

Prologue

THERE'S NOTHING TRITE ABOUT HAVING A PURPOSE IN LIFE. In fact, that's the real secret to living with such focus, determination, and relentless passion that every day is more exciting and challenging than you could ever dream!

But I think most of us have a hard time finding our true purpose, much less realizing we have a destination other than our couch in front of the big screen TV, computer, or mobile device. That's because I've been there myself. And the other thing I've learned is that it's hard recognizing motion if the only thing moving is your thumb on the remote control or across a keypad as you text your life away.

In my case it was a 4-in-1 remote that controlled an entire home theater complex while I sat in my Lazy-Z-Boy recliner (with built-in heat and massage, of course). Did I mention it also had cup holders? Really, it did. Two of them! Only one person could sit in the chair, but you could drink two beverages at once. Go figure.

Which is why, at a very difficult period in my life, I had a hard time recognizing that I had even started a journey.

To quote an old but very true saying: "Journeys begin one step at a time." Sounds trite, doesn't it? After all, who could argue with that? If you want to get somewhere, you have to put one foot in front of the other. It's a no-brainer.

But through first-hand experience, I've learned that the key is not actually taking a step. It's not about moving your feet. Otherwise walking to the bathroom could be considered a journey. Well, it's certainly a destination, but I wouldn't consider it a journey.

A journey involves more than going someplace. It involves learning along the way. The real key to a journey is recognizing you've started it in the first place, which implies you've recognized the fact you're doing more than moving from someplace to someplace

else. In other words, you have more than a destination. You have a *purpose*.

On the journey through life, many of us have a tendency toward being distracted drivers—paying more attention to the little things along the road rather than figuring out our travel plan and why we’re doing what we’re doing. Let’s face it: life gets complicated.

That’s why, as we travel, sometimes it takes encountering a pothole to jolt us into awareness.

I hit that pothole with my name on it, and I’m so glad I did. Now, with 20/20 hindsight, I realize it was in that moment I truly started packing my car for a journey that would become one filled with a unique purpose God had designed for me.

And He would send me the most unlikely of helpers for the most unlikely and surprising of tasks.

Memoirs of an Angel is full of stories—memories entrusted to me by a very special friend, an angel that God sent me just when I needed it. Many of these stories are simple vignettes—quick glimpses into the life I shared with this most unusual of God’s creatures. Some are heart-warming; others are heart-wrenching. A few may even seem hard to believe. But they are all true.

I don’t know where you are on your life’s journey at this very moment. You may be cruising happily down life’s road at 75 mph (not realizing your pothole is just around the bend). Or you may be sitting stranded in a pothole right now. No matter your current circumstances, it’s never too late for you to find purpose and significance.

All you have to do is follow God’s footprints and be open to the presence of his unlikely angels on earth.

A Faithful, Loyal Friend

I EXPECTED THURSDAY, MAY 2, 2002, TO BE LIKE EVERY OTHER DAY. Routine. Part of that routine involved a 95-pound German Shepherd with whom I shared my life. His name was Smokey, and we'd been through a lot together. Rescues, loss, near-death experiences, fun times, bad times, divorce, you name it.

He had become my constant companion. Rarely did people see one without the other. Smokey was my confidant. My guardian. My best friend. He knew the deepest, darkest secrets of my life. He'd lived through most of them with me. Yet he still loved me anyway. All he really seemed to want was to be by my side. No matter what.

When no one else was left in my life (no humans, that is), he remained. Faithful, loyal, dedicated. Content. I used to wonder if it was because he felt he owed me some sort of a debt for saving his life years earlier. I rather doubt it. Not to say it's not possible, but I doubt it.

You see, German Shepherd Dogs are faithful and loyal friends by nature. I've always thought God was having an especially good day when He created them. He was certainly at the top of His game when He made Smokey.

Simply put, Smokey and I had a special bond. Anybody who knew us knew this was a fact just as real as the sun rises in the east. What Smokey probably did not realize is that I owed him my life as well. And not merely my physical being, either.

But back to Thursday May 2, 2002. You see, this was a day I'd dreaded for months. I knew it would come, and I couldn't stop it any more than I could stop a runaway train. Facts are facts, and the worst fact of all was that I couldn't heal Smokey.

His struggle over the past six months with a paralysis was induced by an inoperable, untreatable tumor in his spine. It finally reached a point neither of us could take any more. Inside, he remained the loyal, loving companion he had always been. His heart beat with the pride of a champion. But on the outside, he struggled to lift his head. Walking became an exercise in frustration even though it was always rewarded with me carrying him in my arms wherever he wanted to go.

One day we went to the Post Office to mail a package. A lot of heads turned as I walked in carrying my dog and placed him gently on the floor, and then sat down with him as we waited in line. Each time the line moved, I picked him up and we moved as well. I couldn't afford a cart for him, and I couldn't stand to be without him.

He seemed to understand and took it in stride. Each time we moved ahead in line, he lay down and placed his head in my lap as we waited to buy the postage. I didn't mind, either. As I said, he was a champion. And champions deserve to be pampered. Champions also never quit. They try and try again. They face obstacles with confident resolve.



Best Friends, March 12, 2002

Later on the same day we went to the post office

Earlier in the week, we'd been in the front yard starting our evening walk. This routine used to cover a mile or more of the wonderful sights, sounds, and smells of southern California. But these days, I considered it a blessing for him to make it the mere fifty feet to the corner. Still, we persevered. We enjoyed the routine along with the comfort of each other's company.



Smokey, When We Met

This outing, though, stopped being routine only a few feet from the front door. It became one of my worst fears. Another dog charged at us as if it was going to attack—teeth barred, growling, barking, fur up, the works. And here I was with a nearly paralyzed dog on leash in one hand and nothing but air in the other! This was not good.

But while I was searching for nonexistent options to protect my dog and me, Smokey took over. He stepped around me and moved in front. And waited.

Champions never quit. They try and try again. They face obstacles with confident resolve.

He stood his ground firmly while challenging the aggressor with only his body language. Smokey made no sound. No growl. No bark.

Just pure determination. He was focused completely on the other dog's eyes. He was the picture of a classic German Shepherd and, for all appearances, looked ready for anything. Deterrence—that's the key to protection. Deter the aggressor without actually engaging in conflict. But if you engage, do so with extreme prejudice and win. Smokey looked ready, willing, and able to win.

Apparently, the other dog thought the same thing. He slowed his charge and then stopped altogether. He stared at Smokey as if to test Smokey's will, as well as his own. While the two dogs stared each other down, I was in silent, fervent prayer, begging God to lead this other dog away. I knew there was no way Smokey could withstand an attack. I'm not sure I could have either, given the circumstances.

Then, as if in answer to my prayer, the other dog backed down and simply trotted away. True to the heritage of the German Shepherd breed, Smokey had deterred an attack simply by his presence. His gaze followed that dog down the street and back into its yard. Frozen in place, Smokey focused for several moments at the hole in the fence into which the stranger had disappeared.

Once he was satisfied the other dog was well out of sight and wouldn't return, Smokey turned his head toward me. He wore a big smile and an expression that seemed to say, "See, Daddy, I still got it!"

He did indeed. I smiled back and praised him.

Then he collapsed.

Exhausted, he had given everything he had—every ounce of what precious strength he had left—to protect and defend me. He was ready to give his life without hesitation. I picked him up and carried him inside. I praised him while I drenched his soft fur with tears. His day was coming sooner than either of us wanted.

And we both knew it.

Smokey taught me what unconditional love is all about. He showed me the value of self-sacrifice for the welfare of others. His dedication to me was unwavering. Right to the very end, he thought only of me—never of himself.

Did he actually say this? No. He didn't need to. He said it every day and every way through his actions—the clearest means of communications there is. The same way each of us are evaluated every

day...by how we act.

I wish we could all be like that with each other. Faithful, loyal friends. Models of unconditional love.



Thanks to Smokey, I've learned the importance of trying to be the person my dog thinks I am. And I've learned I have a long way to go to achieve that ideal. So, at the age of 40, I came to the understanding that I was not who I was supposed to be, nor wanted to be, and had a lot of work ahead of me to get there.

Smokey's day—May 2, 2002—finally came. His veterinarian came to our home and helped me let him go from my arms. God took Smokey back into His arms, and He cares for him now.

Yes, I'm convinced.

There are dogs in Heaven.

And there are angels on Earth.

The Journey Begins...

I HAVE A PASSION FOR DOGS, ESPECIALLY GERMAN SHEPHERDS. More specifically, Shepherds that have been abused, as my beloved Smokey had been. In fact, you don't have to know me very well at all to see this passion. Just watch me when I have a Shepherd by my side!

I didn't think this passion was very obvious...until the day after I let Smokey go. That morning was a morning I'll never forget.

I awoke to a whole new routine. One with his toys still lying around but no Smokey. One in which I was now alone and felt very, very lost. To be completely honest, I was scared. All I'd known and cared about was gone, and my heart ached beyond words. The temptation to pull the covers over my head and hide from the world was overwhelming.

Forcing myself to move forward with life, I opened the front door to get my newspaper. Like always, there was the paper. But today, on top of the newspaper, was an envelope with my name in unusual lettering. On top of the envelope were two beautiful roses—the most fragrant I'd smelled in a long time. I stood for a minute, simply inhaling their scent.

Then, puzzled, I opened the envelope. Inside was a drawing done by a child. The crayons were my first clue. It was a picture of Smokey. A very good one, in fact. In this picture, he was smiling. He was soaring among the clouds with his new wings and sporting a big, bright halo.

The artist had signed her work. It was my neighbor's daughter, a quiet and very cute four-year-old, who had carried out this remarkable act of kindness. She wrote:

I miss him, too.

One flower is for Smokey
and one is for you.

I didn't know this little girl very well. In fact, I hadn't seen her in almost a week. Yet somehow she knew Smokey was gone. Later that day, I found out from her mom that she'd done this entirely on her own initiative—right down to picking the flowers from her mom's garden. Wow. Even a child understood the special place Smokey had in my life and my heart. Needless to say, Toys "R" Us got a visit later that day!

At that moment, I couldn't imagine sharing my life with another Shepherd. I knew I would eventually, but not to the extent I had with Smokey. The pain of saying "good-bye" was too much. The weight of the responsibility for another life was too great. I didn't want to walk that path again. As far as I was concerned, the journey, such as it had been, was over before I even got the car packed and out of the driveway.

So I composed a short note to God and sent it via prayer.

Dear God: I'm done. I can't do this again. Find someone else.

Jim

P.S. Please remember to give Smokey a Milk-Bone™ after every meal. He really likes those. He also likes to snuggle.

As sad as all this was, here's the funny part. Want to know how to make God laugh? Simple. Tell Him your plans. And be sure to include what you will and will not do! Now *that* will have Him rolling.

Little did I know that my journey wasn't over; it was just beginning. I was about to embark on a path that would teach me just how wrong I was.

I wouldn't be surprised at all to find out that God gathered together a few of His angels, read them my letter, had a good laugh all around, and said something to the effect of, "OK, let's have some fun with this guy and see if we can get him back on track."

My brief letter to God was returned marked *Refused—Return to*

Sender.

God's funny like that.

But wait. It gets better. Even funnier was that my new teacher was to be an angel. And the punchline? This angel would have a fur coat. Ready or not, aware or not, my journey began.

All I had to do was open my eyes and follow the footprints.



Legacy of Shepherds

Back row (l to r):

Front row (l to r)

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The Boomerang Award

AT A TIME WHEN I FELT ONLY AGONIZING LOSS IN MY LIFE, God sent me a rather special and unique German Shepherd named Cadie.

I didn't expect it. In fact, I wasn't ready for it. Smokey had been my ultimate friend. We'd served each other without hesitation and given all to our friendship. His loss put me into a place of deep depression. A place I never wanted to go again.

Time passed slowly after Smokey's passing. Nothing seemed "right" and there was a big void in my life. I tried to fill it with routine, work, anything. But nothing helped the pain. It was simply a part of life I had to endure and move through. Alone. Or so I thought at the time.

As days became weeks, which became months, the pain slowly subsided. But the longing for Smokey's companionship was still there. To this day I imagine him running and playing in beautiful meadows, relaxing under a big oak tree, and having an unlimited supply of Milk Bone™ dog biscuits. Doggie heaven has to be a great place.

I had no idea what was about to happen. I was too focused on myself and on my pain. So at first I had a hard time realizing that what seemed to be an impossible situation one minute but would turn out to be an amazing event the next was more than luck or happenstance.

But God did what God does—the unexpected—just when He knew I needed it. Ironic how that works, isn't it?

One day I visited the website of German Shepherd Rescue and Adoptions in Raleigh, North Carolina, to see what dogs they might have available. As I read story after story, my heart was touched but not moved to act.

Then I read about Cadie, an award-winning Shepherd—the recipient of the prestigious *Boomerang Award*.

OK, the word *prestigious* is a stretch. The *Boomerang Award* is given to the dog that goes out to a family to be adopted but then is returned to the rescue more than any other dog. Most adoptions work out—the dog finds his or her forever home and the humans find the Shepherd they’ve always wanted. But sometimes—not often, but once in a while—the adoption doesn’t work out and the dog is returned. On very rare occasions, this might happen twice to a dog.

It happened *six times* to Cadie. I don’t think any dog will ever take the award away from her. She was then assigned the status of “permanent foster.” This means she would spend the rest of her life being moved from one foster home to another. She would be cared for but never know a true home. Ever. She was considered unadoptable. Unwanted. Unacceptable.

Growing up part of my life in an orphanage, always wanting to go home but never being able to, I could identify with Cadie. As a child, I learned the real meaning of “unwanted” and failing. The lessons have never gone away.

But for a German Shepherd to have these labels applied to her? Well, that just wasn’t right.

The more I read about her, I realized that Cadie’s life, like mine, had been full of twists and turns. We had a lot in common. Both of us had made the Dean’s List at The School of Hard Knocks, and the bruises tended to hurt for a long time. To understand Cadie, I had to understand myself first. So I asked myself some simple questions:

- Have I ever been hurt by someone I cared about?
- Have I ever been praised one minute and beaten down the next?
- Have I ever been hugged only to be hit or yelled at when all I wanted was another hug?
- Have I ever wondered if I was loved?
- Have I ever felt lost...forgotten...worthless?
- Have I ever given up hope for a future?

I scored 100 on the answers. And, as a result, I hurt a lot.

Both of us had made the Dean's List
at The School of Hard Knocks.

As I found out, though, from reading about Cadie, The School of Hard Knocks accepts all creatures. Cadie had graduated with honors in the class right behind me.

At that time, little did either of us know that, as members of the same fraternity, we would become best friends. But before she became my best friend, she worked at simply surviving.