

**Chapter 12        BIRTH OF SELF-ESTEEM AND THINKING FOR ONESELF**

Many books about therapy of various kinds include case studies of people who have struggled with alcohol and/ or drug abuse. They have all reached rock bottom and then realized, through some event, that unless they themselves tackled their addiction their lives would never improve, and might even soon end. Often the incident is a pivotal event that jolts the addict out of his or her complacency, as the following examples indicate.

For example, young **Ryan Camp's** Big Jolt came during an acid trip he took at a party of drug dealers when he was 17 and had already served time in group homes and in prison for stealing to support his drug habit (Reinhart, 1995). He realized while stoned that he had no real friends.

**"I just started taking a look at where I'd been, what I wanted in the future and started realizing I've got nobody.** Absolutely nobody." Certainly not those at the party who welcomed him only if he brought dope. He remembered a friend who almost jumped off a parking garage roof while on a PCP trip.

"I convinced myself it had to stop."

He served his final sentence at a tough love program for young offenders that forced him to be completely honest with himself. When he was released, he turned his life around, moving in with his sister and attending high school. Whereas earlier he had received failing grades, now his lowest mark was a 70. He plans to study social work and eventually return as a counsellor to the tough love program that helped him change his life.

The Big Jolt that shook **Glen Campbell**, the cowboy singer, was more tangible than memories (Christy, 1994). It was a tape recording. Campbell had a rocky life which included being born to desperately poor sharecroppers in Arkansas, four marriages and addiction to cocaine. He decided to get off drugs because his wife, Kim, made a tape recording of his language when he was "stoned." He was shattered when she later played the tape for him.

He says about hearing it, "I seemed possessed by demons. I was foul-mouthed. I was ranting and raving. I heard the bottom-line truth about myself. It was terrible because I was terrible. I didn't know what I was doing or saying. **Hearing the tape made me so angry that I wanted to get back my self-control.**"

He decided that he must turn his life around, and began wanting to quit drugs more than wanting to get stoned. Because of listening to the tape, Campbell was able to get off drugs. He has recently written a book about his life, *Rhinestoned Cowboy*, with the help of writer Tom Carter.

**Maria Desforges** from Ontario realized that at over 300 pounds she had a weight problem, but she seemed unable to come to grips with this (Phillips, 1997, E3). At age 41 she was a borderline diabetic (her mother had died from complications of diabetes years earlier), worked full-time, had marital problems and didn't want to die young as

her mother had. She had felt badly when she had gone on a helicopter ride with her daughter and been unable to get her seatbelt fastened, but that was all. The Big Jolt which made her determined to lose weight came when she went shopping for a dress. **She tried on one in her size, 24 ½, and was horrified to find that it was too tight.** That was the final straw. She joined Weight Watchers and within two years had lost 100 pounds. She became a team trainer for International Family Fitness, telling her story to clients and emphasizing two points: you have to admit you have a problem and you have to seek help to solve it. This same philosophy has helped millions of people who have battled other addictions to such things as cigarettes, alcohol and drugs, but one may need a Big Jolt to get going.

**Lee Maracle's** life was turned around when she heard the Native author Howard Adams speak. She is a Metis woman who grew up in a working-class neighbourhood in North Vancouver. Because of racism and poverty there seemed little future for her at home, so she drifted as an adolescent to Chicano communities in California, to skid row areas in Toronto, and back to Vancouver as she relates in her book *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* (1975). Howard Adams was a Metis born near Prince Albert who graduated from the University of British Columbia and then earned a doctoral degree in history from the University of California at Berkeley. He became a Marxist professor as well as a strong Canadian nationalist who influenced many Natives (Lutz, 1991). Adams spoke at a reserve meeting in 1968 about Natives and colonization, even though the nuns and priests had told those on the Indian reserve that they would be excommunicated if they went to hear him. Maracle found his oratory overwhelming. Before she heard Adams speak she had been, as she said, "verbally silent, paralysed they call it. **Up till I was 18 I was paralysed, but his voice cut me loose.** It's not that I was not clear about much of this world. It was that I had no way of measuring my clarity. No way of seeing my clarity and testing it, until after Howard's little presentation" (p 178). When Howard spoke, she felt that "the distinction between writing, and speaking, and being a doctor, and being an orator was gone. But anyone can talk, anybody can write, as long as you can grab a dictionary and learn to spell and come to grips with some of the words, the meaning of words." Adams "inspired a good many of us to pick up a pen."

From living an aimless existence, Maracle began to see things in a new way. She began to think about her life, and to write about herself, and about Native culture and politics. In addition, she became a tireless community worker. Hearing a dynamic Native orator had turned her life around.

Self esteem is sometimes gained by a person in response to a Big Jolt involving emotions such as anger, stubbornness or spirituality. **Sonia Johnson's** Jolt was anger. She left the Mormon Church in the United States when she found it did not support the Equal Rights Amendment; it did not believe that women should have equal rights with men (Johnson, 1989, 89-91). Her new assertion of independence broke up her marriage, so that she was left raising her children largely by herself. She found the prospect daunting: "The task seemed impossible. I had lived in terror for years-- terror that they would be unhappy, that they would do drugs, that they would self-destruct--

and doing everything I could think of to prevent these disasters had neither lessened the terror nor changed their behavior."

One evening, her third child and she quarrelled about drugs in the kitchen. He stormed down to the basement in a rage, slamming the door and leaving her feeling wretched and powerless. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, she began herself to feel anger. She writes, "I realized that I was furious at the anguish I had suffered so long as a mother and the misery that seemed still to stretch so endlessly before me." For the first time she saw that she had to take control of her own life, and not make her happiness dependent on others. It was a realization which led her to an entirely new view of her life.

Immediately she went to talk to her son: "**The instant he reluctantly opened his door to me, he knew the old game was over. He knew he was standing in the presence of New Mom**, mom who could not be manipulated or bullied, a woman in her power.... He knew without conscious thought that whether or not he plunged to his death in the abyss below or decided to change his course was now entirely up to him. I was handing him back the responsibility for his life."

Her son decided to change his life in a positive direction, and Johnson did the same after that night. She continued to do what she could for her children, but only if her efforts did not harm her own well-being. She wrote a book called *Going Out of Our Minds: The Metaphysics of Liberation* which positively influenced many readers.

The author **Sheelagh Conway's** Jolt involved stubbornness. Conway attended a rural Irish school when she was young where corporal punishment was routine (Conway, 1987, 46-48). One day, she angered her teacher by forgetting to learn the catechism questions she had been assigned. Her teacher verbally abused her, then ordered her out of the classroom, but Conway was too terrified to move. The teacher took her hand and began to whack her ruler down across it, again and again. The pain was searing. Still Conway wouldn't, or couldn't, move. Finally the teacher put Conway's hand on the doorknob and commanded her to open the door.

Conway writes, "My poor hand lay slackly on the knob and I just stood there limp and motionless. Then something happened that etched itself deep in my psyche. I had reached the pinnacle of humiliation, suffering, shame, and fear, and something gave way. I was no longer afraid. My fear and shame gave way to sheer stubbornness. Now I was determined not to move. **She could beat the living daylights out of me and I would not open that door. It was then that I understood the power and strength of martyrdom....** A seed was firmly planted that day in Miss FitzPatrick's class that would grow and serve me well in later years."

With her new-found stubbornness Conway was able to pull herself out of poverty, move to Canada, and earn several university degrees. She has gone on to become a successful writer and feminist activist.

The Big Jolt that affected **Alma Neuman** (1912-1988), second wife of the American writer James Agee, occurred when she was 60 (Neuman, 1993, 165). By all outward signs she should have been in despair. Her husband had just died, and her son Stefan

had committed suicide at the age of 27.

The change began when her son stood behind her in the hall of her apartment, moving his hands slowly around her body, but never touching her. Support emanated from him. **An hour later he threw himself out the apartment window.**

**She realized later that his movements had been a healing, a blessing, which had had the power to change her life.** She took up yoga and meditation and read spiritual books that gave her a wonderful sense of absolute fearlessness, peace and freedom. She was able soon to stop grieving and move into a new life.

Author Theodore Zeldin (1994, 471) tells the story of **a man** who also was determined to commit suicide, but was unsuccessful. He had had desperate experiences, first murdering a man and being imprisoned, then saving another man's life and being pardoned. When he returned home, he found his wife living with someone else and his daughter a stranger. He was unwanted and felt that he might as well be dead. When his suicide attempt failed, a monk came to visit him. The monk explained that he could not give him anything, as he himself was without possessions, but asked that since he felt overwhelmed by the misery of the poor around them, the murderer come and help him ease their suffering before he tried to kill himself again. Zeldin writes, "Those words changed the murderer's world. Somebody needed him: he was no longer superfluous and disposable. He agreed to help." Later the murderer told the monk, **"If you had given me money, or a room, or a job, I would have restarted my life of crime and killed someone else. But you needed me."**

The monk's world was also changed by this encounter. It "gave him the idea which was to shape his whole future: faced by a person in distress, he had given nothing, but asked something from him instead." This was a momentous idea. With the help of the murderer, the two men founded the Abbé Pierre Emmaus movement in 1949 which served the very poor. Since then the movement has spread throughout France and into 40 other countries. "These two men were not soulmates in the ordinary, romantic meaning of that word, but each owes the other the sense of direction which guides their life today."

**Helen**, a friend of Sonia Johnson, was jolted not by emotion but by hearing the truth, a truth that hurt, a truth that saved her (Johnson, 1989, 68-69). She is a well-educated woman who was beaten by her husband, Fred, for 13 years. She was bonded to him by her terror, afraid of leaving him in case he killed her.

Johnson writes, "One night she was in the emergency room at the local hospital again. As the doctors were putting her eyeball back into its socket, setting her broken shoulder, and sewing up the knife wounds all over her body, one of them who knew her well by this time said, **'You know, Helen, the next time they bring you in here, I'm afraid we'll just have to tell them to wheel you right on through to the morgue.'**"

Suddenly Helen realized despite her brainwashing that "though Fred had always threatened to kill her if she left him, the truth was that he would kill her if she *stayed*. She awoke to her danger, and whereas before she had been afraid of leaving, now she began to feel far more afraid of *not* leaving. She realized that she wanted to live, that

she wanted to be happy, that she didn't deserve this. She began to value her own life."

The change in her perspective led to a change in her personality. She no longer asked herself what she should do-- being nicer to him, trying harder, showing she loved him obviously didn't work. The answer was to begin to value and trust herself. When she did this, she was able to leave the marriage and work toward her own happiness.

Other people have been jolted into major changes in their lives by casual comments that had otherwise little significance. One example happened to **Renee Roth-Hano** (b 1931) who spent the war years in France pretending to be a Catholic girl so that no one would know she was Jewish (Marks, 1993, 40-41). For years after that she continued to tell people she was a Catholic because she could not bear to reveal the truth.

When she was 19, she came to the United States to work as a governess. One spring day she was at Macy's, shopping, when she heard two women at the cosmetics counter loudly talking together.

**"How was your seder last night?" one asked.**

Roth-Hano was horrified. She thought such a comment should never be made in public. She looked around for some negative reaction to the words from people nearby, but no one was ashamed. No one even noticed. She writes, "The two women went on talking like it was no big thing. I felt something inside me breaking free."

Roth-Hano became at last able to accept herself as she was, a Jew. She became a successful psychiatric social worker because she was able to empathize with others and help them find themselves, just as she had found herself.

Another example of an unintended Big Jolt happened to **Roger Wilkins**, a self-described Blue-Chip Black lawyer (Wilkins, 1993, 129). Despite his university degrees and successful career, Wilkins at age 32 suffered from "a sense of deprivation, the sense of exclusion, that would not go away..." as a result of being Black in mainstream America.

This changed during a flight to India when he was entranced by a beautiful air attendant. To his surprise, this attractive woman began to flirt with him, even though she did not know that he was an American, and exclaimed about this when she found out. He writes, "I was stunned. She had taken a load off my head. **This beautiful woman hadn't been talking and flirting with a Negro, a 'nigger'. She'd just been talking to a man, a man whom she had found attractive.**" Before this, Wilkins had "internalized the prevailing white American definition of me as a Negro, something less than a whole man. This woman's unexpected exclamation had ripped a veil off my unconscious mind and had shown me how much America's pervasive racism had crippled me. Thanks to her, I would never be the same. I became a *man* in this world that night."

Wilkins continued to have a successful career, but he also gained self esteem that enabled him to date white as well as Black women.

## Thinking for Oneself

Sometimes, a Big Jolt is necessary to free people from their constricting past. Many people are brought up, or find themselves in, a conservative tradition that will not allow them to think freely for themselves.

**John and Shawna Mitchell** became involved with a nameless church group when they were first married; the church members preferred their group to be anonymous so they would not have to combat stereotypes nor suffer persecution for their beliefs. The couple was invited by a friend to fellowship meetings where they met other fundamentalist Christians like themselves, friendly people who made them feel at home. When they tried to learn more about this church, they found that it had no leaders and no written material. Converts were made by Workers, two men or two women who travelled about preaching God's words-- some people have called the church Two-by-Twos in reference to these preachers. Church members followed strict rules-- no television, no radio, no smoking, no drinking, no dancing. The women wore long dresses and long hair done up in a bun. As the years passed, the Mitchells became more and more involved with their new church. John said, "Our minds had begun to close to other views, to the notion that other people might have a valid way of looking at life" (Staples, 1996).

They began to ask questions of themselves and others: How could they best love God? What was the way to heaven? Why didn't they meet in a church instead of one another's houses? Why did the women have to wear long hair? But they found few answers in their church, only the smug response that its way was the true way and other Christian sects were evil.

The Mitchell's Big Jolt came when they hooked up their home computer to the Internet (although perhaps they were already being impious in having a home computer at all?).

**"The contrast between the intellectual free-for-all of the Net and the rigid, unexplained rules of the sect bowled them over,"** John said. "The Internet was a way that we were able to talk to other people.... They want to know why you think things, and you're trying to explain, and if all you can say is, 'We think you're all going to hell just because,' well, it's hard to do that. You start to examine what you're saying."

John and Shawna began to rethink their lives, and decided that the church with no name did not have all the answers, especially when it didn't give out any answers at all. They resigned as members, and wrote an essay about their new beliefs: "We learn best from the mistakes we make. God has laid out unique lessons for each of us which can be so exciting if we are willing to keep asking and learning. Don't let anyone steal your questions!"

**Voltaire de Cleyre** was born and grew up in Michigan, the daughter of a French-born father and his wife. Her father was a freethinker and admirer of Voltaire, which explains her name. The family suffered from poverty, although when a teenager Voltairine studied at a Catholic Convent school in Sarnia because it offered the best education available. When she left school at 17, she became a private teacher, giving lessons in music, French and penmanship to support herself as she would continue to do for the rest of her life. She began to ponder what was wrong with society and with religion.

About this time, in May 1886, Chicago police fired into a crowd of striking men, killing and wounding several. The next evening, in response to this assault, a group of anarchists held a protest meeting near Haymarket Square. Near its end, someone threw a bomb which killed seven people and injured nearly 70 others. The public was incensed by this catastrophe and blamed eight anarchists, although there was no evidence that they were involved, and six were not even present when the bomb exploded. The eight were found guilty, "the verdict being the product of perjured testimony, a packed jury, a biased judge, and public hysteria" (Avrich, 1978, 48).

When Voltairine saw the newspaper headlines accusing anarchists of the Haymarket bombing she at first joined the cry for vengeance: "'They ought to be hanged!' she declared, words over which she agonized for the rest of her life. **'For that ignorant, outrageous, blood-thirsty sentence I shall never forgive myself,'** she confessed on the 14th anniversary of the executions...."

Voltairine's Big Jolt came when she learned more about the case. She realized that the accusation was false and the trial a farce. When the men were hanged the next year, she became an committed anarchist. She began to lecture and write essays about anarchism, activities that would engross her, along with many contemporaries such as Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, for the rest of her life. When she died, she was buried beside the graves of the Haymarket anarchists "whose martyrdom had inspired her life." Two thousand mourners attended her funeral, showing that her efforts to improve the condition of society had been appreciated by many people.

British people who immigrated to Newfoundland to earn their living by fishing over the centuries settled in outports which had few overland connections to other communities. Many were Methodists who had revival meetings and conversions of those who wanted to be born again, free of sin; sin at that time included drinking, dancing, smoking, playing cards, swearing and working on Sunday. After the second World War, Methodism was challenged as young people began training as teachers, engineers, nurses and civil servants who often returned to the outports to visit and work. Sandra Beardsall (1997, 29) writes that "As they gained the tools of analysis and critique, they observed cracks in the veneer of the conversion theology of their parents." They began to note that Christians sometimes behaved in an unchristian manner after testifying in church, and that calls from the altar for conversions seemed manipulative.

When a student minister lent a Methodist woman, **Naida Robbins**, a book of biblical scholarship which explained much of the Bible as myth, Robbins "experienced a life-change as dramatic as an old-fashioned conversion." Robbins said: "I got about half way through the book, and I said to myself, if I get through it I won't have a prop left, not one prop left. So I put the book down for perhaps two or three weeks.... Anyway, I got up the courage, and I got through it. That was the turning point for me. By the time I got finished, it hit home. And I said to myself, I've got to use my brains. I haven't got to go on tradition, I've got to reason things out...." From that time on Robbins saw life through new eyes and did not accept everything that happened uncritically. The book on the Bible had inspired her to think for herself.

## **Bibliography**

- \* Avrich, Paul. 1978. *An American Anarchist: The Life of Voltairine\_de Cleyre*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- \* Beardsall, Sandra. 1997. "I love to tell the story": Women in outport Newfoundland Methodism. *Canadian Woman Studies* 17,1: 26-30.
- \* Christy, Marian. 1994, Mar 26. Rhinestoned cowboy. *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, p C6.
- \* Conway, Sheelagh. 1987. *A Woman and Catholicism*. Toronto: PaperJacks.
- \* Johnson, Sonia. 1989. *Wildfire*. Albuquerque, NM: Wildfire Books.
- \* Lutz, Hartmut. 1991. Chapter on Lee Maracle, pp 169-179. *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native\_Authors*. Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers.
- \* Marks, Jane. 1993. *The Hidden Children: The Secret Survivors of\_the Holocaust*. New York: Ballantine.
- \* Neuman, Alma. 1993. *Always Straight Ahead*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- \* Reinhart, Tony. 1995, Mar 4. The redemption of Ryan. *Kitchener- Waterloo Record*, p C1.
- \* Staples, David. 1996, Feb 17. No-name Church: Mysterious cult-like sect discouraged questions, criticism. *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, A9.
- \* Wilkins, Roger. 1993. Confessions of a blue-chip Black. In Katharine Whitemore and Gerald Marzorati, eds. *Voices in Black and\_White*, pp 127-141. New York: Franklin Square Press.
- \* Zeldin, Theodore. 1994. *An Intimate History of Humanity*. New York: HarperCollins.