

## *Winds of Destruction*

Severe weather experts reported during the first six months of 2008, “*Tornadoes caused 111 deaths through the end of May, the second highest death toll for any year in the Doppler radar era...*” \*\* Though I lived through those months unaware of the death and destruction caused by this severe weather pattern, the winds of destruction blowing in my life during the spring were an ironic reflection of the course of nature’s wrath.

April 9, 2008 was a Wednesday.

When running late for a service at Word of Faith Fellowship (WOFF), eating is not a priority. Just get in and take your seat, stay awake, appear interested, take hold and know you are being watched. The end of this evening service brought another meeting for me.

A voice from the podium, “John Huddle, meet in Ray’s office.”

My thoughts raced. What had I done? Immediately, I reviewed the last few hours: where, who, what, when, why? Though these meetings were not unusual, after the internal checklist, no alarms went off in my thinking. Many a night was spent in Ray’s office after a church service planning, reviewing and managing the next crisis for my employer, Two Mile Properties.

The first awareness of a strange breeze blowing occurred when I saw my wife standing outside the office door in the fellowship hall. She was as nervous as a bridled filly waiting to jump and run. Her nervousness should have sounded a loud alarm, but I missed it.

I asked, “Why are you here? Where are the children?”

“The children are taken hold of,” she answered avoiding my gaze at every point.

Martha’s name had not been called. Wading through the hallway hustle and bustle, that narrow artery teeming with children and adults moving along their chosen path, my thoughts

caught a glimpse of the hidden truth--she knew the purpose of the meeting. Her expression portrayed angst and yet, I was unsure.

“Will you be in this meeting?”

Her nod sent uneasiness into the pit of my stomach.

Not a business meeting. Sirens wailed. Thoughts bombarded my mind, waves of fear washed over me leaving their residue. Why did the owners call my wife into this meeting?

Even then, it was hard to accept one of the “living mantras” of WOFF: Each part of your life is subject to “the will of God.” In order to know and live in “the will of God,” every part of your life is interconnected and subject to the ever-changing, more intrusive and far-reaching control dynamics of WOFF as administered by the leader – Jane Whaley. She heard God for everyone--reaching into every part of your life. “Sin in your life” kept you from knowing God’s will.

The next few hours changed my life in ways only known by Providence.

Time seemed suspended while I stood outside the office door. As a leader in the church, Ray had an office that served many purposes. Soon, he approached in his slow and deliberate fashion. He sported a look which was meant to put me at ease. I recognized his gentle nature when he brought truth to someone. We exchanged greetings as he unlocked the door and motioned for us to come inside. I took a seat in a small corner at the front of the desk. My wife stood at my left side as he made motions for more folks to crowd into the room. Josh F. took the seat behind the desk. As an attorney and owner of Two Mile, his words carried weight. During the short awkward exchanges of those filing in, it quickly became evident that everyone else had been briefed about the proceedings.

Those in attendance included former pastors of the Greenville church, Gerald Southerland, and his wife, Linda. His tall frame capped with perfect hair, added to his low key demeanor, made him easy prey for Jane's grip. Linda prospered in this matriarchal subculture with obedience pushed by an underlying destructive self-loathing. My wife and I first came in contact with WOFF through their Greenville church in 1992.

Andy K., my immediate supervisor at Two Mile entered the room looking assured of his purpose. Andy, an intelligent and deliberate fellow, never ignoring the levels of authority inside WOFF, while at times showing flashes of self desire that betrayed his shiny coat.

About 9:30PM, Ray led off with a why we are all here statement, "Josh brought some things to my attention that pertain to you..."

Josh took the lead in a much stronger fashion. "If I had known what was going on earlier, I would have addressed this sooner. Andy tells me that you have been spending too many hours on your part-time Credit Union work; your focus has been more on that than with Two Mile."

This statement made me think this was an extension of an impromptu meeting back in March when Andy confronted me about my trust and loyalty. Wrongly, I assumed the fallout from that meeting had been averted.

All in attendance remained solemn waiting for Josh to finish and for me to react to his assessment. His ending ultimatum included, "...tonight, you will quit your part-time job or you will be fired from Two Mile Properties."

Life inside WOFF required synergy. My part-time Credit Union work remained a sticking point for years in the group's quest to own me. This position left me "out from under authority."

My response to Josh included an awkward silence as I considered an acceptable and accurate reply. “I have a real problem with that.”

This initial refusal to accept Josh’s assessment as the will of God brought the next level of reviews of my worth as a person. Andy spoke up next pointing out a time when I left the job to pay a bill. Yes, I did, but felt justified with all the hours I put in to take some time for personal business. That answer did not stop their fury; it sent the personal rebukes to a new level.

About this time, Brooke C. arrived. She blew into the room; her position of leadership included a level of authority surpassing all others in the room. The length of this meeting instantly extended to indefinite. Brooke announced, “There must be the unclean in your life since you could not immediately accept and embrace ‘the will of God’ for the job change.”

The scope and pace of the accusations increased at this point. Moving from job related infractions to my intimate relationship and private time with my wife. We were registering at least an EF-3 on the tornado scale. Their demands increased in an attempt to elicit a confession of whatever sin obviously resided in my heart.

“What is it, John? What is the sin so deep which you have hidden for years that is taking you over?

“That sin is blinding you to God’s will, right now! Tell us, let us blast it and get you help...”

“Whatever it is, it is holding you back from taking your place ....”

“We love you, you know that. We want to help you...”

Brooke summed up the barrage, “If you were right with God, you would be able to accept the will of God, immediately, no matter what!”

The session continued. Brooke and the others took turns berating and pounding me in an effort to open my heart and make me confess my sin. Once a new accusation was pronounced, everyone stared and waited for me to confess to something.

During these silent stare sessions, I drifted into a dream-like state. The people chattered around me, but my understanding slowed. Any response I did give had to be forced from my mouth. I knew the wrongness surrounding this whole scene, yet I felt powerless to change or stop it. With all that was in me I wanted to forget this night all together and get up and run.

During this dream-like state, I realized each person in the room believed the way I was treated was normal and acceptable. Later, that realization became the seed of strength which grew and caused me to leave WOFF.

After about ninety minutes, I did what I later learned other survivors did. I agreed and confessed something in hopes to end the onslaught. In hindsight, I know the subject of my confession didn't matter. Obtaining a confession cemented me deeper under their control.

After this useless admission, Jane Whaley stormed in the room, poked her finger in my obviously confused face and screamed, "You are full of the unclean!"

At that point, in unison, those around me blurted out, "You cut your eyes at her! That was a devil!"

Suddenly, memories of other members telling of their moments like this flooded my thinking. They talked of meeting the "authority of God." Up until then, I had no idea what they were saying. Never had my inner personal space been invaded as much as in this meeting. The sea of activity spun out of control as I clung to my racing thoughts seeking shelter and finding none.

Next, Jane turned on my crying wife, "And you let him be this way!"

Jane left the gathering muttering she had other meetings.

My wife, catching the spirit of the EF-5 blowing through the room began screaming at me, “Repent and start crying out to God!”

At that exhortation, my hopes to end this trauma session rested on leaning over and doing my best to at least feign some behaviors accepted by WOFF as repentance. I knew it to be shallow at best, since the dream-like session left me past feeling, as if under a dose of anesthesia. I retreated into the inner part of my being while watching this horror movie unfold around me. Even my hearing lessened and some rebukes had to be repeated.

After two and a half hours, I still refused to give in to the screaming, rebukes and WOFF-reasoning. Brooke reached for the phone calling for Jane’s direction, “Jane, we are not getting anywhere here, I think we need to quit.”

Once she uttered, “Okay,” and hung-up, the meeting broke up. So odd; no one else seemed affected in the least by the winds of destruction that had blown me over.

My wife asked Josh, “Does he go to work on Thursday?”

By this time, Josh was in the hallway. “I don’t need anyone like that working for me.”

And with that, I was fired. I surrendered the company car and the laptop.

The rolling drama did not end when I left the church grounds. After a solemn ride home with my wife, the children already in bed, my wife exclaimed, “You don’t sleep in this bed!”

Shell shocked, I slept in the recliner. Honestly, who wanted to be next to her at that time?

I remember waking up the next morning to an empty feeling. Was it all a dream? Would things go back to normal and mend themselves? No. The destruction set on course by the tornado force winds that blew into my life was real. The damage was only beginning to be felt.

I lived through Hurricane Hugo in 1989 and had experienced the aftermath. Thursday was the morning after the storm. The damage assessment began. I spent the day wandering, wondering and thinking, *What if things were different? Can we fix this? What do I do from here?* Though I could not see into the future, my world had forever changed.

By the next night, I gathered my courage telling my wife “I am sleeping in my bed! If you don’t like it, you can sleep in the recliner.” We slept in the bed on our separate edges, not touching. No doubt, after that evening, our relationship was on a downhill slide.

April 9<sup>th</sup> marked our twentieth wedding anniversary.