



Unexpected Falls and Unseen Angels

Or:

**How many things are wrong
with this picture?**

By Ross Olson

Illustrated by KaWan Stacy Olson

The aging process is slow and imperceptible and the brain does not always want to admit that the body is failing. Further, the brain has no insight whatsoever into the fact that it is also dwindling. The following is the story of God's protection of one who could NOT help himself. It is both serious and humorous, an entertaining lesson and a somber warning. There are all sorts of "what ifs" and "could haves" that show how different the outcome might have been. To all you kids out there, do as I say, not as I do and for sure, DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME! In addition, make note of all the mistakes of judgment that you see as the story progresses; there will be a contest.

August 11, 2001 was the long awaited "Second Ever Junior Church Alumni Hike." We had the first one last millennium and this will have been the last - it probably should have never happened. For about 15 years I have led hikes for the Junior Church children of First Evangelical Free Church Minneapolis, in the spring and the fall, to nearby parks along the Mississippi or Minnesota Rivers. The hikers are the 4th - 6th Graders and I have been accompanied by my co-teacher Mary Anderson, occasionally helped by an assortment of other adult sponsors. The routes include places where the children may climb steep banks and swing from vines, but the adults are, for the most part, able to take sensible paths.

We have always prayed for safety for the children and have come through with only occasional bee stings, nettle itches and minor scrapes. We have always assumed that since it is immature minds that lead to risky behavior, the adults were going to do fine. Little did I realize that immature minds come in all chronological ages.

Some of the recent graduates of Junior Church, specifically kids in 7th - 10th Grade, have periodically talked of recreating the "good old days" with an "Alumni Hike." I agreed to do this in 1999 as a once-in-a-lifetime event. My co-teacher, Mary Anderson, does not lead kids who are taller than she is - which eliminates just about any child over 6th grade and makes a few of the younger ones suspect. Also, she does not go on rugged hikes, being more in touch than I with physical reality. I probably fall in the category of the "aging ace" who used to easily leap tall molehills and stop speeding butterflies - in my prime - but now need a training program to play basketball with three year olds. (See below for an explanation of this seemingly ridiculous statement.)

Because the group was to be older, it seemed reasonable that the hike should be more demanding. By that sort of thinking, of course, it might also seem appropriate to schedule our senior citizens to scale Devil's Tower. But the kids are indeed able to handle more demanding terrain - the only question is the fearless leader. And in that regard, I recall the advice given by Miss Clavelle



to Madeline (in the children's classic "Madeline's Rescue.") As the intrepid Madeline walked on the guard rail of the bridge over the River Seine and Miss Clavelle told her to get down, Madeline replied, "But I'm not afraid." Knowing that this was precisely the problem, the wise teacher replied, "Fear helps to keep us from hurting ourselves."

As plans for the hike materialized, it was decided to go to Vermillion Falls in Hastings Minnesota. This was where the first alumni hike had taken place on September 25, 1999. That event, ironically, was partly motivated by the fact that the 7th Graders that year had missed their June event because of an injury. Whose injury, you ask? Mine. What injury? Let me explain.

On April 29, 1999, I was playing basketball with my nearly 3 year old grandson Christopher (he's good!) when I suddenly found myself horizontal in the air - for ever so brief an instant - before dutifully obeying the law of gravity and falling to the concrete of the alley. As I looked down at my right leg, which no longer moved to my command (skip this part if you are squeamish) I saw the thigh muscle (quadriceps) slowly pulling away from the kneecap, like a ship leaving the pier. A neighbor driving into his garage, having only seen my horizontal hang time, called out, "nice move."

Doing a brief biomechanical analysis of my situation, I found that although I could not actively straighten the knee, if I used my other leg to position it, I could "lock" it and get to my feet. By keeping the right leg straight, I was able to hobble into the house and carefully descend the stairs to our stock of medical and orthopedic devices (we are that sort of family.) By the way, has anyone noticed that there is no mention of a call for help? Christopher looked at me, puzzled, and said, "Grandpa, get up," to which I replied, "I can't get up," but then I did. Next, as I began to hobble, Christopher's mother, Tami, asked, "Are you all right." Not wanting her to feel bad, thinking perhaps that Christopher was playing too rough with an old man, I replied, "I'm OK."

After applying a knee immobilizer, I found that I did not have much pain and was able to walk stiff legged wherever I needed to go. I did not want to spoil the family back yard picnic and said little except that I would have it checked in the morning. I then went to work the next day, which was to be helping out at the Como HealthPartners - not my usual clinic. It was also the clinic where sports medicine physician, Dr. Al Fongemie, worked. After seeing a few of my

patients and explaining to everybody who asked that I have thrown out my knee playing basketball with a 3 year old, I called upstairs to make an appointment to be seen. As I showed the knee to the esteemed Dr. Fongemie, he exclaimed, "Oh, I wish I had a resident here today." My reply was, "I really hate being an 'interesting case.'"



I was scheduled for an MRI to show the obvious (because, I think, I was destined to be a future case presentation on sports injuries of the non-elite athlete) and scheduled to see an Orthopedic Surgeon who came most highly recommended, Dr. Al Markman. Because of scheduling problems, it took a while to be seen and set up for surgery, so that about 10 days had elapsed between the accident and the repair, during which I continued to work my regular schedule. This is important because it gave me a track record of having "lived with" a major knee injury. It apparently resulted from some sort of weakness of the attachment of the quadriceps, possibly from multiple minor traumas, and perhaps exacerbated by frequent use of Advil for aches and pains, which might interfere with firm healing.

The rehabilitation was slow, spending three months in a knee immobilizer and then many more weeks getting back my strength and flexibility. Thus there was no June hike that year. By September, I was apparently feeling spry enough to take a rugged hike, which I felt I owed the recent graduates. And although there were no mishaps, readers who do the math will note that I had only been able to rehabilitate the leg, without having the brace on, for about 6 - 7 weeks. Is this a danger sign regarding things yet to come? Was I able to put two and two together and get the correct answer? Not really.

The Vermillion Falls Park contains a beautiful waterfall and canyon with an historic (and still active) flour mill as well as ruins of some abandoned mills. It also has many caves and cliffs along the many trails. The previous hike was such a sensation that we had much interest and about 10 kids, in grades 7 - 10, eventually signed up. I wanted another adult helper to go along and had arranged for my college aged daughter, Stacy, to come. There were problems, first with her work, and finally that she and my wife, Karin, decided to go on a weekend driving trip to Chicago with Karin's sister, Heidi and her daughter, Candis. At that point another college student volunteered to come. But shortly after, she also had a conflict come up. A father from the group considered coming, but was not able in the end.

When Karin and Stacy planned to leave for Chicago on Friday, their biggest regret was that they would miss the birth of our third grandson (and Stacy's third nephew.) Induction was planned for that day, but Tami went into labor suddenly during the night and he was born in the wee morning hours, in the van, as they pulled into the parking lot at United Hospital, despite the fact that they live only 5 minutes from the hospital. Thus we all got to see Aizec (pronounced "Isaac") before they left town and knew that mother and baby were doing fine. And because I was given an unexpected day off, I took big

brother Christopher and his cousin Jacob for a day at the zoo. It was a great blessing but also a portent that this was to be "Olson Oddity Weekend."

I have always liked to have help from an adult, preferably a female. My concern has been to have a woman there to deal with the girls if there were problems. The basic reason for needing help, as I saw it, was to supervise. I now realize that this is true, but that it is not only the kids who need supervision, but mostly me. Thus, when at the last minute there were expressions by the parents as we met at the church parking lot, such as, "Oh, Ross, you are alone. Do you need help?" I responded, "We should be OK." After all, the kids were older and bigger. There was one with a drivers' permit. Some of the parents offering help were not really dressed for a rugged hike. We had our cell phone. What could happen?

We drove the 40 minutes from South Minneapolis to Hastings and parked the van under a shady tree by a picnic table. We would plan to hike in one direction first, come back to the van for lunch and then go in the opposite direction, finally circling back. I had scouted out the land on two previous Saturdays to pick the routes, once alone (forgetting to take drinks and getting a bit dehydrated and looking like a red sweaty beet before making it to a store that sold pop) the second time with my grandson, now 5, during which we stayed on the trails but part of the time I carried him to avoid poison ivy and nettles. (Does anyone detect a pattern of poor judgment emerging?)



At this point, unknown to me, my troupe of guardian angels was probably calling for reinforcements and special instructions. The word probably came in this form, "The Lord wants to teach him a lesson, but not to let him kill himself. He pushes himself, sometimes a good trait, but with real limits associated with advancing age."

There had been a little twinge in the left knee a month before when I stumbled on the stairs at church, as well as a little twinge in the right groin, making me worry about recurrence of a previously repaired

inguinal hernia. The knee seemed to be quickly back to normal but there were occasional discomforts in the groin. It did not seem to be made worse by activity, so I continued to be oblivious. Even the death of a professional football player from heat stroke occurring about that time, due to pushing himself beyond his limits, did not seem to have any implications for me, except that I was glad that the forecast was cooler and made sure we packed lots of drinks.

The morning of the hike went well. We went down some steep trails, having to hold branches for support. We walked a narrow ledge about 6" wide and 2 feet long, with a 10 foot drop below, to get to a hidden canyon cut out by the

waterfall. The kids climbed to caves and even up sheer walls in places to the top. We stopped for two or three snacks and drink breaks. There was a time when one slipped on slick moss, but was caught by another hiker.

We came back for lunch and were met by Maureen and Alicia Juarez who brought out a hiker who had been busy for the morning. Maureen is a Nursing Professor at Bethel College. They again noted that I was the only leader and offered to stay, but I again brushed it off, thinking that we were over half done and ought do be able to finish in good shape. It was only about a half an hour later that the accident occurred, and while, unbeknown to us, they were still in Hastings, at the Dairy Queen, but without a cell phone.

We then started down a paved trail to the ruins of an old mill. At the end of the trail, we began to scurry down the canyon to the water's edge. There were many ways to go down and the group split up. I was descending by a way that looked like a series of giant steps, each about three feet high. I put my legs down over the edge and dropped gently to the next level. On about the second or third step, the unexpected happened, the same unexpected thing that had happened over 2 years before with the right knee.

I found my left leg giving way and fell to the rock below. I was not really injured by the fall, maybe a few scrapes of my arms where I tried to catch myself. Then I looked down at a left knee that would no longer straighten to my command. If at this point I had followed the first aid precept, "don't move an injured person," even considering that the injured person was me, the story would have been much less dramatic and a lot like what happened after the basketball game. But a major mistake of judgment took place seconds later.



Having been through this before, I knew that I could stand on the bad leg if I got it straight. Rather than call for help and wait for the kids to come and support me, I stood up and surveyed the terrain for my next move. It seemed that on the next level down or up, there was a better way to get to a gentle path (which is the path I should have been taking the whole time.) Checking the upward climb, it was clear I could not do it. If I had tried and the knee

collapsed at that point, I would have probably flipped back, and landed on my head. As it was, I sat down and tried to hold the knee locked while gently

landing on the next level down. My plan was to hobble to the trail and call the kids to all come back.

The mechanics of the following will merit some discussion. What I felt was the sensation of being airborne - the leg had given way again -- then landing on my back with a crunch. Several of the witnesses thought they saw a flip or more than one flip. What no one saw, but I am nonetheless sure of, were guardian angels, controlling the rotation so that I did not land on my abdomen, risking severe internal injuries, or my head, finishing off what little was left of what I use for a brain, but also on a backpack that contained several things that cushioned and spread out the force of the fall.

In the backpack there were a couple of first aid kits, with some soft things like an ace wrap and gauze bandages although also with metal tape containers and band aid boxes. There were several large wads of Kleenex in zip-lock bags and about three dozen paper cups. There was about 50 feet of coiled rope. And, although I could not find them still in there at the time of this writing, I recall three packages of soft candy. (Do angels like candy?) There was also a plastic Wet Ones container as well as an epinephrine injector for bee sting allergies, an asthma inhaler, extra batteries for the walkie talkies, topping off with sunscreen and insect repellent. The camera was not in the backpack but around my neck in its leather case - it was thrown free and survived intact.

I am convinced that that the backpack cushioned the fall, distributed the force to my chest and prevented me from simultaneously hitting my head as the back hit the rock. On the previous episode of the Vermillion Falls hike, I had not worn a backpack for that particular leg of the journey.

Various flips were possible and to begin with I entertained some fanciful double and triple flips, and although there was no instant replay available on this hike, analysis of the situation leads to the overwhelming conclusion that it was a rather simple 90 degree backward flip, combined with a horizontal movement at a steady rate in the downhill direction and the downward acceleration of gravity. Thus my legs were rotating upwards as my whole body was moving forward. My head just cleared the rocky ledge from which I was dropping and by the time I hit the horizontal shelf below, I was parallel to it, although leaning a bit towards my right.

Anyway, after my rather forceful touchdown, I found the wind knocked out of me and stared up at a sea of young, anxious faces, unable to say a word. Perhaps they thought that I had lost the ability to speak, a possibility that in some quarters would be considered an improvement. Anyway, there was no witty exchange such as I had engaged in with Christopher on the occasion of the other knee's failure. After my wind came back, I explained that my knee had given out and I had apparently bruised my ribs in back, because it hurt to take deep breaths.

They asked how they could help, and in a scene that ideally should have taken place just a few minutes before with a much less seriously injured leader being supported, they got one on each side and helped me back to the path. Once back to the gentle path, I hobbled with help back to the picnic

table by the van. This could have been the end of the adventure, with a call to a parent to drive the van to the closest appropriate medical facility, or even a 911 call, but it didn't.

Although the following chapter might seem to indicate some sort of head injury after all, I have to sadly insist that this is as good as it gets. I sat at the table, took Tylenol and Advil from my pocket medicine supply and had the kids get three cans of Sprite to keep myself hydrated. That was fine as far as it goes but I did not think to use any of the ice in the coolers for an ice pack or apply the ace wraps to hold down the swelling or make a splint out of walking sticks. Well, after all, I have only been a doctor for 34 years and although I was a Scoutmaster in Pensacola, I had never been a Boy Scout or had the training.



As I sat at the picnic table, not moving my leg and not taking deep breaths, I felt pretty good. And this is how the thinking, uncorrected by any adult conversation, went. I had been through this knee thing before and lived with it for 10 days before surgical repair. Although I did not have a knee immobilizer at that moment, I could cope by just keeping the leg straight. Yes, my ribs hurt, right near the shoulder blade, but I was sure it was just a bruise and would get better in time. Besides,

it was only 2:00 pm and if we brought the kids home early, some parents would not be there. I would let the kids play in that open park-like area and wait, sipping on my sodas. Even if I called for a parent to come, it was a somewhat out of the way place to find. The kids climbed trees, swung on the swings and even mugged an impression of Mount Rushmore for me to photograph.

After an hour I was able to get myself into the van and drive to a bridge on the river where the kids could spend an extra half hour to get us to what I considered the proper time to leave. I had downed a lot of liquids, which in retrospect helped stabilize my circulatory status as blood leaked into the torn thigh muscle. I did call Apple Valley HealthPartners and told them I was coming by to get a knee immobilizer.

On arrival at the clinic, they helped me out of the van and into a wheelchair while the kids went into the waiting room. As the urgent care nurses I work with nearly every other Saturday morning selected an appropriate knee immobilizer, the doctor on duty came in and offered to check me over. I responded that I knew what to do for the knee as I had been through it with the other one and although I had bruised my ribs, I was sure that would get better with ice and rest. When they asked if someone would be at home to help, I responded that my wife and daughter were in Chicago but there were two neighbors who could help. Did I have any strong pain medication? Well, my wife had some left over from her last operation (it turned out she had taken them on the trip.)

As we left the clinic, the photo developer was only a couple of blocks away so we dropped off the film of the hike photos from the drive through window. Undoubtedly the clerk wondered why I winced when reaching down to get the receipt.

Then, seeing the McDonalds next to the photo shop, the kids discovered that they were desperately hungry. (Of course, kids that age are always desperately hungry.) We stopped and they went in while I stayed in the van and ate a tuna sandwich and drank Sprite. I also called the closest parents and asked for help taking some of the kids home, especially the ones that were not close to my house.

When we arrived at the Hibst's house, Dave said he was going to drive me home first and then bring the rest. So I struggled into the passenger seat and we continued. It turned out that there was one drop off that was most convenient to do first, at the picnic area of Minnehaha Park where one family would be for the evening. Then we drove towards my house. The guardian angels were not only dealing with me at that point, because while making a left turn at Minnehaha Parkway and Bloomington Avenue, an oncoming car pulled out around another car turning left and we were nearly in an auto accident.

Getting home, Dave and the kids carried all the gear into the house. He would take all the kids to their homes as we had planned and would get my car at church and bring it home after parking the church van, so that I would have a car for the following day, Sunday, when I expected to see them all at church.

First I hobbled up the stairs to look for the stronger pain medicine but could not find it. I thought it might be in the basement but did not feel like going all the way down and back. I grabbed a couple of ice packs along with some more pop and sat in the lounge chair to watch the Vikings preseason opener. They won.

When I got up at the end of the game to replace the melted ice packs, I realized that I was dizzy. At this point I grabbed a cordless phone, our family phone book and lay down on the couch. First I called Karin's brother in Chicago to get a message to her - he had the number of where she was staying. (The information was also on the computer downstairs, but I was not going to attempt that.) I left a message on his machine that I had hurt my knee and was resting at home. She got the message after midnight to call

Tom and at first was afraid that something had happened to Tami or Aizec. Being relieved that it was only her clumsy husband, and because I had made it sound rather routine, she did not try to call Minneapolis. The following day she was not able to get a long distance call to go through on the cell phone as they drove home. So that was all she knew until arriving back in Minneapolis Sunday evening.

The next little conversation with myself went something like this. I know what the knee injury is, but I must have lost a lot of blood into the muscle. The back is getting worse. Maybe it will get better overnight. I was dizzy when up. Now it is after 10:30pm and what if I passed out?



Then, as clear as a bell, I recalled one of Karin's strong and memorable sayings, which goes something like this, "Ross, if you ever need help and don't call for help, I will kill you!" Suddenly it dawned on me that THIS WAS A LIFE-THREATENING SITUATION.

I called HealthPartners and was advised to call 911 to get an ambulance. I called a neighbor to open the door as I was not sure I could make it the 10 feet from the couch to let the emergency team in. I was taken to North Memorial Hospital with oxygen running. In the ER an IV was started and an X Ray taken. Suddenly something was said that spoke to this doctor-in-denial, "There are several broken ribs (turned out to be six) and a pneumo-thorax (partly collapsed lung.)" Well, I guess I was hurt pretty badly after all.

One chest tube was placed to re-expand the lung, and several hours later, when it had not worked, a second tube, which was successful. Then the orthopedic surgeon came by and explained that they would be able to repair the knee that afternoon (by then it was Sunday morning.) Again, if squeamish, skip these lines. When he opened it up, there were 800 cc of clots (nearly 2 units of blood) in the gap between the torn muscle and the kneecap from which it had separated. In addition, a lot more blood that had seeped into the muscles, both up and down from the site of injury. There was also blood coming out of the chest tube and as my hemoglobin were checked each day, the number bottomed out at 8.7, my usual being about 15. I had lost about 40% of my circulating blood volume!

So the next week was spent with tubes hanging out all over. Fortunately I was able and permitted to eat, after the knee operation. Pain medicines are wonderful but nothing seemed to dull the pain in the ribs with deep breaths or coughs. I could even feel the jagged edges of the ribs clicking and scraping together. "But you have to take deep breaths and cough," they said. Otherwise I could get pneumonia.

A few days later, friends, family and many of the kids who had been on the hike began to visit me in the hospital room and brought many wonderful cards and gifts. It is such a boost when wondering if it is worth the struggle to know there are many who want to see me restored to health and that many are praying. After asking if it hurt to laugh, Emily Hibst gave me a card on which she had written, "We didn't feel right about telling you on Saturday but we judged your flip a 9.95 for creativity but we had to knock off a few points because you didn't land on your feet (and you didn't do 'ta-da!)"

Am I learning my lesson? I hope so. I have always been a Lone Ranger, but the Lone Ranger had Tonto. Do I have limitations? I sure know that now. Was I putting others in danger? I hate to think of it but by driving injured, I was passing on my own living-on-the-edge to a group of (semi) innocent kids. In that regard, however, I know that if I had felt dizzy at that point, even my feeble alarm system would have gone off and called it quits.

If I had fallen while with my grandson a week earlier, I may have injured him and certainly he would not have been able to help me. If I had fallen while semi-dehydrated and alone, although I had a cell phone and could have called for help, there is no telling how long it would have taken to be found by a rescue team. Just that morning, we had been in places where to get back out, I would have had to be hoisted up the slope with ropes, probably needed a rescue team to do so. And if I had fallen while on the narrow ledge, over a 10 foot drop, I would most certainly been killed. Thank you Jesus for sparing me from the natural consequences of my foolishness!

My guardian angels, after dealing with their oblivious charge and keeping the outcome within the narrow parameters of allowing just enough and not too much, probably all asked for an extended vacation followed by reassignment. They probably all got promotions and bonuses as well.



For the future? Karin wants to keep me locked up for the rest of my natural life (which she hopes to extend by this intervention) and I can understand why. I do hope to negotiate that point, however. But if I do get beyond the confines of my home again, there are several things I will most certainly remember.

Even though I now have two repaired knees (I am going bionic, "you will be assimilated, resistance is futile") and hopefully they will not fail again, they still possibly might and there are also ankles, hips and other somewhat essential body parts that could also fall apart without clear warning.

Whenever and wherever I walk, even within the confines of my home, I must walk with the thought in mind that there could be a fall at any time. If I fall to level ground, that would be acceptable, soft would be nice. On steps and slopes, a railing is

necessary. But to get into a situation where a fall could be disastrous, is going to be absolutely forbidden.

If I do ever hike again, there must be adequate help, including someone with a loud enough voice and high enough self esteem to call me to task if the need arises. And in any case, a hike must be over rather tame terrain.

But most important of all, I should have prayed. Oh, yes, we prayed about the hike ahead of time, and we prayed together as a group before we left the van and set out. But I should have prayed and waited for instructions WHEN I FIRST FELL, before even trying to get up the first time. Then I should have prayed at each step along the way. What a slow learner I am! Will I live long enough to be wise?

Thank you Jesus for sparing my life and the lives of those who were entrusted to me. Thank you that you allowed enough to happen to get the attention of even such a slow learner as I. Thank you that I was left with enough brains to tell the story. Let me tell it to those who can benefit. For while being spared from a premature physical death is a gift worthy of eternal gratitude, being spared from spiritual death is infinitely more important. Perhaps this reminder of the fragility of life in this world will motivate those who have not made preparations for the next to consider that UNEXPECTED FALLS may happen, and they are not always altered by UNSEEN ANGELS.

See www.rossolson.org for more... if you can stand it!