

In and Out of the Furnace

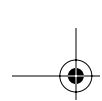
I was born into business. My dad was a talented engineer who decided to begin a manufacturing company in the late 1930s, literally in the basement of our home in Ohio. The business and I were birthed about the same time—so this was indeed a productive period in Dad’s life!

Though I was only a youngster, I remember the company’s earliest large challenge—survival! World War II had severely restricted the supply of components needed to build our product—oil burners for use in residential and commercial heating. To keep the company going, Dad shifted to a completely different line of business, insulating homes in our area.

I was just six years old, but Dad took me along to “help” the insulating crews who worked out of specially equipped trucks. I can still feel the itch from the glass rock wool we fed into a giant hopper to be pumped out into the walls and ceilings of homes being insulated. No thanks to my help, my father kept his small workforce intact and, after the war, resumed burner production.

Toward the end of high school I wrestled with the choice of where to attend college. I was convinced my decision would be closely linked with what would become my career. For some rea-





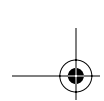
son, I was torn between business and going into the ministry. My heart wanted to follow my dad into engineering. Acceptance to Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the nation's premier engineering school and my first choice for college, would have opened the door to pursue that dream. But part of me was drawn toward ministry—simply because it seemed somehow “more worthy.” So I also applied to Kenyon College, a liberal arts school in Ohio that included an Episcopal seminary. I hoped my decision would be settled through the acceptance process.

When the first letter of acceptance arrived from Kenyon, I was mildly pleased—but not overjoyed. But when acceptance came from MIT weeks later (what seemed like an eternity) I practically did cartwheels. If I hadn't grown up a proper Episcopalian, I probably would have. The nod from MIT (and my enthusiastic response to it) seemed clear evidence that I could indeed follow my heart into the sciences and engineering.

Later, toward the end of college, the struggle between marketplace and ministry resurfaced. Should I jump right into an engineering job, or take a stint as a military chaplain? I counseled with Dr. Theodore Parker Ferris, the esteemed rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in Boston, who wisely advised against going into any direct form of ministry unless I knew beyond doubt I was called to do so. Days later, I received a job offer from an aerospace firm—a timely signpost toward my future vocation.

So began an uninterrupted career in business, yet one that ultimately did carry with it a dimension of “ministry.” Though my “guidance” during those years was shaped mostly by circumstances, I now recognize that God was indeed steering my choices. Still, he





had much more in store for me regarding my spiritual growth.

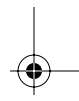
The first installment toward that growth came through a budding relationship with a very special young lady named Wendy Hunt. We met when I was partway through college. The setting? A small camping supply store in Algonquin Provincial Park in Canada, where Wendy was working a summer job to earn money to attend the University of Toronto. Before long, I met her parents. Much to my surprise, I discovered that both Wendy and her family were people of strong faith—with spiritual depth that was new to me. They spoke of a personal relationship with Christ. How different, I thought, from what I'd experienced to that point.

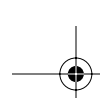
Impressed as I was with the Hunt family, I found it a struggle to align their wholehearted faith with my more “rational” approach. So I waited, and watched. In reality, spiritual pursuits were not my highest priority.

Wendy and I were married after she finished college, and we settled into life together in northern Ohio. I began work with the Romec Division of Lear, Inc., where I helped design guidance systems for missiles and aircraft. Kirsten, our first child, was born a year later, and life, for the most part, was immensely rewarding. Even so, I sensed a missing element. God still seemed distant, impersonal.

A SURPRISE INVITATION

A year after Kirsten was born, my father approached me with an invitation that surprised me, because he had never even hinted at it before. He wanted me to join him in his small manufacturing business. If I said yes to his offer, it would mean leaving the cutting-edge world of aerospace for the low-tech world of home heat-





ing. But the prospect of being able to work with my father really excited me, and that clinched my decision.

Working with Dad was better than I could have ever imagined—he the mentor, I the understudy. For the entire first year he openly shared his knowledge and expertise, and I fully expected to continue learning from him for years to come. But those years never came.

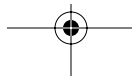
On a chilly morning in February 1965, I received a call from our local police department. Dad, age sixty-seven, had been found slumped over the steering wheel of his car, the victim of an apparent heart attack. From the reported location, I knew he must have been on his way to work. My first response was disbelief. Only hours before, he had seemed so healthy, engaged in his work, attentive to his family. We had so many dreams that were unfulfilled. Yet the crushing reality hit me full force—Dad was now gone. Absent my mentor and closest friend, and only in my mid-twenties, I suddenly felt the overwhelming weight of having to lead the company he had founded and nurtured through its first twenty-eight years.

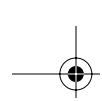


THE INFERNO

Dad's death was not the only tragedy that struck that year. Just a few months later, an emergency call came to my home in the middle of the night from our village fire department—announcing that the Beckett factory was on fire! I shook off what seemed a “bad dream” to realize it was anything but. The exact words from the caller are deeply etched in my memory:

“Beckett—flames are leaping twenty feet above the building—you'd better get out here!”



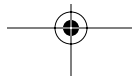


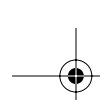
When I arrived at the plant, my worst fears were confirmed as ghastly red-orange flames danced grotesquely behind the factory windows and pierced the night sky above the roof. Volunteer fire-fighters had arrived but were understandably fearful about going into the building, not knowing what volatile or explosive substances might put them at great risk. I assured them I knew how to navigate through the building and they finally agreed to let me lead them into the heart of the inferno.

We fought that fire until dawn. Light from the first rays of sun straining through the smoke-stained windows revealed that not all had been lost. In the days that followed, we rallied our small, twelve-person workforce to an around-the-clock recovery effort and were able to make sufficient repairs to restart production. In fact, by some miracle we didn't miss a single shipment to our customers. To this day I'm not sure how we did that!

The impact of these two events upon me was enormous—like bolts of deadly lightning hitting in close sequence. Up to that time, it seemed I could manage by my own wits. Now, my confidence had been deeply shaken. In spite of wonderful support from Wendy and her family, I wasn't sure where to turn. And God still seemed very far away.

It is often said that coming closer to God requires a "leap of faith," a bold plunge into an unknown realm far beyond our natural capacities or understanding. But my stubborn mind had instructed my reluctant feet to stay firmly planted on safe ground. Months passed without answers. Work challenges continued. I found myself discouraged and confused. All the while it seemed that God was quietly, persistently drawing me to himself.





Small things happened to encourage me: receiving a helpful book from a friend, or hearing a speaker who would answer a key question. Gradually, as I came into my late twenties, the fog began to lift. Bit by bit, pieces of a giant puzzle were falling into place.

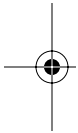
OUT OF DARKNESS

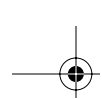
Though many unsettled questions lingered, I came to the point where I could no longer sit on the fence. I wanted to be right in my relationship with God, whatever it took. But there seemed to be such a chasm between us. That gap was widened by my own selfishness, damaged relationships with people I'd hurt and the nagging guilt of some bad decisions. With all this baggage, how could I possibly establish a sound relationship with God? Was there such a thing as a fresh start?

Though I didn't fully know what to expect, I asked the Lord to forgive me—to take away the obstacles that separated me from him. His response was immediate. Much as a teacher might wipe the classroom chalkboard clean with one great sweeping motion, the Lord released me from all the accumulated debris from my past. At once, I was aware that a great burden had been lifted from my shoulders. I felt washed, clean.

But that wasn't the end of it. My next step took me still further into unfamiliar territory. For the first time in my life I was able to intentionally let go, surrendering myself to God. I said, in effect: "Lord, I give myself completely to you. I don't want to hold anything back. I want to be yours, and I trust you to receive me just the way I am."

What followed amazed me. I experienced a new kind of peace,





certain that God had accepted me. I hadn't earned it, nor did I deserve it. But as I took that step of faith, it seemed he welcomed me with open arms. For the first time I felt rightly related to him. I was no longer far away. In words I only dimly understood at the time, I realized I had been "born again"—that strange term I thought might apply to others, but not to me. (A few years later, I read a remark by John Wesley, the great reformer and evangelist of the eighteenth century. He said that when he gave his life to God he felt "strangely warmed." That is an apt description of what happened to me.) I felt a closeness to God I'd never experienced—and only dimly imagined might be possible. I had found what had been missing!

As I looked back at events leading up to this moment, I could see a clear pattern. In spite of my obstinacy, God had actually been at work from day one to bring me to himself. He had given me parents who loved me and were wonderful role models. He had guided key decisions, like where I would attend college and what career I would follow. He had enabled me to kindle a precious relationship with Wendy and her family. He had sent friends and mentors just when I most needed them, especially during the months following my father's death, then again, after the fire. His hand had been quietly guiding and providing. Yet he had never imposed nor compelled—only waited patiently for me to see my need. Now, finally, I had responded in ways he had intended all along.

