

Gravy and Grace: Rick's Story

I am an American citizen, born in EL Paso, TX. My father is Baptist, my mom Catholic. They raised me and my siblings Episcopal as a compromise. My dad's families were tenant farmers that migrated to Florida through Alabama, and probably Georgia. My father was the first person in his family to graduate from a high school. His grandfather served in the Alabama infantry in the civil war, his dad was a sailor in WWII, and he is a retired Soldier and civil servant.

My mom's family got off the boat in the early 20th century. Her dad was 100% Italian and mom half Irish and half German. My mom's paternal grandfather served in WWI so he could quickly get his US citizenship, and her dad was also in the Army in WWII, coming back at war's end with a purple heart for getting shot in the leg in France.

Holidays were fun whether we celebrated in Jersey or Florida. There was always good food after grace. In Jersey it was lasagna. In Florida reunions it was hot dogs and Kentucky Fried Chicken with yummy smashed potatoes and gravy. Life was good...gravy and grace.

I have two brothers and a sister. I'm married with four kids and, as of mid-July, four grandchildren. I've been truly blessed. My kids have kept me young...and I regret not having spent more time with them than I have.

After a year of putzing around with college, I joined the Army to be a helicopter pilot. Being partially color blind, that wasn't going to happen, but I ignored that thinking I could get past the rules through some waiver. Well that's one thing the Army doesn't give waivers for. I took a job as a broadcast journalist, as part of my path to flight school. It wasn't too long and wasn't too short in length. I didn't have the patience to go into military intelligence and get a language and didn't want to lower myself by only spending four days to train to be a postal clerk.

My ten week school lasted almost seven or eight months. Having graduated from basic training in the top percent of my class, I was just as lazy in the broadcast course. I was first delayed by working too hard on a vocabulary test, given to determine if I could read what I was gonna say. I didn't know the thing was timed, so I failed it for working too hard. Once I got into a class, I think I failed voice and diction class once, which many, many people do. My problem was concentration. ADD. My instructor finally gave me blinders to wear on the sides of my sunglasses so I would detect nothing in the room but what I was reading and listening to in my headphones.

The next delay was due to being recycled in class on suspicion of being a dooper. I was, but I don't attribute my lack of will to succeed to smoking pot. After a few weeks of counseling and watching the Falkland's war unfold on this new channel called CNN, I got back into class, passed and moved on to California. I married my beautiful wife Lori there in Monterey. That was the first permanent duty station in the long list of places I've been to on the way to serve in the 1st Cavalry Division, and be assigned to a war zone.

I am a Non-Commissioned Officer in the US Army. I am trained to be a broadcast and print journalist, photographer, editor, producer, videographer. I worked in media analysis and media relations. I've trained executives in methods in dealing with the media. I am a technical expert in the broadcast field, in such that I have not received formal training, but have made many repairs, simple and complex, that have been most timely and essential to accomplishing missions. I am a leader of Soldiers and mentor to my peers. I am the best assistant a leader could have, unless they are manic-depressive, or bipolar, schizophrenic.....I tend to absorb more abuse than I should from people I'm supposed to respect. I'm resilient, loyal, dedicated. I have a great interest in becoming a Deacon while changing careers to the vocations of law or medicine. During a hiatus in my military career, I spent almost 7 years as a public safety officer in the capacity of fireman, jailer, patrolman, narcotics investigator and detective.

I believe that all of my life has been preparation to help people, teach, heal....help them heal themselves. I have always seen myself as a paladin. I never had the confidence in myself to pursue vocations of true value to others. I believed they were corny, at one point, and then that I was not worthy or capable of the tasks those vocations present. I want to help anyone that asks for help. In addition to being the best husband, father, grandfather and friend I can be to my family, I truly believe that's what I'm here for.

I want to help pass it around. I'm a people person. I am very good at interpersonal communication. I have lived in many places around the world and have managed to get along with people of every race, age, religion and nationality. I have had friends that hate each other and see where each of them is coming from... Note the vocational skills above. I am an excellent investigator. I see the big picture. I am conscious of existence, meaning, purpose, and potential of people. I am motivated by a self-felt, self accepted calling to the cause of good and growth in the lives of others. Influential communication of ideas, like I allude to above, is how I do my part. I feel privileged to be able to help people by conveying ideas to them through many forms of media, as well as by just talking with them.

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I believe that on one evening, that Mary whispered to me that I could accomplish anything that I set out to do, as my heart is good, my intentions are good, and that I am blessed and protected....to have no fear. I don't know if it was Mary, but that's what occurred to me. It was immediately after praying....as I'm preparing to change careers from the military to....something. So any advice is good advice, for the most part. Since my conversion, I have gained confidence in myself that I haven't had since I was a child. So I'm not used to the idea that I can do anything, job/career wise... and I'm not used to so many options. They confuse me, as I'm fortunate to probably accomplish whatever I set out to do. I continue to pray on this. As I believe I can do anything except figure out what I'm going to do!!!

My conversion to the Catholic faith is a result of my deciding I wasn't crazy. That was the choice I seemed to have during the time leading up to Easter. This all started with welts. I got welts all over my arms, sides, legs. My forearms looked like someone whipped me with a cane. My legs looked like they had been scratched, which didn't coincide with the diagnosis of a bug bite. Contact dermatitis is a possibility, but I am not allergic to anything, so that didn't make sense to me. I had the pest control guy come by my hooch (my trailer). There was not a sign of any pests in the room but me. We laid sticky traps down but they didn't catch anything but me. I got a new mattress. There was nothing crawling around on the old one. And, I had no bug bites....just welts of various forms in odd places.

That night, I relaxed by reading. I started thumbing through the back of a bible looking at the definitions. As I read them, my mind started racing. Definitions of gentiles, and other phrases started thoughts that I couldn't arrest. I was paranoid, I felt great guilt, that I was a failure and could do nothing right. I beat myself up for past indiscretions that led to previous paranoid flights of mind...and led them back into my head....no drugs, no alcohol. I didn't know what was happening to me. I did know that I had to get my underwear lined up, my socks. I had to make sure that the 20 items I was allowed to have in my laundry bag when I turned it in was a perfect combination of clothing items to give the appearance of someone that had worn clothes in a set four times. I was preparing for an inspection that wasn't coming. I was sweating yet cold. Shaking visibly as I raced from one deficiency to another....thinking about the Christian

plot to take over the world, and the Islamic plot to take over the world and the Muslims hating the Jews and the Jews hating the Christians and the Christians loving everyone but wanting to convert everyone to their faith, just like the others....and it was all based on the book that they said was the source of all knowledge and the basis and authority for their....plans.

Needless to say, I didn't sleep much. When I got up, I went to my two commanders and begged their pardon for being a screw up. I was still sweating, still shaking, and stumbling. But stumbling coherently. Mumbling.

The next day I got up and noticed blood on my leg, and two little holes, like mini vampire teeth. Perfectly round. No swelling, just the painless holes on my leg leaking blood. No signs of bugs on the sticky pads. Nothing in the blankets. Blood wasn't on anything else. That was not comforting.

So I went off to work with the same feeling....the welts, feeling like I was either going crazy or I was under attack. After about an hour of trying to find a sympathetic ear, I went to the clinic. There were no doctors in, so the medics gave me a ride to a nearby clinic that had a higher level of treatment available 24 hours to handle any emergencies or overflow of wounded.

I went in there....and well, they wouldn't even see me. The medic came over to me, guided me to the door and the psychiatrists.

There I learned that you can be labeled as having a psychotic event, a minor psychotic event, and not really feel crazy. Denial?

The doc made notes. Was pleasant enough. Basically saying, since I didn't feel the urge to hurt myself or others, like I would tell, that I should keep taking whatever medicine I was taking and have a good day.

Now feeling well loved by the medical community, I started walking back to my hooch. Along my path -- the chapel. I walked in and spoke for a minute with two of the chaplain's assistants, both of whom I knew from Ft Hood before we deployed to good old Baghdad. I said I just needed to go into the chapel and have a minute or five to think and pray. I didn't say anything about what I was going through. I went to a pew, sat down, and pretty much stood back up. Just a little anxious I guess. I started walking out when SGT Jones offered me a Gatorade. Apparently, there was a big bash/event at the chapel the night before and there were chips and drinks left over. I went in and grabbed one, chugged it. As I started walking out, the Chaplain came in.

When I sat down to talk to Father Torm, I just knew he'd look at me like I was a nut and make me feel as welcome as the folks across the street, in the vocation of medicine, were able to give me the opportunity to feel...welcome.

He didn't. He listened. I told him what I had been through, and that I felt like I had to make a decision...I was crazy or I was being spiritually attacked. That's a catch-22, because to most people you tell you are being attacked by the minions of Lucifer, they're gonna think you're crazy. Father Torm asked if anything had happened to me before like this....visions, or what have you.

I mentioned to him the story of a drive from North Carolina to Maryland one dark and rainy night. I was in my trusty Toyota pickup truck at about 2 am heading north on I-95. It was raining and I was sleeping. Yep. When I woke up I jolted my head up and looked forward. I was still going down the road in between 18-wheelers making their night runs; just I was sleeping while driving. Well, it wasn't me. When I woke up, my hands in my lap, there was an arm reaching out in front of me on my right side. An arm dressed in a white business dress shirt with nice cuffs was holding the wheel until I jolted my head up and grabbed the wheel.

Then I told Father about Native American friends of mine that were medicine women. One was my best friend's fiancée, Apache, and her teacher is Cherokee. She was conducting a healing using various Native American accoutrements like crystals and animal skins....technology passed to the Cherokee before their nation sank in the sea. Well, the gal was halfway into this healing, when she stopped cold and looked up. I was lying down on the floor with my head towards the wall....and that's where she looked. I didn't see anything but from the look on her face as the blood left it she did. She said that I was surrounded by chiefs. Many chiefs. And that they said for her to get her hands off of me pronto. Never heard back from her when I called to ask more about that little event.

Father Torm looked at me and said "angels". I started to cry. He didn't think I was crazy. Most importantly, he led ME to believe I wasn't crazy. As we talked, I realized what a moment of truth was....and I was having one. I was realizing the truth. That everything my Dad had said about Jesus was true. I had major goose bumps, but these were warm. Father Torm referred me to a fellow Soldier who could help me understand what happened. That's when I met the Catholic Defender.

There is a lot of war going on here in Iraq, in the land of Abraham. And a good bit of it is spiritual. Our Soldiers are under constant stress, constant attack. Weakened by seeing their friends have passed, to getting shot at, to having mortars fall around our housing every day at random times in random places around those trailers we live in.

They need help. I need help. And the best help I can get for myself will be in preparing to help others fight for their spirit, their sanity, and their lives.

I have play acted as a paladin....now I know why. I am one. My goals are to become a Deacon and serve the Church and her people. Everything else, no matter what vocation I decide to shoot for when I retire from military service, will be gravy and grace.