

Carried, Sustained and Rescued

By: Roy Vandermeer

Isaiah 46:4b (NIV) I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you. These words from Almighty God to Israel through the Old Testament prophet have profound substance and meaning for me in my life and Pine Rest Christian Hospital was the vehicle through which God's grace became embodied in these words and imparted to me.

During my early life the idea of having a mental illness was completely alien to me and I thought it was a sign of weakness. It, and what I thought were its cousins, mental retardation and insanity, were always secrets and people suffering these maladies were never discussed. But then at the age of 33 my world came crashing in on me and I found myself suffering from mental illness. Up until the time of my illness, my life I thought had been reasonably normal and happy with but a few bumps in the road. Professionally I was being quite successful.

Prologue:

I was born to God-fearing, Dutch-American parents in Chicago Illinois during the latter years of the Great Depression. My birth was premature and something of a surprise to my parents who had tried for 7 years to have a child. I grew up and was tutored in the Christian faith by my parents and the Dutch Reformed Church (now the Reformed Church in America), attending on a very regular basis, worship, Sunday school, Catechism classes, youth groups, children's choir, vacation Bible school, etc. And after the 4th grade my elementary and high school education was accomplished at church-sponsored Christian schools in Chicago where one hour of Bible study each day was mandatory. There has not been a time in my life that I was not aware of the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. I am told that at the age of 3, I would sing myself to sleep in my crib for my afternoon nap singing "Jesus Loves Me This I Know".

When I was 15 years old a turn-the-world-upside-down event occurred in my life. My father who was the most beloved person in my life died suddenly of a massive heart attack. He had been sickly for as long as I could remember with a diseased heart. At the time of his attack, the two of us were in the living room watching a sporting event on TV (TV was really quite new at that time and few homes had one). My father was dead within seconds of the start of the attack, but I did manage to take hold of his hand as he took his last breath. His death was devastating for me, my mother and my younger sister. I questioned why God would do this to us. I could not even cry or grieve for the loss of my father and I was really deeply disappointed with God. Somehow, I felt partly responsible for my father's death. I felt all alone in the world and received little support in my loneliness and no help for my buried grief. It was partly because our church offered superb athletic programs in softball and basketball that I remained faithful in church attendance. In all my disappointment with God, however, He remained faithful to me.

After graduating from high school, I enrolled at Illinois Institute of Technology. Four years later I graduated with a BS in metallurgical engineering. It was during this time that I met, dated and married Marie Van Keppel, a fine Christian woman who became the love of my life and my best friend. The next years found me enrolled in graduate school and becoming a first time father of a son, Philip. Because of my dear wife's support, love and encouragement I was able to complete the requirements for a Phd degree, and graduate. We moved to Oak Ridge, Tennessee where I continued my professional career in metallurgical science and engineering at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. There we joined the Presbyterian Church and soon a second son, Paul, was born.

As time went forward, my career blossomed. I wrote several seminal research papers, presented lectures at professional society meetings and became a Lecturer, Part Time at the University of Tennessee. My research work was cited in a physical metallurgy textbook. Family life progressed in a way I thought was normal. Even though I soon became an elder in the Presbyterian church and taught the adult Sunday School class in our small Presbyterian church my spiritual life stagnated.

In Crisis: In the mid-1960's, through the writings of men like Keith Miller, Bruce Larson, Paul Tournier, Sam Shoemaker, Cecil Osbourne and others, and attendance at Faith-at-Work Conferences, I became aware of a relational sickness in my life although at the time I did not recognize it as such. Deep down inside I began to recognize a void and darkness in my life. Following a Faith-at-Work Conference, I recommitted myself to Jesus Christ and embarked on a course of religious fervor bordering on fanaticism. But my life began to fall apart. Great anxiety became a constant companion. The world began to close in on me and soon I could no longer travel the 25 miles to give my lectures at the University without a devastating fear coming over me. I was retreating into myself and I could not function normally. It was as though I was looking out at the world through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars. My Sunday school lessons became incoherent. I found myself to be in a constant state of agitation. I could not perform my research and writing at work. I was a real basket case and I knew it. It dawned on me that I was suffering a nervous breakdown and had developed a mental illness that needed to be dealt with or surely I would soon become insane or die. My poor wife, Marie, was under great stress too, but God gave her great emotional and physical strength and she held the family together and supported me as best she knew how. I became a patient of a local psychiatrist in Oak Ridge and spent a week in the local general hospital. But the problem was so deep that I knew I needed more help. Both Marie and I knew of Pine Rest Christian Hospital from our church backgrounds in the Christian Reformed and Reformed churches respectively. My psychiatrist agreed I needed intensive help but he was reluctant to send me so far away. Pine Rest was at least 600 miles away from our home. But with Marie's insistence and persistence and after he did a little research, he concluded Pine Rest was a first class place and agreed I should be admitted there if they had room. As I was dysfunctional at the time, Marie handled all the arrangements for me to come to Pine Rest.

Transferring me to Pine Rest was an ordeal within an ordeal especially for Marie. Fortunately it was summertime and the boys were out of school and they could stay at my

mother's house in Chicago. But getting everyone ready for the three day trip from Oak Ridge to Chicago to Grand Rapids, then driving the whole way with no relief, and also at the same time attending to the boys' needs and mine were extremely trying for Marie. For three nights she barely had a couple of hours of sleep. On top of all this, I had developed a serious bladder infection, and on the way to Grand Rapids I needed to stop at hospitals in Louisville, Kentucky and Chicago to be catheterized because I was unable to urinate. Both hospitals wanted me to be admitted for tests but again Marie adamantly proclaimed that I was on my way to another hospital and insisted that they release me. Her persistence paid off and we were allowed to continue on the way. The second night we stayed at my mother's house where the boys would remain for the rest of the summer. But I became so agitated that evening that Marie had to track down my doctor in Oak Ridge so he could call in a prescription to try to ease my anxiety. Nothing seemed to help. I was figuratively "climbing the walls". Finally on this third day I woke Marie at four in the morning insisting that we go to Pine Rest as soon as possible. And so off we went on the last leg of the trip from hell.

We arrived at the Mulder Therapy Center at Pine Rest well before the administrative staff started work. In spite of the fact that we had to wait for admittance, we were treated with kindness, courtesy and love. I can not say too much in praise of the staff of the Mulder Center. In the four months or so that I was a patient there, I was always treated with dignity and love. I really felt cared for. Truly I was in the embrace of a loving God who wanted the best for me.

My first days at the Mulder Center involved among other things an interview with the hospital psychiatrist, undergoing a battery of tests - physical and psychological, learning the daily routine of the place, and meeting the nurses and the other patients. I was assigned to a four bed ward. Soon a team was assigned to my case - a psychiatrist, a social worker, a family counselor, a pastor and nurses. Unfortunately arriving at Pine Rest did nothing to alleviate my extreme anxiety. I was wound up tighter than the proverbial drum or an overloaded spring. It would take many weeks before I would begin to "feel" progress toward healing; although after several weeks I was told that progress was being made, that I had turned a corner, etc.

The daily routine at the Mulder Center was highly regimented. Meals were served during specific times. Mornings after breakfast had us chopping wood, participating in "arts and crafts", etc. After lunch there were devotions led by one of the nurses and later workshops, calisthenics and time at the gym shooting baskets or using the punching bag. My desire to do any of this was virtually non-existent but I pushed myself to participate. In the course of my time at Pine Rest, I learned to use a wood lathe, and among other things made a set of wooden candle sticks, a wood foot stool, a hammered aluminum ash tray, and copper etchings.

There were special outings that were planned by the Center. Each week there was a morning we would all pile on a bus and head off to a local bowling alley. Bowling had always been a favorite activity of mine. Then there was the occasional fishing outing and because it was summer, the weekly softball game.

Psychotherapy sessions were scheduled several times each week and these soon became emotionally very painful but necessary for my healing. During the four months of psycho-therapy I grew to love my therapist and we became good friends until his untimely death in a plane crash several years later. He personified the love of Christ in his dealings with me - asking the hard questions, prodding my psyche, calling me on it when my answers seemed evasive, uncovering many of the repressed and buried feelings I had hidden from myself, and building me up and empathizing with me when I needed it. In short, he personified “tough love” for me. I learned much from him about what it takes to be an emotionally healthy person.

A very important aspect of the treatment and care I received at the Mulder Therapy Center was that it did not just involve my emotional and mental health but was also deeply concerned with my spiritual and physical health as well. The Center was addressing the needs of the whole person. Every so often the pastor assigned to me would come by to chat with me to attend to my spiritual needs and on Sundays there was chapel that we could attend if we so desired. On the physical side, the nursing staff from the start monitored the chronic bladder infection that plagued me when I was admitted. Eventually they scheduled me to see a urologist associated with Butterworth Hospital and provided me transportation to an appointment. Subsequently I underwent testing and soon thereafter bladder surgery at Butterworth where I was admitted for a week. Not many people can say they were a patient at two hospitals simultaneously. The surgery was successful and my physical well-being improved.

Weekends for patients at Pine Rest were the most difficult as there were no planned activities. I was fortunate because most every Friday afternoon Marie would come up from Chicago where she was staying with our boys for a weekend visit. She would leave again on Monday morning. On weekends we would talk about our week, work on a lot of jigsaw puzzles and converse with some of the other patients who became our friends. When I was allowed to leave the ward, we would walk the Pine Rest campus and sometimes ride bicycles (except on Sunday). At first Marie stayed at a nearby motel on these weekends but later she was allowed to board at Pine Rest’s halfway house (an old farm house on the campus) for a very minimal fee.

Labor Day came about midway during my hospitalization and it was necessary for Marie to return to Oak Ridge so our boys could go to school. It was planned for me to return with them for a short time so I could pick up our second car and a briefcase full of my research data from the lab where I was employed. And, I supposed the trip was meant to test how I would function away from the hospital. I returned to Grand Rapids a few days later to continue my recovery “journey”.

While I continued to experience what I sensed was severe anxiety and some depression, I knew deep inside, I was making progress little-by-little. Several events stand out in my mind which justified that view. One of these events was in the form of a dream I had one night at the hospital. In the dream I was at the bottom of a body of water unable to breathe. I was so discombobulated I could not by swimming find my way to the surface to gather a breath of air. Suddenly as I was about ready to breathe my last, in my dream, a

large fishing lure with numerous barbed hooks came trolling by, being pulled by a fishing line of sorts. In my panic and fear of drowning I grabbed for the lure and caught it so that it became embedded in my hand. Before I knew it, I was being dragged with excruciating pain by the line towards the water's surface where I soon emerged and was able to take a big gulp of fresh air. At this point the dream ended but I interpreted it as an omen that I was going to get completely better but not without some emotional pain.

The second event occurred one afternoon as I was resting on my bed. By this time I was in a two bed ward but I had no roommate. I had just finished a very brief devotional reading in my Bible and began to pray when suddenly I found myself very angry with God for allowing me to have a mental illness. And out loud I began to verbalize that anger in my prayer. And to my surprise God did not smite me dead. This was significant because as a child I was taught by my mother never to express anger especially to my father as it might kill him because of his damaged heart. And so I became an expert at repressing my feelings - both anger and love.

The third event took place one evening. A fellow patient and I were walking down the corridor returning to the ward. This fellow patient was a musician and was a wonderful piano player. Several of us who enjoyed classical music had joined him in a room that had a piano and we had listened to him play some Mozart on the piano. As we were walking back to the ward, this fellow informed me - not for the first time - that Mozart had died in his 30's of acute anxiety. Since both of us were about the same age as Mozart was when he died and we both had severe anxiety neuroses, the implication did not escape me. I became extremely upset and angry and I expressed in a loud voice my anger and displeasure with him for his needling and I told him in no uncertain terms that I was going to get well and not to say that to me anymore. When my anger subsided, old feelings of shame came over me and I began to flee the scene. One of the nurses had heard the angry exchange and came running after me. When she caught up to me she consoled me and told me that what I had done was healthy and that my therapist had been trying to get me to express my anger and not repress it. Needless to say I had something to talk about at my next psychotherapy session.

To me the road to wellness seemed to be a long and treacherous one. Coming from so far away I had few visitors beside my dear wife. But I did make several friends among the patients and this was a blessing. Towards the end of my third month at the hospital I was given passes to leave the Pine Rest campus. One weekend Marie came up from Oak Ridge by bus which and we spent it at a motel off campus. Another time I went for dinner to a friend's house in Grand Rapids. These and other freedoms were efforts to wean me from the institutionalization one experiences while undergoing long stays at the hospital.

Finally my discharge came and with some fear and trepidation I returned to my family in Oak Ridge just before Thanksgiving. There were times after I got back to Oak Ridge that I thought I would have to return to Pine Rest. With the help of sessions with my local psychiatrist I managed to weather these small episodes and soon I returned to work and my work productivity began to improve. I remained under psychiatric care in Oak Ridge

for another year and slowly I began to "feel" like I was becoming a whole person. Most importantly my relationships with my wife and sons became much improved.

The following words of John Michael Talbot have encapsulated my experiences:

"I can look back at my darkest periods and realize that these were the times the Lord was holding me closest. But I couldn't see His face because my face was in His breast - crying."

And Pine Rest Christian Hospital was the instrument of healing in the process.

Epilogue:

It is now 39 years since my experiences at Pine Rest. What I learned there was invaluable and I applied the lessons I learned there throughout the years. In hindsight I now view my time at the Mulder Center as a term at a school or learning center although at the time it seemed more like incarceration. Surely it was the love of a caring God expressed through the highly trained and professional staff at Pine Rest that carried me through. For that I will be eternally grateful. One interesting consequence of the Pine Rest experience was manifest about seven years later when Marie and I stepped out and risked with three or four other people including several pastors and founded a 24 hour, 7 days a week, 365 days a year telephone hot line in the Oak Ridge Tennessee area. The group affiliated with Contact Teleministries USA included over 100 trained, Christian, volunteer telephone listeners and backup counselors. Both Marie and I became telephone listeners and she became the first Director of the Counseling Center. Although we are no longer involved because we have moved away, the group remains operative today after 30 years of continuous operation addressing the needs of any who would call. Among those who call are the lonely, the troubled, the drug and alcohol addicted, those who were losing their jobs, yes and even a few would be suicidal persons. Without the learning Marie and I garnered at Pine Rest, participation would have been impossible for us.

The affect of my experiences at Pine Rest made a huge impact on family life. We became and remain a close family and my boys have become, each in his own way, fine, productive, Christian men exhibiting kind and compassionate spirits.

Thanks be to God for his grace.