

Blessed Assurance
By Terry Holliday
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My Grandpa Holliday was one of the biggest inspirations in my life and I try to live my life by the shining example that he led. I'd like to think that I'm a lot like him in many ways. For example, I try to live my life as though there are no strangers, only friends I haven't yet met. Many of my spiritual convictions were convictions of his, too. His death, in August of 1991, was the most devastating loss I had ever experienced at the age of 13. Born on his birthday, September 5th--after he died, I no longer wanted to celebrate my birthday without him. Now, having lived 12 years after his death, I find myself asking quite frequently, "What would Grandpa do? How would we handle this situation? What would he say?"

My uncle Jerry recently went home to visit my uncle Sam and the family in West Virginia last weekend. When he came back to Virginia Beach, he told me he was completely in shock by the people who were depressed, hearing things he couldn't believe he was hearing. Instinctively, I thought, "What would Grandpa do?" The answer came to me so clearly. He would've told me a story he had experienced to uplift my spirit, and to remember it when he was "pushin' up daisies." And I do; I remember so many of his stories that he told me as a kid, and I'm sure they will be with me the rest of my life. So the part of me that knows he is still very much alive *in* me began writing a story, planning to share it with my dad, and uncles Roy Lee and Sam, so that I could give them hope to know that, despite their confusion of the situation, everything would be alright. Everything IS alright.

It has taken a tremendous amount of courage and strength to tell this story, but I am following my heart. Grandpa always told me when I was a kid, "If you follow your heart, you'll never go wrong." While my Uncle Sam died the day after I wrote this story, and I wasn't able to share it with him while he was here in the physical, it is his and my Grandpa Holliday's spirits that give me the courage to share my story with you today, for them. I know that Sam will hear my story, too--because although we are currently apart, we are all one.

Looking back, the events that led up to my spiritual awakening last Easter happened so perfectly, though, at the time, I was very lost and confused about the things that were happening in my life. It all started in August of 1997, when my best friend Pat fired me as her assistant, which prompted me to move from West Virginia to Virginia Beach. The changes that followed in my life were extremely difficult for me to understand, and my life was not easy.

Then in late 1998, even though things seemed to be getting better in my life, I was still unquestionably depressed inside. In November of 1998, I was working for Sentara Hospitals, in Hampton Roads, VA and was noticing a change within my body. I had the nurses in the ER check my blood pressure, which was extremely elevated. A few days later, I had them check it again, and it was still high. On Monday, November 9, 1998, I

went to the ER at Sentara Leigh Hospital, because of the chest pains that I was having, only to be told by the doctor that it was just from stress, and that there was nothing he could do. That night, I hit an all-time low: An unbearable low with dark clouds in my mind that didn't seem they'd ever part. It wasn't my faith in God that was lost; it was my perception of God in my life that I couldn't understand. There was no one event that put me in that state of mind. Now I understand that it was just little things that I let build up inside, until they boiled over, and eventually led me to try to take my life over the next three days.

My first attempt that week to take my life was taking "enough pills to kill three people," as the doctors told me when I finally went to the Emergency Room on Thursday night--having taken the pills Tuesday night when I went to bed. I can remember that it was enough prescription painkillers, antidepressants, vitamins, and several bottles of over-the-counter pills to fill a large coffee cup, which I then chased down with Kahlua and Amaretto liquor. Then I wrote good-bye letters to my family and friends, making sure to leave instructions of what needed done, and where everything was located, so that no one would be burdened by my death. As I went to sleep that night, I imagined that the angel of death would visit me, like on the Touched by an Angel series that I watched on TV, a thought that now seems so childlike to my more mature self. I just had so much pain inside and felt so alone that all I could think about was going to Heaven where there wouldn't be any more pain for me to endure.

However, the next morning, I awoke to a rapid pulse and dying of thirst, but nothing more. You would have thought waking up despite having taken that many pills would have been a "wake-up call" to me, but it wasn't. Disappointed in my failed attempt, I drank a gallon of water and three cans of Mt. Dew to quench my thirst, and then found the sharpest knife I had in the kitchen. Stripping down to my underwear (so I wouldn't stain something that could be given away), I lay in the tub, slitting my wrists both horizontally and vertically; squeezing them when the blood would clot; cutting them deeper when that no longer worked. When I couldn't get any more blood from those cuts, I slit two other veins on my wrists. For six hours, I lay in the tub, not really feeling anything, other than the emotional pain and confusion I had inside. Finally realizing that this attempt wasn't working, either, and bored from sitting in the tub for so long, I got up and cleaned the blood-stained tub and got dressed.

Not long after I had gotten things cleaned up, I had a knock at my door. Because I hadn't called my supervisor or answered the phone when she (or anyone else) called for two days, she called my apartment complex to have them check on me to make sure I was all right. I suppose her intuition told her something was not right. The apartment manager and her assistant had no clue that anything had happened, because when they came to my door, I was wearing a long-sleeved sweatshirt and was able to put on an act of "normalcy" when I answered the door. My only friend at the time in Virginia Beach, Christopher, stopped by that evening and we even had a lengthy conversation, but he was oblivious to what I had been up to as well.

That night, determined to "finish the job," I contemplated how I could do just that. I had no way of hanging myself in my apartment. I lived on the first floor. I didn't own a gun. I didn't want to do something so grotesque that would horrify the person that would find me, so I decided that I would stab myself in the heart with a butcher knife. That night, I spread every towel I owned on my bed, because I didn't want to make a mess for someone else to have to clean up--and lay there, contemplating my death. I kept looking at the deep wounds on my wrists and arms, desperately not wanting to go through the rest of my life marked as a "psycho," someone who was crazy enough to slit his own wrists. But whether it was the finality of stabbing myself in the chest, or my cat, Jasmine, constantly rubbing my feet in the bed that night, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

The next day when I awoke, the sun was shining in my bedroom window, and it was as though the same was happening within the storm cloud in my mind. But then I looked at my wrists and just knew I had to finish what I had started. Despite having taken enough pills to kill three people, and despite having bled in my tub for six hours, Thursday evening, I somehow summoned the strength and energy to drive to the Super K-Mart near my home, and walked around the entire store looking for a hose that I could run from my exhaust pipe to inside my car window to poison my body with carbon monoxide. Unable to find one at Super K-Mart, I then drove to the Lowe's Warehouse, and walked that entire store until I found the tubing I was looking for.

After it started getting dark, I drove around Virginia Beach, looking for a place that was secluded enough that no one would see and stop me, but not so secluded that no one would be able to find me for days, either. I didn't want my family to have to endure the pain of not knowing where I was. I eventually found a deserted lot not far from where I now live. It's since been turned into Navy housing: ironically with a playground where my car was once parked. I ran the hose from my exhaust pipe through my back window, clogging the open space with towels so no oxygen could get in. I sat in the car, with the vent set to recirculate the inside air; not even having enough oxygen that I could light a cigarette. But after sitting in my car for two hours in that condition, all I had was a headache, to which I threw my arms up and said, "Ok, God. You win! I give up! Obviously, I've got some reason to be here." I made a promise to God that night, but more importantly, a promise to myself, that I would never again allow myself to get to a point in my life where I had such little faith that life would get better, because I knew it would. I also made a promise that I would find out what I wanted to do with my life that would make me happy. Looking at my wrists, I had the thought that maybe one day I would be able to help someone else by what I had experienced. And so I set out on my mission. I knew I was just confused, so I wanted to get help sorting things out. I thought I could find help with a psychiatrist, so I went to Sentara Norfolk General's Emergency Room.

The triage nurse told me my blood pressure on Thursday night (three days after having ingested the pills), was "stroke level" as she rushed me back-- but amazingly, none of the medicine I took did any damage to my liver or kidneys. The nurses tried for twenty minutes before they found a vein to start an IV drip because I had lost so much blood. The most horrendous part, for me, was digesting the liquid charcoal they gave me to

deactivate the medicine I had taken. Aside from the physical effects of slitting my wrists--which couldn't be stitched up because they were over twenty-four hours old and would just burst open from infection if they did--there *was* no damage to my body. I can remember the doctors and nurses continuously asking me why I did it. I suppose most people attempt suicide following a major life crisis, but there was nothing in particular that caused mine. I didn't know *why* I had done it. All I knew was that by the time I was at the hospital on Thursday night, I already felt better and wanted help figuring everything out.

The choice to stay in the psychiatric ward that night was mine, and it did nothing more than to show me that my situation was very different from the other psych patients in the hospital. The psychiatrist that saw me the next morning, Friday, November 13th (Friday the 13th of all days), diagnosed me as having Bipolar Disorder (Manic Depression), and prescribed two medicines that made me shake so severely I had to print everything, even my signature on my checks. I stopped seeing that doctor, because he wasn't doing anything more than writing me a prescription for a pill I didn't believe was helping. My family doctor tried several other medicines to try to help over the next few years, but the side effects, to me, were greater than the "disorder" they said I had. It didn't take me long to stop taking the meds and try to figure out a solution on my own.

In March of 1999, I started working for GEICO Insurance, and life seemed to be smooth sailing for a while. When I love my job, everything else in my life seems to go well. I fell in love for the first time that year, only to have my heart broken a year later. Then in March of 2001, my cousin Carolyn that I grew up with passed away suddenly from a stroke, leaving our family completely devastated from the loss, or rather our understanding of what we perceived to be a loss. The night Carolyn died, I hadn't slept for 48 hours because I was on another "manic high," and also because I had to be the strength that my family needed to keep up the home front while everyone else was at Carolyn's bedside. I hadn't allowed myself to grieve as she lay dying in the hospital, nor when her mom, Nancy, called to tell me she was gone. Later that evening, my manager from GEICO, Sherry, called to offer her condolences for my loss. I remember telling her that I wasn't really sad about Carolyn dying because I knew she was in Heaven; but it made me sad when I thought about Haley, Carolyn's two-and-a-half-month-old daughter, and how she would never get to truly know how great her mom was--or that Carolyn wouldn't get to be there when Haley took her first steps, or get to see her on her wedding day. Sherry simply offered the words, "I know, Terry." Then I cried on the phone with her for several minutes, finally letting myself grieve over Carolyn's death, and told her, "I think I can sleep now." As I lay in bed that evening, as though I was dreaming with my eyes open, in the "dream" I was having a conversation with Carolyn with her standing in my bedroom. The only thing I remember saying to her in the dream was "I promise I'll make sure Haley, Nancy, and Jackie (Carolyn's sister) are taken care of." As soon as I said that, Carolyn disappeared to me. The next day when I awoke, I simply dismissed it all as a dream, a coincidence.

Two months later, on May 22, 2001, I was fired from GEICO for forwarding an email joke to a coworker. This event sent me spiraling into a sea of confusion again about

where I was going with my life. I was unemployed for over a month until I began working for a temporary agency out of Norfolk doing medical billing for Bon Secours Health Systems, making half the salary I had been making at GEICO. On September 7, 2001 (two days after my birthday), I was fired from that temp assignment because the head manager had some personal vendetta against me. My supervisor (who loved me) told me she thought the manager felt threatened by me (for whatever reason). Regardless, I found myself unemployed once again and having to live off my credit cards.

On September 11, 2001, completely depressed with life, I was home alone sleeping while all of the events were happening in New York City. I didn't have a TV on and didn't have a radio on, either. All that was playing were the songs on my computer that I listen to while I'm sleeping. The dream that I remembered as I woke up is as vivid today as it was then. In the dream, I thought I was watching an episode of Third Watch on NBC, but it was as though I was inside the show. I saw firefighters and paramedics rushing around, and there were people in this fiery building, which I was looking up at from the ground, to people yelling and screaming for help. In the dream, I could feel the torment and pain in their hearts, but I felt no pain myself--just connected to them. Amidst the chaos of the dream, I felt immense peace and tranquility. When I awoke around 11 a.m., I logged online and my friend, Ariel, posted a link to CNN's website in an AOL Instant Messenger window which, when I clicked it, made me realize the significance of my dream. But again, I dismissed it *as a dream*, another coincidence.

It wasn't until more "coincidences" began to happen that I started understanding them as beyond chance. In January of 2002, I was asleep dreaming when my brother, Marty, called at 6:45 a.m. --15 minutes before my alarm was set to go off--to wake me up and tell me my dad had just had a heart attack. I said, "That's weird. I was just dreaming about dad." Again, I summarily discarded the dream as mere chance. Then, on February 23, and just out of sheer curiosity, I went with my best friend Alison to see a psychic at the Heritage Bookstore in Virginia Beach. I was still so skeptical that anything like this could be legitimate. After all, it went against the very convictions of the faith I had been taught. So I went with determination to prove it was bogus. To my delight, that turned out to be one of the best \$30 I have ever spent in my life. The insight Joyce gave me, combined with the experiences I had, helped me to open my mind for the events that followed the month after.

It was March of 2002, and I was again doing medical billing, but this time for Alternative Behavioral Services, which is owned by First Hospital Corporation. I have never liked doing that type of work, even though I was very good at it. It's just too tedious for my mind, and I can't express my personality in the job. But my loyalty to others, especially employers, has always been stronger than my loyalty to myself. I was also extremely unhappy with my relationship with my mom. I felt like she had all but shut me out of her life because we disagree that my being gay is a choice that can be prayed away. I was completely miserable because I didn't know where I was going with my life, questioning everything about myself.

Then on Friday, March 29, 2001 (Good Friday), I just had a feeling I needed to go home to West Virginia. Despite having been on a three-day bout with insomnia (yet another "manic high"), I just knew I needed to go home. My cousin Jackie pleaded with me to stay in Virginia Beach because I hadn't had any sleep. But I assured her that I'd be all right; I just needed to go home. "I don't know why," I told her. "I just need to. Besides, my best friend Pat is expecting me to stop by her house tonight." I had even bought my first cell phone that day (because I just knew I needed it for this trip). The sales representative at Ntelos that I told my story to said, "To hear your story and to see how positive an outlook you have on life just melts my heart." Then she hugged me (a complete stranger) as we said goodbye, telling me to "Keep that smile on my face." It was such a great feeling to know that I had inspired someone and made them feel better, just by telling my story.

Then on the drive to West Virginia that night, I began a series of conversations that helped me experience my spiritual awakening. I first called my mom to let her know I was on my way home, but with so much on my mind, I began rambling about other things that were bothering me. Eventually, I told her that it bothered me that she had pretty much shut me out of her life; she never wrote anymore, just forwarded emails. She never called, and even when I called, we never really talked. The more I began talking, the more I began opening up to all the things that I had held about my life growing up. My mom apologized, and said that she "wished she could go back and make those things better for me, and if she could, she would." Then I told her that it really bothered me that she couldn't accept me for who I am. Her reply will forever be etched in my mind. She said, "Terry, you're my son, and I will always love you no matter what, but I will never accept what it is you do." The knot in my throat as I write this was just as big then, as my eyes welled up with tears. The one person in the world I wanted acceptance from most was now telling me she would never give it. Unable to speak to her anymore because of how hard I was crying, I assured her I'd "be alright, but I needed to go." Then a whisper in my mind reminded me of a quote I had read which said, "What do you do when the one person who can make you stop crying is the person who made you cry?" Then out of nowhere, my mom's sister, Nancy, in Virginia Beach, who from the time I moved to Virginia Beach had always been like a second mom to me, called to see where I was. As I explained to her what had happened, still crying my eyes out, I told her how much it hurt inside. She simply said, "I know it does, darlin'. I know it does." But those few compassionate words of understanding were enough to help me stop crying. Still driving, she asked me where I was. I told her, "I don't know. My eyes are so blurry I can't see the road signs, but I'll know when I get there." After I gained my composure, I hung up the phone with her and continued my series of conversations with my inner circle of friends. Next, I called my friend Jeff, who at the time, was my friend who could always make me laugh. When I called him that night, he was partying with other friends, and intoxicated. I tried to hide my sadness, but even in his drunken state, he could hear in my voice that something was not right. I assured him I was ok, and then he did what he always did best and made me laugh to lift my spirits.

Then I called my best friend Alison who has been a great strength in my life since I met her at GEICO in 1999. When I lost my job at GEICO, she was the one who told me that

it wasn't the end of the world, and that "Everything happens for a reason." Her words of encouragement always lift my spirits. Even though she wasn't home that night, just hearing her voice on her outgoing message and leaving a message on her voice mail somehow felt the same. Then I called one of my other best friends, Thomas, who was my inspiration at that time in my life. When I needed an inspirational lift, Thomas was the one who could give it. After talking to him for a while, emotionally exhausted, I remember telling him, "I just need to listen to my music. My music consoles me."

A few minutes later, I called my best friend Pat, in West Virginia, to let her know that I was going to be late coming home and wouldn't be there when I told her I would. Pat has always been my "Big Picture" friend in my life, and always helps me put my life into perspective. That night, she helped me realize that it didn't matter if anyone accepted or approved of who I am. It isn't my problem. It's theirs. I've got to be true to myself. After I hung up the phone with her, I began listening to the radio asking myself questions: What makes me happy? What else makes me happy? How can I put those two together? What else can I do? How can I make that bigger, better? The answers began coming to me through the combination of the lyrics of four songs that played on the radio. The first song that played was Puddle of Mudd's "Blurry," which says, "Everything's so blurry and everyone so fake. Everybody's empty, and everything is so messed up," which is exactly how I felt at the time. Then Linkin Park's song "In the End" played. "I tried so hard and got so far, but in the end, it doesn't even matter. I had to fall, to lose it all. But in the end, it doesn't even matter." Then "The Middle," by Jimmy Eat World played, which says, "Hey, don't write yourself off yet. It's only in your head to feel left out and looked down on. Just try your best, try everything you can. And don't you worry what they tell themselves when you're away. It just takes some time when you're in the middle of the ride. Everything, Everything will be just fine. Everything, Everything will be alright." Then Celine Dion's song "A New Day Has Come" played, which spoke to me the most out of all of them. "I was waiting for so long for a miracle to come. Everyone told me to be strong. Hold on, and don't shed a tear. Through the darkness and good times, I knew I'd make it through. And the world thought I had it all, but I was waiting for you. Hush now, I see a light in the sky. Oh, it's almost blinding me. I can't believe I've been touched by an angel with love. Let the rain come down and wash away my tears. Let it fill my soul and drown my fears. Let it shatter the walls for a new sun. A new day has come."

And so it was, with my mouth a gasp from Lexington, Virginia, to my hometown of Smoot, West Virginia, I began seeing my life unfold as I was driving home for Easter last year. I now understand that what doctors call a "manic high" is nothing more than being able to see life from such a distance that everything makes sense, but only when you're "out of your mind;" or to those very few people who are so open minded to the possibility that everything we currently know *might* not be all there is to know. Those "grandiose" ideas that doctors have labeled as symptoms of Bipolar Disorder are, indeed, grand ideas, with the proper guidance and support system, I believe can help change the world.

Since last Easter, I have discovered so much more about who I am and who I want to be. I started writing a book called *The Puzzle of Life* with stories of experiences I have had,

in hopes I can inspire just one person to know that no matter how hard things get; no matter how dim the outcome looks, it always gets better. In our pursuit for happiness, we must first experience what we don't want in order to know what we do want. I have learned to be as thankful to God for those experiences I don't want as I am of the experiences I do, because it's ALL a part of the great process of life and none of it is "bad" or "wrong." But most importantly, I have experienced that God never leaves our sides, and is always a part of us, no matter what you may believe. So many times in our daily lives, we get distracted by obstacles and simply forget who we really are, and from where we've all come.

Music has always consoled my spirit, in both good and bad times, and I know that this is the way it is meant to be. Growing up, my favorite church song was *Blessed Assurance*. No matter how many times I heard the lyrics to the song, it touched me the same every time, now I know why. My life is a lot like #464 in the Blue Hymnal. I would like to share with you the lyrics to the song now.

Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.

This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior, all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior, all the day long.

Perfect submission, perfect delight
Visions of rapture now burst on my sight;
Angels descending bring from above:
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love.

Perfect submission, all is at rest.
I in my Savior am happy and blest,
Watching and waiting, looking above
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love.

This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior, all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior, all the day long.

I want to share with you now the 5 Steps to Peace, taken from a book called "The New Revelations: A Conversation with God" by Neale Donald Walsch. "Peace will be attained when we, as human beings....

Permit ourselves to acknowledge that some of our old beliefs about God and about Life are no longer working.

Explore the possibility that there is something we do not understand about God and about Life, the understanding of which could change everything.

Announce that we are willing for a new understanding of God and Life to now be brought forth, understandings that could produce a new way of life on this planet.

Courageously examine these new understandings, and if they align with our personal inner truth and knowing, enlarge our belief system to include them. And,

Express our lives as a demonstration of our highest beliefs, rather than a denial of them."

Benjamin Franklin's epitaph says: "The Body of Benjamin Franklin (Like the cover of an old book, its contents torn out, and strip of its lettering and gilding) Lies here food for worms. Yet the work itself shall not be lost, for it will (as he believed) appear once more in a new and more beautiful edition corrected and amended by the Author."

My wish today is that you may find the peace in your heart that I have found in mine so you will have the courage to share *your* story, *your* song, and inspire others to love life to the fullest, "all the day long" just as my Grandpa Holliday and Uncle Sam have inspired me to do.

Lastly, I leave you with a Native American proverb to help console your spirit in times of sadness. Always remember, "The soul would have no rainbow if the eyes had no tears." With that said, let us each begin to appreciate life to its fullest extent and live for the moment, for it's all we are guaranteed.

From the greatest depths of my heart, I thank you for sharing my story: because without you, I am not complete. God bless you all, each and every one.