

Miracles Can Sometimes Happen in the Back Side of a Desert

It was the summer of 1969. I was 14 years old and filled with wonder, enthusiasm and childlike anticipation.

As I stood on the threshold of young womanhood, I was intently watching the culture, and I intrinsically knew that something strange was happening here.

It was the summer of Woodstock when nearly 400,000 people showed up at a farm in Bethel, New York, for a music festival that defined a generation. This generation was known for peace marches, drugs and free sex.

Woodstock was an epic event that became synonymous with the counterculture movement of the middle of the 20th century in America.

I couldn't relate to that part of my culture. The life that I was living seemed eons removed from the generation who were freaking out on drugs.

I obeyed my parents, went to church and didn't have a boyfriend.

I wondered where I would fit in, if I would fit in and if my life was relevant during the last year of that momentous decade.

The summer of 1969 was also the summer of the Manson murders. What a horrible, bloody, unimaginable happening!

My heart was raw for the loss of life and beauty in one chilling event. My dad told me it was demonic.

During July of 1969, Senator Ted Kennedy left the scene of a fatal accident in which Mary Jo Kopechne, once a campaign

worker for Robert Kennedy, drowned at Chappaquiddick, Massachusetts.

Senator Kennedy was given a two-month suspended sentence. Mary Jo's parents were given a lifetime of grief.

I wondered where God was in all of it.

And during that historic summer, my family and I took a long-planned vacation across the United States of America.

My dad, my mom, my 16-year-old sister, my 10-year-old brother and I would be trapped in a car and a trailer for six weeks together.

I hoped that we would still love each other when we pulled back in our driveway.

We loaded up our travel trailer and set out across New York and then Ohio. We visited presidential birthplaces and nondescript churches along the way. Our little white station wagon, dragging the 6-sleeper trailer, made its way through Indiana and Illinois.

We stopped on the banks of the Mississippi River and watched a riverboat pass by.

Then it was on to Missouri, Kansas and Oklahoma. The air was dry, the wind was hot and we sang our way into New Mexico.

"You Are My Sunshine!"

"What a Friend We Have in Jesus!"

"It is No Secret What God Can Do!"

Then it was New Mexico where we saw the Carlsbad Caverns and an ancient Indian village high in the stone mountains.

We laughed and played car games while Dad pointed out sights along the way.

Finally, we were just hours away from the Grand Canyon in Arizona. We stopped early the night before we were to spend a day in the immense canyon that was carved out by the Colorado River.

I'll never forget it. We stayed at a KOA Campground in the middle of the desert of Arizona. It was a hot, still night and the manager of the campground came out into the common area and stacked one picnic table on top of another one.

Then—on top of the mountain of picnic tables—he placed a little black-and-white TV with extension cords leading back to the campground office.

Around us, all we could see was sand, cacti and dry vegetation.

As the sun went down that night, the manager turned on the little television set, all of the campers gathered around the grainy images that danced on that screen.

Fathers told their children to be quiet and hold still, mothers patted babies on their shoulders and teenagers shuffled their feet.

Walter Cronkite was there on the television screen. He belonged to all of us during that long decade. He had cried when President Kennedy was shot, shaken his head at the senseless murders in California and mourned boys who were killed in Viet Nam.

Walter Cronkite's voice became the voice of a father to a nation. We listened to him, and we trusted him.

Where have all the Walter Cronkites gone?

That evening, in July of 1969, Mr. Cronkite sat in wonder with the rest of America.

We were there. Man had landed on the moon.

A miracle was happening before our very eyes.

There was a holy hush on the desert of Arizona that night among Americans who had never met before but would forever be bonded together in shared astonishment.

This single event was greater than Woodstock, more earthshattering than the Manson murders, and it eclipsed Chappaquiddick.

When the astronauts were asked what the surface of the moon was like, we all strained to listen to their answer:

“It has a stark beauty all its own. It’s like much of the high desert of the United States.” –From the Nasa transcript of air-to-ground voice transportation.

What? That’s where we were! We were in the desert of the United States of America on July 20, 1969!

The men in the obscure campground cheered, mothers cried and teenagers clapped and shouted.

We were in the high desert of the United States. We were standing on desert sand.

And those men, over 200,000 miles away, were experiencing the same kind of topography.

The camaraderie was deafening. And then we all cried with Walter Cronkite as he took off his glasses and wiped his middle-aged eyes.

No one in the campground wanted to return to their trailers that night. There was too much to talk about. Too much to share. Too much to take in.

The campground manager brought out a couple bags of marshmallows while some of the men started a bonfire.

Women scurried back to their trailers and tents to bring out

baked goods and lemonade.

It was America at its finest. We were family.

Before the last ember died away that night, we joined hands around the campfire in the middle of the desert.

Families from Minnesota and Texas, from West Virginia and New York, from Georgia and from Utah all joined together.

Someone began a prayer, thanking God for the safety of our astronauts and for the blessing of living in America.

And then, a voice began in the dark and in the stillness, "God Bless America!"

That was a defining moment of my teenage years.

You see, I knew that in spite of murders and compromise, in spite of politics and protests, there was still a deep goodness in America that would help us all through the difficult days ahead.

Our trip wasn't over that night, but it could have been. We continued on to California and Idaho and South Dakota and then made our way home along the Great Lake states.

However—it is the image of that campground in the middle of the Arizona desert that has stayed with me for 50 years.

I will never forget what it felt like to see a miracle ... to experience strangers become family in an instant ... and to know that there is always something good in spite of pain.

Sometimes the good is discovered in the back side of a desert.

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