblon, Nicky somebody, and me, to a pick-up game after practice, loser to pay fifty cents to the winner. I knew Mom wouldn’t approve of me betting on a game, but I honestly didn’t think there was any way we would lose to a bunch of old men. Well, we did, and right afterwards, Nicky and I headed to the showers. We assumed the coaches would forget all about the wager and laugh it off, but nooooo. Those coaches followed us into the locker room and made us get out of the shower to pay them the fifty cents, which by some good fortune I happened to have on me that night.

Another time, we held practices over Christmas break, and a former player showed to join us. He had graduated from Whiting the year before and was playing on a scholarship at some college, meaning that he was really good. Everyone else on the team knew that, but I didn’t. During a defensive drill, Coach Divjak told us to split up into groups of two, and everybody avoided that college player, leaving him to be teamed with me. The drill was to stop my opponent from driving around me, even if it meant taking a charge. I tried, but that guy managed to drive around me several times, prompting the coach to get in my face and scream, “If you let him get around you one more time, I’m going to punch you in the face.” His fists were clenched and I really believed he would. So I spent the rest of the drill getting knocked to the floor over and over again. And they say basketball is not a contact sport.

## MISTAKE #30 – NOT LISTENING TO GUIDANCE

In high school, I excelled in mathematics and science. I remember in math class dazzling my peers with shortcuts I had learned from Mr. Zilic, the math teacher at Griggsville. Every now and then, Mr. Zilic would put a box on his head and alliterate in a monotone voice, “I am ZILIAC, the wizard. I am here to answer your math questions.” ZILIAC was a clever play on words referencing ENIAC, the world’s first computer (standing for Electronic Numerical Integrator And Computer). Mr. Zilic was a human calculator before such devices had been invented (at one point I learned how to use an abacus in one of my math classes).

One day, my guidance counselor called me into her office. She practically begged me to consider a career in math or science. I told her I was planning to become a minister. At church camp during junior high, I had responded to the “life recruit” call indicating my commitment to full-time Christian service, making me a life recruit before my dad had made the same decision. I told my guidance counselor that I didn’t want to renege on that commitment. She suggested that I earn a Bachelor’s degree in math or science at a secular university, and then earn a Master’s degree in theology at a seminary. “That way,” she said, “you’ll have something to fall back on if you ever decide to leave the ministry.” When I told my parents about her recommendation, they scoffed saying, “Would she have suggested having something to fall back on if you were planning to become a doctor or a lawyer?”

I couldn’t argue with that, so I forged ahead with Plan A. I do remember having second thoughts while working my way through college at a truck stop, knowing how much my parents struggled with finances due to the low pay scale. And I knew that becoming a minister was choosing one of the lowest paying careers possible. Plus, I knew that classes at a Christian college mostly revolved around history, my weakest subject. But I also wanted to help people, and the thought of making an eternal difference in people’s lives was magnetic. Looking back, I think my guidance counselor was right. At the time, I had no interest in pursuing an education beyond a Bachelor’s degree. If I had known then that I would be applying to Master’s and Doctoral programs, a degree from an institution such as University of Chicago likely would have opened a few more doors. I could have lived at home and driven to class at University of Chicago. Because I was an Illinois State Scholar, I needed to attend an Illinois school to receive the scholarship, but there were so many options available to me that I simply ignored. I got my doctorate, but I did it the hard way and it definitely wasn’t from Harvard.

A church member by the name of Ron Simbro worked as a manager at the Calumet Union 76 Truck Stop on 159th Street in South Holland. He asked my dad if I might want to work there during the summer. He said it was a union job with a forty-eight hour week where the extra eight hours would be time-and-a-half, and holidays double time. It seemed like a great way to earn the money I needed for college. The first job assigned to me was to be the “lot boy,” which meant sweeping the sixteen-acre parking lot. I shouldn’t stereotype, but my experience tells me that truckers are not tidy people. They read a book or magazine and throw it out the window when they’re finished because they don’t want to clutter the cab. They buy a cold watermelon at the grocery store, eat a few bites, and throw the rest out the window. I would start at one end of the parking lot, sweep and shovel until I got to the other end, and the next day start all over again. There was no special equipment—only a push broom, scoop shovel, garbage can, rake, and company truck. Also, I was issued the beginner company shirt that was about three sizes too big. When my official shirts arrived, they were a perfect fit, but the name badge read “Scottie,” apparently due to a manager calling in the order without bothering to spell the name. I had a locker and was instructed to leave dirty shirts at the bottom, and a cleaning service would pick them up, launder them, and hang them back in the locker.

On my last day at the truck stop, I realized I didn’t bring a shirt to wear home. Plus, I figured I would be working there again next year, and wouldn’t it be cool to have a mechanic’s shirt to wear at college. I was hired there again the following summer, and I wore the “Scottie” shirt my first day back. As fate would have it, not just the manager but the regional manager was there. He took one look at me and barked, “Where did you get that shirt?” I responded that I had kept it during my freshman year of college. His face turned red as he blurted, “I thought it fit you too well. Don’t you know we’ve been paying cleaning charges on that shirt for the past nine months?” Evidently, the cleaners charged the truck stop for every shirt not in inventory, and that included mine. I thought I was going to be fired on the spot, but he talked to a manager in the other room and I received my second “Don’t ever let that happen again” threat. I wouldn’t dare. Ironically, the only thing left standing on that site today is the parking lot. All other structures have been demolished.

## MISTAKE #31 – BEING SLOPPY

A common prank in those days involved getting people wet by throwing water, setting a water trap, etc. I forget what exactly happened, but Scott got me wet and I ran in the house to grab a pitcher of water. In the meantime, Scott jumped in the car of Tommy Drummond, his friend, and they took off around the bend and down the alley behind our house. Tommy was driving with his window down, and I was waiting on the sidewalk by the backyard. With perfect timing, I threw that pitcher of water at the car as it sped past, but my aim was a bit off because some of the water went through the open driver’s side window. Tommy slammed on the brakes, jumped out of the car, and began chasing me with the car idling in the alley and Scott left behind as a passenger. Tommy chased me down the alley, onto the street, even in the front door of the house and out the back, but all the running I had been doing in basketball practice paid off because he never caught me. Tommy went to our church, and even though I saw him many times after that, nothing was ever said about the water prank. I wonder if he’s still mad. Wow, thirty-one mistakes before I had reached the age of twenty. And this from a guy who tried so hard to be upright and responsible.