

Chapter X – The Best and the Worst

I continued on down through Nebraska and Colorado. As the sun went down I was in the open expanse of the plains. While riding the plains in the middle of the night I decided to stop for a bit. I was tired and needed to stretch, walk around a little and get the blood flowing back through my legs and butt.

As far as the eye could see there were no lights, no traffic; nothing but me and my ride. I shut the engine off and removed my helmet. The lack of sound is hard to describe. The only thing I heard was the slight breeze. You can sit in a quiet room, but it is not the same. In a room there is still the sound of the furnace or air conditioner, the buzz of the refrigerator or the ticking of the wall clock. Out there the only real sound is your thoughts. As hard as you try you can never escape your thoughts.

Many of us are good at putting on a facade when we are around people. We work hard to create and maintain the persona that we want people to see and often that person we portray ourselves as being is far from our true self. We cannot hide from ourselves, we can hide ourselves from other people, but deep down inside we know who we are.

Our thoughts take us to places and instances in our past and all too often that memory reminds us of our failures. Those times when we did something that haunts us; hard as we try we cannot change what we did. The times when we should have done something, but, for purely selfish reasons, did not. These are the things that define our past. There were good things we did for sure, but the good we perceive to have done is shadowed by our mistakes. I suspect a person with no conscience does not have this problem, but I would not want to go through life with no conscience.

I believe the mistakes we make, if we use them properly and learn from them, will mold us into who we can become. It is from our mistakes that we most often learn.

I sat there for a while; not really sure how long. Memories, mistakes and regrets flooded through my mind. I tried to picture myself as if I were looking down from a mountaintop;

me, alone in the middle of the Great Plains with not a soul in sight. How insignificant I felt as I stood in the middle of this expanse. However, at the same time I felt so very blessed knowing that I was not alone; I believe God is always with me and He knows my mistakes, my memories and my regrets, but loves me still.

Yes there are mistakes and there are regrets but I will not let them degrade me. They may define who I was and perhaps who I am, but not who I can be. I can learn from them and use that experience to make me a better person, or I can succumb to my guilt, crawl into a garbage can and scowl at the world. I do not wish to live in a garbage can.

With renewed energy I put on my helmet, started my engine and left the quiet solitude of that moment in time knowing who I will be has yet to be written and with God's help, grace and compassion I will become the person He wants me to be; the person I can be, the husband my wife deserves, the son and brother my family deserves.

I don't recall where I spent that night, but it was in close proximity to Route 66. Riding Route 66 is one of the things on my Bucket List; ride from the Chicago area to the shores of California. Most of the old road is gone, but there are still remnants along that stretch of history.

The next day I made a quick stop at the entrance to Lincoln National Forest and took a couple of pictures. The sky was turning dark and I figured a bit of rain was in my future so I put my leather jacket on, but did not put my leather chaps on... bad call on my part.

As soon as I started up the mountain it started to rain a bit and the farther up I went the harder it rained and the colder it got. Rain and cold is bad enough, but if you add hail to the mix you rethink the level of discomfort associated with rain and cold.

The pain that accompanied the hail was tolerable, but not something I wanted to live through. The two lane road leading up the mountain was narrow and very few places to pull over for shelter. All I could do was hunker down behind the windshield

and ride through it. On those few occasions when I did see a place to pull over it was too late, as I did not see them until I passed them and there was no available option to turn around. As one might say I was stuck like Chuck; not sure who Chuck is but apparently at one time in his life he found himself in a difficult situation.

I was rolling along about 25 miles per hour, which means my exposed hands and legs were running into hailstones the size of marbles at 25 miles per hour. Try it sometime, you won't like it.

I'm sure the guy in the truck behind me was entertained. I tried to comfort myself by repeating to myself, "Things could be worse." I don't think that thought worked as well as I had hoped.

I reached the top and started down and as I got farther from the top the hail, rain and cold subsided a bit. As it came to a complete stop I rolled into a small town nestled in a wide spot in the road. I pulled up to a "mom & pop" restaurant and relished the feeling of not being pelted by hail stones and the thought of a hot cup of coffee; and maybe a donut.

I was about to step off the bike when an elderly couple walked out of the restaurant. We made eye contact and, after a brief discussion between them (words I obviously could not hear) they turned and walked back into the restaurant. Can't say that I blamed them; I'm sure my appearance was reminiscent of a bag of dead rat hair that had been dipped in swamp water. I looked in the mirror to verify what I felt to be the case and was rewarded with the sight I expected. Yea, I couldn't blame them at all and just smiled to myself and wondered if they were, at this very minute, dialing 911.

I sat for a minute looking at the many hail stones covering the ground and wondered if I should venture into the restaurant for a cup of coffee and risk being arrested. About that time the couple walked back out of the restaurant and handed me a cup of coffee. They said it has apparent to them I was in serious need of a cup. The coffee warmed my body and the conversation with them, coupled with their kind act, warmed my heart. After a bit they wished me safe passage and I went on my way knowing I

would never see these selfless people again, but will certainly never forget them.

I departed that small little town in the mountains and continued down what was becoming an endless road. The flood of thoughts continued and I pondered my most recent predicament with the environment. If we go through life thinking everything is going to be fine then for sure and certain we will end up distraught and troubled with our life because trouble will find us. We must accept the inevitable and learn to deal with it. If we are moving toward a goal and an obstacle presents itself we are faced with a choice; perhaps a number of them. We can run and hide and wait for trouble to pass or we can face it, deal with it and learn from it.

What will we gain if we hide from trouble and turmoil? The answer to that question was easy; we gain nothing. Not sure who said it first, "That which does not kill you makes you stronger." That may be true in some instances but I will assume the one who said it first never lived through a kidney stone. But there is truth to the statement. Working our way through troubles will prepare us for troubles to come. Whether your obstacle is a hail storm, a marital problem or a harsh work environment; they are all obstacles that must be overcome, you cannot hide. If you hide or turn and go the other direction then two things happen. First, you will not reach your goal and second the trouble will continue and perhaps follow and in some cases once it catches up to you will be harder to manage.

When faced with a hail storm ride through it; don't stop and don't turn back. Face it and deal with it head on. If you let adversity control you then you will have willingly given up a piece of yourself, a piece you will never regain. A piece you will need when faced with an obstacle that you cannot hide from or turn away from. If you face it the outcome is priceless. At the end of that horrible hail storm there was a bright sky and the encounter with the selfless couple that I will never forget.

As a rider, whether you ride long distances or a short ride to the store down the street, you face death every day. We can turn our eyes away, but it is there. How you face it (or fail to face it) can be a measure of your character. I choose to face it, to live with it and make it part of who I am. I will

not let the inevitable control me and dictate to me. We will all die someday, so the best we can hope for is to leave a positive legacy. With some of us the only mark we will leave behind are the scrapes we leave on the highway when we meet that distracted cager. I choose to leave more than that and my hope is I succeed.

OK, that was kinda deep... let's lighten this us a bit.

Every rider has stories. Some are shared with others for no other reason than they were there when it happened. Other stories are shared with friends and associates by tall tales, but words seldom tell the real story. It is hard to describe emotions and feelings with words alone. Most of the time riders enter into, interact with and survive such encounters with no witnesses, so we just tuck the episode away in our minds. Later, while riding another stretch of that endless road we relive those moments and it brings a smile to our face. Not sure what that says about us.