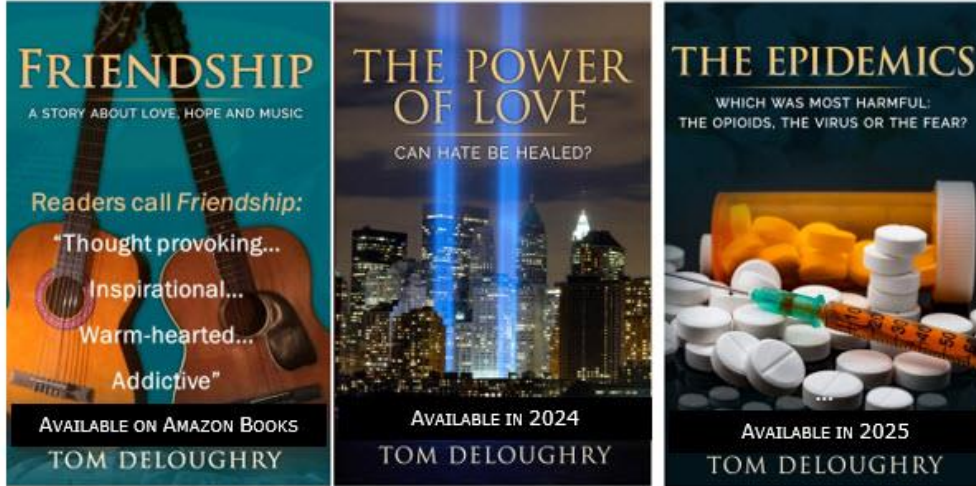


FOUR MUSICIANS MEET IN THE SIXTIES... ARE STUNNED BY TERRORISM... THEN STRUGGLE WITH THE EPIDEMICS



The Epidemics

Which was most harmful: the opioids, the virus or the fear?

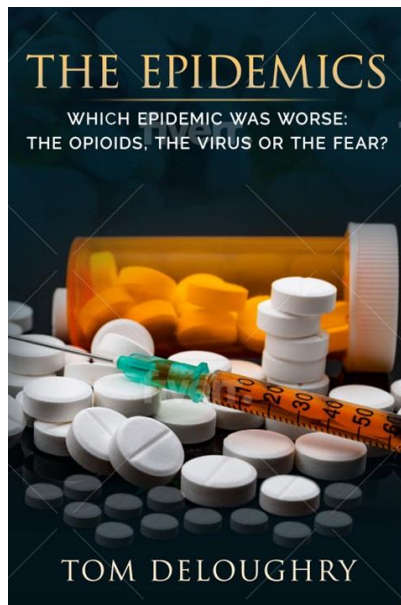
PART THREE OF THE FRIENDSHIP TRILOGY

© [TOM DELOUGHRY](#), 2024

VISIT: WWW.CARINGTEAMS.ORG AND CHOOSE "THE NOVELS" TO LEARN MORE.

Chapters One and Two:

Finding the Holy Land and The Boulevard of Broken Dreams



As a student, Paul travels to Israel to search for holy places but instead finds the sacred at a sidewalk café. Returning home, he begins playing music with *Friendship* and is swept into a murder investigation at a drug abuse center.

Forty years later, as the president of a managed care organization, Paul battles the 'profits over people' policies of the pharmaceutical industry, while becoming personally overwhelmed as his mother's caregiver.

He collaborates with Donna's granddaughter, Alice, a White House communication staffer. Despite strong opposition, they launch a public health program using mindfulness and music to reduce fear, a root cause of prejudice, polarization and bad decision making.

As her life wanes, Susan struggles with a COVID infection but angers her husband by refusing intensive care.

Paul – Finding the Holy Land - Athens, July 1970,

In the summer of 1970, I took a trip to the Holy Land and hated it. But what I learned still shines in my life.

The Acropolis gleamed high on a hill in the distance as Mike and I relaxed in the sunshine at a sidewalk café. We were still recovering from a night of drinking and dancing at a neighborhood café where “Wooly Bully” by Sam the Sham was the only Western song on the jukebox.

Lesley and Lilian, the English girls who had been our companions since we met a week ago in Munich, were huddled over a copy of “Europe on Five Dollars a Day.” Their conversation was riddled with whispers and giggles as they made a list of what the four of us should do in Athens.

The rusty Volkswagen van that Mike and I bought in Frankfurt was parked at the curb. We split the \$400 purchase price and the driving. Our passengers kicked in for the gas. Our hope was to sell it in Paris towards the end of the summer before I flew back for my final year of graduate school in counseling psychology.

“It says here that the “Sound and Light Show at the Acropolis shouldn’t be missed,” said Lilian sliding her guidebook toward me.

“And it seems very affordable,” Lesley added, looking at Mike with a teasing smile, half hidden by her swirl of red hair.

Mike was notoriously proud of being cheap.

“That sounds good to me!” he exclaimed. “And if we go to a local bank, we’ll get the best exchange rate for our traveler’s checks. Plus, I’ve read that there are some incredible deals on leather goods in Athens, if you’re willing to bargain.”

“Which I’m sure you’re very good at,” laughed Lesley as she slipped her arm around the back of Mike’s chair.

I was trying to decide whether another glass of retsina would make me happier or sleepier when a couple approached our table.

“Are any of you interested in a trip to the Holy Land?” asked the man. His German accent didn’t seem to go with his hooked nose and dark olive skin. The short woman who stood touching his arm had sparkling blue eyes and more short blond curls than I had ever seen.

“No, we’re going to the Islands,” said Mike.

“Are you sure? The ticket is very cheap,”

“How cheap?” I asked, gesturing for them to sit down.

“Only \$60 dollars, maybe less,” he said, “but you’ll need to do us a favor.”

Akrm explained that he and Machda had planned to visit their friend in Jerusalem but couldn’t travel due to “complications.” All I would need to do was to deliver a gift and a message to Abdul, who owned the Sign of the Camel, a tearoom in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Mike interrupted to ask Ahrm about the best shopping spots in Athens. While he answered, I considered the possibilities.

I had no schedule to follow as long as I made it back to Buffalo by September for my final year to get a master's in counseling, Mike and I shared an apartment there, but he had quit the job he started after college and was in no hurry to return home.

The English girls were headed to India to rendezvous with their boyfriends, Barry and John, who would fly to New Delhi. Then the four of them would journey to the ashram of a guru who was "even better than the one the Beatles visited."

Mike and I had talked about going to the Greek Island with the girls. Then we'd say good-bye, return to Athens, and take the van on the overnight ferry from Patras to Italy. We'd meander up the Italian boot with stops in Naples, Rome and Florence before selling the van in Paris. Hopefully, my share of the proceeds would cover the cost of getting to Ireland for my final week of the summer.

Mike had a good thing going with Lesley. But I knew I had disappointed Lilian.

Two nights ago, we had camped on the Vardar River in Yugoslavia, just a day's drive from the Greek border. Lilian and I were under the stars in the sleeping bag we had been sharing since we crossed the Alps. Lesley and Mike had the privacy of the van.

After we had been intimate, Lilian rolled away toward the fire and lay very still. I knew I hadn't satisfied her but was too embarrassed to talk about it.

The glow from the flames created a halo of highlights in her long brown hair. She turned to look at me in the half-light of the rising moon.

"I'm glad you're with me," I said lamely, rubbing her back. She was trapped in my arms, and I was trapped in my personality.

She touched my cheek, then looked up at the stars and whispered, "It's been a brilliant trip, hasn't it?"

She was a lovely girl being kind to an uptight guy. I felt her sigh, and a few minutes later, she was asleep.

Ahkm bought us a round of drinks while Mike questioned him about the best bargains in Athens.

"Never buy anything within two blocks of the Plaka," Ahrm said. "All the tourists flock there to see the ruins that were the center of ancient Athens. The best deals are the shops further to the south, away from the big hotels and the famous sites."

"So, tell me about this message for your friend," I asked as the drinks were brought to our table.

"It's very simple," he replied. He focused his deep brown eyes on me, as Machda held his arm and leaned closer to him. Her face was so angelic, I couldn't help staring at her.

“We’ll give you directions to find our friend’s tea room in the Old City.” His voice was quieter now. “Just tell him that Akrm and Machda send their love and this gift, and we will visit in October.”

The gift he took from his small backpack was a wooden plaque of colorful Byzantine icons about 6 by 8 inches and a quarter inch thick. I look closely and decided it was too thin to be stuffed with drugs or something worse.

We agreed on \$50 dollars for a round-trip ticket to Tel Aviv.

I was hoping to have a spiritual experience in the Holy Land. I hadn’t been to church for years and something was missing. Maybe I would find it in a beam of light on a dusty road to Damascus? Or in the sacred silence of a holy place?

Besides, it would be fun to make friends with an Arab.

Two days later I walked through the Jerusalem’s Damascus Gate into another world.

The streets of the Old City – barely wider than a Buffalo sidewalk – were worn brown blocks crowded by stone walls that sheltered shops and homes.

Women hid behind veils, haggling in gibberish with men in flowing robes and headgear. Overhead racks of clothes and brassware formed makeshift tunnels that blocked views of the hot, blue sky. Arched alleys ran off at random angles with stalls clogging every passageway.

Now I knew what “foreign” meant.

I found Abdul wiping cups behind the counter in his tea room. “I come from Athens, and I bring the love of Akrm and Machda,” I said, enjoying the awkward sound of the sentence.

“Ah, Akrm and Machda!” Abdul beamed, approaching me with outstretched arms. He engulfed me in his white robe with the sweet and sour smell of sandalwood and sweat.

After I gave him the gift and delivered the message, he declared that I was his honored guest.

He led the way up a rough ladder to a low loft overflowing with pillows that overlooked the tea bar. He pointed at an old record player with a stack 45s next to it. “You will be our music jockey, yes?” he asked with a heavy accent, as he handed a record to me. I smiled back at him.

For the rest of the evening, I played songs I couldn’t understand. Some had haunting whirling melodies that I could hum or harmonize with by the third verse. I wished I had brought my guitar so I could sing them some American folk music, but it was locked in our van in Athens.

My older brother, Ed, and I had been playing for the past three years in a Buffalo duo that we called Brotherhood, but Europe was my first try at street singing. Most people ignored me, but some would stop to listen and put a few coins in my open guitar case.

The crazy night when we danced to “Woolly Bully” with a three-generation Greek family, wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t been singing on a beach outside of Athens. A young man, who got my attention by putting paper currency in my

case, invited us back to the picnic shelter he shared with his brothers, their spouses and a half dozen children. After feeding us, one of the brothers rode with us to Athens so we could continue the party at their family restaurant.

The sweetest moment came when their mother, the cook, came out from the kitchen and welcomed the four of us with hugs. Then, using only pantomime and gestures toward a portrait hanging high on the wall, she told us how much she loved her husband. And how much she missed cooking with him since he died three years ago. Even Mike had tears in his eyes.

Now, below me in the tearoom, the men laughed and argued in a language I supposed was Arabic. Abdul often smiled and waved up at me.

His assistant kept me well supplied with tiny glasses of a light yellow tea that smelled like hibiscus, plus a round flatbread that was new to me. It was served with a sweet crumbly paste that might have been from some kind of nut. My favorite drink was akra, a cloudy white liquor served in a small glass. It tasted like licorice.

After my second drink, I stretched with pleasure on the pillows and relaxed as the music and men's laughter flowed around me. So, this was Jerusalem.

My spiritual quest began the next morning. I left the hostel without a guidebook, confident I would recognize Mt. Calvary by looking for a naked hill outside the walls of the Old City. I walked the wall, looking to my left for the site where Christ had died. I didn't really expect that the middle cross would be lit with a single beam of sunlight, but maybe...

I saw nothing I recognized from the movies. But after about ten minutes I came upon a thin priest in brown Franciscan robes talking with a young man whose beard looked a lot better than the one I was trying to grow. The monk was giving him directions in French.

I didn't know French, but I knew Franciscans, so I said, "Excuse me, I'm looking for Mt. Calvary. Do you know where it is?"

The young man responded in English.

"Oh, it's over there," pointing inside the Old City to my right. "The walls have been destroyed and rebuilt a number of times since Christ died," he explained.

He switched to French to thank the monk who backed away after blessing us both with the sign of the cross.

"Each time Jerusalem was destroyed," he continued, "the Old City grew a little larger and now Mt. Calvary is inside the wall."

"You sound like an American," I said. "Where are you from?"

"Buffalo."

"Really? Me, too!" I said surprised. "I live on Ashland."

"I live on Norwood!!" he replied.

I was astonished. Six thousand miles from home, I meet a guy who literally lives around the corner.

Ron became my guide. First, we visited the shrine that claimed to be the spot where Mary, the Blessed Mother, was assumed into heaven.

A calm light filtered into a chapel decorated with frescos depicting events from Mary's life.

We were alone except for a middle-aged woman speaking softly in Italian to her elderly mother, plus a fat man in a black robe. His baldness was accentuated by a clump of dark greasy hair draped across the top of his shiny dome.

He eyed us suspiciously from his seat behind a table near the door as we walked towards a fresco that showed a very frightened Mary listening to the Angel Gabriel explain that she would soon become the mother of God. He still had his eye on us as we viewed another fresco in which Mary was being greeted by her visibly pregnant cousin, Elizabeth.

Behind the little altar was a painting of the Assumption. It showed Mary with a mysterious Mona Lisa-ish smile looking up to see her Son waiting for her on a cloud. I liked how His light lit up the brilliant blue of her robe.

The room was cool, but the monk was sweating. As I glanced at him, he moved his hand closer to the donation box on his table next to a sign that said "Please give" in six languages.

"Do you think this is where it really happened?" I asked Ron.

"Perhaps," he said with a strange little smile that echoed Mary's in the painting.

"But how would they know that *this* is the exact spot?" I asked.

"Tradition ...and faith" he whispered, looking up to the painting.

Faith? I thought about how my own faith had been ruined by the catholic schools my parents had scrimped to afford.

I had totally believed all the miracle stories ...the healings ...raising the dead ... the apparition at Lourdes. That is, I believed until my freshman theology instructor at Buffalo's leading Catholic college told the class: "And of course, Moses really didn't part the Red Sea with his staff like you've seen in the movies.

"What really happened," he said, brushing some chalk from his vest, "is that the tide went out, and the tide came in. The Israelites were protected by God, but it was the timing of His natural wonders that saved them, not Moses and his magic staff."

My jaw dropped as the jolt jarred my faith.

It was like when I was seven, and my older sister said, "Paul, you dope. Don't you know it's not Santa Claus? It's Mom and Dad!"

Both revelations changed my world. If Santa wasn't real, maybe there was no magic. If miracles weren't real, maybe there was no God.

If God wasn't real, maybe religion really *was* just the opiate of the people. Crowd control to assure conformity. Demagoguery in the name of donations.

Over the following months at college, a lot clicked into place. And none of it was comforting.

I had been a very good kid who honored his parents. I was afraid of girls, so I was always polite to them. I served on the altar most Sundays and kept my distance from the occasional creepy priest. I studied hard, did well in high school, was elected to the student council and earned four varsity letters in cross-country and track.

But I grew up believing that I was a sinful shit because the priests and the nuns told me that masturbation was a mortal sin that would condemn me to hell. Christ suffered and died because of *my* sins... because I couldn't control myself.

My faith now seemed foolish. But old lessons die hard, and I still hungered for God.

Maybe the English girls were right, and I should go to India and check out their guru. Or maybe there was something here in the Holy Land that could help me.

Ron glowed at each sacred spots we visited. I glowered, increasingly annoyed with the claims I heard. This is the garden where Jesus suffered the night before he died? This is where He fell the third time when he carried the cross? This is where a woman comforted him on his way to Calvary and was rewarded with His picture on her veil?

No way.

Ron told me how to find the other holy sites before we parted that evening. We exchanged phone numbers, but I knew I wouldn't get in touch when I got home.

I hated the Holy City. The next morning, as I neared the church built over the site of the Crucifixion, vendors called to me: "Hey, buddy! Are you from New York? Greenwich Village? Want some good hash? Come with me. A free smoke!"

Or: "Here, mister, have a nice drink to relax. Want to meet some pretty girls? Very nice!! You will like them!"

I had enjoyed all of the above between Amsterdam and Athens, but my mission here was different. I was in search of the sacred.

And I couldn't find it.

I thought maybe Ron's glow had been from some hash he wasn't sharing, But that didn't explain the church ladies in the Holy Sepulcher who prayed in a half-dozen languages, then fell to their knees and sobbed. All around me, people were having mystical experiences. Me? I was just mystified.

It's only six miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. I hitchhiked there that afternoon and was dropped off about two miles outside of town.

I was shocked. The land of milk and honey looked like it was recovering from a nuclear blast. Big stones, ugly shrubs and shoddy souvenir shops dotted the landscape as I walked toward the birthplace of Christ.

The Star of Bethlehem sold cheap rosaries and cold sodas. I sat outside on my pack, resting in the shade and looking at Manger Square on the hill across the valley. Tour buses rumbled past a sad-looking donkey.

My best experience in Bethlehem was eating my first pita bread sandwich at a small restaurant near the edge of town. My worst was trying to pray in the underground chapel at the place where God became man.

Here, too, emotion ran high. But the wailing soundtrack of the pilgrims seemed more fit for a funeral than the most amazing place in the universe. I didn't get it.

I fled the holiest parts of the land, three days before my flight would take me back to Athens.

I have no desire to visit Tel Aviv again. Yet, it was there that I first saw some glimmers of God.

There were no sites I wanted to see, no one I wanted to meet, and nothing I wanted to do. The dirty window in my cheap room looked out on a kitchen across the alley.

Tel Aviv had beautiful boulevards and a boardwalk along the beach. I enjoyed my walks despite a threatening shadow from the Israeli reservists who casually carried their weapons as they rode busses, browsed in bookstores and relaxed in parks.

Each day, as I strolled without a purpose, a song from the film, "A Man and A Woman" kept going through my head. It's a simple tune with the same phrase playing over and over - first a little slow, then a little fast and then a final long note.

Afterwards, I learned that meditation is any technique that stops your daydreams and brings you back to the present moment. So, I guess that song was my meditation chant and the three days in Tel Aviv was my first retreat.

My first glimpse of the Spirit came toward the end of the second day when I was sitting at a sidewalk café. A young man and a beautiful woman with dark curls tumbling over her shoulders were walking towards me, holding hands. But my mind got twisted by their matching Army uniforms, the automatic weapons slung over their shoulders and then, suddenly, a warm brilliant light from the vivid glow they shared.

As they passed, I could see the same glow everywhere. ...around an old lady talking to a fat man with a mustache ...surrounding the palm trees ...connecting the flowers in a pot on the sidewalk.

Peace, love and oneness reigned in the middle of a modern city. It was extremely odd and amazingly wonderful. I was deeply stunned and very satisfied.

I didn't visit any churches or say any prayers. But I had seen that all creation is part of a connected Whole. And that love was simply a sense of that Oneness.

Before I visited the Holy Land, I thought that God only lived in ancient places and sacred tabernacles. But now I knew that I could find the Holy Land without going anywhere at all.

Paul - The Boulevard of Broken Dreams - Buffalo - 1972

A year and a half later, the phone rang in my office.

"Hello, Paul, this is Patrick O'Hara, Chief of Homicide for the Buffalo Police Department.

“We’re investigating the death of Patricia Saunders. I understand that she and her boyfriend, Frankie Roberts, were clients at your counseling center.”

I hesitated. “Well, Mr. O’Hara, I really don’t know how to respond.” I knew his call meant that a terrible tragedy was going to get worse.

“Everything about our clients is confidential,” I continued as my heart began to pound. “So, I’m not sure if I can even confirm or deny whether someone is or isn’t a client.”

“I advise you to cut the bullshit,” O’Hara snapped. “We’re trying to decide if we should charge Frankie in Patty’s death. What you know about both of them might help us decide. Would you mind coming down to headquarters this afternoon to answer a couple of questions?” he asked. “Or should I send a squad car to Lee Street?”

The phone was slippery in my hand as I hung up. Another catastrophe was brewing. And I knew it was my fault.

I got Chief O’Hara’s call just after Christmas, about a year and a half after we opened the Lee Street Counseling Center. I had failed Patty. Was it too late to help Frankie?

We called Lee Street the “Boulevard of Broken Dreams” because everyone we met was depressed or disappointed about something. But the problems faced by Frankie and Patty went beyond the daily dramas of the teens, parents and others who came to us for help. And I wouldn’t learn Frankie’s final lesson until years after I left the West Side.

The Lee Street Counseling Center was in an old bar at the end of a rundown street on Buffalo’s West Side. Through funding from the New York State Office of Drug Abuse Services and the Erie County Department of Mental Health, the bar had been converted into a storefront center with a reception area in front, plus six little offices and a group room in the back.

On one side was a sandwich shop with good lunchtime specials. On our other side, a tavern offered afternoon specials on shots. Both did a pretty good business.

Most afternoons, we’d see a steady stream of taxis picking up ladies with grocery bags from the supermarket across the street. Taxis are a luxury in some neighborhoods. In ours, it was how you went food shopping when you couldn’t afford a car.

I was the senior counselor responsible for intakes and my own caseload. I also supervised the other counselors because I had a master’s degree, and they didn’t. But in my two years of training, none of my professors had even mentioned drug abuse counseling.

The oldest person on our staff was David, our director, who was twenty-eight. The smartest was Jane, an ex-junkie who was our outreach worker.

It was our first day and the entire staff would meet for the first time that afternoon. But Jane and I both came in early, and our first chat wasn’t going well.

"I don't care what you learned in school, you don't know shit about what happens on the street," Jane insisted in our first meeting.

"So, tell me," I said.

"Uh, uhh," she replied in an annoyed sing-song, shaking her head 'no' as she paused to light a second cigarette in my tiny office.

"If I told you what the street is really like," she said, "you'd just use my stories like all those case studies you've been reading. More knowledge in your head that interferes with what's coming from your heart."

I said, "It sounds like you're angry. Tell me more."

"Uh, uuh," she sang again, like she was losing patience with a little kid. "And don't try using that reflective bullshit on me. I know where you're coming from, and I think it's a pretty empty place ...and pretty damn dishonest."

"So where do we go from here?" I asked.

Her hard brown eyes flashed with annoyance. "Where you go is up to you. I'm going to lunch," she said.

Thus, ended our first meeting. In an hour I would meet everybody else.

We all had been hired by David, our director, who had three years of experience running a similar program in Niagara Falls. He had started four months ago to oversee our start-up, but today was the first day for the rest of us.

Our group room was a thickly carpeted space stuffed with pillows and bean bag chairs. There was also a stack of chairs we'd use for running groups with parents. The walls were decorated with inspirational posters featuring well-meaning cliches like: "The longest journey begins with a single step."

I walked into the group room and found Jane, plus three other women and two guys lounging on the pillows. After exchanging names, hugs and handshakes I joined them on the floor and waited for David. Jane was friendly to everyone, but mostly ignored me.

As I glanced around, I knew no one would ever accuse us of "dressing professionally." During my job interview, David had said he was trying to hire a staff that our clients could "identify with" in terms of our looks and interests. Apparently, he chose well because each of us could have been featured in an ad for the latest hippie fashions.

My hair hung below my shoulders. I was wearing what became my normal work outfit: a T-shirt, jeans and shower clogs because leather sandals hurt my feet.

I wondered how much my hair had bolstered my resume. I had gotten my master's by sitting through two years of lectures and writing dozens of papers about theories of counseling. However, the issue of addictions had never been mentioned except for an occasional reference to Alcoholics Anonymous. My only somewhat related experience was a summer job at a downstate psychiatric center, where as a recreational therapist, I mostly led sing-alongs with my guitar.

David entered, took off his well-shined shoes and sat down gracefully on a large pillow. His back was straight, his legs were crossed in the lotus position and his hands rested in his lap. With his button-down shirt, nicely pressed khakis and well-barbered hair, he looked like a successful alumnus from an expensive prep school who maybe moonlighted as a yoga instructor.

He looked at each of us with a bemused fondness as he began. "You are about to start what may be the most difficult job you will ever have. Nobody knows the best way to help people with drug problems. And nobody knows the best way to prevent them. But your job is to do both.

"As soon as we start seeing clients," he said, "you're going to be in over your head. You're going to be worried, afraid, angry and, occasionally, successful. And, often, your heart will break when you feel the suffering that will be walking in and out of here. I don't know the best way to stop that suffering or avoid drowning in it. But I do know a process we can follow to get better at helping our clients ...and ourselves."

He took the time to look at each of us before continuing. "First of all, help each other. Each of you has something unique to offer. And each of you has some flaws you will stumble over. But don't point your fingers. Instead, offer your hand to support each other."

He reached out with his open hand, as his calm gaze went around the circle.

Wow, I thought, this guy is *good*. I darted a glance at Jane who seemed equally impressed.

"Secondly, learn," David continued. "You know that part of your responsibilities will be to staff a 24-hour hotline for our clients. You'll get calls from kids having bad acid trips, suicidal clients, and frantic parents. "So, our training will start tomorrow with a four-part series from the staff of the Suicide Prevention Center.

"I also want you to learn from each other," he continued, "and the other people in the community who are doing the same job that you are. Erie County and the State has funded a network of ten drug abuse centers. Once a month, we'll all meet. Each center will take a turn presenting something they're good at, or leading a discussion about something that's been a problem or a concern."

David checked his notes, and then said: "We've budgeted a lot of money for consultation. So, keep in mind that there are a lot of community professionals available to back you up: physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and others. You'll meet some of them next week and learn what kind of support they can provide.

"If you want to access any of them, just check in first with either me or Paul, who will be our senior counselor," David said, gesturing in my direction.

All eyes swiveled to check me out. I gave them a little smile and a wave.

Oh no, I thought, as my butterflies turned into nausea. What have I gotten myself into?

Almost exactly one year ago I had sat in a sidewalk cafe in Tel Aviv and saw the Love that connects everything. I often went for weeks without thinking about it. But whenever I remembered the Love, little glimmers of it always appeared no matter where I was.

Now I was stretched across three pillows facing a woman who didn't respect me, a man who might be a great boss, and some hippies who looked hipper than me. My clogs were damp with the sweat from my the bottom of my feet.

Then, I thought of the Love and looked for it. Warm glimmers, like faint fireflies, appeared around them and from them. I relaxed and a small surge of satisfaction rose into my chest.

But, almost immediately, my worried mind took over, and I began thinking about how to impress them.

We weren't too busy at first, so we did outreach in Delaware Park. We'd put up a couple of signs saying, "Looking for a Natural High?" next to a stack of flyers that promoted our services. Then we'd play frisbee and assorted musical instruments in the meadow behind the Rose Garden to connect with people and get the word out.

The outreach didn't produce a lot of new clients. But the long, lazy days at the end of that summer converted an odd group of do-gooders into good friends. Sometimes Jane and I even laughed at each other's jokes.

At the Center, our reception area was both a drop-in center and a waiting room for clients with counseling appointments. It was staffed by Maria, a dark pretty woman with a slender figure.

Her standard routine when someone entered the "welcome room" was to offer coffee or tea and then ask what kind of music they liked. She had an encyclopedic knowledge of 50's and 60's music, plus lots of old standards and Latin music that she could play on our stereo.

After her first two months, we never had a staff meeting without her. Sometimes we learned more about our clients from her informal chats with them, than from the artificial setting of our fifty minute counseling sessions.

Some of the drop-ins were neighbors or mothers who just wanted to check us out. Occasionally it was a group of kids who wanted to know if we were "narcs" who would turn them in for getting high. A couple of regulars just seemed to like the free coffee and Maria's company.

A few were people whose lives had careened out of control. Like "Fast" Frankie and his girlfriend, Patty. They both were "down freaks," addicted to barbiturates. Patty also flirted with heroin. "I'll chip it sometimes on special occasions," she told me. "But I'm not strung out or anything."

After we celebrated the Center's first anniversary, their visits to our welcome room became more regular. They'd stop by once or twice a week for coffee and to complain about each other ...and about us.

Patty usually sat with her back to a corner and avoided eye contact.

Frankie would strut from chair to chair, proud of his dark good looks. He often picked up some of our drug abuse pamphlets, glanced at them, and then dumped them on a table or the floor.

“You know, you’re nice people, but none of you know what the hell you’re doing,” he announced.

“So, educate us,” I answered.

His eyes flashed with the knowledge of some gleeful mystery. Then, he looked intently at me and said, “If I told you everything I know, your head would explode.”

He liked the standards, especially anything by Frank Sinatra. “I Did It My Way” became his theme song, and he’d often sing the last couple of bars when he was entering or leaving.

He was crazy, charismatic and comical. His favorite act was the invisible dog routine. “Nice dog, nice dog,” he’s say, while lovingly petting the air. He’d look at you with his warm eyes and wild grin while his pet performed amazing, invisible tricks.

The bigger the audience, the better he liked it.

Patty made us sad. She was a pretty girl from the suburbs who sold herself on the streets because, as she told Jane, “I need the money, and I like sex.”

Patty never cared what kind of music we played. She had little to say, but often told Frankie to leave her alone if he started a conversation. If he touched her shoulder while passing by, she would pull away. We never saw her without him, although sometimes Frankie would come by himself.

Despite all their visits, none of us could ever get them to sit down for a counseling session.

“So why do you keep coming here?” I asked them one evening as we were closing up.

“You guys are a lot cheaper than the movies, and much more entertaining,” he said happily, while Patty put on her coat and ignored me.

At the beginning of October, Maria told me, “I’m getting nervous around Frankie, and don’t want to be alone with him anymore.”

We were standing by the coffee table in the welcome room. “Did something happen?” I asked.

“He just seems to be getting creepier,” she said as distaste flickered in her face. “When he’s here without Patty, sometimes he’ll stand right over me when I’m changing records on the stereo. Or I’ll be pouring him a cup of coffee and turn around and he’s about two feet from my face.”

Frankie was a husky Italian guy, and Maria only came up to his shoulder. I didn’t blame her for being afraid.

"You know," she said, "I used to think he was funny and kind of sweet. Crazy but harmless. But now I'm not sure."

"I'm not so sure either."

"And," she added, "he did his invisible dog routine the other day when a new client and his mother were waiting for an appointment. The kid's eyes were bulging, and the mother looked like she was going to run out of here."

"You're right," I said. "We have to do something. For one thing, I'll tell him no more invisible dogs in the welcome room. But our top priority has to be to make sure you feel safe. Not just with Frankie, but anyone else who wanders in here."

"Thanks, Paul," Maria said looking a little relieved. "Can we discuss it at our next staff meeting?"

"Good idea."

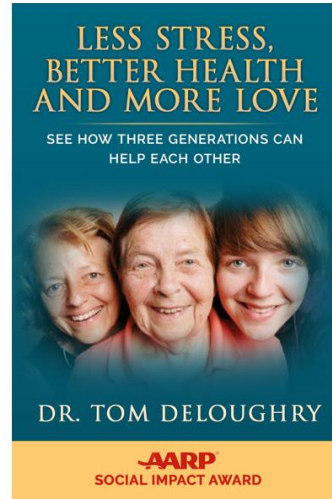
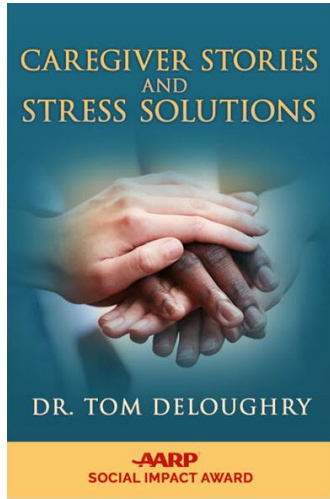
"You know," I continued, "I've often thought what an amazing job you do out here juggling the phones, doing the typing and welcoming a very strange group of people. And I know that David feels the same way."

She took a step closer and touched my arm. Her eyes were shining as she said, "Thanks, Paul. I really appreciate that." Her lips looked soft and very kissable.

I hesitated before I turned to get my coffee, saying, "And everyone else really appreciates you, too."

Frankie and Patty were the kind of people we were funded to help. But should we keep trying? ...if it meant putting Maria or others at risk? ...or scaring off parents and kids with less dramatic problems?

Should I tell them not to come back, until they were serious about letting us help?

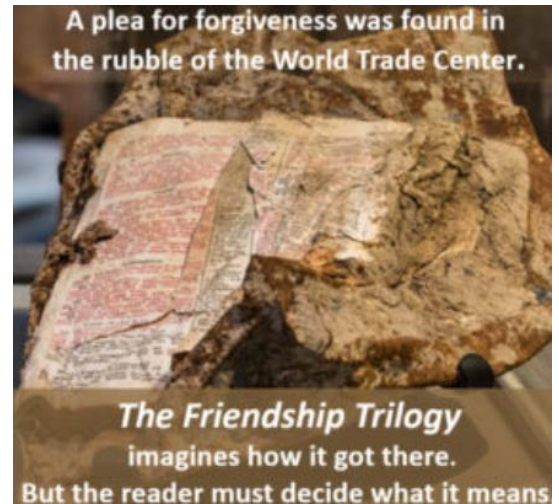


True stories about caregiving that empower three generations.

The *Less Stress, Better Health and More Love* workbook draws from *Caregiver Stories and Stress Solutions*, which includes five short stories about Tom and his mother and other teaching stories, as well as dozens of well-researched strategies for seniors, adults and teens.

The caregiver stories, about how Tom struggled while helping his mother, were to be the initial framework for the novels. But six months into his writing, he learned that a Bible with Christ’s “turn the other cheek” message of forgiveness had been found in the rubble of the Twin Towers. This challenging message made him sick to his stomach, as he had planned a much more superficial story about music, forgiveness and prayer.

However, after some soul-searching, Tom expanded the scope of the novels to explore how hate can be healed in an age of terrorism and polarization. The third novel is an account of how mindfulness, music and the other strategies in the workbook can reduce fear—which Tom believes is the most dangerous epidemic. But what’s more important is: *What do you think? ...and what will you do about it?*



FOUR MUSICIANS MEET IN THE SIXTIES... ARE STUNNED BY TERRORISM... THEN STRUGGLE WITH THE EPIDEMICS

