**Life is**

**Hard**

**By T W Gilbert**

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When I was two years old, my family and I visited my grandmother’s house.

My first cousin and I played in the very large front yard all day.

He was three.

There was a part of the yard that was uncut.

I lost one of my shoes in the tall grass.

My cousin and I laughed and laughed about it.

We were told to look for it.

We searched and searched and rolled around in the grass laughing.

We did not find it.

The next day I woke up completely covered head to foot in poison ivy.

My mom bathed me in pink Caladryl Lotion for the next two weeks as I lay in bed itching and in pain.

Another early memory was sitting on a tiny stage.

It was at the nursery school I went to.

The nursery school was in the home of the teacher who ran the school.

It was the annual year end performance.

I was with all of the other children in my class there.

We were all dressed up to recite a few memorized words for the audience.

We were to recite our memorized words one student at a time.

The audience was all of the parents of the kids there.

When it came to my turn to recite, I got scared.

I could not remember the words I was supposed to recite.

I ran from the room.

I hid under the front hall buffet at the teacher’s house.

I remember screaming at the top of my lungs and refusing to come out from under the buffet.

I remember my mother being embarrassed and angry with me.

Here is a picture of my class. I am the one holding my hand over my face.



I am not a child now.

Some say I am old.

As a child I was not smart.

I had a pretty good family, sort of.

I thought so at the time, anyway.

I wish I knew then what I know now.

But life does not work that way.

My first day of regular school, my older sister took me.

We walked there from our house a few blocks away.

![A painting of a house

Description automatically generated with medium confidence]()

I was in kindergarten.

My sister left me there and went to her class.

I cried until my best friend and her mom talked to me and tried to comfort me.

During my second-grade school year my best friend’s family moved to Oklahoma.

We didn’t see each other again for many years.

When we did, we both had changed.

In the evenings in summertime, we used to play baseball in a neighbor’s back yard.

All the neighbor kids would join in.

We used a bat to see who would pick first who was on their team.

There were always friendly arguments.

The game would end at dark.

Or maybe when we heard our mom blowing her three toned train whistle.

It was our signal that we had to run home.

When I was very little, I loved to climb trees.

I stopped when I realized I had an awful fear of heights.

I did not do well in school, at first.

I had to get extra help when I did not do well on tests.

It did not help much.

My folks called me stupid, and lazy, and helpless.

I thought I was.

I did not know then that I was not able to study right.

I could not focus on what I was reading.

My mind would drift and wander all the time.

I was too active.

I was clumsy.

The only thing I was good at was playing the piano.

I started piano lessons when I was 4.

My parents could not stand the noise I kept making banging on the keys of our upright piano all the time every day.

They begged the piano teacher up the street to take me on as a student.

She only took on new students after they had turned 6.

But she took me on, for some reason.

I would walk up the street by myself.

My piano lesson was at 8:00 in the morning before school once a week.

After the lesson I would then walk home.

My piano teacher tried and tried to teach me how to read music.

But I could not read the music.

I never could.

I still can’t.

I was told that the notes on the lines were E,G,B,D,F on the upper staff.

And the notes between the lines were F,A,C,E.

The lower staff was G,B,D,F,A for the lines.

And the lower staff spaces were A,C,E,G.

I would look at the notes on the page of music and then the piano keys.

I’d place my fingers on the keys.

Then I’d check again.

Then I’d look at the notes and then again at the piano keys to make sure.

I’d place my fingers on the keys where the notes were.

It took me weeks to figure out any simple piece.

I could not read the notes on the page and make my fingers play them at the same time.

I used to spend hours playing the same pieces on the piano that I had slowly learned, over and over.

![A picture containing piano, music, indoor, electric organ

Description automatically generated]()

The pieces I had learned took a very long time for me to memorize.

I guess I was called slow.

There was a reason.

It made sense to my folks.

So, it made sense to me.

I was just wrong, all the time.

I had some good friends when I was young.

I don’t know where they are now.

I did not like school.

I would stare at the clock on the wall waiting for class to end.

I liked recess.

I liked playing outside with my friends.

Shooting marbles in the dirt playground.

Playing tag. Playing kick ball.

I liked sports: baseball, football, soccer, ice hockey, basketball.

But I was not very good.

I wanted sports to be fun.

They weren’t.

I went to summer camp in the summers.

Church camp.

YMCA day camp.

Nature camp.

![A bird standing on a rock by a body of water

Description automatically generated with medium confidence]()

I went along with what I was supposed to do.

And where I was supposed to go.

A car that is lost a lot goes down bumpy roads as if it is normal.

I had to go to church.

I sang in the kid’s choir.

I did cub scouts and boy scouts, but I quit them, too.

![A picture containing outdoor, tree, standing, person

Description automatically generated]()

Oh, and another thing, which never helped.

I had an older brother who drowned in a pond near our house.

He was six.

I was one.

My parents drank even more because of that, and never stopped.

But they are gone now.

They both died a few years ago.

They both lived to be old, too.

While alive they never stopped dishing out their words, their hits, their harm.

![A picture containing text, drawing, fabric

Description automatically generated]()

They knew too much about where they had landed, but too little of how they had gotten there.

My older brother had been the oldest child in our family.

Now my sister was the oldest.

There would also be a younger brother and younger sister who came along afterwards.

But I was dirt that could never be washed out, scrubbed clean, or hidden.

My folks smiled a lot and laughed a lot with their friends and neighbors.

I don’t think their laughter was happy.

Life is hard.

They did not want to admit that.

I didn’t either, even though I knew it.

When I was three years old my mom told me the name of the college I was going to go to.

It was where all of my ancestors had gone.

I was supposed to be happy about this.

It just made me confused.

When I was six, my dad was in a very bad car accident.

It was a Saturday.

He was driving to a town north of us to do some work at another hospital.

Some guy had fallen asleep while driving and plowed right into him head on.

My dad had both his legs broken, and some ribs too.

The windshield had shattered.

He had glass fragments imbedded throughout his body.

He was in the hospital for months.

Our mom spent a lot of time visiting him at the hospital.

We had a babysitter every afternoon after school to look after us.

We watched a lot of TV: The Edge of Night, The Mickey Mouse Club, American Band Stand, The Ranger Andy Show, every day.

When my dad got out of the hospital he was in a hospital bed in our home.

It took him a very long time to learn how to walk again.

It took him a very long time to be able to drive again and to go to work again.

He used crutches to get around on while he learned how to walk again.

He was never the same as he had been before.

Life is very hard.

Harder for some people than for others.

Sometime in the third grade, some of us from the class had to go to the school basement.

There was a nurse there to give us Fluoride treatments for our teeth.

We sat in dentist type chairs and had our mouths opened with wire metal things.

We had to sit for the longest time.

The nurse put some gauze dripping with yucky stinky goo all around our gums.

It was supposed to help our teeth.

My mother liked the fluoride so much she also put fluoride drops in our orange juice glasses at breakfast.

I think she thought that if a little fluoride was good then a lot of fluoride was even better.

When I was in the fourth grade, the superintendent of our city schools came to our class.

He handed out tests for all of us to take, right then and there.

I later found out it was an IQ test.

I later found out that I scored an 80 on that test.

I had to get extra help from tutors after that.

I don’t know if that helped or not.

I remember in 5th grade our teacher having all of my classmates and me standing in several rows in front of the class.

We were learning how to recite poetry.

We had to recite a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

I remember it started with, “Under a spreading chestnut tree the village smithy stands…”

All of us had to say the poem exactly the way the teacher wanted it said.

We all had to say it perfectly together.

He would stop us when we didn’t do it the way we were supposed to.

He’d get really mad when we didn’t do it right.

I hated poetry.

Sometime when I was 11 years old our mother told us something that made little sense at the time.

We had all been attending church at the Congregational church in our hometown since we were little.

This was because my father’s mother had insisted on this.

But she had just died, along with 2 other grandparents in that same year.

Our mother then explained that we were not really Congregationalists.

We were really Quakers.

We would now be attending Quaker meetings instead of going to church.

I actually had thought that God had intended people to attend the churches that they were all going to.

I had a lot of problems with this.

![A painting of a church

Description automatically generated with medium confidence]()

And I still do.

When I was in the sixth grade, my teacher told my parents that I was not going to amount to anything.

She told them I would not be able to go to the prep school that my parents wanted me to go to.

My mother came home from the parent teacher conference very angry with me.

I got yelled at for hours.

I was told that from now on I would have to come directly home from school and study.

This went on for over a year.

In 7th grade I was driven by my dad on a Saturday to a school far away to take some tests.

They were to see if I could go to the prep school my folks wanted me to attend.

I did very poorly on those tests.

The prep school told my parents that I would have to go to summer school and pass summer school in order to get into the school.

So I went to summer school.

My dad stayed home with me while the rest of the family went to stay at a summer cottage by a lake.

On the first day of summer school, I accidently showed up two hours before my scheduled class.

It was a higher-level math class than the one I was supposed to be in.

The same teacher for both classes asked me if I wanted to stay and take that class too, to see if I could do well in it.

I said I didn’t care, but I’d try it.

He was probably the best teacher I have ever had.

I passed both classes and got into the prep school.

Prep school was hard.

I had four hours of homework every night, for five years.

I never got used to it.

I barely passed all of the courses I ever had at prep school.

The prep school would print up the end of the year’s grades of all of its students on a bulletin board for all to see, every year.

I was ashamed and hurt and unhappy.

But at least it was honest, and out there.

And not like the hidden scores at home that I knew I could never change.

The prep school not only provided college prep courses, they demanded that every student participate in sports.

I tried playing soccer in the fall, swimming and diving in the winter, and lacrosse in the spring.

In my second year of swimming in the winter, the best swimmer in the school told me to stop.

He said I wasn’t good enough to be a part of the school’s swimming teams.

He told me to quit.

I did as I was told.

I then tried to play ice hockey.

I mostly stayed on the benches for all the sports I tried to participate in.

During my time at prep school, I attended a summer camp in northern Ontario.

It was a canoe camp.

Each camp session every year lasted for more than two months.

We would go with our designated group of ten campers and two staff on canoe trips.

These trips were for maybe 3 days, or five days, or fifteen days, or a month, or even two months.

We tripped in Temagami Provincial Forest in Ontario, and even into Quebec.

We would paddle and portage from lake to lake in the wilderness.

We took our tents and food with us, and our cooking gear.

It was very hard, at first, carrying a heavy canvas and cedar canoe on my shoulders on portages by myself.

Here is a picture of someone carrying a canoe on a portage:

A picture containing text, outdoor, green

Description automatically generated

But I got to like it a lot.

I even made some really good friends there.

But I remember something to this day about the camp.

During my first year, there were two kids who had actually known each other from a different camp.

They had both attended the same camp back in the states the previous year.

On the last day of camp when everyone was on the big dock getting ready to leave to board the huge boat to take us into town from the island camp, one of these two boys yelled out to his friend, “See you at the next camp.”

After he yelled out those words, there was complete silence for a long time from the rest of the campers on the dock.

Yes, I know, life is hard, and sometimes crazy.

In prep school I had some really great friends.

We were the geeks and nerds before there were such things as geeks and nerds.

We all read The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, and The Lord of the Flies, 1984, and The Catcher in the Rye, and listened to Bob Dylan.

I was given an old guitar.

It was an old bulky Harmony guitar worth about $15.00 dollars.

We listened to and played folk music and old Delta Blues.

We had a jug band like Jim Kweskin.

We would sneak away from the school on Saturday afternoons and go smoke cigarettes in a farm pasture off the main road from the school.

Smoking was illegal at the school.

We didn’t care.

We also smoked pot that some friend of a friend would buy from the mafia.

His contact was in the next town over from where the school was.

It was not very good stuff.

But we would collect all the seeds from the dime bags and keep them.

A member of our small group one spring planted and fertilized those seeds in his back yard.

He grew a huge crop of homegrown pot.

It was amazing.

But he got caught, and so did we, and things got really crazy for a while.

He got expelled and we were put on severe restrictions.

In my 11th year of school, I was told I had to fill out applications for college.

I did not fill out any applications for college, and I lied about doing this.

In my senior year everyone else was getting accepted at colleges and I had heard nothing.

I admitted that I had lied, as I truly did not want to go to college.

I had hated school from the very beginning.

I simply wanted to get a job and go to work.

My parents both refused to allow me to do this.

They decided to send me to England for a year to a school there.

They said I would go to college when I got back.

I spent the summer after prep school at the canoe camp in Canada.

In September of that year, my parents drove me to New York City.

They put me on a boat to England.

The ocean liner took 6 days to get from New York City to Southampton, England.

![A painting of a boat

Description automatically generated with low confidence]()

When I got off the boat, I was supposed to go with some of the people I had traveled with.

That did not happen.

So, I got on a train with all of my gear and suitcases to go to London.

I was maybe supposed to stay with some people in London who would care for me before my school opened.

That did not happen.

So, I got on another train and headed to the town where the school was.

It was about 11:30 at night when I got to the train station in the town with the school.

Luckily, there was a taxi waiting for any passengers at the train station.

I got a ride to the school.

The school personnel were surprised to see me.

I had arrived a full week before school would be in session.

The school personnel placed me in the dorm room and building where I would stay for my year there.

They were very helpful.

I had to go downtown and register as an alien visiting England.

I opened up a bank account there.

I went to a drug store (called an apothecary) to buy a toothbrush and some toothpaste.

While at the school I played rugby for the first time.

I also played cricket for the first time.

I watched a lot of British football on TV.

I also attended football games in stadiums.

Their football is what we call soccer.

I joined a student blues band and played the piano in the rock and roll blues band.

We performed at local school dances all over England.

During the first week of school there, the headmaster requested that I come to his office to speak with him.

He had discovered that I had been raised as a Quaker.

The school I was attending in England was a Quaker school.

He also discovered that I had signed up as a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War.

He was curious about my religious beliefs.

He wanted to know how conscientious objection was viewed in the states.

While I sat in front of his desk and tried to answer some of his very pointed and serious questions, I noticed that he was also opening and responding to mail he had received.

He was reading and writing letters to persons he had received letters from while he was carrying on a conversation with me, as if it were no trouble at all.

I later found out that he and Norman Vincent Peale were the only “double firsts” at Oxford University, ever.

A “double first” is someone who goes to two separate colleges for four years simultaneously and is summa Cum laude (first in his class) in both colleges all at once.

That is just simply crazy, and insane, all at once.

My headmaster in England was probably the smartest person I’ve ever personally met.

At the end of our brief interview, my headmaster told me that every day I was in England and Europe would be an educational experience for me.

So, I should not restrict myself to classrooms only.

I should feel free to travel anywhere and everywhere, at any time.

But I should let the school know where I was and what I was doing always.

Two of my best friends from summer canoe camp were also students in England during that year.

On school holiday vacations, the three of us traveled in Europe.

We traveled to see what he could see.

We went to France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Austria, Brussels, and The Netherlands.

We went to museums in every country.

We went to restaurants everywhere.

We had a great time traveling and talking with Europeans everywhere.

I did not take my studying seriously.

My parents submitted college applications on my behalf to many different U.S. colleges while I was in England.

While I was spending a year in England, I got into a college in Ohio.

I shouldn’t have.

I didn’t have the grades.

But my parents knew some people who knew some people.

In their world this is how they got things done.

I flunked out of college after my first year.

I was unable to deal with not knowing where my life was supposed to be going.

A white car parked on the side of a road

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

I’d grown up in a house where I wasn’t expected to become anything worthwhile.

The first summer after I flunked out of college, I went to work as a staff person at the canoe camp in Canada.

On the last 15 day trip with my section of kids, I was portaging around a set of impossible rapids on a river.

I tripped on a root snag on the path I was walking on.

The canoe on my shoulders slipped.

I tried to regain my balance.

But the ax I was using to steer my canoe came loose, and I swung the ax into my right knee.

I soon realized my predicament.

We were two days away from civilization.

I very tightly butterflied the 2-inch gash on my knee.

It soon began to bleed inside.

And it began to swell.

I was able to sit down inside one of the canoes as we made our way down the river to where we needed to portage back to camp.

The pain in my knee and leg continued to grow as we went down the river.

We decided that I would need to have two strong campers help me get back to camp as soon as possible. We left the rest of the campers and staff to get back on their own normal schedule.

So, two campers and I headed off as quickly as possible to get back to camp.

We took along enough food with us.

And we took a tarp to cover us if we needed to rest and sleep on the way.

It was getting dark out and evening was soon upon us.

We portaged around the last impassable waterfall and headed up a very small steam to another lake, in the dark.

![A picture containing text

Description automatically generated]()

I used a homemade crutch to try to walk on my bad leg around some of the places where we could not paddle.

I needed the support and help of the two campers to do this.

When we got to the next lake, there was a fog and we could not see in the dark.

But there were actually bright stars in the sky to guide us (Arcturus and another beside it in the east).

So, I told the two campers who were paddling to aim between those two stars as we crossed the calm lake.

When we got to the other side of the lake, there was another camp section camped there.

It was now just early dawn and the sun was coming up.

They helped us make a homemade stretcher out of a tarp they had.

They carried me across the next portage into the next lake.

While we were on the portage, we heard a motorboat engine starting up.

Everyone carrying me starting yelling at the top of their lungs.

The sound of the motorboat engine stopped.

When we got to the end of the portage there was a dock and a cabin and several persons there getting ready for a fishing trip.

It was explained to them how hurt I was.

They said that they knew of a cabin up the lake where there was a phone, and they would phone for help.

They took off in their boat immediately.

In about an hour the sound of a small seaplane was heard coming towards us.

It landed in the water and pulled up to the dock on which I was lying.

The campers and staff and others helped me into the small seaplane.

We then took off from the lake and headed for the main camp which was several miles away.

But it did not take us long to get there by plane.

The doctor at the camp examined my wound and said I needed surgery to fix the leg.

He then gave me a shot to numb the pain.

It numbed me pretty good.

The camp director put me into his private motorboat, and we went very quicky the 26 miles to the town where he had his station wagon parked.

We then drove to the major city south of us to the hospital there where I was admitted.

I had surgery late that night and woke up the next day with bandages on my leg.

A lot of shots were given to me to stop any infection I may have had because of the ax wound.

The shots hurt worse than the ax going into my knee.

I was in the hospital for six days.

A very sweet and nice family of my hospital roommate’s drove me to the local airport.

And I flew home to the states taking four different flights to get there.

I stayed at home for two months.

I got physical therapy at the local hospital.

I needed to learn how to walk again.

I had to get my locked knee to work like a knee again.

After I was completely well, I returned to the town where I had gone to college.

I got a job working in a hospital as an aide.

I worked there for two years.

It was hard work.

But then, life is hard.

I got back into college, but only if I scored very well on all of my courses.

I got married during this time.

It didn’t work out.

And I dropped out of college for a second time.

I also got a job working at a place that took care of disabled people.

Here I discovered my future life’s work.

I could be with these amazing people and not seem out of place.

I fit right in.

I got married again right away with a nurse who worked at this company.

We ended up having 3 children in four years.

I changed jobs 6 times in the next 9 years.

We also moved 7 times in those 9 years.

The marriage ended and she got the children.

Yes, life is hard.

I moved to an off-campus college boarding house.

I lived in a one room basement apartment.

I got invited to a lecture on the college campus.

I connected with the woman giving the lecture.

We wrote letters to each other for a year.

I got back into the college that I had twice dropped out of.

It seems they accepted over aged students from the town for way less tuition.

With help from my new friend I was able to graduate.

It took me only 16 years to get a college degree.

She helped me move to her city.

I got a low paying job helping people with disabilities.

I also got into a graduate school to get a Master’s degree in Special Education.

I decided to change the way I studied for schoolwork.

I read all of the textbooks before the classes started.

Then I just sat in class and took notes.

It seemed to work.

But then the woman who was helping me got a chance to go back to school.

So I took a break from classes to help her with kids and schedules.

She then got her Master’s degree in English.

It took her two years.

She then got a job teaching at the college she had gotten her degree from.

We soon got married.

I went back to school to finish up my degree.

I got a straight 4 point average in Grad school.

Since moving to her city, I went from job to job four different times.

But I finally got a job with a company where I stayed for the next 20 years.

My new wife asked me about my life.

She asked me about the family I had grown up with.

She wanted to know why I said the things I did.

And why I did the things that I did.

We both looked at my crazy childhood.

It wasn’t pretty.

Either looking at it, or what we were looking at.

I began to remember things about my childhood I’d forgotten.

I remembered as a very young child being timed out in my room almost every day because I was such a disobedient child.

I remembered standing in front of the one window in my room and staring at the outside wishing I was outside.

I also remember eating the paint off of the windowsill in my room.

It was chewy.

My parents were both medical doctors.

They never realized that my eating the paint had caused me to suffer from lead poisoning.

This was just one of the things I remembered from talking to my wife.

I began for the first time to see myself differently.

I began to change.

My old family did not like the changes.

I wasn’t supposed to change.

I wasn’t supposed to ever change.

I wasn’t supposed to grow up.

I was supposed to fit into the role that had been set for me and remain there.

I stopped speaking to all of the members of my old family.

The silence lasted for about 16 years.

My wife was a poet as well as a teacher.

She helped me learn how to write poetry.

We went to poetry workshops together.

My early attempts at writing poems were simple and not very good.

But years of practice writing poems has made a big difference.

With anything one is doing, practice, practice, practice is needed.

Work, work, work without quitting.

Life is hard.

Here is a poem I wrote after a few years of writing:

### The Seminar

“Teach me,” I say to the wall, “how you can

hold up more than your share, or more than I’d

care to.” It has the art of a one man

band down pat, for all to hear, and the pride

to go with it. “Teach me,” I say to the

wall, “how I can see through you with one eye

closed, or at least with one hand clasped to a

book, a pen, or a pair of shoes.” I try

to keep up with the line of sun light now

bent on the wall as it turns the house to

face me. “Teach me,” I say to the wall, “how

you bounce thoughts off the air so they can chew

the fat on their own, stand with the rest of

us to mix truth with tacks and holes with love.”

I don’t know if the poem is any good or not.

It’s just what I felt at the time when I wrote it.

I guess that’s important.

Anyway, at the new job I began teaching people there how to read.

They all wanted to learn how to read. And then others who lived outside the company also wanted to learn how to read.

Besides playing the piano, this was the second thing I ever did that I was good at.

And that I enjoyed doing.

I met some really amazing students.

![Two people looking at a computer

Description automatically generated with medium confidence]()

Helping them learn how to read was a very new experience for me.

They had never been expected to learn.

They were all as surprised as I was.

I went back to school to get another Master’s degree in Reading Instruction.

In my last course, I met a professor who had a Master’s degree in Speech and a Doctorate in Reading.

I talked to her about my work.

She agreed to come with me and watch my tutoring process.

After she watched my tutoring process, she asked me if I wanted to do a study with her that we could publish.

It took a few years, but we did it.

When teaching, I used to use the Laubach workbooks at first.

I wrote to Laubach and asked if I could adapt their workbooks.

They said, “Yes.” I could.

I wrote to Harper Collins Publishers and asked if I could adapt their book Charlotte’s Web.

They said, “Yes.” I could.

I also used movie scripts, too.

I got them from Google.

I copied and pasted them to my own computer.

I printed them up for my students to use.

I also thought of a way to help my students with their reading skills.

I created a children’s learning toy to help with seeing letters and words better.

It is a box of colored blocks.

There are 144 blocks in 12 rows with 12 blocks in each row.

They are colored cubes of red and blue and yellow and white.

I had the toy patented with the United States Patent Office.

That took years to do and a lot of money.

I have not been able to get the toy blocks manufactured by a toy company yet, but I will.

Life is hard, and sometimes crazy.



My friend the Doctor of Education and I have spoken at academic conferences all over the country in the last 25 years.

We try to explain how we teach people with disabilities how to read.

Some of my students come to the presentations.

They read for the crowds and demonstrate how they can read.

It is so amazing to watch them in front of an audience reading.

They are all very proud of their abilities.

In 2008 I wanted to share my work on reading with the world.

I realized that the Laubach and Harper Collins materials were copyrighted.

So, I could not use any of their materials at all.

I began the long process of creating my own emergent literacy curriculum.

It took me about 9 months of writing and editing.

I wrote a lot of new material, and I also used a lot of my own writings.

The whole book is about 1200 pages long, give or take a few pages.

I wrote and adapted all of it so that the font is Ariel and the type size is 28.

This was to help my students, or any students, see the letters and words better.

After I got done with writing it, I copyrighted all of it and was granted the copyright.

I also decided to add pictures above all (or most) of the nouns and verbs and adjectives and adverbs in the first half of the curriculum.

I thought that adding pictures might help the students with deciphering the words on the pages.

But I needed very appropriate pictures for the book.

I went online with Google and found a website that offered **FREE** pictures that anyone could download. This discovery was so fantastic and delightful.

The website had over 65 million pictures of anything and everything imaginable.

I began the process of downloading what I thought were the most appropriate pictures for each word in my book.

I then used the exact same pictures whenever that same word showed up in the book.

The process of cutting and pasting all these pictures took a very long time and actually took years.

In August of 2015, my wife fell at home and hurt her shoulder.

It did not get well.

After a week of horrible pain, she decided to go to the hospital.

The nurses at the hospital emergency room took x-ray pictures of her shoulder.

The E.R. doctor came into our room to explain the x-rays.

He sat down in a chair in the room.

He said the shoulder was bruised and would heal on its own.

He would give us some medicine for the pain.

But, the x-rays also happened to show two spots on her left lung.

He did not like the look of the two spots.

He said we should go to our family doctor with the x-rays and show them to her.

After we got home, we called our family doctor and told her the news.

She set up an appointment to see her and bring along the x-rays.

So we went to see her.

When she saw the x-rays and was told what the E.R. doctor had said, she set up an appointment with an oncologist.

An oncologist is a cancer doctor.

![A picture containing text, ceiling, baggage claim

Description automatically generated]()

A month later in August we got to see an oncologist.

He explained what tests they would do to see what the spots in the lungs were.

One test was drinking a lot of concentrated sugar in a special drink.

The drink would make the spots show up better on an M.R.I. scan.

The other test would be to have a surgical cut to remove some of the material causing the spot and testing it in a lab to see what it was.

My wife drank the sugar drink and had the M.R.I. scan so the doctors could see the spots in her lungs better.

She also had the out-patient surgery to take out some of the material from one of the spots in her left lung.

It turned out to be cancer.

The cancer was called adenocarcinoma.

Life is hard, but maybe you knew that.

She had surgery three months later.

They removed half of her left lung.

They said they got it all.

She had a very hard time recovering from the surgery.

She seemed OK for a while.

But nine months later the cancers returned.

She then went through chemo- therapy and then radiation treatments.

These were hard on her.

Yes, I know, life is hard.

Her oncologist told her she probably had just a few months left to live.

She was in a lot of pain.

Her pain medicines were increased until they no longer worked.

She went into hospice care to relieve the pains that wouldn’t quit.

The pains quit in hospice.

But so did she.

She passed nearly two years after her first diagnosis.

I called my sister right after she died.

I told my sister that the vacuum of her absence was crazy and hard and unexpected.

My sister told me to write about it every day.

So, I began writing poems about loss and grief.

I wrote 234 poems in the next 6 months. I turned the poems into 3 books of poetry.

I self-published those three books.

I don’t think many people have bought them to read them.

I wrote them for me.

Writing and music have always been a sort of therapy for me.

I seem to feel better when I write and play the piano.

Here is the first poem I wrote for her:

**The Hole**

Tennis is not solitaire. Neither is  
living. My wife’s been gone two days, and I  
turn to her empty chair with, “Life’s a quiz-  
zical specu…” and “How in the…” or “Why

did you…”, and death’s timely shrouded mirror  
reflects nothing, where two were, but I can’t,  
and my waking’s no longer that clearer  
picture of where I’m going. So I fant-

icize, dearer than her yelling and com-  
plaining, “I know you’ll like the roses bloom-  
ing in the back yard now. I could pick some,  
supposing they would look nice in your room,”

remembering her kiss, those things I miss,  
as I begin my forced writing with this:

I went to work every day.

I went through all of my wife’s things.

I gave away a lot of her clothes.

I gave away a lot of her jewelry.

My youngest son and I rearranged the house.

It took months and months and months.

But loss and grief remained.

In the Fall after my wife died, I was looking through the website that had provided me with all of the **FREE** pictures I had used for my book.

I discovered a fine print commentary at the very bottom of one of the pages to the site.

It indicated that none of the photographs in the website was actually **FREE,** and all of them were in fact copyright protected.

I had to delete all of the pictures from my curriculum.

But I realized that I had used my phone to take pictures for the three poetry books I’d written about loss and grief.

So, I thought to myself, “Why can’t I take my own pictures for my literacy book?”

I wrote down all of the words I would need, and the number of pictures was about 3,500.

I grouped as many pictures as I could into logical categories: zoo pictures, farm pictures, museum pictures, grocery store pictures, home pictures, school pictures, travel pictures, sports pictures, etc. (etcetera).

Then I went about (on my time off) to take the pictures I needed, and I scratched off the ones I took from my 86 page list.

The photographing of pictures took me about two years to complete.

But there were also several hundred pictures out of the 3,500 that I could not film.

So, I set about (with great help from many marvelous friends) to paint the remaining pictures.

This was accomplished in several months.

Then I scanned all of the 3,500 pictures into my computer and placed them all where they needed to be in my curriculum.

The literacy curriculum was completed.

Here is an example of one of the pages from one of the pictured books:

A picture containing floor, indoor, dishware, paper cup

Description automatically generated A fire truck parked in front of a building

Description automatically generated with medium confidence A person holding a sign

Description automatically generated with medium confidence A picture containing text

Description automatically generated

A pail helps carry tools.

A picture containing grass, outdoor, sky, tree

Description automatically generated A person holding a cell phone

Description automatically generated with low confidence A picture containing text

Description automatically generated A picture containing cat, indoor

Description automatically generated

A rig holds parts together.

 A person holding a pair of scissors

Description automatically generated with medium confidence A picture containing fruit

Description automatically generated A picture containing plant, fruit, chocolate, edible seed

Description automatically generated

A saw cuts wood or metal.

A picture containing text

Description automatically generated A fire truck parked in front of a building

Description automatically generated with medium confidence A picture containing indoor, floor, person, wooden

Description automatically generated A person sitting at a table

Description automatically generated with low confidence

A tool helps make or fix

A picture containing text, shelf, store, shop

Description automatically generated

things.

When I was unable to get over the loss and grief of losing my late wife to cancer, I signed up for counseling at a local loss and grief counseling agency.

I went to both individual counseling and group counseling.

It really helped a lot.

It was really good being with others like me who had lost a loved one, a wife, a husband, a spouse, a soul mate.

We talked and shared and laughed and cried.

We now keep seeing each other once a month for dinners at local restaurants.

We have become good friends.

About a year and a half after my wife passed, I went to visit my daughter.

This was a Saturday night, when we weren’t both busy.

She was helping me with painting pictures for my reading books.

After we talked about the pictures and the books and my reading tutoring, she said, “You are just too damned lonely, and I’m going to fix it.”

All I said was, “Oh, Dear!”

She took out her phone and looked up online dating services and signed me up.

She asked me for all of my personal information: my likes and dislikes, my work, my hobbies, and more about me than I wanted to share.

She also took a picture of me with her phone.

She uploaded the picture of me into the online dating profile.

I paid the fifty dollars with my credit card for the service.

And she hit enter.

Soon after my phone began to “ding” with persons who might be interested in getting to know me.

My phone “dinged” all night long and into the next day.

The next morning was Sunday.

I was at the local laundromat doing my weekly laundry.

I began looking at the many pictures and profiles of women who might be interested in me.

It was very uncomfortable and confusing.

But a little voice in my head said, “Write a poem and include it in your profile.”

So, I did.

Here it is:

We go through life a wandering for ev-

er and a day, without a clue of me

and you or what we’d like to say. We nev-

er know where we’ve come from or what our sea

will bring. We live alone, in flesh and bone,

and fears to which we cling. We strive to know

why we are here, on earth where we’ve been thrown,

while giving, taking, and mistaking, tow-

ing all we’ve sewn. We live with no direc-

tions, though we hope and dream and smile, and pray

we make it through to peace, beyond life’s wreck,

in style. If we could just hold hands this day,

perhaps to share what’s here, it would appear

we’ve found what’s real, before we disappear.

I finished my laundry and went home.

Later that day I looked at the dating site and looked at the number of women who might be interested in meeting me.

It was very strange.

On Monday I got a personal message from a woman who lived just a few miles from me.

She was asking me specific questions about the poem that I had included on my post.

I responded to her message, and we started an online conversation that went on for a week.

The next Saturday we met at a park at dusk by the lake and spent the next 8 hours together.

Even after the park closed, we went to a local restaurant and stayed at the outdoor patio until after even the restaurant closed.

We have been together ever since.

We play scrabble together.

Generally, she beats me soundly at this game.

She is so smart.

I love her.

We laugh a lot.

We shop together.

We travel together.

She helps me with my work.

I try to help her with all of her work.

It’s a system of grand mutuality.

A person and person taking a selfie

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Life is hard, but love makes it a lot easier.

My youngest son, who still lives with me, helped me set up a web site with my curriculum materials.

I did the work that went into the web site.

He did all of the work setting up the web site.

It is 100% free to use and share and download.

It is for people who want to learn how to read or learn how to read better.

It has a lot of my theories, my work, the history, some discoveries, the methods, and curriculum materials.

In 30 plus years of tutoring one-on-one over 50 students (long term; years) from northern Ohio, I have amassed over 10,000 hours of teaching.

Many of my students have been able, as adults, who began being completely illiterate, to become independent readers over time.

They have also been able to go on to become fully employed in the community with paying jobs.

The only crazy problem with all of my work with literacy, is that the world’s greatest experts follow very different methods and procedures and do not give my work much credence.

How funny is it that actually reading to develop reading skills gets such bad press.

I’m not sure how I should interpret this strange circumstance.

Life is hard, very hard, especially for those trying to build bridges, in an unconventional way.

Web site:

[www.literacyforanyone.com](http://www.literacyforanyone.com)

This is my large extended family now:

![A group of people posing for a photo

Description automatically generated]()

Blessings,

Tom Gilbert