



**ON WE
MARCH**

A MEMOIR OF GROWING UP
IN THE SALVATION ARMY

BETTE DOWDELL

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The Salvation Army***

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INTRODUCTION

I did not grow up in a vanilla family. Vanilla is comfortable, fairly predictable and somewhat bland. That doesn't describe us.

Some people believe the opposite of vanilla has to be dysfunctional, where anger, rage and lack of connection rule the roost. That doesn't describe us, either. We had love to spare, with parents who gave us dreams to dream and a big leg-up on the future.

My lack of vanilla predictability came from growing up in The Salvation Army, with constant moving, difficult circumstances and almost no money. But, here's the key: None of us realized we had it hard; we each thought we were living a life of privilege.

At the hub of all this optimism was Daddy, a once-in-a-lifetime man, ably assisted by Mother, always ready to take whatever hill appeared on the horizon. This is their story.

To give you an idea, people who knew Daddy routinely refer to him as either "Sir Charles" or "Saint Charles." That's the kind of effect he had. To know him was to understand the meaning of "awe," especially since, despite his manifold gifts, he had a firmly grounded ego.

And Mother wasn't exactly chopped liver. Between them they raised five children once described by a sister-in-law as "intimidating as" (I'm paraphrasing here) all get out.

I hope as you read these pages, you'll discern several things:

First, what amazing parents God blessed me with. Words strain and struggle to describe such extraordinary people.

Second, the attitude and scope of all the great work The Salvation Army does. When you write a check to the Army, make it as large as you can stretch, in memory of Charles E. Dowdell, known in these pages as Daddy.

Third, what real Christianity looks like with skin and shoes on. That is, how it gets lived out, both individually and corporately, as in a church. You'll read about several such churches in this book, especially First United Methodist Church of Huntington Beach in California, home of The Dowdell Chapel.

Last, how you can apply the lessons and the attitudes in this book to enhance your own go at life. Daddy and Mother always wanted their lives to witness, not only to God, but also to hope, to love and to optimism.

If I did it right, you'll laugh a lot—and perhaps cry some, too. I hope you enjoy reading *On We March* as much as I enjoyed living and writing it.

Bette Dowdell
Glendale Arizona

PRE-ME

Daddy was large. Not so much in height, although he stood six feet tall, but barrel-chested, with shoulders to spare. Add his enormous natural dignity and presence, and you have one awesome man, especially when he wore his midnight-blue, high-collared Salvation Army uniform.

His noticeable easy-going comfort in being who he was multiplied the effect of his imposing self. And when appearance and aura failed to strike the fear of God into the populace, Daddy's booming bass voice finished the job and brought in the stragglers.

Goggle-eyed tykes regularly asked if he were God.

But even more impressive than Daddy's awesome physical presence was his outsized heart. He appreciated and encouraged everybody fortunate enough to venture into his life, making him a "memory man." Everybody who met him remembered him--and had stories to tell.

What a blessing, then, to be his children and receive his exceptional beneficence as a birthright. Joe, named after Daddy's father, came first, then Charles, named after Daddy, then Flo, named after Daddy's sister, then me and, finally, Barney, named after Mother's brother Bern. Joe and Charles were "the boys." Flo and I were "the girls." Barney stood alone, with no need for a group name.

Fourth is, perhaps, poor placement for a high-energy, high-decibel child. Especially a usually scruffy tomboy who marched to an unpredictably syncopated drummer unheard by others. I made Mother weak in the knees.

But Daddy enjoyed my creative antics. I made him laugh, and he cheered me on. He said I lived life on tiptoes. Mother, who didn't tend toward relaxed attitudes, couldn't fully support that charming point of view, so I stuck with Daddy. We formed a mutual admiration society of two.

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Daddy, Charles Edwin Dowdell, started life in Buffalo, New York, the first child of Salvation Army officers who rose high in the Salvation Army ranks. Good people, upright people, but hard. Daddy's big heart didn't reflect the rocky soil that gave him birth.

Daddy grew up all over the eastern United States, from Buffalo to Savannah and from New York City to Toledo, Ohio, where he played football and music at Scott High School. He graduated with top grades, a reputation as an outstanding musician and his name engraved on athletic trophies.

The Cincinnati Conservatory offered Daddy a full college scholarship: Tuition, fees, room and board, the works. The offer meant a college education at no cost to his parents. He planned to study music, then become a Salvation Army officer (minister). But his mother declared that only sinners went to college—on their way straight to hell. He didn't fit any part of her picture, but his pleas didn't move her.

Defying his parents meant losing them. At sixteen, with no circle of support because of the constant moving, his dream and himself belittled and his mother's dire predictions of a ruined life, he probably couldn't imagine freedom might be within his reach.

Instead of his Conservatory dream, Daddy worked a few years before going to Training College, the Army's tough, practical version of seminary. At that time, Training College consisted of one year at the college, with classes from morning until night, followed by five years of intensive home study lessons, done as you served in your given appointments. These lessons were graded at Headquarters, and all the young probationary Lieutenants needed passing grades to remain an officer.

At his Training College graduation, the brass assigned Daddy to the editorial department at headquarters in New York. He would spend his time writing and speaking. Even better, he'd play in the New York Territorial Staff Band. He could all but hear angels singing "Hallelujah!" But his father, neither a writer nor a musician, saw the appointment as sissy stuff and told the powers-that-be to "give him the hardest thing you have."

When Grandpa, an important officer in the Eastern Territory, spoke, people knew they'd better listen. Daddy ended up in Watertown, New York, struggling to revive a dying Corps (church) that couldn't afford to pay him. Single, handsome and twenty-one, he knew God had a plan, if his parents didn't manage to block it.

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Mother, Josephine Marian Gowen, began life in Downend, near Bristol, England, the eighth of nine rambunctious brothers and sisters, plus two older half-brothers from her widowed father's first marriage. When she was eleven, an accident killed her father, Elias. A bicyclist ran into him, and his head smashed into a brick building as he fell.

After his death, Mother's mother, Mary, eked out a living for the family with a small farm, a country store and an occasional job hand-sewing trousers for the King of England. Her struggles added determination to her desire to gain money and, somehow, social status.

In her teens, after working a year or two as a nurse's aide, Mother decided she wanted more opportunity than England's class-oriented society offered. Not one to dawdle, she celebrated her nineteenth birthday as she sailed for New York City to join her brother, Bern, and his wife, Annie. Hired as a secretary in Manhattan, she dreamed of fame and fortune—especially fortune—certain they lay just around the corner.

Out for a walk one Sunday evening, she happened by a Salvation Army Open Air (street service) complete with brass instruments and a big, bass drum. Raised in the Church of England, she found the people's earnestness and the idea of worshiping on a street corner amusing.

Mother made a fateful decision to follow the ardent Salvationists back to their church and get some funny stories about these odd people. Her tales would gain center stage at the office and entertain her coworkers, raising her status as a sophisticated woman about town.

Instead, she most unexpectedly found herself sobbing at a mercy seat (prayer rail), asking God to forgive her sins and make her his child. She quickly became a Salvation Army soldier (member). In a short time, sensing God's call to become an officer, she willingly discarded her plans for wealth and fame to enroll in Training College.

Mother stayed, by invitation, at the Training College for an extra year as a graduate assistant, then the Army assigned her to the Bowery Corps—right in the middle of New York City's skid row. Single, pretty, twenty-three and working on the Bowery, she trusted God's plan for her future.

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To offer skid-row inhabitants a way to escape their alcoholic prison, the Bowery Corps held nightly meetings (worship services). One night, just as the meeting was ending, a man, drunk almost to a stupor, disheveled and caked with grime, reeled his way down the aisle and fell across the mercy seat.

Mother, exhausted from a long day, thought about skipping the usual practice of kneeling with the man to talk and pray until he "broke through." He was probably too drunk to understand what she said, let alone make any spiritual progress. But she couldn't ignore the hope of possibility and went to his side.

Kneeling in a cloud of alcohol mixed with filth, she prayed while he babbled. She put some religious tracts in his pockets to remind him--if he ever sobered up--of where he had been. The man staggered back out to the streets, and Mother closed up and dragged herself to bed.

She didn't recognize him--in fact, could hardly believe it was the same man--when he returned the next day: Clean, shaved, hair combed and stone-cold sober, he told his story of being the editor for a New York paper before booze took over his life. Now free, he planned to stay sober and make the climb back.

They kept in touch for several years, and, true to his commitment, he never touched another drop of liquor. Mother never forgot him, the miracle she almost let get away.

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Daddy and Mother met at Star Lake, the Salvation Army music camp in Butler, New Jersey. Music, especially brass bands, played a big part in Army life. Every Corps had at least a few musicians. Large Corps had sizable, excellent bands. The Army's leading young musicians gathered at Star Lake each summer, by coveted invitation only, to study under world-famous composers and conductors.

Besides the wall-to-wall music at Star Lake, Daddy loved the all-out style of baseball played there. Adding to the excitement of the game, the Stars and Stripes waved proudly from a substantial flagpole installed in deep center field. Center fielders played with their usual abandon, inhibited only slightly by thoughts of a sudden, unfortunate collision with the flagpole. These regrettable meetings happened from time to time, an inconvenience, as the game had to be halted so the wounded unfortunate could be carted off the field.

But the flagpole served as a goal as well as a menace. Every batter approached the plate with dreams of glory, determined to blast the ball over the flagpole. They didn't bother pointing a la Babe Ruth; everybody knew their goal. Many tried; Daddy succeeded. Grandma bragged about it for years.

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Once a year the New York Staff Band presented a concert at Star Lake. Every Salvationist in the area tried to go. Most likely, Daddy and Mother met at such a concert. Daddy, stationed too far away to play in the band that year, came to hear the bands and lead some music clinics while Mother came for the entertainment and a chance to be with friends.

Through the years, Daddy occasionally told us, eyes twinkling, how Mother lured him into the woods at Star Lake. Mother always rose to the bait, proclaiming--without the slightest hint of a smile or twinkle anywhere--she most certainly had done no such thing, making Daddy's smile a little broader.

All we know for sure is Daddy and Mother met at Star Lake.

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William Booth, founder of The Salvation Army, believed husbands and wives should be as one: one goal, one desire, and one plan of action to properly serve God. To achieve this, he set the rule

that officers could only marry other officers. An officer who married a non-officer, no matter how devout, had to resign his or her commission and “leave the work.”

This arrangement worked well enough for the majority who met their intended before or during Training College, but pickings slimmed out considerably after college, particularly for women, who outnumbered the men.

After two years “in the field,” I believe Mother took one look at the bleak horizon and made the Star Lake meeting happen. Had it been Daddy’s idea, she would have told us the whole story, leaving Daddy no opportunity to loft his line about being lured into the woods. Being the chaser instead of the chased put into question the efficacy of Mother’s manifold charms, which would never do.

They proved that opposites attract. Mother, raised in class-conscious England by a mother drawn to social-climbing, and Daddy, a fully American man’s man interested in sports and music, were nowhere close to an obvious match.

Even their equal commitment to God led to different approaches. For instance, in her desire to help people, Mother freely volunteered her definite ideas of who should do what, how they should do it and when. She took exception to people who failed to follow her “suggestions.” Although counseled about this bulldozing tendency during her graduate year at Training College, she never understood why recipients of her ministrations would choose not to follow her obviously spot-on directions.

Daddy, while equally interested in helping, and perhaps even more so in encouraging, never volunteered his thoughts in personal matters. If you wanted his views, you had to ask. And he saw it as your decision to accept or reject his counsel.

An accomplished raconteur, Daddy appreciated all types of morally upright humor, especially when it afforded him the delight of winding his way through a good story leading to a great punch line. Mother killed every joke she tried to tell. Her humor leaned toward banana peels. Daddy couldn’t understand how she found humor in somebody getting hurt, and she couldn’t understand how he could miss the obvious hilarity in a banana-peel pratfall.

Even music added confusion. At some of their appointments, Mother played the piano for the meetings (worship services). Rather than play an introductory lead into the hymns, Mother simply struck a chord. Daddy, thinking it to be the starting note, would take a deep breath to start the singing, at which point Mother would suddenly play a different chord. Discussions of this surprising habit led nowhere, but Daddy finally deduced her first chord signaled the key in which the hymn was written, and her second chord gave the starting note. Mother believed proper presentation of a hymn required both, unless, of course, she forgot, in which case the first chord presented the starting note, and there would be no second chord. She insisted Daddy should realize this and sing out with vigor and confidence whenever she didn’t play a second chord.

Daddy, however, thought it wiser to proceed with caution lest she belatedly bang out the missing chord.

Still, these two dynamic, larger-than-life people loved God, each other and us kids so, with ups and downs of perhaps greater than average amplitude, given the strength of the participants, it all worked out. A marriage of powerful equals is a blessing for the offspring, but it surely isn't for sissies.

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Captain Dowdell–Daddy–and Captain Gowen–Mother–had a short courtship, much of it via the good graces of the postal service. Because they were stationed miles apart, Mother planned their wedding without input from Daddy. It showed.

Mother dreamily envisioned two hearts dedicated to God becoming one, gathering strength to do battle with Satan. She saw her marriage as a road leading to triumphant victory for God and his church. Fully captivated by her vision, she missed a crucial detail.

The Brooklyn Salvation Army Corps lacked the center aisle so beloved by brides. Instead, two aisles flanked the center section of seats. Mother decided she and Daddy, wearing their uniforms in keeping with Army tradition, would simultaneously proceed down the two aisles and meet at the altar. To add to the loveliness of the occasion, she arranged to have Girl Guards (the Army's Christian equivalent of Girl Scouts) and Sunbeams (similar to Brownies), holding little Salvation Army flags, line each aisle.

To communicate her vision of two hearts fighting as one for God, she chose "Onward Christian Soldiers" as the processional by which she and Daddy advanced down the aisles. Unfortunately, she overlooked the second line of that venerable hymn, "Marching as to war," the relevance of which became unhappily obvious when the music began.

What with the Girl Guards, Sunbeams and their flags, the aisle had no room for Daddy to proceed, as the plans demanded, to the altar. Slim and trim at 225 or so, he weighed about 100 pounds more than Mother. Overlooking this hundred-pound detail meant each aisle had the same narrow processional channel, fine for her, but far too narrow for him. Had Mother worn the more traditional long, billowing wedding gown instead of her uniform, a simple, straight-line street dress with military insignia, she would have allowed for more space. But no.

The surprising need to thread a too-narrow needle created a dilemma for Daddy. He could not possibly get down the aisle with any style or grace, but he had no interest in dealing with the consequences of not trying. He made a manful attempt, twisting and turning his way toward the altar while the little girls, under strict orders from bride Captain Gowen to stand straight and tall, adamantly held their positions, refusing to volunteer even an inch of ground. Rather than Mother's romanticized vision of how he would come to her, Daddy resembled a pressured quarterback desperately scrambling to gain some badly needed yardage.

He struggled valiantly to stay within his allotted space, but it was the irresistible force meeting the immovable object. With the Girl Guards and Sunbeams determined to follow their orders at all costs and Daddy equally determined to reach the altar, some bumping and staggering added to the festivities as Daddy all but dragged the little girls down the aisle with him.

Mother saw the quasi-mayhem as a plot to ruin her beautiful plans. Daddy saw it as the better of two choices, the other, if indeed you can call it a choice, being not to come down the aisle at all.

And thus they met before the altar: Daddy embarrassed by his less than graceful entrance, Mother fuming at the “fact” he purposely bumped into her Girl Guards and Sunbeams. Then somebody sang their wedding song, “Because,” which subtly posed the thought that God believed they deserved each other. If either noticed it, neither believed it, at least not at the moment.

And so the ceremony proceeded, the deed was done and married life began.

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Daddy and Mother honeymooned briefly at Niagara Falls, then went to their temporary assignment in Pittsburgh. Since they married in April, and the Army made permanent assignments in June, it would fill in until a permanent—at least as permanent as Salvation Army appointments could be—assignment became available.

The assignment, physical director for a “magnificent gym and swimming pool,” included their living quarters: A dormitory room containing six tin beds and six tin lockers, romance not being an Army priority.

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The Salvation Army included Social Service Centers, or Socials, residential rehabilitation centers for alcoholics. (Socials, now called Adult Rehabilitation Centers, or ARCs, are the part of the Army that picks up donations and sells them in their thrift stores.) Residents typically came to the Social from long years of addiction. If they stayed sober long enough to come and request help, they could join the program, which included a place to stay, regular meals, clothing, medical care, Christian AA meetings, counseling and a job. Their work gave them an income and also kept the Social going.

Some men came for help. Some came to scam the system, wanting “three hots and a cot” and no interference in the way they lived life. The officer-in-charge had the responsibility to keep things moving forward, helping those who sought help, and motivating those pushing for a free ride.

The rehabilitation program required Sunday church attendance. The officer conducted the worship service in the Social’s chapel for a congregation of all the men currently in residence—street-wise, mostly middle-aged men, old and weary before their time.

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Daddy and Mother's second appointment took them to New Haven, Connecticut, to serve in such a Social. The residents took one look and mistook the young couple for greenhorns. They had no idea Daddy grew up around Socials, the son of an Army officer who eventually headed all the Socials for the Eastern Territory. They also had no idea his father proudly, and frequently, told the story of successfully putting Daddy—while still in grade school—in charge of a Social when an unexpected two-day trip came up. And, finally, they failed to recognize Daddy's blue-twisted steel and tiger-meat constitution.

Believing they had the opportunity to wrest control of the institution away from the supposed greenhorns, the men hatched a plot. On Daddy and Mother's first Sunday, six residents, selected by their peers, challenged their new Captain. Rather than come to church, they stayed in the dormitory on the second floor directly above the chapel. The door to the stairs linking the dormitory and the chapel opened right behind the pulpit

Cued by the opening notes of the first hymn, the wayward six began raising a din to announce their absence and their intention to take control of the Social away from Daddy. They wanted a fight. They believed easy victory was at hand.

Everybody in the room recognized the situation and the odds. However it might turn out, Daddy had to respond to the challenge.

He signaled Mother to take over leading the hymn, turned around and started up the stairs, closing the door behind him. Mother stood in the pulpit, waving her arms and exuding bravado as she led the singing and wondered about Daddy's fate.

The truants jumped Daddy as soon as he reached the top of the stairs. Allowing Daddy to remain by the stairs proved to be the fatal flaw in their plan.

Literally fighting for his life and realizing the impossibility of fighting all of them at once, Daddy blindly grappled to get a grip on one man at a time, then hurl him down the stairs. One by one they flew. As each body crashed into the door behind her, Mother called out, "Louder, men" and increased the vigor of her arm-waving. By the time the last body thundered against the door, the men in the service were braying at the tops of their lungs about the tender love of Jesus and Mother's arms windmilled with a velocity that threatened to take her airborne.

The fight over, Daddy came down the stairs, leaned over the body pile and opened the door. One by one, the men untangled themselves and slunk into the chapel. Last, and a whole lot more than least, came Daddy, obviously ready for whatever came next. As he scanned the chapel for their next move, the stunned roomful of men silently cried "uncle." Against all odds, they had lost the battle.

Daddy resumed the worship service. From that day on, Sunday attendance never fell below 100 per cent.

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