

Growing up at various points in our lives, we probably wished for different things. Perhaps it was to get older or just be big, like Tom Hanks' character Josh in the film "Big." Or maybe it was to go back and be a hero like Robin Williams character Jack in "The Best of Times," who dreams of going back to catch a game winning touchdown pass in high school that he dropped. Perhaps you wanted to be rich and a mover and shaker like Nick Carraway, one of the main character's from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

Most all of us have daydreamed about such things, including Tom Peterson, who was a successful advertising executive when he experienced a dramatic conversion that prompted him to start Catholic media ministries and became a Catholic evangelist, using the power of the Internet to help people find and return to the Catholic faith.

Growing up in a faith-filled Catholic family, the Petersons would go to mass every Sunday, and looking back, he sees nothing missing in his Catholic upbringing. He says "I loved my faith because my parents loved their faith, and it translated to me. I was trying to be a good kid who did the right things."

By the time he reached junior high school, however, his “good Catholic boy” image ricocheted against him, and other boys began to pick on him, ridicule him, and beat him up.

He says that started his spiral down, and he had it in his heart that he was going to get even with them by becoming successful. He remembers saying to himself: “I’m not going to hire you someday.” He looks back and thinks how foolish it was for him to think that as a teenager. But he carried that into adulthood, where he was determined to prove something - not only to himself, but to those other guys too.

Tom made good on his promise. After graduating from Arizona State College, he landed a high-paying job. He thought about buying a Ferrari but opted for a condo instead. He eventually did buy the sports car, and he would drive 90 mph on Phoenix freeways, swearing at people who got in his way. He eventually started his own advertising agency, and he became even more successful. But along with his success came a distorted sense or pride.

“I was out of control,” he explains. “I suffered from ‘influenza.’ I was making a couple of hundred thousand dollars a year, and I was amassing more and more material stuff in order to fill the emptiness in my heart, but nothing was making me happy. I was addicted to money, power, glory and the satisfaction that was proving something to himself and other people.

He married his wife, Tricia in 1986, and two years later their daughter Katie was born. Two more daughters, Kim and Chris, followed in 1990 and 1995.

There was never any question that Tom and Tricia would raise their daughters in the Catholic faith. He went to Mass every Sunday with his family, but he would daydream through Mass, thinking about what he would eat for lunch or the things he had to do on Monday. “I was there physically, but I was mentally and spiritually absent, he acknowledges.

This feeling of spiritual emptiness bothered Tom. He says “I think we all know the truth down deep. As we get deeper into the deceptions, the lies, the lures of the world that are sold to us, it becomes habitual, and it gets deeper, and suddenly it doesn’t feel wrong. It doesn’t feel like we have abandoned God. I justified my mediocrity and my lack of faith by saying,

'I'm not as bad as other people are!' But in reality, I was immersed in materialism, consumerism, and secularism."

Tom was actually listening at Mass one Sunday when a young man invited the men of the parish to attend a Crusillo retreat. Tom remembers actually wanting to go, and he says he couldn't think of an excuse for not going.

On the first evening of the retreat, the priest invited men with "prayer language" to come into another room for a short meeting. Tom wasn't sure what that meant, but he decided to find out what they were doing. When he walked into the room, there was one empty chair. "There's a chair for you if you want it" he remembers thinking.

During the brief meeting, the priest suggested that they would pray over the other men during Benediction. he reminded them that the Holy Spirit would work through them. "God will be God, and we will be His instruments," the priest said.

Later that evening, the priest asked if anyone wanted to be prayed over, and Tom was the first one to jump up. He says he felt as if he needed

something. And so the others prayed over him, and Tom dropped on the floor in front of the Eucharist. He literally heard God giving him insight and wisdom, saying Downsize and simplify. He knew what God meant; he had multiple homes and cars and so many things, but no time for God. Then he says the Lord started ministering to him, saying to him “you’ve got one foot in My world and one foot in the secular world. You’re trying to have it both ways. You need to choose sides. Do you want to follow Me? Do you want to be on My side?” And Tom said Absolutely, One hundred percent. That is when his life changed.

He first promised God not to be a cheap Catholic; he was only putting in \$2 to the plate and started giving more. He also opened his eyes to some situations with clients who were shady and walked away from a business deal that was netting \$500,000 a year. He sold his vacation home, several cars, and some unnecessary possessions. His wife Tricia who went on a women’s retreat stood behind him. Tom said she didn’t care so much about the stuff, just doing the right thing. He said when they gave some stuff up, they entered a greater adventure.

He started reading the Bible, and phrases would stick in his head. He started going to daily Mass. The words “seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added to you” echoed in his mind (Matthew 6:33). He found after going to Mass his whole day went well. He became a Eucharistic Minister, an RCIA sponsor, and his faith kept growing. He felt, as he learned about his faith, that he found a treasure chest of spiritual gold - or a treasure in the field as we hear in the Gospel, and now he wanted to tell everyone as he had a marketing and sales background. He prayed God might help him to evangelize; and low and behold, after Mass a woman tapped him on the shoulder and asked him to help her son who had been away for 20 years from the Church. Tom visited him several times and invited him to Mass but he refused. But a few months later that young man called up Tom and said he changed his mind because he had been fishing that day and pulled a crucifix out of the water, wondering if it was a sign. He started coming to Mass again, and a few months later met his future wife.

A short time later Tom had two dreams of his own that would lead him in a new direction, one about an unborn child struggling, the second about producing some type of Catholic film. He responded by making some pro-life commercials, and setting up a pro-life website to help expectant

mothers pondering a bad decision to choose life. Those ads turned into national ads on cable, along with a website, and Tom estimated thousands of unborn lives had been saved.

God challenged him further, and this was to use his own experiences to help those who were spiritually numb to reconnect with the Catholic faith. He would use that experience of conversion and so in 2000 with the Diocese of Phoenix he launched the “Catholics Come Home” website inviting people to come back to the Church. The website features the history, beauty spirituality and universality of the Catholic Church, and addresses the issues that are of concern to those who walked away from the Church. Just a few week after the ads launched, thousands of people responded; Mass attendance went up, and priests reported people who had been away for years were coming back to confession. He’s continued to be involved in that for the last 20 years, helping people to return to the faith.

He closes by saying “There’s the famous painting where Jesus is knocking on the door and there’s no doorknob, which means we have to open it from the inside. That was me. I invited Jesus in, and He changed my life forever.

I'm hoked. Nothing brings me greater joy than knowing that I am here to love and serve God."

What did Tom find? True wisdom. As Thomas Aquinas said, when he had the vision of Jesus asking him what he wanted for he had written so well of Jesus, Aquinas famously responded, "only you."

So then how about us? What would you wish for? Now there's nothing wrong with daydreaming about things; I wouldn't mind winning Mega Millions next week, though it probably isn't going to happen. But if you think about it, so often the things we want, like Tom, don't really end up making us truly happy. Wealth, honor, possessions, power; all of these things have their place, but without wisdom, we won't know how to use them. This kind of thing is the subject of many movies and shows and literature. When we like Solomon and like Tom did later in life gain wisdom, we know how to use what God has given us. The challenge then is to grow in this wisdom, and to use what we are given for the greater good like Tom did.

With respect to growing in wisdom, the starting point is to listen to God and to ask for it. God on the one hand allows randomness in the world; hence I



don't think he's guiding the ping pong balls in a lottery hopper or a slot machine. But when we ask for the Holy Spirit and wisdom, this will be granted to us. When we echo Tom and Thomas Aquinas and want only the Lord, we learn so much. That's why it's important to pray, to meditate, to have time for silence.

We also grow in wisdom by listening to the Church and the people God puts in our lives. The Church is there to help us grow in wisdom. It's why faith formation matters so much over the course of our lives; from Bible in a year by Fr. Mike Schmitz to apologetics on the catechism or videos from people like Bishop Robert Barron, there's so much good stuff out there. We'll be really emphasizing that with our synod here in the archdiocese these next few years with small groups that will be forming. But we also gain wisdom through people; people who are friends who can give us guidance and counsel, and point us in the right direction; people who will challenge us and help us to truly grow. It's important to seek these prophets out.

Lastly, when we look at what we are given, we are given that wisdom, but we'll also find that while we may not have a kingdom like Solomon's, we

are given much. So it's important to ask ourselves how are we using what we've been given - wisely or foolishly? How do we use our resources financially to support our family, or the needs of others through charity? How do we exercise our roles as a part of a family? Do you love your spouse and try to help them? If you have children do you try to be present to them and help them, knowing when it's time to exercise authority or ease back as they grow older? How do you use your power in your place or work or on committees you are a part of? Are you a person of hope who tries to make this world a better place through how you live your life? These are all good questions to ask that we sometimes don't think about, but true wisdom helps us.

Perhaps you fantasize every so often about what you'd ask the genie in the bottle. I know I still daydream about various things that would be great to have or change. But in the end, my hope is to be a saint, and to find the true happiness I seek means knowing that only God will give me that happiness. And if I want to get to heaven, I need to know how to use what God has given me. Hopefully you want the same too. So seek the true wisdom that might not give you money, fame or power, but that will one day help you and others whose lives you are a part of become saints.

