

In search of the Eternal Buzz: where English meets Italian

Vito and I were both raised in a tradition of hospitality. Both his parents were born and raised in Sicily, and he and his brother are first generation Italian-Americans. Vito has lived in Chicago and its suburbs all his life and as a child was fully immersed in the Italian-American community. His mother did not speak English when she first came to the United States at the age of twenty-six, so Italian was his first language. Family, pasta, espresso, biscotti and Italian plastic color his childhood imagination.

I was born in Canterbury, England. My family re-located to the north-midlands of England when I was very young. I was raised in a small market town in the large rural county of Lincolnshire. I grew up where people walk to the local butcher, grocer, baker to get their produce, neighbors drop in unannounced and the tea-pot is always full!

Vito and I met on the campus of the University of Illinois. Vito was in his junior year, and I was a graduate exchange student. Neither of us had experienced salvation, but both of us were searching for truth. Vito experienced religion through Catholic elementary school and attending Christmas and Easter masses. I sporadically attended a Methodist church as a child and a small charismatic church as a teenager. During his freshman year at college, Vito became heavily involved in the "pot-culture".

When we met, Vito was living in a house on campus with two roommates. His house was always full. It was a social hub, where all kinds of people would go to hang out, get high, drink espresso and eat pasta with garlic and oil. My first memory of walking into that house is so vivid. As Vito opened the door, my eyes scanned the room. Above the music system, which was playing loudly, were empty liquor bottles of every description placed like trophies in a display cabinet. Balanced against the empty bottles was a displaced bumper sticker which read, "*IN SEARCH OF THE ETERNAL BUZZ.*" In my heart, I knew that this "Eternal Buzz" must be Jesus Christ. I had not fully experienced Him in His power and mercy, but wanted to. Vito, struggling to escape the recent trauma of a broken home life, was



searching for a sense of dignity and purpose among the emptiness of the party lifestyle he was living.

Unknown to us, at that moment the Spirit of the living God engaged us in hot pursuit of Jesus



Christ. At the end of that year, we decided to take a road trip around the United States. I was going to be leaving U. of I. to go to the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada to pursue my Master's Degree. Vito was to stay in Champaign to complete his Bachelor's degree. With a white rental car, rudimentary camping equipment, a Randall McNally road map, Bible, \$1000 cash, our parents' credit card, and an acoustic guitar in the backseat, we set off on a self-proclaimed epic journey "to find God"! We committed to read the Bible every day. By the end of that 30 day road trip, we had driven 8,636 miles, visited 19 states and crossed into Mexico and Canada!

Several hours after leaving the university campus, we encountered a severe thunder storm which forced us to exit the interstate and find shelter. After calling various hotels with no vacancies, we located a motel in Jonesborough, Arkansas. The following morning was Sunday. As we were leaving the motel we saw a small hand painted sign that simply said, "Church," with an arrow pointed in the direction of the building. We decided to follow the sign!

The church was small. About 50 people raised their hands and voices in worship. As we walked in, it was apparent that we were not part of the regular Sunday morning crowd. As we stood in an empty pew somewhere toward the back of the building, I noticed that tears were streaming down Vito's face. Vito now explains that at that moment he felt so dirty in the presence of something so holy. With his bi-lingual background, Vito has always been interested in

languages. Hearing the woman behind him speaking in a language, which he recognized as the same language he had heard me use occasionally in prayer, was bewildering to him. Silently, his tears continued to fall down his cheeks. It was Fourth of July weekend, and the animated pastor began to preach about true freedom. At the end of the sermon, the preacher asked for those wishing to make a commitment to Jesus to come forward for prayer. After a few moments, Vito, weeping profusely, made the journey to the altar. Vito's prayer throughout his life had been, "God, if you're real, show me, and I will serve you until I die." During this service, God was answering Vito's prayer. Now the long journey to fulfill Vito's promise of service would begin.

In the year that followed that road trip, Vito began to develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. However, he lived in two violently opposing worlds. As he says in his own words, "I would sin all day and then would read the Bible and pray at night for a few moments." He would visit the Catholic Church on campus about once a month and tell his friends, "I'll meet you at the bar afterwards." One of his friends from high school spotted Vito as he walked up for communion and mouthed the words, "What are *YOU* doing here?" During his senior year, Vito had nightmares almost every night. His dreams were filled with him running, being chased, jumping over fences, and trying to escape from his pursuers. He would wake up in the middle of the night, having sweat through his shirt, his sheets and into his mattress. We believe there was a battle raging for his soul.

In the meantime I was adjusting to life as a graduate student on the beautiful pacific north-west coast of Canada. Heavily involved in my studies and campus-life, I was unable to make much time for my pursuit of God. However, after the Christmas break, having been back in England for Christmas and spending a few days in Chicago with Vito, I found myself in my studio apartment on my knees asking God to help me find a



church. I felt like Jesus had been patiently knocking on the door of my life for a decade and it was time for me to truly embrace the Christian life. I flicked through a yellow pages to find a church. In the listings under "church" I found the word, "Pentecostal." Having had experience with the charismatic movement in England, I knew that "Pentecostal" would mean lively worship, so I called the number listed. The pastor answered the phone and told me that the

service had just begun, but there was a young couple who lived close to me who would pick me up for service the following Sunday. Sure enough, next Sunday John and Sandy rang the buzzer to my apartment. I thought they were the most straight-laced couple I had ever seen! Of course, they were so friendly and welcoming, but I thought they were 25 going on 45!!

For the next several months I would sporadically visit the small Pentecostal church in Victoria. I knew that the presence of God was there; the worship was vibrant and the preaching was strong, but I was still hesitant to become fully involved. It was not until late May of that year that I fully engaged with what the Lord had in store for Vito and me. After graduation, Vito came to Canada to stay with me for a few days. For the past five months, I had been sharing with him some of my impressions of the Pentecostal church in Victoria. I had told him about the sermon when the pastor had proclaimed that he was on a “train to glory,” which had really captured Vito’s imagination. That Sunday morning, Vito met John and Sandy for the first time when they picked us up for service.

During the car ride, John explained to Vito that there was prayer before the service began. Vito noticing that there was still a half hour before the service was scheduled to begin, silently questioned how it was possible for anyone to prayer for a full half hour! Entering the prayer room, Vito saw the women praying on one side and the men praying on the other. The women were loud; wailing and crying out to God. Vito prayed silently, “Lord, if these people are crazy, get Rachel and me out of here, but if this is for real, I’m in.” At the end of the prayer service, we walked into the sanctuary. After a few simple choruses, the pastor invited members of the congregation to testify about God’s goodness. An older lady stood and began to describe her granddaughter’s precious questions about angles and the wonder and beauty of God’s creation. The beautiful simplicity of her words touched Vito deeply, and once again he began to weep and this time tremble in the presence of God. When she sat down, Vito got up from the pew and began to tell the small congregation about his experience in the church in Jonesborough, Arkansas. While he was still standing, the pastor asked Vito if he had ever received the baptism of the Holy Ghost with the evidence of speaking with other tongues. Vito genuinely responded that he had not, and when the pastor asked him if he would like to, Vito said that he would. Right there, in the middle of the testimony service, Vito went to the altar to pray with the pastor. Everyone began to pray. The pastor explained to Vito that all he needed to do was repent. Vito responded that he felt he had been doing that for about a year. Vito then lifted his hands and began to pray. He says that he felt a tidal wave hit him in his gut in an explosion of love, joy, peace and many other emotions all at once. His lips began to stammer as he worshiped God. In the meantime, in melodramatic-like fashion, one of the light fixtures fell from the ceiling and shattered on the ground!

Immediately following the service, the visiting evangelist showed Vito the 10th chapter of Acts, where the Roman centurion, Cornelius, receives the Holy Ghost as is baptized in the name of Lord Jesus. Instantly identifying with his fellow Italian, Vito saw that what had happened to Cornelius in the book of Acts, had happened to him. In the following days Vito met with Pastor Bartel asking question after question. Pastor Bartel always answered his questions with a scripture. Vito decided to get baptized the following service.

The Tuesday evening of that week, Vito and I spent the evening at my friend's house. Having no understanding of holy living or what it meant to live a separated, consecrated life, we shared a beer and passed a joint and Angie read our tarot cards while Vito began to tell her about what had happened to him at church on Sunday. Vito began to feel very ill. Over the past four years, Vito had built a strong tolerance for alcohol, but that evening having not even finished his one bottle of beer he felt sick. He got up and headed to the bathroom to wash his face. As he came out he fell to the ground in a state of semi-consciousness. I was terrified. I had seen Vito consume much more alcohol without any effect in the past, so I felt it must be something serious. I wanted to call an ambulance. In the meantime, Vito was experiencing what he describes as a "time-out" with the Lord. He felt that whatever makes Vito, Vito, was being stripped away from him and he began to experience terror beyond any of his nightmares. He explains that he felt he was feeling what it must be like to die and go to hell. He felt the Lord speak to his heart, "it's his way or my way." At that moment Vito counted the cost of his salvation. "Life, death, heaven, hell, what are my friends going to think..." He was anxious about how his family and friends would react to his conversion. Finally, during that brief moment in time, Vito made his decision, "Ok God, I will serve you until I die."

With that decision, he regained full consciousness and stood to his feet. Vito looked at our friend, Angie, squarely in the eye and told her that without question God was real and in time she would come to know Him for herself. With that the apartment buzzer rang. I had been persuaded by Angie not to call an ambulance and instead call a cab to take us to the hospital. It was the cab driver at the door. As Vito seemed perfectly normal once more, we asked the driver to take us just a few short blocks to my loft studio apartment. We both sat in the back seat of the cab, saying nothing.

Quickly giving the cab driver his fare, we climbed the wooden, outdoor stairs up to my apartment, blurting out,

"I have so much to tell you."

"And I have so much to tell you."

As we opened the door we said, "Let's just pray." It was as if the windows of heaven opened up and flooded into that little apartment. The glorious backdrop of the Pacific Ocean glistened with the late evening sun as God filled us once again with His Spirit. As soon as our knees hit the floor and we began to pray, we realized we were speaking with other tongues, magnifying God! Vito laughed to himself, "Either I have totally lost my mind, or this is real!" With all the makings of a fairy tale, Vito heard the same voice in his heart that he'd heard at Angie's apartment now say, "Propose." Without hesitation, Vito obeyed God's command! Of course, I answered yes and we hugged full of wonder at this incredible experience God had given us. From that moment we did not look back, we had been delivered from every addiction and were completely free. We were truly born again by God's grace and power. We had begun our walk with the Lord in earnest. That Sunday, Vito was water baptized in Jesus name and felt the sin, shame and guilt of the past fall from his shoulders. We were married just 6 months later.



Pastor Bartel had directed Vito to a new home missions church in the Chicagoland area pioneered by the veteran church planter, Jack E. Yonts. Filled with grandiose ideas about converting the whole of Rome, we asked Pastor Yonts for a crash course in the Bible as we searched for jobs teaching English in Italy. As I finished my master's thesis in Canada, Vito met with Pastor Yonts every Tuesday and Thursday morning for prayer from 6am to 7am at his home. After prayer, he would go through the Exploring God's Word home bible Study. The first

time Vito went to his home, Pastor Yonts shared his vision to train young men and women to build ten churches in the Chicago area. At that moment, Vito knew he was one of those young men.

In time the Lord spoke to us about staying in Chicago and training under Pastor Yonts. Pastor Yonts and his family loved us as their own, and we have been grateful to be part of what God is doing in Chicago. Jesus is the best thing that ever happened to us. He changed the course of our lives pulling us out of darkness and into His marvelous light. God has provided grace for every season of our life; we are blessed with four amazing Children (Benjamin, Genevieve, Olivia and Isaac). It has been glorious to see each of our parents baptized in Jesus name and filled with the Holy Spirit. Also, Vito's brother Anthony is a licensed minister and fellow Home Missionary with the UPCI. Over the past 14 years we have been privileged to serve in many different areas of ministry: assistant pastor, outreach director, women's ministry director among other roles. Almost from the moment of our conversion, we have had people in our home. From starting a weekly Bible study for college students in our Lake Michigan condo just 6 months after our salvation experience, to pioneering the small group ministry at Bartlett UPC and eventually founding a home missions work in Wheaton, Vito and I have integrated teaching and preaching the word of God with hospitality. Depending on their taste, people have learned about God's goodness while drinking espresso from Sicily or a proper cup of English tea. We have had the privilege to watch people receive the Holy Ghost in our living room, make decisions to be baptized, touch God in prayer and be loosed from the bondage of addiction to experience the joy of salvation.

The concept of *Eternal Buzz Café*—helping people who are searching for the Eternal Buzz to find it has been at the core of our ministry since we began. Jesus, coffee and tea is just who we are. You can't be in our home for long before the kettle begins to boil and the espresso aroma fills the air. As one of our dear friends says, "When you go over to Vito and Rachel's, you always end up staying longer than you intended to, and you always end up speaking with tongues!"

Eternal Buzz Café provides a place to tell His story in our lives—just a short chapter in the great drama of God's redemption. It provides a place where people who might never enter our home or the church can be refreshed and open to things of God. It is a natural progression of our ministry through hospitality and relationship building. It does not replace the church, but is an integral part of its vision. *Eternal Buzz Café* is a tangible way to show people the love of Jesus and expose them to the life changing power of His word in the heart of the city that where God has called us.