

ON THE DOWNWARD SLIDE TO 80

By John F. Hall

The other day, I had just walked into Hancock's Neighborhood Market in Cadiz, Kentucky. LaDonna Diggs was just leaving the check out line after paying for her groceries. She saw me and smiled. She worked with my sister-in-law, and my brother-in-law, Marsha and Roger Garner at the Hover plant that closed in Cadiz. Their jobs were shipped to Mexico many, many years ago. LaDonna would do cartwheels in the plant.



She goes to nearly all the visitations at the two funeral homes in Cadiz. No one is a stranger to her. She is sunshine on a dark, unhappy day.

LaDonna asked me how I was feeling. I usually say: "I'm feeling old and decrepit." But this was June 29th, my birthday. I told her that I turned 77 today! She looked at me, smiled and said: "That's wonderful! And in three years you will turn 80!" I didn't know if I should laugh or cry. I gave LaDonna a hug and she went on her merry way. She takes care of her 95 year old mother who has Alzheimer's. I read somewhere that they might change the name of that disease to being deeply forgetful. God knows that I'm getting forgetful.

I never gave any thought to living to be 80 years old. Actually, everyday that I wake up, I'm always amazed that I am still here. John D. Occhipinti wrote the song, "Happy 80th Birthday to Brother John." These are some of his lyrics: "Happy Birthday to Brother John. Happy Birthday to Brother John. He's 80 years old, and it must be told. He's 80 years old, and he's in God's fold. Brother John is 80 years old. Jesus 15 the reason why we celebrate today. Jesus blesses Brother John, because he does obey. Although his hair has turned to gray, he still knows how to pray. Brother John is 80 years old. 79 years now are gone. It's 80 years now for Brother John. He's 80 years old, and it must be told, Brother John's gonna walk on streets of gold. Brother John is 80 years old..."

Several people suggested that I should write a book. I'm no F. Scott Fitzgerald, Earnest Hemingway, or Jesse Stuart. I decided 44 years ago that I would not write fiction. So that ruled out writing a number one novel or fabulous book. If I could not experience or observe something, I would not write a story about it. I have a talent, thanks to the grace and inspiration from Christ, to write nonfiction stories. But I do not seek profit or fame from my stories. I give my stories away. I have the satisfaction of knowing that my readers, of different ages, enjoy reading them. I am like Jesse Stuart, in that I enjoy working on a story everyday. Jesse is from eastern Kentucky, yet he gave his 460 stories, mostly fiction, to Murray State University. They are in the Jesse Stuart room in one of the campus libraries. Someday, I'd like to go into that room and read his stories, but that is too far down my bucket list.

Andrea Carter wrote the song, "80 Candles on the Cake." These are some of her lyrics: "You're not getting older, you're just getting better, like berries on the vine. If you sit and

wait, if you can hesitate, they just get better with time...80 candles on the cake, enough to light the room. The fire trucks will all pull up, if you don't blow'em out soon."

Carolyn Leigh and Johnny Richards wrote the song, "Young at Heart." I believe that no matter a person's age, one thing that makes them happy is remaining young at heart. These are some of their lyrics: "Fairy tales can come true, it can happen to you if you're young at heart. For it's hard, you will find, to be narrow of mind if you're young at heart. You can go to extremes with impossible schemes. You can laugh when your dreams fall apart at the seems. And life gets more exciting with each passing day. And love is in your heart or on it's way. Don't you know that's worth every treasure on earth to be young at heart. For as rich as you are it's much better by far to be young at heart. And if you should survive to a hundred and five, look at all you'll derive out of bein' alive. And here is the best part, you have a head start, if you are among the very young at heart..."

I mail some of my stories to young people in the hope that I can teach them some lessons that I learned in my life. I share some of my stories with friends and with my Christian Fraternity Brothers. They asked me to continue writing my stories. I learned a few things during the 77 years that I have journeyed on this earth. And in no specific order of importance, these are some of those things. It seems that some people, young and old alike, create their own unnecessary stress. They let social media and constant digital connectivity run their lives. They can't seem to live beyond the screens on their cell phones.

These people overlook the good in their lives. They don't stay focused on the positive. They fail to be aware that they have great potential and great personal worth. Sadly, they feel that they are not worthy of love, happiness or success. They cannot accept the fact that they are uniquely imperfect. They fail to understand that perfectionism ensures failure because no one is perfect. They don't look beyond the symptoms of unhappiness. For some reason, they don't know how to look deeply inside themselves for the cause of their unhappiness. It is as if they will not give themselves permission to be happy, healthy, and successful. They seem to feel that they have not earned the right to be happy. They don't believe that the best is yet to come. They doubt their ability to overcome obstacles and disappointments.

No one, especially this old writer, can suggest what they should do to be happy and satisfied with their lives. As for me, giving Christ some of my time, during the week, and on Sunday, makes me happy and satisfied. And, like Jesse Stuart, I get satisfaction from writing just one page a day. As my oldest granddaughter, Andrea texted to me: "I truly enjoy how much you bring faith into your stories because people don't do that anymore." I told Andrea that it could be that those people have such little faith.

E. G. Masters wrote the hymn, "I'm satisfied with Jesus, He's Everything to Me." These are his lyrics: "I'm satisfied with Jesus, he's everything to me; he saved my soul from torment, and awful misery; He gave me peace and gladness, yea, more than I deserved, and since my Savior found me, Him I have gladly served." "I'm satisfied with Jesus, I find He's all I need, He healed my soul and body, and makes me whole indeed; He gives

me food and raiment, yes, all I eat and wear; he beareth all my burdens, my sorrows, and my care. I'm satisfied with Jesus, whatever he may do, and this same satisfaction is waiting now for you; I'm satisfied with Jesus, wherever I may be, and, while I now obey Him, He's satisfied with me.”.

I know that I'm on that downward slide to 80, and it's not really too much fun. I talked to a man about the same age as me. He was using a walker that has single wheels. I have one with dual wheels. I asked the man what happened to him. He said he had hip replacement. I asked him how long did he realize that his hip was going out. He said, “about four years.” We both have skin cancer that we have been fighting for decades. My spinal stenosis is causing me severe pain at times, at times. The sciatic nerve that goes from my lower back, down my right leg to my foot, drives me up the wall. I first went to the VA Clinic in Hopkinsville. They took X-rays and said it would be six weeks before I could get an appointment to see a surgeon at the VA Hospital in Nashville, Tennessee. I went ahead and made the appointment.

I was helping my son with a septic job in Lyon County, Kentucky. I was talking to a woman who was sitting on a porch with her husband. He was just sitting there staring straight ahead and not talking. I asked what happened to her husband. She said that he went into the VA Medical Center in Marion, Illinois. She said that he was alright when he went in, but he was in terrible shape when he came out. Before I went to my appointment at the VA Hospital in Nashville, I went to Vanderbilt Hospital and talked to one of their foot surgeons: She looked at my foot and said that it was beyond her experience to repair. I showed the VA surgeon my foot X-rays. He said that he would be glad to operate on my foot. He gave me his business card and told me that I could call him direct. He would bypass the regular surgery schedulers, and put me ahead of the line. I thanked him and threw his business card in the trash can as I was leaving the VA Hospital. The Nashville VA Hospital, at that time in 2017, was one of the five worst hospitals in the VA system.

I searched the internet for the best ankle and foot surgeon in Nashville. I went with the 1997-2003 Titans/Oilers team physician, Dr. Jeffrey Herring. He took extensive X-rays of my right foot. He told me if I did nothing that I could lose the toes on that foot. He disagreed with the Vanderbilt surgeon that poor circulation in my right foot made surgery not an option. One of my long toe's joints had separated. My big toe had crossed over and was on top of the long toe. He scheduled surgery at Saint Thomas Midtown Hospital. He broke my big toe and inserted two screws to straighten it up. He then inserted a six-inch pin through the long toe. After the surgery, I was about to leave when my right foot began to really bleed. Dr. Herring told the surgery nurse, that only he would correct the bleeding. I had to wait until he finished another surgery before he could stop the bleeding. I was bed ridden for ten days and could not drive for ten weeks.

The surgery worked for about a year and the repairs to the big toe and long toe failed. A second surgery was performed. After six months, it failed.

I went back to Dr. Herring. He wanted to do a third surgery. This time, he wanted to break four toes and insert a six-inch pin in each toe. I told Dr. Herring that I was too old

to tolerate any further torture and I declined the third surgery. He said that we had to do something. I have rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis in my right foot. I asked him to give me another option. He gave a prescription and sent me to Hanger Clinic to be fitted with inserts in my shoes. This allows me to walk without too much pain. I also purchased walking shoes, two sizes larger, to avoid pressure on my right foot. Dr. Jeffery Herring is the best foot surgeon in Nashville and I highly recommend him.

Dr. Herring just came up against a foot that is not wanting to cooperate. The damage goes back to my paratrooper days of jumping out of helicopters and cargo planes. On my parachute landing falls (PLFs), I would always let my right foot hit the ground first. At a 22-foot a second fall, I repeatedly injured my right foot. And running in Army jump boots for 30 years did not help. The Army lost my active duty medical records when I was in the 101st Airborne Division. I had no evidence of the damage that I suffered after having bad PLFs. I decided to go ahead and file a VA claim even as I am on the downward slide to 80. I still have a good quality of life. I climb the staircase in my old house at least a dozen times a day. Being a writer is not too hard on this 77 year old man.

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*Read other stories by John F. Hall at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>