

# E PLURIBUS UNUM

*Pastor Fred has talked with me numerous times on this extraordinary, yet difficult experience from members of his flock and the community of Jack Valley. I have no additional words of wisdom that could improve on what is here given.*

*Pastor Arnold Schmidt*

The Pacific Intermountain Express ran once a week, leaving from Denver on Sunday morning and returning on Saturday night. For this seven-day journey, two powerful locomotives, working in tandem at times, pulled three sleepers, two dining cars, and three vista cars. The PIE always ran at full capacity. The passengers on board had no destinations; they had no tickets for stops along the way; they did have a safe return as a goal. Depending on the season, the train did occasionally make stops at certain points of interest, but it was all part of one passage.

The riders of the Pacific Intermountain Express rode the common ground of their cars as

sightseers. Once in a while, a large group would book the whole train and thus provide an additional element of singularity to the journey.

This particular day, the PIE carried a random list of passengers from a random list of locations that were all booked on a first-come, first-booked basis. Joe Randall and his wife Clara occupied the front seat in Vista Car #1. They had dreamed of such a vacation for several years. Since Joe's parents wanted the kids to visit them on the farm for the summer, and since the cookie jar held funds aplenty, they decided to go for it. After about an hour of travel, a steward came to their seat and told them breakfast was ready and they could go back to the dining car. They just had to look for the table that had their name and the town where they were from on a reservation card. Getting up from their seats, they walked back down the aisle towards the dining car. About two-thirds of the way back, Clara stopped suddenly.

"Maggie!" she exclaimed. "What are you guys doing here? Wait, that was kind of a dumb question, wasn't it? Joe, come back. It's Maggie and Bill."

"This is so funny," said Maggie.

“Hi, guys,” said Joe. “I told you it wouldn’t work, Bill.”

“I know, Joe, but we gave it a good try.”

“What are you guys talking about?” asked Clara. “Did you know about this?”

“No,” answered Joe. “We’re just messing with you. It is a small world, though, isn’t it?”

“Well, look, we’ve created a traffic jam, here,” said Clara. “We’re holding up the line. So, I’m sure we’ll have a chance to talk later.”

“See ya, guys,” said Bill.

“Can you believe that, Joe?” remarked Clara, as they continued to the dining car.

“Here we are, Hon,” said Joe, pointing to the reservation card on the table.

A few minutes later, Bill and Maggie Davis walked past their friends. “We must be farther down,” Maggie said.

“Bon appétit,” said Joe.

“I still have a hard time believing that,” said Clara. “I mean, what are the chances of two families from the same church taking the same train ride a thousand miles away and not knowing beforehand?”

“Okay, then,” said Joe. “Here’s another one for you. Take a glance at the reservation card across the aisle.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Frank Sythe,” read Clara. “Am I supposed to know them?”

“Keep reading.”

“Jack Valley ... Joe, this is uncanny ... I wonder if this is them coming now?”

An elderly couple slid into the booth across from Joe and Clara.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Joe. Holding up their reservation card, Joe continued, “I was wondering if you might have accidentally gotten our booth.”

The gentleman picked up the card on their table and reread it, “No, I’m sorry. Ours has our name on it. What does yours say?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Randall, Jack Valley.”

“Jack Valley?” said Mr. Sythe. “You’re kidding?”

“No, that’s what it says,” said Joe. “We’re from Jack Valley, aren’t we, dear?”

“Don’t pay any attention to him,” said Clara. “This is so strange. We just saw two friends of ours

from our church in Jack Valley and neither of us knew the other was on this train.”

“What church is that?” asked Jackie Sythe.

“St. Peter Lutheran.”

“We’re members at First Baptist,” said Jackie.

“Sure, that’s on Route 21, right?” said Joe.

“Yes,” answered Frank. “And do you want to know what’s even stranger? We just saw a couple from our church and neither of us knew the other was on this train either.”

Looking up and around, Joe said, “It’s ... the Twilight Zone.”

“Well, we don’t want to hold up our waiter here,” said Clara. “We’ll have to introduce our friends to your friends later.”

“Count on it,” said Frank.

The waiter handed them menus and took their drink order. He returned a short time later and asked them if they were ready to order yet.

“You go ahead, dear,” said Joe. “With the strange aura around, my inner psyche has not yet returned to the physical world.”

“Oh, shut up, and order.”

After a delicious meal and another brief conversation with the Sythe’s, Joe and Clara returned to their seats in the vista car.

Over the course of the next two days, Joe and Clara introduced Bill and Maggie to Frank and Jackie. Reciprocally, Frank and Jackie introduced David and Betty Clark to everyone else. By the third day, the eight became friends.

On the fourth day, the Pacific Intermountain Express stopped at an old gold mine town that had become a tourist attraction. While they were walking around the town, Joe thought he saw someone that he knew.

“Clara, doesn’t that guy over there in the red shirt look familiar?”

“Yes, he sorta does. I don’t recognize the woman he’s with, though.”

“I know him from somewhere. You don’t suppose he’s from ...?”

“Normally, I would say not a chance. But now, I don’t know.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out. Let’s get a little closer.”

Joe and Clara moved up next to the couple and Joe reached into the bucket of gems next to the bucket the man was looking at.

“They sure make them look real,” said Joe.

“Yes, they do,” said the man. Looking up and smiling, “Yes ... yes, they do.”

“Don’t I know you from somewhere?” asked Joe.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” the man said.

“You wouldn’t happen to be from Jack Valley, would you?”

“Profitville, actually.”

“I’m thinking ... a store?”

“Shoe repair,” stated the man.

“Sure ... sure. Over the bridge on Main Street.”

“You got it.”

“Do we have an eerie story for you,” said Joe.

Joe and Clara introduced themselves and then found their other friends, old and new. They then introduced them to Richard and Tanya Terrabino. By the time the train blew its whistle to reboard,

Richard and Tanya had revealed that they went to church at St. Ann's Catholic and had lived next to Maggie's parents for five years.

The afternoon's trip through the mountains provided some gorgeous panoramic views. At different points in the trip, each of the new friends made a comment about the awesome creative hand of God. When the train traversed a tunnel in the mountain, the sky opened up to a fiery orange background streaked with brilliant hues of purple and gold.

Clara turned to Joe and said, "I love you, Joe. With this kind of beauty, can you imagine what heaven's going to be like?"

"I know. It's mind boggling."

At 6:00 pm, the steward began seating people for dinner. Just as he reached Joe and Clara's seat, the train lurched momentarily and then there was a loud ear-piercing screech of metal on metal. Although it would only span a few seconds, the time that it took for the car to tip over and roll down the side of the mountain seemed like a slow-motion dream to Joe. Vista Car # 1 came to rest on a ledge about two hundred feet from where it had been on the tracks.



Strangely, Joe did not feel hurt. His right arm had a couple of minor abrasions, but that appeared to be it. He immediately climbed over a mangled seat and started looking for Clara. He found her under another seat and quickly realized his beloved bride was dead. A jagged piece of metal had pierced her throat. The moaning of several other people resonated in his ears in the otherwise deathly silence of the railcar, but he could not leave Clara. Finally, he couldn't stand it anymore. He couldn't do anything for his wife; she was with God; he had to see if he could help anybody else. Jammed metal and twisted seats made it very difficult to maneuver. He saw Maggie's head and crawled back to her. Bill was obviously dead. Maggie couldn't move, but she opened her eyes.

“Joe, is that you?” she whispered.

“Yes, Maggie.”

“Bill? Where's Bill?”

“I am so sorry, Maggie. Bill didn't make it. He didn't make it ... hang in there, Maggie.” But it was too late. Maggie passed away in his arms.

A few feet away, he found Frank, but he couldn't see Jackie anywhere. “Frank, can you hear me? Frank?”

“Yes, Joe, I hear you.”

“Can you move, Frank?”

“No, Joe. The weight ... it’s just too much.”

“I’ll see if I can get this off of you.”

“Joe, don’t. Tell Jackie I love her.”

“Yes, Frank, I will, but ... Frank? Frank?”

Joe felt the car move a little. He crawled over to where a window had been, knocked out the remaining glass, and leaned out. He could see the ledge giving way, so he maneuvered the rest of his body out the hole, and in a desperate leap, went for the branch of a tree that hung low. His feet went out from under him, but his hands continued to feel the rough bark of the tree. He watched between his legs as the railcar tumbled down the mountain. About thirty feet to his right, he could still see the dining car upside down on another ledge. He worked his way up the tree branch, jumped on a rock, and crawled over to the dining car. Ten feet to his left he saw a man on his back who seemed to be twitching. When he got up to him, he recognized him as Richard Terrabino.

“Richard, it’s Joe. Look at me, Richard.” When the man opened his eyes, Joe said, “Where are you hurting, Richard? Can you move?”

Richard tried to prop himself up on his elbows but quickly collapsed. “I can’t feel my legs, Joe ... Joe, would you find Tanya?”

“I’ll try, Richard. I’ll try.” Joe looked up the mountain at the two teetering cars left on the tracks. “Richard, I’ve got to try to move you. If those two cars above come down, we won’t stand a chance.”

Richard grabbed Joe’s wrist with a strong right hand and pulled him closer. In shortened breath, he said, “I’ll see you on the other side.” Joe felt Richard’s grip release and he knew he was gone.

Joe dodged a large rock that tumbled down from above. When he heard a creaking and then a groaning, he crawled to his left as quickly as he could. With a thunderous roar, Vista Cars 2 and 3 came crashing down, caught the back end of the dining car on the ledge, and carried it with them down the mountainside. Alone, he saw no other life. He knew he had to try to get back up to the tracks; rescuers would probably find him much quicker up there. An hour later, a rescue chopper lowered its medic and sling down to the lone man clinging to a twisted rail.

All the passengers on the Pacific Intermountain Express but one died on that mountainside that

autumn afternoon. The churches of St. Ann's Catholic, First Baptist, and St. Peter Lutheran in Jack Valley overflowed with the living for the funerals.

Pastor Anderson had many long conversations with Joe Randall for months following. Questions of "Why?" abounded; answers were not always definitive; they couldn't be without knowing everything that God knows. Perhaps the last conversation they had cast the clearest light on a shadowy question that still haunts Joe Randall today.

"Pastor, why do we wait until the end?" asked Joe.

"What do you mean, Joe?"

"Why do we wait until the end to resolve our differences with all the people who are supposed to be our brothers and sisters in Christ?"

"I assume you're referring to the fact that the dying words of the people on that mountainside were not about doctrinal differences?"

"Yes."

"The brutal truth is, I don't know. The human condition is both simple and complex. Ultimately, I'm sure it goes back to the Garden of Eden, but The Tower of Babel was certainly a point in time that communication problems broadened. John

tells us that the Lord himself prayed that all may be one. For a time in history, the structure of the Church was sort of united, but certain abuses brought about the Reformation. And while the reformers addressed the abuses and corrected some, the resulting split ended up creating widespread differences. Time only multiplied those differences.”

“So, we each have to have a church on the corner with walls that separate us from our brothers and sisters?” asked Joe.

“The physical building walls and the spiritual interpretation walls. Of course, we can’t be so naïve as to ignore the fact that there are some brothers and sisters who have taken a path on some issues that I believe is just wrong in the broad context of what God has revealed to us through the scriptures. They will have to try to justify that path to the Lord someday. While we can’t judge them, we don’t have to go down the same path that they have chosen. I don’t know how God will judge them. I know we must always keep the doors of the heart unlocked for them, and I know we must keep our eyes and minds open on any path we take on our journey as a church and as an individual. I know that Father Riley at St. Ann’s, Pastor Douglas at First Baptist,

and I have talked more since that day than we ever had before. We're even going to collaborate on a couple of projects. Death is the great equalizer in the human journey. It is the point at which all the different denominations, all the different doctrines, all the people of God become one, meeting at one point, Joe."

"Ever since I lost Clara ... sometimes when I hear people arguing and holding grudges about stupid petty stuff ... I just want to grab them and shake them and say stop. It's just not worth it; wake up; live every day as if it were the last."

"Well, Joe, I know what you mean. Sometimes I want to do the same thing, but then I get caught up in all the everyday chores and concerns myself. I've done a lot of grief counseling in my career, and I've found that—and I know this may sound strange—the most fortunate people are those who know they are dying, and they have a little time to think about their relationship with God and resolve their differences with others. The toughest situations are those like what you experienced—where death is instantaneous. Because all those things that, as you say, we wait until the end to do, never get done. Certainly, it is less of a concern with Clara and the others on board that train with

active faith lives. For believers, this tragedy was ... as Charles Dickens put it in *The Tale of Two Cities*, ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ... it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair ...’”

“And for those who reject God, Pastor, it is but the season of Darkness.”

“Yes, my friend. Without hope or light, how could it be anything else?”