

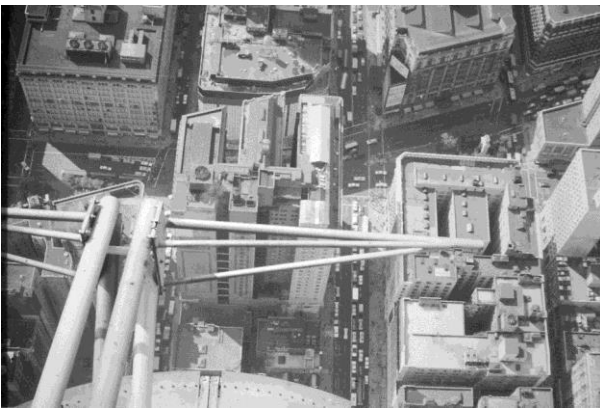
# Prologue

---

*“Terror is not negotiable.”*

I was looking straight down with nothing between me and the streets of New York City but one thousand feet of emptiness, and I was being forced to lean towards that emptiness.

Let me back up a little. It was a beautiful crisp day in the fall of 1963 and I had been working as a project engineer for Belmont Electric for about six months. I had never been to the Empire State Building (ESB) before. I was terrified as I climbed a ladder to a five foot wide ledge on the east side of ESB overlooking a patio filled with telephone company microwave transmitters on the 88<sup>th</sup> floor facing the East River and Long Island. I remember that in the elevator on the way up, I was sure I could feel the building falling over. I was afraid of heights. It was a clear day and the view was spectacular, but the knot in my stomach was my main focus. My supervisor Bob Willman, an 82 year old engineer, was very spry as he walked around the corner of the ledge to the south side of the building with me trailing a few steps behind. I didn't know that the width of the ledge had gotten smaller as I looked to my left and found that the terrace



**Looking down at 34th Street and Broadway from ESB**

had ended and I was looking down at 33rd Street with images that looked like little ants and beetles scurrying around on the ground.

I was terrified. The only thing separating me from the open space and falling to my death was the shoulder width ledge under my feet. Certainly wide enough to walk on if it was level, but, it sloped slightly down to let water run off, and as I tried to lean my shoulders against the building's wall, which there was no room to do, the sensation of being pushed towards the void below turned into panic. My terror almost paralyzed me. About two feet in front of me I saw a pole with an antenna

mounted on it. The pole was mounted to the ledge I was on. I lunged for it, hands outstretched, barely able to reach it with my fingertips, and wrapped my arms around it for dear life. As I held onto the pole, I prayed it would not bend, prayed Bob would not look back and see me terrified, and prayed I could find a way to get across to the west side of the building before Bob noticed I was not behind him. I began to crawl, trying desperately to ward off the sensation that I was going to slide off the ledge and fall to my death. I finally, miraculously it seemed, reached the west side of the ledge and crawled around the corner to a wide ledge and relative safety.

I thought my heart would jump out of my body. I gathered myself and stood up on legs that felt like rubber and there was Bob, on the patio below, making notes so we could give an estimate for the project we were working on. To my relief, he had not even noticed. I looked out over the Hudson River and beyond that New Jersey, with one thought in mind. Two actually. One was thanking God that I had survived, the other was getting down to the street and safety. If that pole had been a few inches further out on the ledge, I'd have grabbed empty air and fallen to my death. Bob was a good teacher, and pointed out the various things to consider when making an estimate to install a microwave antenna on the patio. This time we went down a ladder that went directly to the 88<sup>th</sup> floor, walked down from there to the 86<sup>th</sup> floor, took a tourist elevator to the 79<sup>th</sup> floor, and from there an express elevator to the street. The knot in my

stomach slowly unclenched as Bob and I got on the 34<sup>th</sup> Street crosstown bus to return to our office on First Avenue.

I had no idea when I left my second floor walk-up at seven am that morning that I would almost die in a few hours. When I got home at six that evening, I grabbed an iced tea from our under-the-counter fridge and sat down on the Danish look-alike couch. I looked around at the living room of this one-bedroom apartment, at the off-white walls, windows facing a courtyard that let in very little light on the best of days, smells from the downstairs deli tempting me to not wait for dinner. I looked around as the reality of what almost happened set in. I did what I often did. In my head, I said what I had thought before, "Thank you, God! Thank you for helping me!" My roommate, Bernie, came in and greeted me, looked at me, and asked if I was all right. I said, yes, but I almost wasn't all right at all. I told him that I had almost died. I told him about the other times that I had almost died as well. Bernie was speechless. So was I. We went downstairs and grabbed a hamburger and fries at Spark's, a local hangout.

This incident was one of over a dozen in my life in which I was within a few inches or a few seconds of death.

Ironically, years before when I was in deep depression talking about killing myself, a fraternity brother told me that if I really wanted to do it, I should go and jump off ESB so at least I could do something right. He should only know! Eventually, ESB became my primary work location for more than two decades. Other than occasional moments of sheer terror when I could feel the building swaying, I enjoyed the work I was doing, and eventually I was known around the world for the work I did there. Years later, Lindsey, a close friend, gave me a souvenir snowfall globe with a small ESB inside. It was inscribed, "Joe's Place." It *was* my place, and I was very proud of it.

Almost falling off ESB was not the first near death experience and there were many that occurred subsequently, yet it was not until I was in therapy years later that I had an awareness of this series of near death experiences. I was aware of them individually, yet never thought about them as important events in my life. In the spring of 2013, my friend Bob Andersen, the author of *2<sup>nd</sup> Choice, Growing Up Adopted*, called out of the blue to talk about the enormity of what we adopted people survived and how we survived it. I had been thinking about the same thing in the few days before his call. His belief, and though we had not spoken about it, my belief, is that there has to be a God or a higher power who is watching over us for us to have survived.

As I think about it now in 2015, it had to be either God, or my Guardian Angel, or my natural mother, or a combination of the three making sure I survived these near misses so that I could be here to educate and help others heal. Whatever forces prevented me from being raised by my own mother are unknown to me. What I believe is that given those unfortunate circumstances, my life's work is to help others heal.