

Chapter 1

His name was Jones. At least, that's what I called

him. Not Mr. Jones . . . just Jones. He called me "young man" or "son." And I rarely heard him call anyone else by name either. It was always young man or young lady, child or son.

He was old, but the kind of old that is difficult to quantify. Was he sixty-five or eighty—or a hundred and eighty? And every single time I ever laid eyes on him, he had an old, brown suitcase close at hand.

Me? I was twenty-three when I saw him for the first time. He held out his hand, and for some reason, I took it. Looking back on the moment, I think that act in itself was a small miracle. Any other time, and with any other person, considering my circumstances, I might have cowered in fear or come out with my fists flying.

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I had been crying, and he heard me, I guess. My cries were not the muffled sobs of loneliness or the whimpering of discomfort—though certainly I was lonely and uncomfortable—but the anguished wail that a guy will let loose only when he is sure there is no one around to hear him. And I was sure. Wrong, obviously, but sure. At least as sure as one spending another night under a pier can be.

My mother had succumbed to cancer several years earlier, a tragic event in my life that was compounded shortly thereafter by my father, who, neglecting to wear his seat belt, managed to chase my mother into the afterlife by way of an otherwise survivable automobile accident.

One questionable decision followed another during the confused aftermath of what I saw as "my abandonment," and within a couple of years, I found myself on the Gulf Coast, without a home, a vehicle, or the financial means to obtain either. I did odd jobs—mostly cleaning fish on the piers or selling bait to the tourists—and showered at the beach or swam myself clean in a pool at one of the hotels.

If it was cold, there was always a garage left open in one of

the many empty vacation homes that dotted the beach. Rich people (anyone who owned a vacation home), I soon learned, often had an extra refrigerator or freezer hooked up in their garages. Not only were these excellent sources of old lunch meat and drinks, but they also worked almost as well as a heater if I lay close to the warm air that blew from the fan at the bottom.

Most nights, though, I much preferred my “home” under

neath the Gulf State Park Pier. I had a large hole dug in and smoothed out right where the concrete met the sand. Visualize a monstrous lean-to: it was roomy, absolutely hidden from view, and as dry as anything ever is at the beach. I left my few belongings there—mostly fishing tackle, T-shirts, and shorts—often for days at a time, and never had anything stolen. Honestly, I didn’t think anyone knew I slept there—which is why I was so surprised when I looked up and saw Jones.

“Come here, son,” he said, with his hand outstretched.

“Move into the light.” I shuffled forward, taking his right hand with my own, and eased into the soft glow cast from the sodium vapor bulbs above the pier.

Jones was not a large man—nowhere near six feet—but neither was he small. His white hair was worn straight back over his head. It was too long, but had been carefully brushed and smoothed with his fingertips. His eyes, even in the dim light, seemed to shine. They were a clear, crystal blue, framed by a deeply wrinkled face. Though he wore jeans, a white T-shirt, and leather flip-flops, the old man seemed stately—though even now I admit that is hardly a word one would use to describe a five-foot-nine-or-so old man under a pier at night.

As I describe Jones, I might as well go ahead and tell you that I never knew whether he was black or white. I’m not sure it matters beyond trying to paint a mental picture for you, but I never asked and never decided if his café au lait-colored skin was the result of genetics or a life lived mostly outdoors. In any case, he was brown. Sort of.

“You crying about something in particular?” he asked. “Maybe somebody in particular?”

Yeah, I thought. Me. I am the “somebody in particular.” “Are you going to rob me?” I asked aloud. It was an odd question.

More evidence, I suppose, of the level of distrust I had in everyone and everything at that time.

The old man's eyebrows rose. Peering beyond me into the darkness from which I had emerged moments before, he chuckled. "Rob you? I don't know . . . you got some furniture or a TV in there I didn't see?"

I didn't respond. I might have hung my head. Somehow, his attempt at humor made me feel worse. Not that he seemed to care.

He punched me playfully on the arm. "Lighten up, young man," he said. "First of all, you're about a foot and a half taller than me, so, no, I'm not about to rob you. Second . . . there is a benefit to not owning a bunch of stuff." I looked at him blankly, so he went on: "You're safe. Not only am I not gonna rob you; neither is anybody else. You got nothing to take!" He paused, aware that I was still not smiling. In fact, quite the opposite—I was becoming angry.

The old man changed tack. "Hey, Andy, if I promise not to ever rob you, can I have one of the Cokes you have stashed back in there?" He gestured behind me. I stared back at him. "Yes? No?" he said. "Please?"

"How did you know my name?" I asked.

"You can call me Jones, by the way."

"Okay. So how did you know my name? And how do you know whether or not I have any Cokes under here?"

"No big deal, really." He shrugged. "I been watching you for a long time. I been around. And the Cokes are bound to be a product of your late-night forays into the garages of the local rich and famous. So . . . can I have one?"

I watched him for a moment, considering his answer, then slowly nodded and retreated into the darkness for his Coke. Returning with two cans, I handed one to the old man.

"Didn't shake it up, did ya?" He grinned. Then, seeing once again that I refused even the slightest smile, he sighed and said, "Lord, Lord. You are a tough one." Popping the top on

the Coke, Jones shifted in the sand and crossed his legs. “All right,” he said, taking a long pull from the red can, “let’s get started.”

“Get started . . . at what?” I asked flatly.

Jones set his drink can down and said, “We need to start noticing a few things. We need to check your heart. We need to gather a little perspective.”

“I don’t even know what you are talking about,” I said. “And I don’t know who you are.”

“Fair enough.” He smiled. “Well, let me see, now . . . how do I explain?” He leaned toward me quickly. “As for who I am, call me Jo—”

“You already told me that,” I interrupted. “What I mean—”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. You mean, where’d I come from, and stuff like that.”

I nodded.

“Well, this evening, I came from just up the beach a ways.” I sighed and rolled my eyes. Chuckling, he held up both hands in mock protest. “Hang on. Hang on, now. Don’t get aggravated at old Jones.” In a softer voice he added, “Okay?” Accepting my nod, he continued.

“I am a noticer,” he said. “It is my gift. While others may be able to sing well or run fast, I notice things that other people overlook. And, you know, most of them are in plain sight.” The old man leaned back on his hands and cocked his head. “I notice things about situations and people that produce perspective. That’s what most folks lack—perspective—a broader view. So I give them that broader view . . . and it allows them to regroup, take a breath, and begin their lives again.”

For several minutes we sat there quietly, peering out at the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. I was strangely calm in the presence of this old man, who was now lying on his side, elbow in the sand, with his head propped on his hand. After a while, he spoke again—a question this time. “So your mama and daddy passed on?”

“How did you know that?” I asked in return.

He gave the tiniest of shrugs, as if to say, Everybody knows, but I knew they didn't.

Though it alarmed me that this stranger seemed to know so much about me, I shook off the eerie feeling and answered his question. “Yeah, they're both dead.”

He pursed his lips. “Well . . . that's a matter of perspective

too.” When I questioned him with a look, he continued. “There's

a big difference in 'dead' and 'passed on.' ”

“Not to me,” I snorted.

“You ain't the one who's passed on.”

“You got that right,” I said bitterly. “I'm the one who's left.” On the verge of tears again and with a mean tone of voice, I blurted out, “So what's your perspective on that? Huh?”

Carefully, Jones asked, “Well, why do you think you are here? In this situation . . . in this place, I mean.”

“Because I chose to be,” I tossed out. “My own bad decisions. My attitude.” I stared hard at him. “See? I know all the right answers. So I don't need to hear it from you. It's all my fault, okay? Is that what you want me to say?”

“No,” the old man said calmly. “I was just curious if you had any perspective of your own.”

“Well, no, I don't,” I said. “I grew up hearing that old adage about God putting a person after His own heart where He wants him to be. And He puts me under a pier?” I cursed, then added, “By the way, about that reference to the difference between 'dead' and 'passed on,' I've spent more than enough of my life in church, so I get what you're implying. I'm just not sure I buy any of that anymore.”

“That's okay for the moment,” Jones said soothingly. “I hear you. And I understand why you feel that way. But listen . . . I'm

not selling anything. Remember, I am only here for—”

“For perspective, yeah, I know.”

Jones was silent for a time, and I began to wonder if I had

been rude enough to shut him down completely. But, no. That was just the first of several chances I would offer him to give up on me and leave. And he didn't.

“Young man?” Jones asked as he brushed a wisp of white hair from his eyes. “What would you think if I told you that, yes, your bad choices and decisions have had a part in your ending up under this pier, but beyond that, under this pier is exactly where you should be in order for a future to occur that you can't even imagine at this point?”

“I don't understand,” I said. “And I'm not sure I would believe it if I did.”

“You will,” Jones replied. “Trust me. One day you will.” Then, suddenly smiling, he said, “Here's the thing, son, everybody seems to misunderstand that saying you threw at me a minute ago. Why does everyone think that when people say that 'God will put a person after His own heart where He wants him to be' . . . that it means God will put them on a mountaintop or in a big house or at the front of the line?

“Think with me here . . . everybody wants to be on the mountaintop, but if you'll remember, mountaintops are rocky and cold. There is no growth on the top of a mountain. Sure, the view is great, but what's a view for? A view just gives us a glimpse of our next destination—our next target. But to hit that target, we must come off the mountain, go through the valley, and begin to climb the next slope. It is in the valley that we slog through the lush grass and rich soil, learning and becoming what enables us to summit life's next peak.

“So, my contention is that you are right where you are supposed to be.” The old man scooped up a double handful of the white sand and let it pour from his fingers. “It may look like barren sand to you, son, but nothing could be further from the truth. I say to you that, as you lay your head down tonight, you are sleeping on fertile ground. Think. Learn. Pray. Plan. Dream.

For soon . . . you will become.”

Before he left that night, Jones opened his suitcase, holding it carefully away from my curious gaze, and removed three small, orange hardcover books. “Do you read?” he asked. As I nodded, he added, “I’m not asking if you can read; I’m asking if you do.”

“Yes,” I responded. “Mostly magazines and stuff, but I do.”

“Good enough,” Jones said. “Read these.”

I looked at what he handed me in the semidarkness. The titles were all names. Winston Churchill. Will Rogers. George Washington Carver. I glanced back up at him. “History books?”

“No,” he said, with a twinkle in his eye, “adventure stories! Success, failure, romance, intrigue, tragedy, and triumph—and the best part is that every word is true! Remember, young man, experience is not the best teacher. Other people’s experience is the best teacher. By reading about the lives of great people, you can unlock the secrets to what made them great.”

I read Winston Churchill until dawn. It was com

forting somehow to discover a life that had endured more

tragedy and rejection than my own. And it didn’t escape me that by the end of his life, Churchill had met with more than an equal measure of success.

Jones had said good-bye sometime after I started reading. I barely noticed him leave, but in the morning, I wished I had been nicer to the old man. I felt embarrassed, a bit ashamed of myself, but not nearly so devoid of hope as I had been the evening before. By nightfall, I had finished George Washington Carver and was so tired that I slept until the next morning.

That day, I washed boats at the marina and thought constantly about what I had read. I also kept an eye out for Jones, but I didn’t see him. Gene, the marina manager, said he knew Jones well. He told me that the old man had been coming through town for years. “In fact,” Gene said, “Jones was old when I was a boy. And I’m fifty-two.”

I read Will Rogers within the next twenty-four hours, but it wasn't until several days later that I saw my friend again. I was throwing a cast net in the lagoon, trying to catch shrimp and mullet minnows to sell for bait, when the old man slipped up behind me. "Doing any good?" he asked.

"Hey, Jones!" I exclaimed. "I didn't hear you come up! Where've you been? I already read the books!"

He chortled at my enthusiasm. (Actually, I was a bit surprised myself that I was so glad to see him.) "Slow down, slow down! Let me comment." He grinned. "You didn't hear me come up because you were splashing around so much you wouldn't have heard me if I was riding an elephant. As for where I've

been? I've been around—even seen you a couple of times—but didn't want to be a bother. And I'm glad you finished the books. Like 'em?"

"Yes, sir," I answered breathlessly. "I really did."

"Good. I figured you were through with all three by now. I hope you don't mind . . . I stopped by the pier and got them. And I left three more."

"Really?" I said, surprised. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. I'm getting them from the library. But I'm picking them out special for you." Jones then held up a plastic bag. "You hungry? I got lunch."

"I'm always hungry," I said. "Lately, I've been a 'one-meal-a-day' kind of guy, or what my mom used to call an 'opportunistic eater.'"

"Well, come on," he said. "Get out of the water. I have a feast."

The "feast" turned out to be Vienna sausages and sardines. I was hungry, so I ate, but I wasn't exactly thrilled with the fare, and Jones knew it. I wondered later if that's why he brought it in the first place.

We had settled under an oak tree on a high dune, the beach in front of us and the deep-blue lagoon at our backs. I wore old tennis shoes, blue jean cutoffs, and no shirt. Jones, in his usual casual

attire, had coiled a blue bandanna around his head. The blue of that headband seemed to make his eyes glow. From where we sat, we could hear the crashing of the surf, and there was just enough breeze to make the summer temperature bearable. “So, what are you eating?” Jones asked, peering at me with a smile.

I looked up, puzzled. Wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, I swallowed and said, “What? You know what I’m eating. Same as you.”

“Really?” the old man teased, with a sly look. “Somehow I doubt it. But let’s see . . .” He leaned over to glance at my food, then looked back at me. “What are you eating?” he asked again. “And where are you eating it?” Seeing that I was now more confused than ever, he added gently, “It’s not a trick; just answer the questions.”

I raised my eyebrows and said, “Well . . .” I held up my hands as if to say, I still don’t know what you’re getting at, and said, “I guess I’m—”

“No, don’t guess. Just tell me.”

“Okay. I am eating sardines and Vienna sausages.”

“Where?”

“In the sand.”

Jones smiled. “I thought so.” Nodding then, he said again, “I thought so. Well, the books will help, but I believe I can help as well.”

“Jones,” I said, shaking my head, “what are you talking about?”

“Your vision, my boy. It is incredibly cloudy at the moment, but I am certain we can clear a pathway from your head to your heart and into your future.”

I was frustrated, but curious. “I still don’t understand.”

Jones put his hand on my shoulder and said, “I know you don’t. And I wouldn’t expect you to understand.” He leaned close

to me. “Because you lack perspective.”

He laughed at the expression on my face, but continued.

“Young man, you see only the sand at your feet and what you are eating that you wish was something else. I don’t tell you this as a rebuke; you are very ordinary in your views. Most people are just like you, disgusted with themselves for what they are and what they eat and what they drive. Most of us never stop to think that there are quite literally millions in this world who lack our blessings and opportunities, have no food to eat at all, and no hope of ever owning a car.

“The situation in which you find yourself is fraught with difficulty, yes. It is also piled high with benefits.” Jones paused to ponder a thought, narrowed his eyes, then said, “Here, for you, young man, is a law of the universe—one of many, to be sure, but one that is especially applicable to your life at present. Remember, whatever you focus upon, increases.”

I frowned, trying to grasp the meaning of his words. Fortunately, Jones didn’t leave me guessing.

“When you focus on the things you need,” he went on to explain, “you’ll find those needs increasing. If you concentrate your thoughts on what you don’t have, you will soon be concentrating on other things that you had forgotten you don’t have—and feel worse! If you set your mind on loss, you are more likely to lose . . . But a grateful perspective brings happiness and abundance into a person’s life.”

Jones saw the doubt on my face. He put his cans aside and shifted his body to face me directly. “Consider this: when we are happy and enthusiastic,” he said, “other people enjoy being around us. True?”

“I guess,” I answered.

“No guesses,” Jones chided. “When we are happy and enthusiastic, other people enjoy being around us. Yes or no?”

“Yes.”

“And knowing that one’s opportunities and encouragement come from people, what happens to a person everyone enjoys being around?”

I was beginning to catch on. “They get more opportunities and encouragement?” I ventured.

“That is correct,” Jones affirmed. “And what happens to a life filled with opportunities and encouragement?” As I opened my mouth to speak, the old man answered for me. “A life filled with opportunities and encouragement finds more and more opportunities and encouragement, and success becomes inevitable.”

Seeing the hope and new understanding in my expression, Jones held up a finger. “I must caution you, however,” he said, “that the opposite of this principle is true as well. When a person is negative, complaining, and disagreeable, other people stay away. And that person receives less encouragement and fewer opportunities—because no one wants to be around him. And we know what happens to a life without opportunities and encouragement . . .”

“Things get worse and worse,” I answered.

Jones paused a moment to let the truth of my last realization sink in. Then he offered a plan of action. “So how does one become a person whom other people want to be around? Let me make a suggestion. Ask yourself this question every day: ‘What is it about me that other people would change if they could?’”

Thinking for a moment, I had a question of my own. “Jones, what if I get an answer about something that I don’t want to change?”

The old man tittered and replied, “The question wasn’t about you in the first place. The question was, what would other people change about you if they could?”

Sensing my uncertainty, he explained, “Look, son, I’m not saying that you should live your life according to the whims of others. I am simply pointing out that if you are to become a person of influence—if you want people to believe the things you believe or buy what you are selling—then others must at least be comfortable around you. A successful life has a great deal to do with perspective. And another person’s perspective about you can sometimes be as important as your perspective is about yourself.”

For several minutes, we both sat silently, watching the gulls soar overhead, listening to the surf break on the beach. Then Jones began to gather the empty cans and place them in the plastic bag. Standing, he extended his hand and helped me to my feet. "Incidentally," he said with a smirk, "you ate sardines and Vienna sausages in the sand. I dined on surf and turf with an ocean view." He slapped me on the back. "It's all about perspective."

Later that day, I crawled back into my home under

the pier. Laid neatly on my tackle box were three more orange books. Again, they were all biographies. Joan of Arc. Abraham Lincoln. Viktor Frankl. I picked up the Frankl book first; I was unfamiliar with him. The book was titled *Man's Search for Meaning*. As I skimmed through, I learned that Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist who survived the Nazi death camps during World War II. His wife, father, and mother were all murdered.

It's all about perspective . . . I could hear Jones's voice rattling around in my head.

Suddenly I noticed that there was a piece of paper folded into the book. As I removed it, I could see that it was a napkin. On it, Jones had written:

Young man,

Read this one first. I am proud of you.

Jones

Tears filled my eyes as I carefully placed the letter back into the book. It had been a long time since anyone had been proud of me.

Today, I can remember distinctly that the next

three books were Harry Truman, Florence Nightingale, and King David. Then I was given Harriet Tubman, Queen Elizabeth I, and John Adams. Numbers thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen were Eleanor Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and Joshua Chamberlain. Tucked into the Chamberlain book was a note from Jones, simply instructing me to please return these last three to the library

myself, which I did—and I checked out George Washington, Anne Frank, and Christopher Columbus on my own.

It wasn't long before I noticed that Jones had gone.

I looked for him for weeks, finding evidence of his having “been around” at every turn. Jones had arranged for Nancy, the owner of Sea N Suds, a restaurant on the beach, to fry any fish I brought in. Hush puppies and iced tea were included in my special price. Along with all the crackers I could eat, the price was a dollar.

Soon, more charter boat captains began giving me their boats to wash, and in some cases, their clients' fish to clean. Every single time, Jones's name was mentioned.

One day, Brent Burns, a songwriter performing at the Holiday Inn, told me that an old man had informed him that I was funny and had suggested that I might do some comedy during his breaks. Could I? he asked. I did, and though I was probably not very good, Brent laughed at my material several times a week and encouraged me with his words and an occasional meal.

The next several years were a blur. I continued to

read biographies even though the pier was no longer my shelter. Through the influence of General George Patton, Madame Curie, Joshua, Caleb, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Alexander the Great, Booker T. Washington, Daniel Boone, and eventually more than two hundred other biographies, I had begun to move my life in a forward direction.

At some point during that time, a crystallizing moment occurred as I read yet another account of the life of some influential, financially secure, highly successful person. I realized that a graph had formed in my mind, unconsciously identifying seven things that these great people all had in common—seven principles they had all employed. And I wondered, What would happen to my life if I harnessed the power of these seven principles? After all, I reasoned, principles work every time. And they work whether I understand them or not. The principle of gravity was working long before the apple ever fell on Newton's head . . . yet when that apple finally did fall, and Newton understood the principle behind it, society was then free to harness that principle to fly airplanes, build suspension bridges, and a host of other things!

Continuing this line of thought, I became convinced that the principles of personal success—in parenting, finances, leadership, and relationships—are no different from the principle of gravity. And since they do work every time, and they work whether or not I know them, I concluded, why shouldn't I harness them and apply them in my daily life, to create the future God wants for me?

So I did.

My life today, the well-being of my family, and whatever success we have enjoyed have been direct results of the power of seven simple principles. Several years ago, I shared these principles with the world, in a book that became a New York Times Best Seller and has since been translated into more than twenty languages. The Traveler's Gift is now used by corporations, teams, governments, and individuals all across the globe.

The Traveler's Gift is a story about a family enduring a tragic period in their lives. As the story progresses, the father, David Ponder, is allowed to travel through time, meeting with seven historic individuals who are also experiencing turmoil and hardship. These people—among them Harry Truman, Anne Frank, Abraham Lincoln, King Solomon, and Columbus—each give Ponder a separate principle to incorporate into his life. And because of these seven principles, his life is changed forever.

So, if you have ever heard me speak at a corporate

event or read any of my books and wondered how I came to read more than two hundred biographies—books that led me to the seven principles—now you know. It was an old man named Jones who took an interest in (or pity on) a young man going through the worst time in his life.

I have thought of Jones every single day now for almost twenty-five years. On the day I was married, I had hoped he would be there. I wanted him to sit in the first row—where my father would have been. When each of my boys was born, I

walked outside the hospital alone, in the half-light of an early morning, hoping to find Jones waiting, smiling, ready with advice and comfort about my future as a father. There have been so many times I've wished for just an hour alone with that old man. But I never saw him again.

Until last week.