

My Unsung Psalm

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A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY AND MEMOIR

Katherine Georges

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A Spiritual Journey and Memoir

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To God

*“I was born still holding God’s hand and throughout my life I
have never wanted to let go.”*

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Opening the Invitation

Have there been times in your life when you have wondered about a day like this, a day when time stands still? Have you felt this moment brush across your memory like a warm blanket? It is a memorial to something you once knew and long to embrace. The memory keeps you moving forward, hoping one day to be found in God's presence again. This moment is here, and every breath that surrounds you is His.

*If God appeared before you now, would you know Him?
I invite you on a spiritual journey with me, to God's house.
Here is where your journey begins.*

The day is long. The wind is hot. The sun is still well above the horizon. No clouds are in sight to offer relief, and only your shadow falls upon the ground. You long for the sinews of life to come and fill you. Unconscious of your movement, you wipe the sweat from your brow. Light, from the sun's rays, blinds you for an instant, and you shield your eyes. All at once, you are very aware of the air surrounding you as it touches your skin.

In anticipation, you turn and look ahead.

Is He coming for me? The thought suddenly fills your mind, and you remain held within it.

Now, not far from where you are, you see *God* walking. He wasn't there before, you are certain, but God is coming to you.

As the space between you and God lessens, you can no longer wait. You run to greet Him, rejoicing. Are you overcome with emotion? Do you laugh or cry or both, realizing He is finally here with you? Immediately, you understand how very alive you are in His presence.

God's arms welcome you into them. How long have *you* waited for this moment? As you reach for Him, do *your hands* appear calloused and worn from years of labor? Or are they smooth and polished, with youth still left within them? Are they bruised and in pain? Are you steady, or are you shaking when God embraces you?

God speaks to you now. He is God! And He is *your* God. He tells you that you have always known Him and He has always been here with you. You were never alone. You know the truth in His words. His words enter into every cell inside you, becoming part of you, and suddenly you remember everything because God is here with you.

Then, God asks you to deliver His invitation to the world. You run your fingers over the letters. They are the words of His psalm that all humanity has been waiting to hear. The words must be set to the voice of music. God's words carry more power than speech alone. They breathe and live in you, reaching deep within your soul.

Your lips thirst for words to say to God. All you know to do—in this moment when God's love surpasses all your understanding—is sing. Like a child of God, you sing softly the words of God's psalm.

*I am God.
I am your God.
You have always known who I am.
I have always been here with you.
I love you!*

Tears fill your eyes, releasing pain you have felt for thousands of years. You hold on to God and never want to let Him go. Now you understand—you must bring His *message of hope* to the world.

Dusk comes over the horizon. Do you ask God why He has chosen you to deliver His unsung psalm, or do you just believe?

He waits for your answer. Do you hesitate or immediately begin your journey? Are you prepared for *this* journey? Are you willing to leave everything you have? Are you bound tightly to what you are leaving behind, or are you ready to let go and take God's hand? Looking around, you see so many people you love, and you want to bring them with you. Can they come? Is this moment meant for them as well?

You pause for a long time in reflection. You are filled with unwanted emotion. What an enormous quest you must perform. God's unsung psalm is His gift, His simple words that the world needs to receive. They are words that everyone can understand.

Do you turn back now or do you go on believing in what He's asked you to do? Faith and hope run deep in you. You know God's voice will keep you moving forward. His voice is the music that fills your soul.

The choice is yours. It always has been. And you realize that life is about this moment, the moment when you say, "Yes." Then, with the wisdom and willingness of a child, *you take up your journey and you take His hand.*



For years, people have held on, hoping that someday God would answer their cries. You, in your lifetime, have prayed for God's peace and grace to guide you. Have you waited long and still continued to believe? Have you heard His voice, or do you need to hear His voice? In the uncertainty of this world, never knowing what will happen tomorrow, God wants you to know that He hears you. And now God offers you His psalm. God wants you to hear Him!

My Unsung Psalm is God's song. It is His response to you and to me. Out of all the psalms that have been written to God, I believe this is one that came back. God sings it because He loves you.

Again, I ask:

*What if a day like this happened to you?
Would you be willing to begin your journey?
It happened to me, and this is my story.*

I was born still holding God's hand. I don't know how to separate myself from Him or His voice. But then, why would I want to? God is my complete existence. I enjoyed God and wanted to be with Him. I was only a child, and I thought as a child. God loved me, and I had a simple faith. Letting go of God's hand would be letting go of life.

God entrusted His psalm to me because I never stopped believing in Him. People tried to take faith away from me. They tried to make me doubt God. But they did not succeed. My faith is unending. Even if someone were to prove that God did not exist, I would still believe, because I hear His voice. I feel the

touch of His hand. If I am to fail at everything else in my life, I can tell you now, loving God is the one thing I got right.

My story is not the psalm, but the psalm is in my life's unfolding story. This book is a memoir of my relationship with God. It is the journey I have taken holding God's hand. I am a simple person and my hands are small. I haven't accomplished anything of great worldly value, yet I am of great value to God. He offered me His psalm, and I must give it to anyone willing to listen.

For many years, I didn't know how to write *My Unsung Psalm*. I didn't think my story should even be part of this book. It wasn't until I stopped trying so hard *not* to include my story that I finally understood what God was asking of me. I must tell my own story and tell it honestly, leaving myself open and vulnerable. I must set before you the events that shaped my life and let you experience them for yourselves, with all the joy and the pain. Only then can you witness my faith, believe my story, and hear God's voice in my life.

God's voice can be heard in the journeys we take with Him, in our stories, and in our daily lives. Wherever you are, He will meet you there. And if you are not on a journey, this is your invitation to begin. His psalm is silently waiting for you to find your voice in the chorus and for the music to start. God asks you to sing the psalm with Him.

Join me now on my spiritual journey to hear God's unsung psalm. The music is interwoven throughout these pages. Long for it in anticipation, and when you think you hear it, hold fast to it. Learn the words with me. God has been singing it all along. It is the psalm that keeps us alive, the music that initiates the rhythm of our hearts, the music of our souls. Though my journey has not been easy, as you will soon read, my faith is strong and endures because I have always felt *loved* by God.

It is my wish that your voice might lift the music high up over the mountains. And then, perhaps, angels will join in until the whole of heaven is filled with voices singing the psalm with God. Until that day, we must continue in faith with God's message of hope to keep us moving forward. His psalm is that hope.

CHAPTER 1

Surviving the Unexpected

When grace was the only living reality in my life and blessings were promised, faith helped me survive the unexpected.

The first thing I remember is pain.

It was the spring of 2007, and I was in St. Vincent's Hospital in Green Bay, Wisconsin. The emergency room was brightly lit with sterile metal IV hooks hanging from the paneled ceiling. I sat in a bed waiting for my symptoms to subside, to be reassured that all was well. As pain intensified and became intolerable, I knew something was wrong. I had spent three hours fighting the pain. Silent tears stained my face, evidence that I refused to ask for relief. I pushed the large white button on the pad that rested beside my left shoulder and heard a voice over the speaker.

"Yes, can I help you?"

"I am sorry to bother you, but would you please tell Dr. Grusen that my pain has reached a seven?" I said it reluctantly. I had intended to drive home later that day and not be admitted. Overcoming pain was a skill I had spent a lifetime mastering. If I made this decision, I couldn't leave the emergency ward.

A few minutes passed, but it felt like a decade. I tried leaning my head forward and then back, but it was of little use, and the pain was becoming more intense by the minute. I could feel stabbing pain in the wall of my carotid artery. My artery was fragile. I had a condition that caused it to dissolve from the inside out. Constant atrophy and pressure in the artery made the wall separate and bleed. It could rupture at any time, a risk I lived with

daily. The artery wasn't healing as my physicians and I had expected. Instead, it was lengthening and causing new circulatory complications in my brain. Conquering pain became an increasingly difficult challenge.

Dr. Grusen entered the room and wanted to speak with me. "I need you to reconsider letting me relieve the pain for you, Mrs. Georges," she said. "It isn't necessary for you to suffer. We want to make you as comfortable as possible." She was concerned, very eager to help me, and did not ignore my complaints.

She appeared to be around thirty-five, and I judged that she was new to the emergency unit. I was eleven years older than her, if I was correct. I knew she didn't understand why I chose to live with, rather than numb, the pain. I felt more freedom with pain than the freedom that came from killing the pain. Perhaps this seemed unusual, but pain had a purpose in my life. Pain was the catalyst of change, most common to everyone, but it could bring about uncommon results.

I reflected over the day's events and thought about how the pain had begun. I was selecting a new bedspread at Younkers, a large department store, when I suddenly felt light-headed. The pain started in my right foot. I felt it tighten, but I didn't immediately recognize the symptom. My neurologist had advised me to take ownership of my symptoms and take action, but my mind wasn't paying attention. I was caught up in the task of buying the items on my list and arriving home before dark.

Not having responded to the pain in my foot, while standing in the parking lot of Younkers, I suddenly felt a sense of urgency. But I rationalized that it was now only four in the afternoon, that it was a nice day, and I still had things to do. I carried the bedspread to my car, and then I decided to go back into the store to buy the matching pillows.

I returned to the floor where I had purchased the bedspread. The place had the dreamlike quality of small hotel rooms that were ready for the busy traveler. I didn't find pleasure in shopping; instead I enjoyed the people. I watched a mother correct her daughter for sitting in one of the bedroom suites, then laugh as both stretched out on a mattress that welcomed their arrival. I witnessed the smile they shared, and my heart smiled with them.

Bending down and reaching deep into a shelf, I searched and found the pillows. When I stood up again, I felt that off-balanced swoop that comes with strong shifts in blood pressure.

There wasn't a waiting line at the counter. The saleswoman remembered me and effortlessly completed the transaction. I quickly and confidently

descended the escalator with my package and maneuvered past the other shoppers. Walking briskly past the cosmetic counter and enjoying the sweet mix of flowered perfumes, I observed a husband buying a special perfume for his wife. Then, pushing through the entry doors, I stepped out into the sunlight again. In my mind, I was crossing out the items on my list and enjoying the satisfaction of knowing another task had been completed.

But before I could step off the curb, I felt the pain come on stronger. It rushed over me with such intensity that it blinded me. I nearly dropped the bag as I staggered, trying to catch my balance. I stood motionless, but inside, my veins and arteries were screaming. I closed my eyes, breathing in the pain and trying to control it with my mind. My vision cleared, and I opened my eyes, looking straight toward the place where my car was parked. That was my target. I needed to get to my car and not collapse along the way. I began to search for the keys and realized they were already in my hand. *Strange*, I thought. Immediately, the muscles in my right thigh and wrist began constricting. Holding the ignition key tight between my thumb and forefinger, I walked slowly, each footstep intensifying the pain that was now drumming in my head and the side of my neck. I tried to remain on a steady course to reach my car.

As I approached, I pressed the remote trunk button on the keypad, and the trunk released and opened, but I found it difficult to lift the bag of pillows. I felt awkward and unable to coordinate my muscles. It took both hands to pull the lid down and close the trunk. My right arm was weak and fell limp to my side. I leaned my right side against the Avalon and slid my way along until I reached the door.

With the key still hanging between my fingers, I sat down in the driver's seat. Turning my entire body in one smooth motion on the leather, I inserted the key into the ignition. For a minute, I paused to collect my thoughts and go over the symptoms. I had not felt this level of pain in years. It was déjà vu, so similar to the day when I had chosen to drive home from the parking lot in Evergreen, Colorado, and *I lost my eyesight*. That day was etched in my mind forever, the kind of memory that even dreams are scared to repeat.

What happened in Evergreen seven years ago could have ended in tragedy, but God was there, guiding me and guiding my family to safety. Now, lying in the emergency room at St. Vincent's Hospital in Green Bay, I wanted to

think back in time so I could find some connection to the symptoms I was experiencing.

My daughter, Mary, was barely a year old back then, and my son, Max, had recently celebrated his eighth birthday. It began as an uneventful day in the new store that Wal-Mart had opened, located just off I-70 at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. Much of the new shrubbery around the parking lot was surrounded by river stone and cement curbing. This gave the new store an oddly manufactured appearance, similar to an oasis on the horizon. I could see the snowcapped peaks in the distance.

I walked to my car and opened the rear passenger door with my left hand while Mary still sat saddled on my right hip. I placed her gently in the car seat, cautious about securing the overhead seat belt to the buckle in her lap. I gave her a warm smile and kissed her forehead. Her hair smelled of lavender and zwieback toast. I shut the door gently and waved. I still remember the sound of the door closing.

Suddenly, I felt dizzy. I had experienced this off and on for several months, but there was a new, unfamiliar feeling added to this. My neck felt weak and stiff at the same time. Oddly, my thoughts were blurred. I was unable to focus as my chest tightened.

Perhaps it was just the altitude, and I wasn't yet acclimated. My instincts told me that something was wrong, but I didn't understand.

I walked around the car and got in. I just wanted to sit there and think this through. Max was already waiting in the front passenger seat. I wasn't eager to get home. It was a beautiful day, no reason to rush. I was willing to be patient. I wanted to understand these strange symptoms. What was my body trying to tell me? I turned to look at Max and then, the feeling came on again. There was something in my neck, and I reached to touch it. I imagined that I could touch inside my skin and search with my fingers for what was there. I tried to focus my thoughts again.

"Max, maybe I should call home," I said, as if he knew what was on my mind.

I tried my cell phone, but I couldn't get a signal. After a few minutes passed, I felt the pain subside. My thoughts seemed clearer, and I decided to put the entire matter behind me until we arrived home safely, when I could discuss it with my husband.

I'm only eight miles from home, I reasoned. Only eight miles—I can make it.

I remember it all so clearly, that day in Evergreen. That day was etched permanently in my mind.

I started the engine, released the parking brake, and exited the lot. I slowly descended the long straightaway on the highway. To my left was Hiwan Hills, where several of our friends lived. I passed Soda Creek Road to Bergen Park on the right. Then the highway opened onto a meadow of green. I had only driven a few miles when I saw the sign to Squaw Pass. Just a little farther and I would see the lake at Keys on the Green, the entrance to Upper Bear Creek Road, where we lived back then.

Suddenly, without warning, a dark cloud came over my vision. My peripheral view was gone. I felt heavy, small, like I was being sucked through a vacuum or black hole. My hands were glued to the steering wheel, but visually, everything was gone!

A thought screamed from my mind, “Oh, my God!”

There was no pleasure in the darkness, just waiting. It was an odd void of nothingness, like a space discarded of life. Though it may have been seconds, perhaps six or seven, that passed, it felt like eternity. The seconds ticked and ticked. The car was heading straight forward, not turning, just gliding as my hands remained attached to the steering wheel. The sounds of the wind and the road were enveloped in darkness, but I was not afraid.

Then, I heard His voice, God’s voice, as pure and clear as any water I had ever seen or heard. God said, “*You have two minutes.*”

I was completely calm. I knew immediately what God meant by His words. I was surrounded by God as He carried us through the darkness.

During those next two minutes, our lives were entirely dependent upon God. I knew He was in control and that I didn’t have to be. I have never been afraid in God’s arms. I never questioned why things happened. All I could do was respond to His voice, and that was enough that day. I simply said, “Yes, I hear You!”

God’s light guided me as I drove blindly down the highway. Like a street-light in the fog hanging over the highway a few yards ahead, He was there. I couldn’t see the shoulder of the road—the only shoulder on that stretch of the highway; the rest was bordered by a cliff—but I could feel it under the tires of the car as I pulled off slowly and came to a stop.

Two minutes had passed, and we were unharmed. I handed Max the phone. An ambulance and my husband arrived a few minutes later. I was taken to a

hospital in Denver where doctors discovered I had been having a series of strokes.

What made me listen to His voice that day? I knew it was God. I knew that He was there with us and that I was not alone. Every part of me had responded to His voice, which carried us through to safety. I didn't need to wait until some future event to be in safe arms. I was already there, and so was my family. I always felt God's love. I felt at peace, and I trusted it.



I had made a decision earlier in the day, and it had been the right decision to drive to the emergency entrance of St. Vincent's Hospital from the Younkers parking lot while my vision was still clear. I couldn't take the chance that something like the event in Evergreen seven years earlier would happen again. Door County, where we lived now, was an hour north of Green Bay. The risk would have been too great. There would have been few places to stop for assistance along the way, and I knew the symptoms of stroke now.

I began to think about pain again and the important place it always had in my life. Pain had been with me, testing me, pushing me to overcome. I didn't know other people's experiences with pain. I only knew that from an early age, I had developed a high tolerance and often had no choice but to conquer pain.

It was interesting that driving had once more become a part of my daily routine. I used every precaution necessary to insure my safety and the safety of others. I was so thankful to have my freedom again, and I took it very seriously. Most of us take driving privileges for granted, just as we take all privileges for granted. When the freedom to decide no longer exists, it is difficult to accept the limitation. But these were the challenges that drove me forward, urging me to reach deeper within myself to become better and more adaptable to change. Change could not overwhelm me. It could only strengthen my resolve and make me stronger so that I could do what most people thought was impossible.

It had been six months after the small strokes in Evergreen before I would drive again. Tests showed that I didn't have permanent vision loss. My vision loss was transient. The events had occurred in my occipital lobe, the area that controls eyesight. I had to be cautious. These were not the only reasons that I experienced visual impairment and often double vision.

My brain had compensated for the lack of blood flow by creating a web of tangled veins and cerebral arteries. Telangiectasia and malformations, an abnormal growth of capillaries and veins, were damaging areas of my brain. The abnormal branches needed nutrients to function properly and caused nerve tissues to atrophy. Even the protective white matter was decreasing due to loss of volume on the right side. But fast water in a river always finds a way to continue flowing, and my blood would find a way. The body—amazing machine that it is—saw to it that my arteries moved and changed course, creating veins as needed and reconnecting or branching off as necessary. Capillary beds grew in order for the fenestration process to continue to collect and administer hydration to underlying tissues. It was all a grand design that perfected the imperfect, making my brain tissue still useful.

Driving again didn't come easily. At first, I only drove a few blocks from my home. Experiencing seizures daily, it was important to have an emergency plan and a set of procedures. Seizures are common in a person who has experienced strokes. The seizures mimic the event. Because my brain function was limited during a seizure, I trained my mind to focus on what the symptoms were telling me. This was where pain taught me something. I learned from pain and adapted.

Before each episode, my hearing would change, and my sight would become fixed. I was abruptly in tune with every cell in my body. Having only a small window of time and feeling an intense awareness of my surroundings, I paid attention. I had time, long enough to pull the car over and wait until it passed. I always called the paramedics, and they often stayed with me until I was ready to drive home. They believed and knew how hard I was trying. These episodes took several years to overcome, and the shop owners and paramedics came to know me well. At first, I drove only a few blocks, then progressed to several miles. God kept me hopeful as He taught me to be aware of my inner workings and use these innate sensations.

God had not given up on me any more than I had given up on myself. He had created a self-sustaining body built to overcome adversity and function regardless of damage, in harmony with the mind and soul. Who was I to question His work? I wasn't about to question *Him*. I just accepted His gift and was thankful to be alive!

Is it possible to explain why I had such an internal drive to go on? I just did because I heard God's voice. Life was in His voice. Perhaps it was because I never felt alone. As living proof of God's message of hope, I trusted that God

had a plan for every day that He kept me alive, and every step I took suddenly became His gift. He healed me yesterday, and He is healing me today, because I am still here. I rest securely in the hope that He will heal me tomorrow! I never thought of death and employed no knowledge of it. I did not live for the end, as many people spend their lives doing. I have never considered where I will be when I die. I enjoy life. I live with God today! And I knew as I was healing that I had to be satisfied with living moment to moment, holding God's hand. God was my strength.

People often wonder what makes one person survive and another give up all hope and die. In my case, I lived a Trinitarian Christological reality. God in three persons lived within me. Being alone was not part of my existence. God was always with me. He didn't tell me to stay alive at all costs or promise me He would keep me safe from all harm. But God did speak to me in a voice that I think few people have ever heard.

* * *

But now in the emergency unit at St. Vincent's Hospital, it was the nurse who was speaking as she tapped on the IV needle in the vein in my left hand. It jolted me back to the present. She tapped several more times before injecting morphine into the receptive lead, and I felt the slight burning as it entered my blood stream. I followed it up my arm with my eyes as I imagined it creeping upward toward my shoulder. It wasn't long before I knew the morphine had made the full round of my vascular system, entering my lungs, going through the valves in my heart. The pain in my head was not letting up, but soon it became more tolerable. The pain in the ophthalmic artery under my right eye eased so that it no longer hurt to close my eyes.

"Dr. Grusen ordered the morphine for you. How are you feeling now?" asked the polite nurse.

"I'm going to try to rest," I responded.

"I'll turn off the lights for you," she offered as she turned toward the monitors and checked the drip valve.

"That won't be necessary. The lights don't bother me," I said.

The nurse shifted to the side as Dr. Grusen and another nurse entered the room. I tried to concentrate as she spoke. She explained that the CT scan showed that the dissection was increasing and causing the onset of pain. She was concerned that my artery had sustained too much damage and it was time

to perform surgery. Her tone was serious. However, she sounded very hopeful as she told me that the vascular surgeon was consulting with an interventional radiologist about repairing the damaged artery. I was surprised they wanted to do surgery but understood her hopefulness and was grateful for the possibility. Then, she left me in the care of the nurses.

“You will be going into surgery in a few hours, Mrs. Georges. I need to take care of the admission papers so you won’t have to bother with them later. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

The morphine caused her voice to sound muffled and sunken. I realized she was asking me something important, and I tried to focus as I thought about Dr. Grusen’s words.

“I want to make sure we have your home address and phone number correct. Are you allergic to any medications? Do you have a living will and directive? Let’s go over your medications.” The name on her tag was Mary, like the name of my daughter.

“I notice you take heparin injections daily. What time did you take blood thinner today?” she asked. Mary explained that the heparin might present a problem in surgery, but they would be prepared for any complications that might arise. She left the room, and I ran her words through my mind.

I understood her. There was a risk of bleeding to death on the operating table. There was a greater risk of leaving the dissecting artery untreated. The length of the dissection had expanded from six centimeters to six and a half centimeters—this compared to four centimeters two years earlier when the doctors discovered it.

The occurrence of the dissection had remained a mystery to me. I had healed from the aneurysm that had caused turbulent flow and had sent clots to my brain. I had overcome the daily seizures that had, for a while, occurred thirty to forty times per day. Those were an enormous challenge to survive because anticonvulsant medication was considered too harmful to prescribe. I had learned to tolerate the pain and conquer it without the use of medicine.

Then, an odd pain had started under my jaw near my left ear, on the side opposite of my older aneurysm. I thought it might be a nerve running to my jaw, but it wasn’t. As I lay inside the MRI “missile tube,” as it banged and whirled and ticked in monotonous rhythms, in my mind’s eye, I saw something wrong. Somehow it took magnetically charged cells for my body to become aware of what had gone undetected. Why hadn’t the wall of my artery screamed out in pain sooner? And why was I feeling it on the opposite side?

The human mind is God's most masterful work of art. It is capable of keeping all in balance and useful. Above the bifurcation of the internal carotid artery, my brain was transferring the pain to the other side of my body. My body could then go to work to heal the side that had been damaged. In this way, my brain sheltered me from the pain for a while.

The news, though, that came with this new pain was not what I wanted to hear. If the artery ruptured or caused more strokes, could I go back and face it all over again? I didn't know if I would still have the strength and the fortitude necessary to overcome.

It had taken years for my emotions to return after the first strokes. I hadn't been able to cry or laugh. I'd been devoid of feelings just as my body was devoid of controlled movement. My blood had kept pumping throughout my body, but nothing else had flowed within me.

Emotionally, I was flatlined.

Losing the ability to feel emotion was as difficult to endure as the physical pain. I had no way to express myself. Trapped inside, I couldn't show feelings through expressions on my face or through gestures with my hands. People misinterpreted my body language, and I was disconnected from them. The confusion led friends to avoid contact with me, but I didn't complain about my condition. I understood the limitations and boundaries clearly. I knew that I needed my emotions and that I had to learn to feel again. It took enormous faith during those years.

My ability to feel did return. Before the dissecting artery was discovered, my life had filled with wonder again. All that I had worked hard to accomplish brought tremendous rewards. I had endured impossible odds, but I had survived! Suddenly, I could feel every ounce of the universe move, and I was awestruck. Having feelings and emotions, being able to touch things—all had come back. Like the moment of complete awareness just after a storm, when the clouds open so the rays of the sun can cut through them, the earth of my life had been drenched and cleansed of all impurities. I was healed. I was in health, not in illness, and I now saw my life in this light. I could feel the goodness pulsing around me, touching me, healing me.

This full awareness came to me as an awakening each morning and didn't end until I rested my head on the pillow at night. I was content to just have a cornucopia of feelings again. They had been missing for so long. All the nuisances and subtleties of everyday existence had been overridden with pain.

I was connected again to something greater; a story was being told that was bigger than my little world, and I wanted to be a part of it.

Everything seemed new, refreshed. Hearing the sounds of birds shaking off the wet morning dew from their wings enveloped my senses. Digging my soil-drenched gloves deep into the garden bed to dislodge another stone helped me release the obstacles of life in a tangible way. I was content to run my palm across the veins of the leaf of a strong tree and sit gently near the roots as the tree provided shade from the heat of the day. This gave me great satisfaction. Few can imagine the joy I felt! Listening to the water as it trickled down the sides of the fountain established new sensations of flowing peace within me, and all the time I held God's hand.

When I experienced this awakening, this healing, I didn't want it to ever stop. In a way, I made certain it didn't stop. The concept of "no pain, no gain" was quite real to me. With pain came God's voice, which told me to "move." God didn't tell me to lie down. Oh, no! He told me to get up and live the life He had given me. Please understand that this was an *audible* voice, and that throughout these pages when I say that God spoke to me, I mean audibly. His was a real voice and carried power and strength.

Soon I saw, in a very tangible way, my ability to conquer pain. I could do anything as long as He was still holding my hand. It was only in the death of my spirit that I might lose memory of Him and not recognize His voice, and that wasn't going to happen. I was in life and living it to the fullest. I was a willing participant.

* * *

One particular day when I was outside with my children, something amazing happened. I had picked up a softball and bat and motioned my son to join me. My son was eager to accept the spontaneity of the moment. Max had not been active in team sports and had not yet experienced confidence in his own abilities. But in that moment, it didn't matter. No one was judging either of us.

I had spent two long years developing enough strength and stamina to leave my walker behind for just fifteen minutes of independence. I had progressed slowly at first until I reached a steady, sustained pace. I was finally able to get through the day with only a seizure or two, and pain was being shoved to the far end of my struggles. I ignored it!

This was our moment. I threw several pitches, and Max hit each one, clean and straight. He smiled; I smiled.

“Do you want another one?” was the unspoken question on my face.

He acknowledged me with a nod. I threw the pitch, and he hit it to the far end of the neighbor’s yard. I was astonished as I watched the ball jet through the air and land yards away. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye and laughed. Then, without hesitation, I ran to retrieve the ball. My legs were underneath me, propelling me forward, but I wasn’t touching the ground. I was flying. I knew that something miraculous had just occurred, because Max and Mary were standing with open mouths. Simultaneously, we looked down at my legs. That was when I realized my body was healed. *I was healed!*

My family embraced life again. We took sailing lessons. We kayaked. We went skiing and ice-skating. If I could ride a bike, I could ride a horse. Being healed was more powerful than just being alive. For the next few years, I lived in a channel of grace. It lifted me and made me weightless. The sinews of life pulsed within me. I wanted to live life to the fullest and absorb everything that had been lost. I hadn’t known that healing was a process. This wasn’t a “one-time occurrence.” It existed on a continuum. It was a direct flow of giving, accepting, and receiving that allowed the process to work. I had to become a vessel of God’s grace, not a cup passively waiting to be filled.

After those years, I expected more out of living and expected everyone to accept my healing. I thought people were being inspired by my story, so I repeated it often. I didn’t know there were some who wanted me to fall down and not be able to get back up. In the midst of a miracle, a new struggle appeared, one of the spirit, a struggle that I was not prepared for.

God’s voice filled me:

I am God.

I am your God.

You have always known who I am.

I have always been here with you.

I love you!

CHAPTER 2

A Message of Hope

As all things became possible, the condition of weakness became my strength, and I was to be restored by a message of hope.

Thirty minutes had passed, and I was still in the emergency unit at St. Vincent's Hospital. Again, a nurse's voice brought my wandering mind back to the present. Her voice followed her approaching footsteps. She was talking as she entered the room, and she was carrying her laptop.

"Why are you being anti-coagulated with heparin?" Mary asked, looking down and typing on the keypad. It wasn't an odd question, and she asked it matter-of-factly.

I pulled my mind to full consciousness and answered her.

"It was an experiment, Mary," I explained. "I was only asked to take it for fourteen days." I felt tears form as I continued to speak.

My hematologist thought he found a rare platelet defect that kept my collagen from binding with epinephrine, so he decided to try heparin and prescribed Lovenox injections. It was a leap of faith on his part and mine. He explained that my arteries were bleeding and forming good clots that could break off and might cause more strokes. He wanted to prevent this from happening. The experiment worked, and I continued taking heparin.

"Most patients went to the hospital for their injections, but he wanted me to be able to do this at home. It was hard to talk myself into it, giving myself injections daily in the abdomen. Each one is still very painful." Then I added thoughtfully, "That was five years ago." Now, the tears fell down my face.

I took a deep breath, thinking of how much time had passed from that first day I was prescribed Lovenox. That was a good name for the drug, I thought. *Love knocks*. But using it was a double-edged sword. There was always the question of whether the benefits outweighed the risks.

Mary was looking straight into my eyes. She had stopped typing and was trying to hold back her thoughts, but I knew what she was thinking. Low-molecular-weight heparin is used short-term with stroke and heart surgery patients. Patients can bleed to death from hemorrhaging and damage to the kidneys might occur over time. No studies had been done to show the risk of long-term use, but the risks are very significant.

Then she said, "So, you are a daily miracle. What *is* your prognosis?" Her voice was more solemn now.

"They gave me a year to live. I'm still here." I said. The room fell silent as I uttered those words, but they brought a smile to my face. *I am still here!*

It was about half past eleven in the evening when I called my husband from St. Vincent's Hospital. They had moved me from the emergency unit to the eighth floor. I explained that the vascular surgeon believed he could do something, possibly stint the dissecting artery, and I would be going into surgery in a few hours. So, I assumed there would be time before he needed to drive down from Door County to be with me. I reassured him as we talked about our children. Skip's voice fell silent.

We didn't talk about the risks of surgery. We knew them well. Dr. John Towne, a vascular surgeon specializing in aneurysms of the brain at Froedtert Medical Center in Milwaukee, had explained that the dissection was inoperable. He had concluded two years earlier that no preventative measures were to be taken. Surgery could be considered only if I was in an emergency situation, one of preserving life. I told myself that the physicians at St. Vincent's Hospital now believed this was that emergency.

I didn't put any emotion into it. I couldn't. I was on too much morphine to consider the possible outcomes. I just accepted it with a high degree of hope, content that the surgeon at this hospital was knowledgeable. The field of vascular surgery had progressed, and now they felt it was the right time.

Dr. Grusen was excited when she told me that Dr. McNutt, St. Vincent's vascular surgeon, knew Dr. Towne and that they were colleagues. I didn't need any more convincing. I trusted the surgical team immediately.

I awoke at six the following morning. The pain was less intense, and I was thankful. The morning light was just beginning to filter through the blinds, and I was happy to see a peach colored blanket at the foot of my bed instead of the usual white in most hospitals. I looked around at the objects in the room, and then I replayed in my mind the news we received seven years earlier in the Denver Hospital after I'd lost my eyesight in Evergreen. Had it been that long? Seven years?

I didn't understand most of the medical terms used that day. Dr. Eric Hammerberg stood at the end of the hospital bed with a very troubled look on his face and had difficulty getting the words out. He did not enjoy sharing this with me. I assured him that I was okay and asked him to continue.

Like a foreigner who doesn't speak the local language but can pick up on the gravity of the situation by the solemn tone of voice, I had to listen to him carefully. He pointed out that, in addition to the small strokes, the radiologist had found defects in the blood flow to the right side of my brain and added that my heart was weak. I had mild mitral valve prolapse with myxomatous changes, and the other valves were insufficient. Dr. Hammerberg said the cardiologist would explain this to me, since he was only my neurologist. He was sorry to give us this news. He was sincere. There was nothing he or anyone else could do to save me from what was happening to my body.

I felt compelled to say "thank you" for all his hard work and his taking the time to explain my complications. I even said I knew it must have been very hard to tell me. I had a husband and two young children who looked to me as if I had all the answers. Skip looked at me for guidance. I wasn't even forty years old. This was a turning point in my life—in our lives. It was one of those moments of uncertainty when complete faith must guide the way.

Now, I was facing events again that would be a turning point in our lives. I needed complete faith that God was working through the hands of my surgeons. Each of us has a role in life, a role God has chosen for us. Throughout my life, at various times, I had played the role of the messenger. From the day I opened the invitation, I had been on a journey of faith. I had enjoyed the walk, suffered along the walk, stopped walking, and had even wanted to end the journey at times. Yet my story of faith continued, and I never stopped believing God was with me. My life's purpose had been laid out long ago. I was a living message of hope and knew what I had to do. I had to put my trust in Him, the one God who had always been here with me, who never let go of

my hand. He comforted me and cared for me. I didn't need to know why or ask questions. I had to trust Him, and I did.

The sun suddenly beamed onto my face through the slits of the vertical blinds, and I felt its warmth immediately. My room at St. Vincent's Hospital was peaceful. Actually, it wasn't my room. I took no ownership of it. I was only a passerby who had rented it for this night. Another person would soon come and occupy this room tomorrow. I was on a journey, and I knew I would be going home.

God's voice restored me and offered hope:

*I am God.
I am your God.
You have always known who I am.
I have always been here with you.
I love you!*

Now, my childhood memoirs begin.

CHAPTER 3

Touching the Petals

*Going back to the years when God was just God
and joy was God's gift, my childish spirit began to grow.
Childhood was about enjoying the petals without touching them.*

It was Sunday morning, the day you wait for all week until it arrives. The air was crisp, and rays from the sun warmed the coat on my back as we walked the path away from St. John's Chapel. This was the church I was growing up in and loved. It was also where I attended school each day and had lessons on Sunday. It was 1965 in Houston, Texas, and I was four years old.

The tree limbs' shadows crisscrossed the cement and danced over my shoes. I wore white patent-leather slippers that buckled across the rise of my foot, with cotton socks fringed in lace. My skinny legs extended from my favorite powder blue dress. A small white purse swung up and down from a strap in my gloved hand as I hopped around the light/shadow pattern on the ground.

"It's a painting. I'm dancing in my painting," I said to my new daddy, who was holding my other hand as we walked. He didn't respond, and my movements became more exaggerated.

The paintbrush in my mind busily colored in the surrounding landscape between the shadows. Each leaf was a different green illusively mixed from imaginary colors. The details of the stems that held each one were outlined, creating bendable, moving silhouettes. A small wind rushed past my ears and flew up into the trees as if to announce the arrival of the music. I heard the chimes as the leaves brushed upon one another and branches slapped the trunks of the trees. I smiled as the wave of sounds joined together. There was

only the slightest pause, and I took a deep breath waiting for the notes in a great symphony of nature. I always painted to the music.

Before my symphony could begin, though, I felt a tugging at my hand. Apparently, I had stopped walking, and my father wanted me to keep up with his pace.

“What are you doing?” he asked me.

“I’m listening to music. Can you hear it?”

He pulled me forward, and I turned my head as the music started without me. *It will be okay*, I thought. *There will always be music*. Voices began to chant as we stepped on to the parking lot. Small crowds of parents and their children stood near cars. Some were deciding to go to Avalon Drug Store for lunch, while others were making plans to meet later. We belonged to a wonderful community of families. I smiled and waved at Cristina, my best friend, as we walked past.

My new father opened the door, and I slid into the back. The navy leather still smelled new. It was a convertible Cadillac El Dorado. Daddy started the car and turned on the air conditioner. The air came out so cold and strong that I hid behind the driver’s seat. A minute later, my mother and brother got in the car. We drove down River Oaks Boulevard to San Felipe, then on a few blocks before moving on to Post Oak Lane. I didn’t know the names of the other streets in Houston.

My parents were sitting silently, so I thought I could tell my mother something I’d learned in Sunday school that morning. I was very excited and knew she would love my discovery.

“Mommy!” I called to get her attention. “Mommy, I want to tell you something.”

“What is it?” Her voice from the front was disjointed by the waves of air from the vents.

“I love you *almost* as much as I love Jesus.” I was so excited to get the words out that I could hardly sit still.

There was a pause, the kind of pause that makes a child’s stomach hurt. I had no idea what I had said wrong, but I felt suddenly that I was a stranger in the car. The backs of my thighs stuck to the leather seat, making it hard to move. I sandwiched my hands between my thighs and the seat, chaining it to me. The silence lasted so long that I rested my head on the back of the driver’s seat, just waiting, longing for her to say something. But what I heard was not affirming. My mother began to cry, and my father was comforting her.

“Kate, it’s alright. She doesn’t mean it,” he said to her.

I was unsure what was wrong, and I wanted to slip into the leather and disappear. My brother began to twist around on the back seat next to me. Everyone was so quiet. What had I said that hurt my mother so deeply? Why was she crying? I thought she loved God and would be glad that I did too. I loved her. I was confused.

The music was gone. I leaned against the glass and looked out the window, my head tapping against it each time the wheels went over an obstacle in the road or the car took a sharp turn. The drive seemed endless, and I felt trapped, unable to get out. No one knew my thoughts, which would soon turn into tears.

I thought about the magnolia tree that stood majestically in the front yard of our home. Its leaves were dark and thick as leather. It was the blossom, the white velvet petals, that I waited for in anticipation. It formed new leaves as it grew, dropping seeds to the ground, each to be buried there like a great treasure. In Texas, the magnolia tree thrived all along the Gulf Coast. Each petal of the blossom was a cup of life, ready to be shared. The flower opened only for a day. I couldn’t touch the petals or they would die. But magnolia blossoms have three layers. That was their secret! They held hope within them as they opened again and again, revealing more of themselves. I had waited patiently many times to witness their flowering.

When we arrived home, my brother, Farish, squeezed out of the back and ran inside to change. He didn’t want to wait. I imagined he wanted to take off his suit and tie, dress shirt, and loafers so he could play, but I knew he was getting out of the storm coming my way.

My mother didn’t look at me and went inside.

I didn’t expect what happened next. My stepfather grabbed my hair behind my right ear and pulled me out of the car by it. I stumbled as I tried to catch myself but fell to the ground and struggled to my feet. My knee scraped across the cement, and blood welled to the surface of my skin. I could feel it drip down my leg onto my sock as we walked into the house. He was grabbing my right arm now, so tightly that his fingers sunk deep into my flesh.

My mother gazed up away from us as we walked by her door. She was taking off her white sleeveless dress, her arm circling around her back to reach the zipper. I was waiting for her to turn around and see me, but she didn’t. My hair flew into my eyes as a hand came across and slapped the right side of my

face. I felt my jaw shift and tasted the blood in my mouth, and I swallowed it down as it pooled in the back of my throat.

I followed the slow descent of a small teardrop of blood. It dripped down, staining my Sunday dress. It reminded me of the scarlet thread of redemption, the bloodline that ran from the beginning of time, a story I had learned from the Old Testament that I carried from school to chapel each week. It was more than a story to me. I understood why God wanted to be with his people. He loved them.

I knocked over a lamp in the hallway as he continued dragging me along with him. He yelled words at me that I didn't understand. I had never heard those words before. I pulled back as my eyelids shuttered from the harsh, forceful words that came out of my new father. I kept blinking and tried to rub my eyes, but my hands were trapped.

The sound of the lamp crashing to the floor and his angry voice brought my mother out of her room. She was very afraid of him, but somehow I wasn't. She was standing in the hall in her white brassiere and slip, and in an excited tone began begging him to leave me alone. He just told her to shut up and announced that he was going to teach me not to be disrespectful to her again.

I felt the breadth of his anger then. He had removed his black leather belt from the loops on his slacks and doubled it over, holding it in one hand. He hit the lower part of my back, and the pain he inflicted caused me to fall to the ground. I lay there with his pain, which was now part of me, embracing it, on the cold stone floor. But God was there. I wasn't alone. I could see the archway of our family music room and the piano near the entrance. The bench was tucked in close under the keyboard, and I could almost hear it being played. My stepfather had never known love, and I knew then that I had to tell him how much God loved him. A thought of forgiveness came into my mind as God's arms lifted me up. And in that moment I stood up and began to sing a childhood song as tears rolled down my face.

"Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong; they are weak, but He is strong."

Then I did the unimaginable. I hugged him and said, "Thank you, Daddy, I still love you," and left the room. He sat there in silence, in the dark, for a long time.

I went to my room, my enchanted palace where pink touched every surface. Unlike the magnolia petals, it laced across the curtains and painted the top of the dresser. It was quilted in the spread that covered my bed and was

woven into the shag carpet on the floor. It tiptoed over the marble countertop, around the sink, and onto the hairbrush that was in my doll's hand. I ran my hand across the pink wall and went to work.

I removed the stained dress and used a satin-covered hanger, draping it over the counter. I dipped the stained part in running water as I stood there in my white underwear and camisole leaning over the sink. Then I removed my shoes, placed them in the center of the dress, and used a sock to towel my knee. The blood was dry now, and the cold water stung as it entered the wound. After dressing in play clothes, I wrapped everything in a bundle and threw it in the corner of my closet.

Instantly, a voice yelled from the closet as the clothes came flying back out at me.

"Farish! What are you doing in there?" I asked as I fell down laughing. But there was nothing funny about this. Farish was frightened and was in hiding.

"Is he gone?" asked Farish.

"No, he isn't gone, but he won't find you. He's in there talking to God," I replied, trying to comfort him. My older brother looked at me with disbelief, that look he gave me when he thought I was lying. But I wasn't lying. It was true.

"Come on, let's go play outside," I suggested with a smile that told him it was safe to come out of hiding.

But before we could leave, my mother came in and quietly shut the door behind her.

"Kandy, you can't push him like that. He can't take it. His temper flares when you do something wrong. Just don't talk back, and it will be okay, I promise. He doesn't understand how to love. Remember, he's not your father and not Farish's father. Don is your father. Just remember, he's not in your blood."

She reached into the closet where Farish had been sitting and retrieved the pink stuffed animal that Don had given me when I was born. She opened my memory box of silver rattles and cards given to her at my birth. She repeated the story of how much Don had loved us. But my father, Don, had not been in my life for years. From a distance, he observed my childhood from his dark glasses and photographs. Then she said one more thing.

"Just remember, you are a Farish. Never forget that you are a Farish and that you carry the family name. It runs in your blood." She reminded us of this legacy often, but it had no meaning to me. If I was a Farish, and there was

power in a name, a name that had begun as Humble Oil and had built into an empire—from the wildcat days of Spindletop oil domes to large holdings of Standard Oil and then Exxon—how did *that* power protect me? How could it protect my brother or my mother? I didn't understand. I would never understand the secrets kept, the things that happened behind closed doors, just to maintain a name. I wanted the world to know that some things were not acceptable—like hurting another human being. I wanted the world to know God because He wanted to be with them. It was His name that I carried in my blood.

Her words echoed in my head as Farish and I ran through the music room to the double sliding glass doors to the outside. As we went out, I heard him call her.

“Kate!” he yelled from the bedroom. It was the last word I heard as I closed the door.

Years went by, and he continuously tried to break my resolve. He inflicted physical and emotional pain, but he never inflicted sexual pain. I was thankful he left me alone. But the more I invited him to talk about God, the more he inflicted pain on me. This I failed to understand for many years.



Five years later I found myself sitting in a physician's exam room. I was now nine years old.

“Why are we here, Mommy?” I asked as we sat in the room at Stanford University School of Medicine in California.

The doors opened, and five men walked in with a look of determination, ready to tell us something that I knew would haunt my mother forever.

We had arrived the day before, and Sis, a longtime friend of my mother's, had welcomed us into the Utzinger home. Her husband was head of the vascular surgery department at Stanford. When my headaches had begun months earlier, my mother had made the arrangements to fly me to San Francisco for tests. She had not told me why we were going. Even on the plane, I thought we were going on vacation. Though I was a child and still thought as a child, I liked to be told things so I could be prepared.

Dr. Utzinger entered the room and joined the men as they quietly discussed their findings. One at a time they filed past me, touching me endlessly, gently pressing my face and spine. Then, Dr. Utzinger spoke directly to my mother.

“Kate, she has a unique and rare condition. We aren’t certain, but it is similar in a way to brittle bone disease, *osteogenesis imperfecta*. Her muscles and tissues are fragile. They atrophy. Her vascular system tears and doesn’t heal properly. Very little is known about the disease process. We think she may have Ehlers-Danlos, which affects her muscles, bone, and tissue due to defective collagen. And if we are correct, she has the rarest form. This, combined with vascular anomalies of possibly Sturge-Weber, leaves her at great risk. Patients with Ehlers-Danlos of the vascular system don’t heal. That is why the syndrome is so fatal. There isn’t more information about the syndrome. We don’t know how it will continue to affect her body over time. So, I’m sorry to say, this is as close as we have come to a diagnosis. What caused atrophy so soon, though, is a mystery. But most children with this don’t survive into adulthood. In Russia, they have developed a treatment to minimize the vascular lesions, but it is only cosmetic. If you are concerned about her appearance, I can make arrangements for her to be seen by the Russian specialists.”

Dr. Utzinger paused and waited.

“It’s my fault. I should never have had her. There was something wrong with the pregnancy or maybe ... yes, it’s a good idea to go to Russia. They can do something there.” My mother tried to hold back her tears while the other men in the room listened to the conversation abstractly.

“There is a risk, Kate. It could become worse with treatment. I suggest you consider it carefully.” Dr. Utzinger was calm and reassuring. Then he turned to me.

“What do you want to do?” he asked. I felt sincerity in his question.

“I will be fine. I have God.”

I felt strong. I lifted myself off the table and walked across the room to gather my clothes from where they lay on the sterile chair in the corner. I passed the men in their white lab coats and smiled, then I told them one by one, “Thank you for your time,” and I left the room.

I was silent as we returned to Sis’s house. Her home didn’t feel like a home. It was made of large blocks of concrete and had a pool that caused everything in it to be one shade of grey. In the back of my mind, I kept hearing my mother repeating over and over that it was all her fault.

* * *

I watched as the flood of painful memories kept playing like a movie in my mind. In each scene, I saw myself being knocked down and standing up again. Then, the scenes were replaced with the image of the toy that my stepfather had given my sister when she was born just a year after they married. It was a blow-up toy, a plastic cone with a clown face and a weight in the bottom. Each time she would knock it down, the clown bounced back, and my stepfather laughed with joy at her accomplishment.

It was symbolic irony in a way. He never hurt her, never even yelled at Kalli. She was his flesh and blood. I knew she was safe with him. I never asked God why. I knew why. My stepfather wanted to break my spirit, the way his had been broken years earlier. I had always stood up to him, and told him it was wrong to treat me the way he did. I didn't need a future promise from God to save me. I had faith because He had already placed His spirit in me.

Kalli was a beautiful baby, and I loved her. I never resented her. I didn't need my stepfather's love. God was with me. I spent hours teaching Kalli new things, and her smile when we were alone together amazed me. I knew she was looking at me and somehow understood all the things she saw happening in our house. Kalli knew why she was there. She was the one who made it a home, not my parents and not my brother. It was Kalli who kept us together with her smile of wonder. But I knew it was all very temporary.

Adults often show us the world through the wrong set of lenses. But when the child of wonder encounters God, she is not afraid. Kalli was a child of wonder, but she was also afraid. My stepfather made her afraid. She needed me to hold her hand and introduce her to God. I had to be there for her. I had to share what I knew as truth. Truth would light our path.

There is a *story of wonder* that is very powerful. A friend once told me this simple tale. I know it only in its spoken version. I can't credit the author, but the meaning isn't lost in my brief version.

I took a child by the hand and showed her the expanses of our world. We traveled far and left no stone unturned. I wanted her to see everything that God had created. Then we met God, and the child fell asleep. I took a child by the hand and showed him the magnitude of our world. We flew to the highest peak to hear the thunder and see the lightning. We dove into the ocean to feel the crashing of the giant waves. Then we met God, and the child hid behind me. So I asked a child to join

me on a journey. We walked through the fields and stopped to look at a small chrysalis hanging from a branch. We laughed as we made snow angels and then danced around in the wind with the swaying trees. We were so filled with wonder and awe. Then we met God, and the child took God's hand.

I may have been only a child, but spiritually I understood the truth that the adults around me refused to see. I did not regret those things that happened to me. They happened, and they were real. They did not leave me free of emotion, but I learned not to think how life might have been. Instead I saw truth in what it was. They were a part of me but didn't destroy me. I was not ashamed. I never felt shame in any way. They weren't a cloud over me. Instead, they were reminders of all that I struggled for and accomplished in adversity. They were a sign to me that I had overcome because of God's hand in my life. I was weak, and I could break, but I was also strong. I was never lost. Hope was not gone from me. I put aside fear because hope freed me from mere mediocrity, from living only a minor existence, and freed me to have a major influence in the lives of other people. Hopeful thinking regenerated hope in me. Courage and strength led me beyond my weaknesses. My greatest reward of all was just being with God. I began with Him, and I could end with Him. Nothing else mattered more.

God's voice filled me with wonder so I could enjoy the world with Him:

*I am God.
I am your God.
You have always known who I am.
I have always been here with you.
I love you!*

CHAPTER 4

Killing the Pain

Only God can reconcile suffering through fellowship and offer the needed change that must come by knowing Him.

“Don’t do it, Kate.” His voice was shaking as he said the words.

My stepfather stood facing my mother at a distance of three or four yards. He was holding the chain that held the metal gate closed over the cattle guard. I watched the dangling chain as it swayed back and forth. He leaned against the post and bent one knee, trying to appear unfazed. I could see his black boot tip kick up dust from the ground. Above his head, at least fifteen feet high, was the name of our ranch burnt into a long piece of saw-cut wood. It read, “Little Okacita,” and was the sign above the entrance to our horse ranch in Conroe. It was the smaller version of our Okacita Ranch in Kerrville. The time was 1971, and I was ten years old.

My stepfather’s gaze was disturbing. I was only a little girl, but I knew the look of fear. It was the look also of risk demanding a decision, after which there could be no turning back. He was facing the possibility of sudden death, and it was smack in front of him. How he played his role would determine the outcome.

I stood behind my mother as she steadied the rifle, bracing it between her arm and chest. Her finger was on the trigger, ready for release. She was an experienced hunter and knew what she was doing. This was a calculated attempt to free herself of him.

I had been asleep on the back seat during the drive to Conroe, then awakened as we pulled off the main roadway and onto the dirt road leading to

our ranch. The earth in Conroe was red with clay deposits. When it rained, it stuck to everything like a thick mold. But today was dry. She had opened the trunk after he got out and asked me to hand her the rifle. The sheath still covered it as she took it from me forcefully.

As I stood behind her, I wondered what she was going to do to him. There was a moment of engagement when their eyes met, almost as if they were ready to say I'm sorry, but the words never came. We just all stood there in a long pause that seemed to last forever. No one moved. No one dared!

Then came an instant like that moment when you know you have lost a race as your opponent passes you, and then you pull back in relief that it is over. You exhale a deep breath and convince yourself that you don't care, that it was just a race. In that moment, my mother pulled the rifle toward her, let the butt rest on her boot for a moment, and then returned it to its sheath and placed it in the trunk. The sound of the trunk lid as it closed sent shockwaves through my body. And the only thought that entered my mind was, "I wish she had killed him."

He opened the gate quietly, not looking at either of us. I grabbed a stick from the side of the road and tapped it on the ground a few times to be sure it was strong. Then I went through the gate and began walking down the winding dirt drive to the ranch house. My mother drove past me in the car faster than usual, as if she was in a big hurry to get somewhere, but the road was a dead end. The tires kicked up dust that stung my eyes. I slipped through the trees toward the stables and spent the rest of my day with God down by the well pump.

What made my mother hate him so much that she was willing to kill him to get rid of her pain, the pain she saw as belonging to her alone? What had he done to her, and, more important was the question, what had he *not* done for her that caused her to despise him? When did they stop giving their love to one another and turn their gift of joy into hatred and pain that could be released only by complete separation, even by physical death?

My mother felt that as long as he was alive, she would never be free. But it was an illusion in her mind. She could leave him. What stopped her from leaving, though, was easy to understand. She didn't know how to survive on her own. He had control of everything. She had tied and bound herself to him, but then had discovered that she had answered the wrong call.

He had tied himself to her and still loved her. Neither of them could dissolve their love, regardless of how hard they tried. Divorcing would solve nothing.

She was stuck in the consequences of her life being intertwined with his. Their love had produced children, and she couldn't reverse time to get rid of them too. Or could she? How do you bring yourself to love someone so much that you are able to let him or her go? I was no longer a child, and I was not an adult, yet I knew deep feelings of the heart. I had loved both of them and trusted them. Now, I was caught in a tangled web, unable to move along with them. I knew only one freedom, the freedom to choose God as my parent to guide me and to love me. What better example?

I didn't know how to talk to them about God, and they didn't want to listen.

A few weeks later, we were driving on a street in Houston in the dark of night. My mother had gathered us in the car, still in our pajamas. Kalli was wrapped in a blanket in the front seat, leaning against my mother. My mother's arm cradled her while her left hand was free to steer. Farish complained from the backseat every time my mother made a turn or hit a hole in the street. She swerved a few times when she wasn't paying attention. She had a faraway look that shifted between glassy-eyed and strong determination. I could make out her features only as we passed under a streetlight, then her face would go dark until a half second later when I could see her again. It all felt familiar, like the flashing red lights you see after an accident.

The night lingered on, and I didn't know where we were going. I closed my eyes, hoping to fall asleep and wake up in my warm bed. I turned and rested my forehead against the cold glass window on the passenger's side. My bangs pushed into the skin on my brow and felt rough, but I didn't care. I just wanted to go home.

We stopped across from a tall building with a large fountain at the entrance. I could see the water shoot into the air and the light flickering off the drops as they came down. It was beautiful, and I was now wide-awake. Spotlights illuminated the words "River Oaks Apartments." I looked up, my eyes ascending to each floor where there was a light in the window. Long curtains covered most of the windows except near the top floor. I didn't count how many floors there were.

Just then, a figure appeared in one of the windows—the thin outline of a woman. She walked once to the right, stopped, and then I didn't see her. She came again into view with something in her hand and drank from what must have been a glass. A man walked up behind her, touched her hips and wrapped

his arms around her waist. When she turned and they disappeared, I looked down. My eyes were starting to hurt, and I turned toward my mother.

“That’s your father,” she said in a strange tone of voice. She meant my stepfather.

“What is he doing here?” I asked so innocently. None of this made sense to me.

She explained that he lived here now. But how could that be? I had just seen him this morning at breakfast, so I didn’t believe her. I realized then that she wanted me there as a witness. But what was I witnessing? It was all very confusing, this war. Where were the battle lines?

When Farish and I played war, we divided the soldiers and arms equally, but we played on both sides. No one really dominated the game. We just played. Some of his soldiers had bayonets, and others had rifles. Some carried flags. We had Indians that joined the ranks, and on occasion, my dolls fought alongside his GI Joes. Many times this game gave me nightmares. I would wake up and know it wasn’t real. Then I would dream a better ending. What I couldn’t erase was the war that was raging inside the hearts of the people I loved and who were responsible for taking care of us—for taking care of me.

Instead of helping me understand why they now hated each other, they used me in their game as a scout and spy. They were so good at it that I didn’t know what they were doing until they coerced the information out of me. Then, they accused me and tried to convince me that it was my fault and neither one trusted me. I was left more in the dark than anyone could imagine. But God was always the light in the darkness. He taught me to understand and still love.

To add to this game, they brought in nurses and maids as allies, and nothing was left of our family; they assigned their own responsibilities to someone else. It was hard to decide where the battle zone ended. But I eventually made my way to the sidelines and observed from a distance.

Kalli was the spoil, Farish had already deserted, and my mother was pregnant with Kara. It was a matter of survival, and I did what I could to disengage.

All my parents’ hope seemed gone, and the downward spiral had begun. It was elusive at first. They weren’t even aware of what was enveloping their souls. They began to fade away while I tried to hold on to who they really were.

With all their hatred came a strange confusion. They were no longer my parents, and I thought the goodness in them might be extinguished forever. Each one had exceptional gifts to offer this world, but they caused each other

to die inside. I watched my mother wake up each morning and then wander around with no place to go. I didn't know how to help her except to just be there and listen. Nothing led her forward; nothing brought her back. It was like an abyss of the mind, and there was no bottom to it.

My mother and stepfather were now lost, and I wasn't sure that even God could find them.

I heard their voices crying in the distance:

*Oh, Lord.
I feel so lonely and afraid.
Give me the courage and strength
To live my life!*

CHAPTER 5

God Holds My Paintbrush

*Roots never formed to hold me to the ground, then God lifted me
up so I could paint the sky.*

The trees in our backyard were blushing with kumquats. The kumquat fruit was similar to the fruit of an apricot and had a leathery skin of golden orange color that contrasted beautifully with the leaves that surrounded it. I didn't hesitate. The outside beckoned me to join the chorus and to paint the world. It was still 1971. I was a girl, a young lady, and ten years old.

I ran out of my bedroom, nearly slipping on the pink shag carpet. The soles of my sandals had no treads, and I grabbed the doorframe to pivot and swing around. I came down the hallway singing an old schoolyard song: "Say, say my playmate, come out and play with me, then we'll be jolly three," but something stopped me abruptly.

Rosa, our housekeeper, grabbed me by the waist and startled me. She began to talk to me so quietly that I had to hold my breath to listen. The seriousness of her words made me forget about going outside.

"Your parents are divorcing, and you are moving," she said softly in a calm but authoritative voice.

"Why? Where are we going?" I asked, but Rosa didn't tell me. She never told me anything. No one ever told me anything, but I knew.

I went back into my room and sat down in the corner on the floor. I listened to the voices in the living room but couldn't make out the words. Then, I heard my grandfather's voice, and I peeked through the slit in the folding doors. My room had originally been the study, and my queen-size bed frame

was pushed against the doors connecting it to the living room to keep them closed. I could hear every sound in the house through those doors. I often heard my mother and stepfather arguing, using cruel words, then testing each other's resolve and slipping away. Later, I heard kind words exchanged between them as they pleaded again for affection. Our house was filled with human voices that made it hard to be still and know God. If they would just stop and listen, they might feel God's hand reach toward them. Not all the goodness was absent. There remained the kind voices of children who shared love unconditionally. It was the only love children understood, the only love I would ever understand.

The large windows of my room gave me a panoramic view of the front yard. I pulled on the cord, opening the drapes until light filled the space. I could easily look up toward the magnolia tree now. At night, I often heard the azalea bushes rustle to even the slightest breeze outside my windows. Then the air conditioning would come on and hum me to sleep.

I couldn't see my grandfather through the folding doors, but I was glad he was there to help my mother. I loved my grandfather, who always smelled like bourbon and horse sweat mixed together. He played polo and rode every day but still managed to watch over and protect his daughter. I loved my mother as well, but I found it hard to follow her. Her path rarely crossed mine.

I reached for a box of tissues and began pulling out each one, counting them as they spiraled slowly on to my lap. Then I thought about Cristina and the many times we had made doll furniture and blankets just from small cuttings of tissue paper. I started folding, and before I knew how much time had passed, I had created an entire world made of tissue.

Tissue paper houses filled with tissue paper people—I thought of how life could easily be constructed but leave everyone vulnerable and fragile. My family had been folded together and now was being torn apart. I wasn't sad or happy about their decision to divorce, but I thought it was wrong—wrong that two people had forgotten to ask God to be with them. If God could move mountains, He could turn paper into a home for us. He just had to be asked.

My mother was an elegant woman. She had amazing skills. But her dreams were cut apart before she had a chance to build them. My stepfather only saw what she couldn't do and criticized her weaknesses. She tried to make my stepfather love her the way God loved her.

My stepfather was a stockbroker, specializing in initial stock offerings—he was far ahead of the times, but my mother only saw what he had not yet attained. My brother had the ability to make friends quickly and could make anyone laugh, but his laughter was never heard in our house. My sister could entertain everyone and make them smile, but her talents were used only to pacify. And I—I had an old soul, but I wasn't allowed to speak wise words. They kept God away from real matters of the heart and only for Sundays. We were considered the ideal family, so much so that an advertising firm put our faces on bank brochures and filmed us in commercials that were seen all over Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio. It was difficult to look up at our faces plastered on billboards as we drove down the highway. How was it possible that no one knew that our family was made of paper?

Farish came into my room and watched while I finished cutting paper. He didn't say anything. He just came over to my tissue paper house, looked at it, and blew it away in one big breath. I looked at him from the corner of my eye, then crawled over to a large wooden trunk of costumes and pulled out a green army coat. We never said a word; we just walked in silence as we always did when life was taking us someplace uncertain. It was a bump in the road, a beaten path that led somewhere. But it held possibility and opportunity for change.

I heard doors open and others shut as we walked down the long hallway. I saw our mother leave, and I followed Farish into his room to play soldiers. I wanted to use the cannons, the metal ones that shot real pellets. He agreed but wouldn't allow me to use his collection of tin soldiers in the display cabinet. They were too special for this game.

I didn't pay attention to when my mother came home. She came and left so often that I was used to her leaving. There had been a time I would cry when she went away. Now, it seemed normal. I still loved her, but I understood her limitations to love.

Occasionally, she told me stories of her life when she was married to my father, but I knew only fragments of their lives *during* their marriage. My parents were separated when I was born. I remember that he had a wonderful smile. He smiled to make up for all the loss he had experienced in his life. He was an orphan, separated from his twin sister and sent to a home for boys in Northwest Texas when family members refused to take him in. He had been separated at the heart; this was something I always understood about him, and

I knew he couldn't be more than he was for me. Perhaps my mother knew this as well.

By the time he was fifteen years of age, he had run away from the orphanage and vowed to find his sister. As he made his way down the state, he worked on construction crews and cotton farms and began to learn the crafty art of salesmanship. This was the path he chose. It took him several years to reach Houston with enough money in his pocket to try his hand in real estate. It wasn't long before he was occupied with a very influential group of friends. At least, he *assumed* they were friends. It was this naive spirit and entrepreneurial savvy that would cause his rise and his fall.

His friendship with the Moody boys from Galveston brought associated wealth and the connections he thought he needed to be happy. Within a short time, my father was attending debutante balls and escorting women of the highest social status. This is where he met my mother, and this was where he thought he wanted to be. But he didn't understand the power he was flirting with or that he was in over his head.

* * *

My grandfather was Bob Farish, a wealthy oilman who relied heavily on the guidance of his older brothers, Will and Steve. Everyone called him Mr. Bob. He was a tall slip of a man who dressed and filled the part of a fine gentleman of aristocracy. He always wore gloves while driving and eating. He never touched a plate that another person had touched. He said it contaminated the food. This is how he developed such a strong friendship with Howard Hughes, who had lived down the street when they were boys together. Howard married Ella Rice, who later became my grandfather's sister-in-law. Few people understood their disorder, but this is what made my grandfather and Mr. Hughes special.

My grandparents were no longer married. My grandmother had remarried Dr. Ted Hannon, who was originally from Door County in Wisconsin. Pop-Ted practiced medicine in Houston. In my grandmother's words, Bob, Pop-Pop, was not made to be a husband. He was a philanthropist and played polo, hardly paying attention to his wife. The odd piece in their relationship was that they remained great friends throughout life. My grandmother, Ted, and Bob shared a meal together each week, and Bob came over after riding daily to walk through her gardens. They were all good friends, seen at parties

together and at club dinners. Friends and acquaintances accepted their threesome as unique but genuine. I never imagined it was abnormal to behave that way.

When my mother had her debutant party, the threesome was there, sharing equally in the responsibilities. It all seemed quite civil. She was presented through the Allegro Club at the Bayou, Houston, and River Oaks country clubs.

* * *

My father, Don Hargrove, had no legacy, no name, and no power, but by that time, he was able to buy his way into society. He had made a few million by his twenty-first birthday and by all accounts was building trust with the old guard of Houston. However, when he swept my mother off her feet, my grandparents did not approve of him or his friends. And my mother simply didn't know how to handle her dominating family.

You would think my father, Don, would have known by then what he was walking into. But he didn't. He was not ready for the control each family would exhibit over her decisions after they married. And he had no idea how powerful the roles were that each family played in Houston.

She became pregnant, and Don tried to do the honorable thing by marrying her in a quiet wedding. When my grandmother, Fay, found out, she was ashamed and afraid of what people might think and made my mother have an abortion. My father was never the same. Nor, do I think, was my mother.

A few years later, my brother was born. It was Don who chose his name—Farish Power Hargrove—believing that my mother's maiden name would someday help my brother. Ironically, my great-grandmother was named Katherine Power and was descended from the Earls of Ireland. My father didn't understand how power was made. Giving someone a powerful name didn't bring power; it only brought pretense, not presence.

My parents didn't stay in Houston for long. My father was restless, and they moved to Canada and several other places. It was in California that my mother began to be frightened by the friends he was making. Don was in yet another real estate venture but becoming more secretive. One night he came home late. He had been drinking and entered the house with several men who were well armed. She recognized their connections with organized

crime, something she was familiar with. She was scared and called my grandfather in Houston.

Within hours, a private car pulled into the driveway and took my mother and Farish to a private plane that flew them back to Houston. Just as easily, my grandparents removed Don from my mother's life. My grandfather purchased a house for my mother in Houston. Don did return to Houston a year later but remained distant. However, on one occasion, Don tried to reunite with my mother by storming into the house. My grandfather convinced her to call the police. That night she became pregnant with me.

This was the legacy I lived with, but I never felt it was my story or connected to my future. My life was with God, and He gave me a better place to call home.



My brother and I spent our first years in a house on Chimney Rock, and on that street I met Cristina.

I remained friends with Cristina after my mother remarried and we moved to a house in Memorial, a suburb of Houston. Cristina and I spent hours playing games of adventure. It was easy for us to let our imaginations take over and transport us to another place in time. Her life was as complicated as mine. Born of a wealthy Cuban mother and father of Houston society, Cristina had her own legacy to endure. Her grandfather had been a renowned Cuban journalist, and she kept his black-and-white photograph near her heart while she dreamed of following in his footsteps someday. Each time, we played our game of imagination until we were asked to stop, and then continued when we were together again. The game wasn't far removed from our real lives, except *we* chose the players.

"Who do you want to fly your plane today? I pick John Davidson, because he can sing while he pilots," I said, jumping back into our imaginative game.

"You always pick him. Why don't you be more extravagant and pick Rudolf Nureyev or Baryshnikov?" asked Cristina, biting the edge of her lower lip.

"Why would I want a dancer as a pilot? Let's have a theater in the plane this time, and an Oshmans Store. We need tents and skis on the island. I didn't have any hiking gear on the beach last time," I said as I moved the dolls around in position for takeoff.

Cristina immediately disputed the idea. “I’m not sleeping in tents,” she said.

Then our game paused, and she asked the question I didn’t want to answer. I didn’t want her to know I was leaving soon. Cristina had never been brave, but it must have taken courage to ask me.

“When are you moving to Aspen?” she asked. Her eyes became red and spilled tears as she looked up at me. My parents hadn’t finalized the divorce; they were separating, and now it seemed all too real.

Cristina and I were best friends, our lives so interconnected by a great need. We needed someone to trust in this world, someone we could count on to always be there through thick and thin. Cristina didn’t believe in God. She couldn’t. She needed others too much, and her emotions were too fragile for her to entrust them to someone or something. She needed things she could hold on to, things that were familiar and that she had tested. If it was sound and could hold her, even then she hesitated to get on board. Only in her fantasies did she really take risks. Our personalities were different, but our friendship was the same. Our friendship overcame the limitations in this world, and we entered the realm of adventure where anything was possible.

We created kingdoms and dynasties, handpicked the performers and the scenes. It was all one great vision. But while she was busy in make-believe, I was formulating a plan for how to improve the world. Kingdoms became world governments, performers became ambassadors of change, and scenes became scripted peace initiatives. I wanted to change the world. I wanted to make a difference.

* * *

I realized at an early age that I was unique in my family. I assumed it was because God guided my thoughts and held my hand, and because His guidance brought goodness into my life and the lives of others. What greater parent could I have asked for? I saw everything as a great quest for the solution to world hunger, to disarmament, to equality of wealth. I thought there should be a new definition of wealth. I never understood people’s value systems. To me it was so confusing. Why would anyone buy a house with twenty bedrooms and ten bathrooms when they could travel and help others with their money? Why did countries have boundaries that confined its citizens? Why

did international trade agreements exist, and yet we could set embargoes at any time? How could two people be allowed to create war?

Why did people befriend each other, love each other, then kill each other the next day? Only God had the answers, and I wanted to be His instrument of change.

* * *

Eventually, Don, my father, took another wrong turn. Just as my mother had, he remarried. He eloped with a young girl named Susan Andrews. (That was only six months after my mother had married Richard Rivers and was pregnant with Kalli.) My father's old friend, Robert Moody, arranged for the wedding in Galveston.

When my father and his new bride returned to Houston, her parents tried to have their marriage annulled. Then they continued with their plans and hosted a debutante party for her in their home—as though the elopement had never happened. Don arrived, assuming that he was welcome, only to find he was being grilled and his character defamed by Mr. Andrews, who was head of a prestigious law firm. The last person Don spoke to that night was an old friend. He told her that he was frightened for his life and that “they” were after him. She was very concerned and wanted to meet with him. No one except my father knows what happened that night.

My father's body was found on Christmas morning.

* * *

A few months had passed, and moving didn't seem like such a foreign idea. I even began to welcome it. We went to see my grandfather to say good-bye; I knew I would miss him. He lived at Lamar Towers and had around-the-clock care from a nurse. My grandfather developed Alzheimer's at a young age and remained confined to his home.

“Pop-Pop, will you come and visit me after we move?” I asked my grandfather as I tried to sit on the plastic-covered sofa in his living room. It was obvious why he had been friends with Mr. Hughes.

I couldn't sit comfortably, so I walked around, picking up framed pictures of his brothers and sister. The frames were stacked neatly on a shelf in the secretary cabinet. Harrison was the brother who had died early. “Hap” was the name they called him. I always liked that name. My grandfather had played

polo with his younger brother, Steve, and started Huisache Polo Club, named after their riding ranch on Post Oak. Their trophies sat on a shelf above the pictures. The large trophy cups and bowls glistened from being polished recently.

Photographs of his horses framed the walls. My grandfather loved to be out in the elements, in a sweat-drenched shirt and helmet playing polo in squelching heat. Yet all his furniture was protected by plastic. Even his car still had the original plastic seat covers. He had traveled across the world to receive honors as a polo player and now was trapped within the boundaries he had set for himself in his own home. What was he protecting?

The boundaries of a polo field are similar to the boundaries that had shaped my entire family legacy up to that point in time. At a glance, a polo field appears to be an open plateau waiting patiently for play to begin. The goalposts are set eight yards apart, allowing ample room for several ponies to come racing through. Identified by red paint on the lower eighth of the goalposts and often sideboards that mark the sidelines of the field, the game is bound on all sides.

Last-minute preparations are made as the players arrive and park their vehicles and bring their ponies out from the trailers. Horses on leads are left to graze in the tall grass while others are tied off. Their tails are braided and taped to keep them from catching a player's mallet during the game.

The spectators fill the private boxes or walk around socializing. But no one really watches or understands how the game is played. No one wants to know the truth and the sacrifices made when a horse dies from sheer exhaustion or is permanently lamed or blinded by a mallet. These are the consequences of the game, and all players understand the risk. Their lives are at stake, but so are their livelihoods, for they are judged by their performance. It could make or break them.

I loved polo as long as all honor and respect was given to the horses by their riders and the crowds that enjoy that game. It is the sport of kings and of servants.

I thought about the game of polo and how the game had established who I was, but this was not what I wanted to be. I had been a spectator, unable to break away from events that were out of my control. My life wasn't a game, but my family had tried to make it one. Life must have meaning and purpose! God now offered me a chance. My mother was about to set our lives on a new

course, and I wanted God right there with me. I needed to take up my reins and never look back.

There in my grandfather's apartment, I continued looking around at his beautiful possessions, wondering if he had enjoyed them. Did he remember what they meant to him? He'd had so many adventures growing up in the early part of the century, and he had always enjoyed telling me his stories. But now, he was little more than a man who had lost all memory of his past.

Again I asked him, "Pop-Pop, will you come and visit me after we move? Will you come and see me?"

"Of course darlin', and I will take you out to dance," he said as he lifted his eyebrows and tapped his gray gloves on his hip. He was wearing a wrinkled nightshirt made of white cotton, and I could see only a few strands of blond hair left on his balding head. He was unshaven, but he still maintained the elegance and dignity of a world class gentleman. I was amazed! I enjoyed his smile for a few more minutes.

I knew he wouldn't come to Aspen. It was a nice dream, but I was leaving everything behind in Houston—my roots, my past, my legacy—because it offered only one path to my future. I was uprooted; the Farish blood no longer defined me, and I realized I would be okay.



I discovered that living in hope had an amazing benefit: it offered renewal. It enabled me to start all over again, create a new life, and wear a new skin. As soon I started on the journey, I made new connections. Without my knowing that limitations existed, God initiated those journeys, and I was more than willing to accompany Him. Besides, I knew that He held my paintbrush and my hand and that I could paint the world the way He showed it to me. I was ready to see it through His eyes.

I had no fear. Fear doesn't even exist in hopeful people. Hope brings about a feeling of dignity that can't be replaced by anything else because it transports us beyond our present circumstances. I chose to be hopeful and move outside myself. All I had to do was think about lifting up and helping someone else for just that split second, and in the next ten minutes, I'd started on a path with God to fulfill the journey. I wanted to experience the results of taking action. Results would come because, without expectations, without fear, I could just do it. I stood up and started walking. I saw light where there was none. I said

yes to God, the right voice, when all I knew was confusion. And I let God take the lead as I never had before. I was no longer a child, and I put away the things of a child.

My voice responded to God:

*Yes, Lord,
I have always known who you are.
You have always been here with me.
I am not afraid!*

Learning to Deliver the Message

As *you* walk along your journey, you have met many people along the way. Some have joined you, and some have looked away. You are ready to deliver God's message of hope, but not everyone is willing to listen. You know human love is conditional as you continue to carry the invitation of God. You realize that you must learn new ways to reach out to people so they will read God's psalm.

You see invitations being blown about by the wind. Are you discouraged by the confusion that surrounds you? Or are you directed by God to keep walking?

Some invitations fall to the ground and are taken up again by the wind.

Now you see children running around picking up the invitations and talking to each other. You watch mothers caught up in their daily work suddenly stop and listen. You note fathers standing around a table holding on to invitations that were hidden in their pockets. They are wondering where the invitations came from.

You see travelers in trains reading. Airline passengers hold up the invitation in one hand while taking a sip from their glass with the other. At bus stops, strangers begin to talk, and teachers in schools read a new letter to their students.

All seems so simple now. You see God in everything as He shows *you* His world.

CHAPTER 6

Hearing the Music

*Into my heart entered the music,
the rhythm of God and His song.*

Rain in the valley was cleansing. It poured down the mouth of the leaves of the aspen trees. Rain danced off the boulders strewn here and there on the mountainside and, in waves, threw itself against the rooftops of our Aspen home. It was 1974. I was now thirteen years of age.

I loved the rain and went out in it every chance I had. I didn't care if it drenched my clothes and the long strands of my hair. It felt amazing. It was a gift from heaven, and it was completely free for the taking. And I partook of its cleansing.

My family had lived in Aspen for three years. We returned to Houston during the summer, and my stepfather visited Aspen, but much of the turbulence in our lives had subsided.

I rode Dixie in the rain. His single stable was at the end of the long staircase below the deck of the house. He wouldn't accept a bit, and most of the time I just mounted his back, no reins, no blanket or saddle. He was as unconstrained as I was. We shared a similar spirit. I knew and understood his stubbornness. He was a quarter horse. He had the stamina and character of a quarter horse but still had the composure of a thoroughbred. It couldn't be bred out of him or surgically removed by gelding him. He had the spirit of a great stallion.

Our property on Red Mountain extended to the top of the mountain and adjoined Hunter Creek. That was where I spent my afternoons with Dixie.

On our walks together, we talked about many things. Mostly, I created a memory from every blade of grass and tree we passed. I memorized the sound of Dixie's hoof fall when his hooves hit the ground, as though someday this would all be gone and I would need the memory. We walked along as I counted the steps, like the march to the beat of a drum. We were the drummers, inviting nature to join us. Hoofbeats faded away, the path became grass, and I waited patiently in anticipation until I heard the distant sound of the roaring river to my right. Then there it was, always faithful.

That sound—humming and building, rushing around and filling the air with a powerful mist—was what I wanted to hear. I could smell the mist from the river. It was so close now. This was the entrance to God's garden, the place that He still tended. It was right behind Red Mountain.

Dixie and I followed the river up to the clearing. It was there that the sun met the golden grain of the earth and touched it from heaven. God was in this place, and I could return any time I wanted.

Dixie knew what was next. I leaned forward and squeezed my legs at his girth, and we broke into a canter. We sailed across the open expanse. Nothing could hold us back. When we reached the end, we turned around and raced back, over and over again. Stopping to rest in the center of the field, I wiped the sweat from my brow. Then, I dismounted by sliding off Dixie's back and kissed him just under his eye.

"Thank you," I said.

I walked to the creek and removed my boots. Slowly dipping my toes in until they were used to the icy water, I waded in and reached the middle where there was a large boulder. Then I climbed up on it and lay back, stretching out on its granite shoulder. Water rushed around me so that I was separated from the land. Every problem in the world was at rest in this place, content to live out the purpose it was designed for.

Dixie wandered around. When he was ready, he came into the water to find me and pressed his head against my side to let me know it was time. I mounted his back, and we heaved ourselves up onto the bank. An eddy of warm water washed back along our sides and felt good as we emerged.

We were dry by the time we reached the outer edge of the clearing. A warm breeze touched my skin, and then I heard it—the *grace note*. A major, then a minor; the tempo built and raised a half note, then waited ... waited ... in anticipation ... waited, then the expected note that must come, that graces the music and causes all to look up in reverence, to reach a level that seems

impossible. It was the music—the music that brings every living thing to be still and listen for the call of its own name, knowing that God is there.

I spent many days in the clearing with Dixie. Everything that I needed to understand about life, I learned in the clearing. In the beginning, God made children. Adam and Eve were merely children, spiritually children. They thought as children and had no understanding of the tree of knowledge or the tree of life. They walked and talked with God, still holding His hand. They had forgotten to let go.



Returning home from school one afternoon, I came upon a scene that broke my heart and changed my resolve forever.

“What are you doing?” I asked when I saw the trainer and my stepfather leading Dixie on a rope toward a trailer. Though my parents had been separated for several years, he occasionally would appear, my parents would be together for a day or two, and then he would just leave again. We would be left to pick up the pieces.

I knew something valuable was being taken away from me and that I wasn’t going to get it back.

“She gave him to me! You can’t just haul him away!”

These were the words I thought as I watched the three men put Dixie in the trailer and then drive away. My stepfather never said a word, never looked at me, never let me say good-bye. He just took away one more thing that I loved, my friend—like he always did. He never said he was sorry. I never heard those words.

My mother had invited him into our lives again!

I went into the stable. Even the saddle and bridle were gone. I shut the door and sat down in the corner and didn’t move for hours. I couldn’t.

Days went by. I didn’t know where to go. I didn’t feel like sitting on the roof or taking a walk. I had to learn to let go again and learn where to place my trust.

Then my mother told me that we were going to the East Coast to visit boarding schools. I don’t remember the plane ride. We toured Fox Croft, Madera, Choate, Rosemary, and then Chatham Hall. By then, she had convinced me that this was a good decision, and I chose Chatham Hall in Virginia. It *was* a good decision. Maybe being on my own was important now.

We flew home in silence. I packed my bags and then went to say good-bye to the field where Dixie and I had run. I stood in the middle of the clearing and cried as I fell on my knees. Looking around, I said, "I will remember you."

Then, as I was leaving, I thought I heard something. I listened again and I thought I heard, so quietly, a barely audible sound, the grace note of God's music. The symphony played, and all was well. And I realized that I could take this with me wherever I might go. And I have. His music is always with me, gracing my life.

I laughed and spun around in circles, leaving trails in the tall grass. *I'm free!* I thought. *I can go anywhere.* I ran smiling out of the clearing and headed down the path of a new life. No one could ever take anything away from me again because I had it in a memory with God.



For the next few years—while I was at Chatham Hall—my sisters, brother, and I were transported from one place to another. We learned that we could survive.

My stepfather had to learn to survive as well. He had been asked to leave his position as head of the Food Corporation in Houston when stockholders read gossip column accounts of his excursions to Aspen in the company jet. We were able to travel anywhere in the jet, but not with my father's girlfriends. They weren't much older than I was. The final straw came when he lined his office and his house on Locke Lane in Houston with suede. He was too visible, and Sam Douglass and Doc Pfeffer asked him to move on. He didn't quiet down his lifestyle, however.

He moved to Lexington, Kentucky, bought a tobacco plantation, and began investing in racehorses. He tried to walk in the footsteps of my mother's cousin, Will Farish, and in doing so, made many costly mistakes. I traveled to Lexington and went to horse auctions with him during school breaks. I sat around while film crews recorded his new movie on his property, and, when he remembered that I was around, I had to pay immediate attention to him.

My stepfather enjoyed showing off his possessions and took all newly arrived guests on a grand tour of his property. He found pleasure in describing the history of his tobacco farm, the house, and the servants' quarters.

I spent time in the pool house, the only building on the property that felt like home because it had furniture from the house in Houston. I didn't know his maid, and she had no interest in knowing me. She just told me to stay out of her way. She seemed to find a strange freedom in her work as long as she was left alone to do it. Oddly though, she didn't want a relationship with anyone, especially me, who could have affirmed her dignity. I valued her and her work.

One day I found chains in the basement where slaves had been bound. The discovery sent a cold chill down my spine. The house had been built before Emancipation in the 1860s. How could anyone have treated another human being as nothing more than an animal? The thought sickened me, and I never returned to the basement after that day.

One summer my mother drove through Lexington to drop off my sisters for a few weeks. My parents occasionally still spent time together. Though they were divorced by now, my mother was never able to free herself from him. We had gone out to dinner, and something went wrong. The waitress made a small mistake that set off my stepfather's temper. Kalli boldly talked back to him and stood up for the waitress. She had not done this before. He couldn't release his anger on Kalli because he loved her too much to ever hurt her.

He was fuming in the car as we drove back to his house, cussing the woman as he swerved back and forth on the road. We finally arrived, but the caretaker and his wife were not waiting by the garage as my stepfather expected. He jammed the car into the first space in the five-car garage and went to find them, not shutting the door behind him. He just walked into the night looking for his victim. I could hear his voice echo in the distance as he called their names. It was a haunting call.

We got out of the car slowly, quietly, and I walked up to the screen door of the sunroom, hoping not to be seen. Suddenly, he ran toward me out of the darkness, but before he could grab me, the dog began to bark. The dog, leashed to a pole in the side yard, was protecting my sister, who was only steps away. It jumped in the air over and over again at him. It was a beautiful Siberian husky that he had purchased in Aspen. It had been a sled-racing dog that we all treated with great respect.

Kalli started to cry. The dog was now tangling itself in the leash. I watched my father pick up a newspaper, rolling it in his hands as he headed toward the dog. I had witnessed similar scenes so many times before. It was always

the same. He was playing out his role in the horror film of his childhood. He became a different person, acting as the violent man with the unloved child trapped inside. His fears transformed him, and he let the darkness consume him. Kalli screamed at him and told me to stop him. Everyone knew I was the only one who could stand up to him, but I didn't want to this time. It felt too dangerous, too risky.

He began to beat the dog as we watched. Over and over again, his hand came down on Julie's head while he held her tightly by the collar around her neck. He foamed at the mouth as he yelled. At last, I just couldn't take it and lunged toward him. He just threw me to the side. Kalli screamed in the doorway. My mother grabbed Kara, who was only an infant, and shielded her eyes. I grabbed at his leg, and he raised his hand toward me. Then I let go. He hit Julie one last time, and we all watched as she fell slowly to the ground. She was dead. No life pulsed within her.

I walked into the house, limp inside. I couldn't believe what I had just witnessed. There were no words to describe the emotions one feels in witnessing a killing. There were no weapons that night, just a killing hand that took life away. An empty wretchedness filled the space where life had once been but now had ceased to exist. My stepfather found no relief or satisfaction after the release of his anger. The minutes that followed my stepfather's violent act were ticking by. What I witnessed had made me wide awake to the evil in him. I saw it in his eyes, and he recognized it in himself. I now had knowledge of something that couldn't be hidden or washed away. I had always tried to see some good in him, but this changed everything. Could God still reach him?

I climbed the back stairway to my room. For some reason, on this visit, he told me to stay in the maid's quarters over the kitchen. I went in and began to pack, not knowing where we were going. I just knew we were leaving. My mother came in and said he was coming for me.

Did he want to kill me too? I didn't have time to think this through.

I turned around as he entered the room.

"Where are you going?" He yelled at me in a way that I will never forget. Foam was dripping from the side of his mouth. He had become the raging dog he killed.

"You killed it! Why?" I cried. "You killed it."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but you aren't going anywhere," he yelled back while his dark eyes shot right at me.

Then he hit me in the mouth so hard that he shoved my teeth back, and I felt a blood vessel break under my eye.

“I hope this teaches you not to pick on people bigger than you.” His words shattered the room as if it was made of glass—black glass.

My mother and I got into the car without Kalli or Kara. I couldn’t imagine that she would leave them behind, but she knew they were safe with him. He never touched them. She also knew that if we stayed, he *would* kill me.

We drove past the caretakers, who had witnessed the entire event. They had packed all their belongings and followed us in their car down the long row of trees that lined the plantation’s entrance, then they turned east on Versailles Road. They passed us and never went back after that night. They got away! I watched their car drive farther into the distance, and I wanted to be with them, strangers whom I hardly knew. I looked at the horse farms as we drove along in the night. Now and again I could see people moving about inside the large, well-lit living rooms. I wondered how it was possible that they didn’t know the things that happened in our family. How could they just sit there complacently and not respond? Someone had to hear, but they hadn’t. No one ever came to our rescue. But God was with us that night. I felt His presence protecting my sisters.

I didn’t care about the planes or the cars, the houses, or the yachts. They meant nothing to me. Money had no value to me. How could it? The more we had, the less we had. All I wanted was a home and a family that lived peacefully within it, but as long as we were together, my wish never came true. We were all left with no resolution to the conflict and struggle we endured, not while he was alive. Healing physically was easy compared to the emotional healing that became necessary. Rain is cleansing, but it also forms rainbows, beautiful bridges that I could walk across if I chose.



My mother and I returned to Aspen after this trip. She brought in nanny after nanny to raise my sisters in Aspen. The nannies lived at the house, and we were supposed to accept them as a new part of the family. It didn’t matter anymore. I didn’t trust her words now. She didn’t keep her promises. She went back to him and confided in him when she wanted to leave him. I tried to guide my sisters, but the nannies saw this as interfering in their roles.

Both parents had an excessive need to show off their wealth, and it occupied their time. It was as though they were competing against each other for the most attention. My mother threw elaborate parties, renting entire hotels for her guests to come and ski. Our house was in *Architectural Digest* and *Home and Garden*. I even came home one day to find *Playboy* magazine and models filming in our house.

I never knew what to expect. There were always strangers there. One winter, Diana Ross, her husband, and children rented the house. I came back to find my room empty and no clothes in the closet. They had turned it into a nursery. Then, I was introduced to President Somoza of Nicaragua as he sat in our upstairs living room with his children who attended Kent University, and his bodyguards who were stationed at all the entrances. It was no longer our home, and we were no longer a family.

The men who came into my mother's life while we lived in Aspen tried to help her, and they were good to her. But they were not what she needed. She thought they wanted to marry her. I discovered that most were still married but separated—and not planning to leave their wives. She was the other woman, and it seemed wrong. What happened to marriage and respect? I was a young girl looking for better role models, and instead all I saw was infidelity everywhere I turned. What a fool *I* was at times to believe in those men. They brought me gifts, but I didn't need their gifts. I needed my mother to learn to love again and to share God's love with me.

That was when I wrote my first mission statement. It emulated the character values of 1 Corinthians 13. From that moment forward, I applied my paraphrased version to my life.

If I could speak words of wisdom beyond my years, they would be heard only as noise if I withheld love and did not forgive. I could understand life that remained a mystery to others, and I could have enough faith for all to know, but I would be useless without God's love. What value would there be in giving everything and sacrificing much if I didn't share God's love? With love comes suffering but also great joy. It endures and makes us stronger. I never need recognition for what I have done or left undone, and only God deserves praise for what He does. But I give willingly, expecting nothing, especially from those who cannot give in return. And I seek truth. My

life must reflect my purpose to love others, to choose faith, to live a hope-filled life, because I already know God's greatest gift, and I want to share it with others. I feel loved.

I was determined to have a good life.

CHAPTER 7

The Goodness of Friends

*I have been blessed by the fountain of friendship,
and all that I receive I have already given.*

It was spring at Chatham. I was thirteen, and I was happy to be there. I learned while I was away that my mother's life had changed beyond measure. Both of my parents were spending well beyond their means, and years of extravagance were catching up with them. Unfortunately, my sisters now had to experience the pain that my mother was putting them through.

My mother was so depressed and lost that it finally took hold of her physically. She gained weight, cut her hair, and regressed emotionally into her teen years. It was hard to watch. Kalli and Kara were still at Aspen Country Day School, and her behavior and decisions had become embarrassing for them. It was more difficult for them than it was for me. But I wanted my mother to take care of her life, and I wondered how she could have come to this state. I wanted just to be her friend and remove the mother-daughter relationship that stopped us from understanding each other. She let the challenges of life overtake her, and she didn't let go and let God be in control. My mother was not as strong as I was. There was no way back for her, but she could move forward, couldn't she? For years, the spiral down continued. We all went off to different schools and started new lives, leaving her alone, but I knew that over time her faith would grow. Sometimes it takes time to understand the lessons of life.

My life and all of our lives then changed for the better, but we had to separate to make it happen.



At Chatham, the girls who came from different parts of the world to study there fascinated me and taught me things about friendship that I wasn't able to learn from my mother. I became friends with girls from Nicaragua, Belgium, Switzerland, Spain, and Saudi Arabia. It was an amazing time in my life and theirs.

It's been too long for me to remember her name, but I remember well the girl from Africa who joined us in my senior year. She had no experience with American culture or our methods. She was helpless in all respects, and everyone pitched in to help her adjust and offer her hope. She didn't know how to wash and fold her clothing, make a bed, use modern hygiene products, or style her hair. We became dorm mothers to her needs.

What I recall most was her genuine smile and gentle nature. There she was, in an Episcopal preparatory school for girls, attending vespers and chapel weekly. She handled it with grace and humility. In a conversation we had one afternoon, I discovered something unique about her.

"Maybe I can visit you in your country some day?" I asked.

I was looking at her brightly colored garments with geometric patterns that now lay folded on a shelf in the laundry room. She had put them aside and kept around her head only a small scarf that matched her dress.

"You would not like my country. I never want to go back," she responded in a soft monotone that was barely audible as it competed against the noise of the washing machines.

"Do you mean that?"

"My father has chosen a man for me to marry. Now that I know your ways, I refuse to marry someone I do not love." Her eyes were full of tears, but she stood resolved in her words. Her voice was sweet, and I wondered how she would go about obtaining her freedom to choose. Would she ever find a place to fit in if she chose a different path than the one her father planned for her?

I watched as she removed the scarf from her head and now tied it around her neck, like a small act of freedom. She struggled to make it into a bow. I leaned forward and helped her as I returned her smile.

“So, what will you do then? Where will you go?” I asked her, eager to know how she would change the course of her life.

“I will stay with my cousins, and then I will call my father to tell him of my decision.” As I listened, she laid out her entire conspiracy.

A new feeling came over me as I learned from the girls at Chatham. Each one was there for a different reason. Some were living out family legacies and not questioning their journey; they just knew what was expected of them and did it. Others outwardly debated with instructors, advisors, classmates, and anyone who contradicted their views.

Girls on a defined course toward their futures never stopped to share in the discussions. Then there were some who never spoke up at all, who hid away every chance they had, and became nearly invisible. I worried about them and wanted to know their stories. One girl left and never returned. I heard she’d died, and no one ever told us what happened. She had been assigned as my roommate our senior year but refused to share a room. I knew that she had committed suicide.

I learned that freedom was more than a decision. It was the will to do what was permitted and unrestrained by God, but this free spirit and attitude came with a price. Freedom didn’t make me free. But I was free to choose, and choose I did. I chose God.

It was also at Chatham that I had an experience with racism and learned where freedom could take me and the consequences of my choices. I met the new school chef and enjoyed going to the kitchen during free hours just to talk with the staff. They sang Baptist hymns quietly as they worked. Sometimes they would shoo me away, but I believed they accepted me. I liked their fellowship, and I looked forward to being there.

One late afternoon, I had a conversation with the chef about his church in town. All the women chimed in and laughed about the joy and raising of the spirit they felt there. I could almost see it in my mind’s eye as I listened. I decided then what I was going to do.

I mapped the route to the Baptist church and arrived as the assembly began to praise God. The doors were open, and people were still coming in. I walked up the side steps and stood in the doorway, listening to the choir of voices. It was so free compared to the chorus and handbell choir I performed in at school. I was spellbound by the music and just stood there motionless. I was so happy and wanted to be part of this church.

Then, there was silence, complete silence! Everyone turned and looked at me. This was the most southern part of Virginia, and I was very much out of my place. I was an intruder, and I realized it in that moment. I had not been invited and was not welcome here.

Within a few minutes, a long white limo pulled up, and I was taken back to school. Sometimes I didn't accept the realities of life. I wanted change, but change takes time regardless of the necessity. My freedom had cost them theirs.

I was escorted into the head mistress's office and asked to sit down.

"What were you doing there? Are you aware that you were breaking curfew?" The head mistress spoke in a reprimanding tone.

"I thought I was welcome. I didn't know it was wrong of me, but now I see. Are you going to expel me?" I asked as I looked into her compassionate eyes.

"No, I think you have had enough humiliation for one day," she replied as she motioned me out of her office. As I was leaving, she called my name and I turned to see her warm smile.

But this was not the end of my humiliation. The kitchen chef and staff never spoke to me again. They asked that I not be allowed to visit the kitchen during my free time. For months, they turned away whenever it was my turn to serve in the dining room or I had to come in to retrieve a tray of food for my table.

It was only when the chef took me aside during graduation that the humiliation was finally resolved. I quickly apologized for intruding in his life. He told me he was sorry and that he was moving on to another job. He was finally going to marry the woman in the pictures that were taped up around his kitchen office. I was happy for him and understood. But I didn't understand exclusivity in his society anymore than I did in mine. I didn't understand why people weren't welcoming, especially in faith. I didn't ever want to understand this reality. How could the color of my skin make a difference? How could faith separate us rather than unite us and bring us together on common ground? I realized then that each of us had a role to play as we prejudged one another. It was my responsibility to begin with me. I could make a difference in people's hearts and minds. I was certain of this.

I had studied faith all through my childhood. I had made faith a living reality in my life. I was grounded in belief and held fast in prayer. I recognized the work of God, and I had taken on the study of biblical text with all seriousness. I had even recorded genealogies from the books of Moses, tracing the

bloodline of the first children who later became the founders of the nations. I made the family tree of Mary, Jesus' mother. I drew maps of the holy land and Fertile Crescent by combining the countries of the Middle East. I compared symbols of other religions and cultural differences between India and China. I read about missionaries of various faiths and how they imposed new meanings of symbols as they evangelized in other countries, creating new symbols around the world. Thoughtfully, I took on Arabic and Hebrew. I studied at the Islamic society only blocks from my grandmother's house in River Oaks. Classes were held at a Catholic School. I met a young follower of the Jehovah Witnesses and another woman who followed Rev. Sun Myung Moon. She was his executive accountant and the sister of a friend. Her grandfather had been Rear Admiral Richard Byrd, who had been the first person to fly over the North Pole. Though I didn't share their beliefs, I respected them. I chose not to judge and just listened. Judging was not my role. From Catholicism to Protestantism to Fundamentalism, I listened and learned. I understood our differences rather than trying to unify them. My foundation was Christian, and I did not sway from my beliefs, but I developed compassion for those whom I could not really understand.

Then I studied etymology. Among the simplest of words, I found God's greatest meaning. Every word became a treasure to discover. It was the first time that I had devoted myself to a deeper understanding of people and how we are all connected to God. And this opened the book that I never wanted to close. Every word of God has His power when spoken. We may speak different languages and in different ways, but all words come from God. Even *the* is the origin of *trinity*, *theology*, and *The Holy Bible*. Finally, I understood that the vertical arm of the cross gave strength to my life because I knew God loved me, but it was the horizontal arm that taught me to share His love with others. I didn't have to carry the cross. Christ had already carried it for me. I wasn't designed to do God's job, nor was He asking me to. Only He could bring people to Himself. But I did have to hold the hands of people to truly love them and invite them to hold God's hand.

* * *

I returned to Houston after Chatham and college. I entered the early years of my adulthood with direction and a book of faith as my road map. I was becoming a young woman, capable of making my own decisions. I made

mistakes, but they were my mistakes, and I enjoyed being accountable to God. I wanted truth and honesty in everything. I began a career as a designer in the architectural field and often went back to Aspen for renewal.

In Aspen I had a small circle of friends. They were thirty years my senior, but I enjoyed their company tremendously. Aspen was always a place of renewal for me, but this time I had new friendships, and I entered a time of discovery. I wanted to know other peoples' stories and experience true fellowship.

It was several years before I met Eleanor, but her story had a great effect on me. Eleanor asked me to walk with her each morning, and I was honored. While she trained for a marathon, we walked six and a half miles each day. Eleanor told me about her life, her eight children, and the life she'd had previously. Her husband had died, and she was remarried. I wondered where her amazing strength came from. She told me her existence had not always been easy. Her children meant everything to her, and she was committed to offering them a good life.

I thought about what a good life meant to her. It seemed to me that just the joy of being alive was enough for her. But I found a different interpretation of a good life everywhere I looked in Aspen, Houston, and the places I traveled to. Could it be defined by being able to wake up each day, thankful I am alive, joyfully doing the work God set out for me, and then being satisfied at the end of the day that I had done what He asked of me? Could this be enough?

One evening, Eleanor invited me to attend the Passover with her. Her friends met weekly in the basement of a community church in Aspen. With such few members, they didn't have a synagogue. There was one zealous man there who had converted to Judaism after marrying a Jewish girl, as was the custom. He stood out with his bright red hair and wire eyeglass frames, but I enjoyed his excitement. I realized he took his faith seriously.

After we arrived, we stood around a long table together. We broke bread and shared wine. When I leaned forward to join hands with the two elderly people in front of me, I saw numbers inked into their wrists, and I realized they had been victims of the death camps. I kept back tears for them. I held their hands so gently, worried that they might break just by being touched. They were not about to accept my light touch. They grabbed my hands tightly as we all prayed and then began to sing.

As the evening came to a close, Eleanor asked me if I had enjoyed the service. Then she asked me if I wanted to meet her parents. But I didn't need

an introduction. They had already given me *their hands*. Then I understood where Eleanor's strength came from.

As I reflected over my many friendships, I found that each one was special and unique. But some were more. Some were women of great faith who showed me how they expressed joy even during suffering. I have had amazing friends along my journey, and I have stopped long enough to share in their goodness.

The lyrics of an old John Denver song about friends lingered in my mind after that night: "Friends, I will remember you, think of you, pray for you. And when another day is through, I'll still be friends with you." Perhaps, as a friend once said to me, sharing God's love with those who will become friends was the means to a good life.

CHAPTER 8

Making Max, Mixing Mary

*If two become one and one light draws flame to the other,
God kindles love forever.*

I thought love, true love, would never come to me—not in my lifetime. Maybe it was a wish that set loose the thought of love, or maybe God decided I was ready to have someone special in my life. Whatever the reason, it came and blessed me. I was twenty-four now, and it was 1985.

I walked along Galveston Beach with the man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, resting my head on his shoulder as we strolled near the Flagship Hotel. I could hear the seagulls calling overhead, calling us to join them, hovering motionless in the air. The waves gently reached out to touch the shore and then retreated. It was as though all had been prepared and waiting so that we could enjoy this feast of sensations together.

There was only one person designed by God just for me, so that two could become one. I now understood this. There really were no substitutes, regardless of how hard I tried to find them. I knew this man was the right one.

I was moving to London when we met, but that changed. I had no doubt that God had brought us together, and I wasn't about to miss out on the best thing that had ever happened to me. Our lives melded together, and we were completely happy. Within six months, we were married at St. John's Church.

But my life was fragile. And I was about to learn from the next few chapters in my life how fragile it was.

* * *

Years passed. Skip worked for IBM, and I went with him many times to the One Hundred Percent Club, vacations where corporate headquarters awarded employees for their significant contributions to the company. He was acknowledged for meeting sales quotas and his hard work. I enjoyed being part of his professional life and believed he would be president of IBM someday.

Though I worked at 3DInternational, an architectural engineering firm, I was more interested in volunteering at DePelchin Children's Center, a place for abused children and their families to receive counseling. I couldn't keep my mind on work because my heart was with the children who needed me. I wanted to offer myself in every way I could. DePelchin was once known as the Faith Home. I understood what the children were going through. I wanted to be useful to them in their time of need. I wanted God to show me how I could help them.

My dedicated mentor, Maralyn Robinson, guided me in my work at DePelchin and taught me greater understanding for all children and pregnant teen girls who were in residence at the adoption center. I painted murals with the most emotionally troubled children in the psychiatric ward. They gave me gifts of love and hope, more than I could ever have given them.

Soon, it became the right time to start my family. I had been married five years. I was Mrs. Richard Georges, living in a beautiful apartment we owned at 1400 Hermann, a high-rise building in downtown Houston. We lived on the fourteenth floor in 14B, with a panoramic view of Houston. Our life as husband and wife was perfect in our eyes. We lacked nothing in our marriage. We talked about everything, we respected each other, and God guided our decisions.

As an extension of our love, we wanted to have a child. With wise counsel from my doctor, Skip and I went to Baylor Medical Center to talk to Dr. Robert Carpenter, a high-risk specialist, about having a child. I had experienced a major medical event, the rupture of an ovary that spilled into my pelvic cavity, but I had healed. I had only one ovary left, one that had been repaired, and I didn't know if too much scar tissue remained for us to have a child.

"If you have a child, if you become pregnant, the risks are great. You have a fifty percent chance of dying during the pregnancy. There's no risk to the child, and what you have is not hereditary; at least, that is what the latest studies suggest. The child will be protected as long as you make it through the pregnancy."

Dr. Carpenter broke off his matter-of-fact statement. He was being straightforward, to the point, and I valued this. I didn't need sugarcoating.

"Why would you and Richard want to take such a risk, Katherine? Do you mind my asking?" It was not unusual for people to use our formal names when meeting us for the first time.

He deserved an honest response, and I tried to give him one. I looked over at Skip, then answered Dr. Carpenter.

"With my health situation, I never wanted to be a burden in a marriage, and I didn't know if I could actually have children. But I believe we have enough love to get through this. We want a child." I said this without holding back.

I knew God would be with us. No doubt entered my mind. I saw having a child as a gift. If I didn't make it, my husband would still have a wonderful gift of our love. I had lived on borrowed time most of my life. This was not anything new.

"I see. Some things are worth having, even for a moment. I understand. Well then, you will need to be here for ultrasounds every two weeks throughout the pregnancy. It will be a planned Caesarean. I am in charge of your care. So, as long as we work together, we can make this happen for you and Mr. Georges. Make an appointment with my assistant as soon as your pregnancy is confirmed."

He concluded our conversation, then he turned to look at me closely.

"Amazing! You are a very brave young woman," he said and left the room.

I didn't see it as courageous or brave. Instead, I had placed my complete trust in God.

Skip went back to the IBM office, and I went to the medical library at M. D. Anderson Hospital. I read everything I could find about Ehlers-Danlos vascular type, Klippel-Trenauney-Weber, and numerous other syndromes that had been mentioned to me over the years. None were hereditary, according to literature of the time, though this would change. There was only a little information—a paragraph here, a photograph there. But the librarian was kind enough to make copies as I brought her book after book of medical journals.

I did my best to learn the nomenclature and study the material, then I spent several months journaling my findings. I put as much as I could into Word Pro, one of the few databases available at that time for home computers. Skip taught me better commands to use with my computer's operating system

and how to sort the database. I had used AutoCAD and Intergraph software before, and this helped me think logically about the medical information I studied. I located every doctor listed in reports through the medical center where they had worked. It was all very time-consuming.

I took care of my body, exercised even more than usual, and began to prepare for a new arrival in the world. And I was now pregnant, about to begin a new life as a mother.

Skip continued his work at IBM, where he had been for twelve years, but I left the corporate pinstriped suit and briefcase world. I began painting large watercolors on hot pressboard at our dining table, something I had always enjoyed. (I'd had several successful art exhibitions in the past.) Now I was getting ready to have a child. It was a time for preparing. Like most parents-to-be, we read many books, and those that had the most impact were written about a child's self-worth.

We wanted our child to find value in himself and what he had to offer the world. And we wanted him to learn to accept the gifts of others, learn what they had to offer. Most important, he must know God and rely on God first. We believed this defined successful parents. We were very sure of our role as parents.

The pregnancy wasn't easy. I developed nine blood clots in the last term. I couldn't be anti-coagulated due to risk to the baby. But not once did we doubt God's work. My volunteering with the Junior League and DePelchin Children's Center had to come to an end. I was confined to home, and Dr. Carpenter requested that I take time to rest.

* * *

The morning of the delivery finally arrived, and we were ready.

"We're taking her in now." I heard Dr. Carpenter say to Skip, who stood to the side of the bed.

"Everything is going to be wonderful! I love you," I said to my husband with a reassuring smile. I loved him completely, and that was what mattered most in that moment, and I felt his love for me.

He looked as though his entire life was being pictured before him as they wheeled me into the operating room. He didn't know whether he should even breathe, for fear that it might affect the outcome.

Skip was a corporate man. All his principles were centered around his integrity and loyalty to the company. He had never worked anywhere else. IBM had been good to him, and he knew it. They had molded him, sent him to leadership and management conferences. He was one of the top salesmen in his division and had recently begun executive training at Harvard. He was more of a gentleman than anyone I had ever known. His principles and values guided him, and his unconditional love helped me grow. God had chosen wisely when he brought us together.

There was complete silence as Max entered the world. Calmness and unspoken wisdom about the birth of a child that only a woman understands came over me.

“Mrs. Georges? Here is your son,” announced Dr. Carpenter.

I could see in his eyes that every birth was as amazing to him as it was to me, that it gave his work as a physician real meaning and purpose. He had also confided in me that my pregnancy was one of his greatest challenges as a physician.

“Let my husband hold him first. Let him know what it’s like to welcome a child into this world,” I said.

I gave everything I had to being a mother, so for the next few years, we were busy making Max and mixing Mary.

Sometimes hope can level the playing field of life. We have a chance. We are offered the opportunity to make something of our lives, and that was what I did. I felt nothing more rewarding than being a mother and wife. It was what I hadn’t experienced in my childhood that made it so rewarding to be a mother. I absorbed it, breathed it all in, and found great joy.



Max was an amazing child to raise. 1400 Hermann was next to the Warwick Towers in Houston and across from Hermann Park. I enjoyed the easy, carefree lifestyle of the high-rise. Valets delivered my groceries and parked my car when I was too tired to do it myself. I could call downstairs anytime day or night when I needed something mechanical taken care of. Being a young mother, I found this reassuring. Guests were announced in advance. We had an inner courtyard and amenities such as a swimming pool, gardens, and tennis courts. But more importantly, we could walk to the museums that became an essential part of our daily lives.

Max was, by all accounts, a very unusual child. He was reading encyclopedias by the time he was three. But I didn't know he was different from other children until he entered preschool. Up until then, he seemed ordinary to me, but I had not compared him to any other child, and when we played, I was absorbed in his world.

We learned as we went. The Museum of Natural Science was the main attraction. Max knew the curators of every exhibit, and they knew him by name. We spent hours in the geology and chemistry sections. (The movie *Night at the Museum* was very much our reality back then). I liked the mock refinery exhibits and distilleries. He enjoyed the elevator that made us believe we were descending deep into a mine. As a ritual we played the geological software programs. The movie about sediment on the ocean floor was sponsored by the Farish family, and watching it made him feel connected to something beyond the ordinary.

From our bedroom windows, we watched the children's museum being built next door. And when Circus Flora, a European-style circus of acrobatics came to town, we watched the big tent being installed right below our view. We lived above the trees on the fourteenth floor, and it gave us the feeling of living above the world.

We enrolled Max at The Presbyterian School and had only been there two weeks when I received a disturbing phone call.

"Principal Reynolds wants to speak with you in his office," I heard the secretary say on the other end of the phone. Her voice defined the urgency.

I suggested a time and drove over within the hour. I had no idea what was wrong. I walked into the school hallway where Rob Reynolds met me.

"What is it? Is something wrong?" I asked immediately.

"No, I didn't mean to alarm you. But, Mrs. Georges, your son is gifted and doesn't belong here." He said this with a look of sadness on his face.

"What exactly is gifted?" I asked naively.

"Well, in his case, he is far beyond the ordinary, and unfortunately, this is something you are going to have to live with the rest of your life. My daughter is a gifted child, and I can tell you, it isn't easy on them. They struggle to fit in. You understand?"

But I didn't understand. Did he mean this was a bad thing, or did he mean it was going to be hard to help Max cope? My father's IQ had tested off the charts, according to my mother. And I had skipped several grades in middle

school, but I didn't think that was so unusual. We were about to find out how unusual it was.

Then he added another comment that left me pondering.

"Mrs. Georges, giftedness at this level isn't learned, it's inherited." His voice trailed off as he spoke. My stepfather had told me so often that I was stupid that maybe I didn't realize what a contradiction this was. Even my mother called me a playful name in Spanish that I choose not to repeat.

I wondered if it were possible that giftedness manifested itself in different ways in different people. I'd heard of autistic savants with exceptional intuitive behaviors. Even blind people have an added sense of connectedness beyond just hearing and touch. *Gifted*—the word stayed in the forefront of my mind. Wasn't every child gifted? But after multiple IQ tests, behavioral assessments, and psychological-educational evaluations, we discovered that Max was in the exceptionally to profoundly gifted range.

And so a new adventure began for us. We had to find a way to help him adjust to life, to fit in. I researched asynchronous development and called centers around the country that studied giftedness. I attended science and mathematics conferences like a diligent teacher in training. And I found that I enjoyed teaching him with innovative software that was suited to the gifted. Software companies started sending me new products that they had developed but were not on the market yet. They wanted to see how Max responded to them. We were their beta testers. I was asked to write and speak about giftedness from a parent's perspective. The article was published in *Tempo Magazine*, a magazine for educators of the gifted.

All of the studies in the world couldn't tell me what I came to understand through my experience with Max. As a mother, I realized that every child must find significance and meaning in his or her daily life and indigenous environment. This meant that a child could be misunderstood in the educational setting or community if he was different. I decided to school him, but not with traditional homeschool curricula. I used books found in public middle schools and taught myself so I could offer the information to Max. I didn't teach Max; I facilitated learning. I wanted him to reenter the educational system at any time. By using common textbooks, I thought this would make for an easier transition later on. I enlisted help from the physics department at Rice University, and a student came to our apartment once a week.

It was an exciting time to be alive. If we weren't at one of the many museums, we were at cultural festivals in Hermann Park. We learned to enjoy

cuisine from all parts of the world. But it was the music that engaged us the most. From Latin beats to African rhythms to Native American ring dancing, we enjoyed days that were filled with wonder.

Then I became involved in a program called Catechesis of the Good Shepherd at St. John's, the school and church I had been raised in. It was based on the ideals of Maria Montessori and wasn't a typical Sunday school program. Max was on a waiting list with other children. The church needed someone to become a catechist or the children would miss the opportunity to learn.

The rooms were called atriums, named after the place where a catechumen went to prepare for baptism. Also, atrium reminded me of an indoor garden. Everything was child-sized and made especially for the children. Nothing in the atrium was for the adult. It was a place where the child came to be with God and came into contemplative prayer. Children's hands were busy doing activities they had mastered. This freed their minds and hearts to be in conversation with God. Natural prayer became a central part of their spiritual education before they were introduced to liturgy. Everything I had learned about God in my relationship with Him as a child came together and culminated in this teaching. God was giving me an opportunity to share my faith with children, children who didn't question it or deny it. I learned to prepare myself and the atrium to welcome the child.

I could tell children everything I knew about God, and they accepted my gift, receiving it completely. Of course, these were children who were still interconnected with Him, and whose faith some adults hadn't shattered by their lack of faith.

Max was in the atrium, growing in spirit while he was developing his intellect at Wilhelm Schole, a small international school we found for him. Wilhelm was only a few miles from 1400 Hermann. We were thankful a school existed that could accommodate his needs. At Wilhelm, he entered the fourth grade at age five, and no one questioned or doubted his abilities. The instructors were mere facilitators of knowledge. He was learning four languages at the same time. It was a place of learning like no other. It was a time for him like no other.

But Max, like all gifted children, had his challenges. People expected more out of him than he knew how to offer. He was a child out of step with social standards. People wanted him to perform and produce. But he was only a child. Instructors at Wilhelm asked him to teach the class. This brought resentment from older classmates. He was scarred by some of their reactions, and it was

hard as a parent to know what to do. The school didn't extend beyond fifth grade, so Max was again schooled at home. I tried to help him find a place to fit in, but eventually he would need to find it on his own.

* * *

Then came Mary!

Mary entered the world with a smile. Everything about her was beautiful from the day she was born. Goodness radiated from her. Even her complexion was radiant. Skip and I hadn't imagined having a second child, considering the risks, so Mary was the greatest little miracle. We couldn't have planned for a child like her. She was special; she was a gift. God must have known I needed a little girl in my life.

After overcoming my own difficult childhood, Max and Mary were the greatest rewards possible. God allowed me to offer them a perfect childhood, the one I hadn't experienced, and I accepted this gift with grace. I think of those years as "making Max and mixing Mary" as I added a few ounces of gumption and zest to make it extraordinary.

I had finally come to a place in my life where all was well with my soul. I didn't have worries. I wasn't idle with despair. I was useful and doing what God intended for me. Perhaps I had at last found the definition of a good life. God had a special purpose for me, and I was living it.

CHAPTER 9

Letting Go

*Trusting that God has a plan when change comes
reminds us to depend on Him. We possess nothing on this earth.
All is His.*

Not everything lasts forever. Something unpleasant began to change our lives. Skip was no longer happy at IBM. Lou Gerstner was now head of the company and taking it in a new direction. They had hired him to increase profits, but his leadership style tore at its very heart. IBM had been founded on traditional principles of character—service to the customer, and respect for the employee. Now, mutual respect turned into quotas of excellent performance driven by the bottom line. This was 1999.

My husband watched many of his friends take early retirement while he learned the new party line. He was not alone. IBM was not alone. They had to change to survive.

Richard—Skip, as he was called even in the office—took on the task like a gentleman, but I heard the complaints at home. He spent less time with people at IBM. They were being scattered and moved across the corporate structure to other locations. Instead of territories with smaller divisions, there were regions. IBM was taking a larger role in the global market. It didn't feel secure, and IBM lost its unique ability to shepherd.

Disillusioned by corporate life, Skip dreamed about Colorado. I dreamed right along with him. IBM's structured office was all my husband had ever known. Could he handle the adjustment to a home office? It meant giving up his legacy at IBM, just as I had given up my legacy in Houston. Though he

would transfer with IBM, moving to Colorado would mean that he would no longer be on an upward career path. We knew we could build a life there the same way we'd built a life in Houston. So what could blind our way?

I flew to Denver with Mary, who was now a year old, and rented a car. I drove to Boulder and then to Evergreen. Aspen was too far from Denver, and Skip needed access to the airport for business travel. I drove down Parkway 74 toward Evergreen and stopped when I reached the little town. Mary and I ate lunch and took several back roads. It was charming. Then, as if out of nowhere, tucked under the pines, there appeared an old Episcopal church.

"Mary, this is it, a place we can call home," I said aloud, hardly knowing that the words were being spoken from my own lips.

There was a hush under the canopy of trees, and like children laughing, a teasing wind pulled us out of the car. We walked down to the river and sat among the flowers in an open yard. I lay back, rested my head on the grass, and looked up at the icicle shaped trees at the top of the mountain. It was a deep vermilion green with a halo of blue. Aspen had never been so verdant. Evergreen was a good name for this place.

I walked inside the Church of the Transfiguration. I ran my hand against the walls to feel its soundness. The sanctuary was new, but I sensed something old in this place. History was here. I could feel it. Where was it? I walked around, searching. Then I found it. Part of the building was over several hundred years old, and something special had happened here. Pioneering men and women had brought their families here; couples had married and baptized their children in this place. Loved ones had said good-bye, and there had been dancing and singing.

Mary and I stayed, wandering the property for several hours, and then I realized that I had to find a house. I didn't have much time. I called realtors, and we met them. Each house just wasn't right. We went back to the inn, and I called Skip. I explained that I couldn't find what we needed and that I might have to return home and look again on another trip. I fell asleep disappointed.

The next morning, we were out driving around at six o'clock. Just one last look at the church, and I could leave. But I made the wrong turn and found myself winding on a road that was too narrow for me to turn around.

As I came around a bend, I thought I was in a small, sleepy Irish town and had been transported to somewhere else in time. Small stone pathways bordered by low stone walls led to wood and stone cottages under the evergreens. A

creek ran through each property. I passed several people tending their gardens. They smiled and gave me a look—a knowing look as if they had a secret.

Where was I? I kept traveling up the road, wondering where it was taking us. Then, I saw it. A three-story, octagonal house on the side of the road. The setting was out of a fairy tale. The roaring river was only yards from the house; you could fish off the lower deck. There was a wraparound deck at the top, and I imagined a rope and wooden bridge leading from an imaginary tree house to the other side. It was like a dream, but it was real, sitting right there in front of us. And it was for lease.

Standing in the driveway, I called the leasing company and asked if the house was for sale or if we could lease with the option to buy. No, he said, we could only lease the house; the owners had no interest in selling. I signed a contract within the hour. We could use the house for two years.

What was it that brought me to that house? I drove away with the question still in my mind. Then I recognized the similarity. Though it was smaller, it was a replica of our house in Aspen. We'd had three octagons in Aspen, all glass from floor to ceiling with glass corridors connecting each level. It was futuristic, like a spaceship sitting on the edge of the mountain.

This house was to replace something I had lost. How often is a person given a chance to return to a place they once knew, not just the memory of the place? We were returning to Colorado, a place I had once called home.

A few months later, we arrived. Movers were busy unpacking the truck. I even hired them to unpack our belongings and fill the cabinets and drawers. After two days, all the boxes, except a few in the garage, were gone. Skip was busy preparing his office, so the children and I went for a walk.

We came to a part of the creek where the water was shallow and only fifteen feet across. The creek at the house was too deep and fast to wade through.

“Mom, teach me to cross the creek. Show me.” Max looked down at the water as he said the words.

He leaned over now, and I watched the water fill the inside of his boots and knew what a cold shock he must have been feeling. He didn't flinch, this city boy who had known adventure only when we went on vacations and visited museums.

“Teach me. I know you know how,” he said with a welcoming smile.

I looked for a long stick nearby and made sure it was good and strong. I explained to him how to use his feet to guide him, to find his balance before venturing farther, and to use the stick to reach toward the next spot. He

listened carefully. When we were ready, I grabbed his other arm to steady him, and we took a leap of faith.

We found ourselves in the middle of the creek. The water was up to his waist, and he was getting scared. A crowd of passersby had stopped now to watch us. This made it worse for Max, who didn't like being the center of attention.

"Mom, what do I do? Everyone is watching us. Don't let them see I am afraid," he said with intensity.

"You are all right. I am here with you. I know you can do this. Do you see the edge over there? Just walk straight using your stick until you reach the other side," I whispered in his ear.

He looked at me, took a deep breath, and then did something amazing—he let go of me and the stick. He waded to the other side as though he had done this a million times. When he reached the other bank, he jumped out and danced around in the air. Then he ran across the open field like a bird released from its cage that, realizing it's free, takes flight. I had given my child the feeling of freedom.

It doesn't take much to overcome our limitations. Ordinary people take leaps of faith everyday. We just have to believe it's possible.



But my husband wasn't free to make decisions. IBM had taken its toll on him, and Skip was struggling to find his way. He resented everything I did only because of his frustration with IBM. He didn't want me to be involved in this new church like I had been in Houston. He wanted me at home with him all the time, but he was never really with me. Being in the same house didn't mean we were together, not together in spirit. I couldn't live the way he wanted me to. I couldn't be kept in a cage or have my wings clipped so that I couldn't fly. He didn't trust life or any of the circumstances that came with it now. He was searching for a kind of love for life that only God could provide. I could reassure him over and over again of the love I had for him, but it was never enough. He was missing the most important love of all in his life. All I could do was be patient with him and wait, but eventually, even patience can run out. Sometimes the harder we look, the harder it is to find the one thing we are looking for.

The transition to an office at home and the inability to connect with the people he worked with was very hard for Skip. The more he tried to place his trust in this new life, the more he lacked security. He had relied on the corporate ladder of success to define him. He was happy one minute and sad the next. Even the smallest thing became an enormous obstacle for him.

The children and I, though, thrived in Evergreen. Every moment was one of wonder. We were explorers of a new world and enjoyed each new discovery. Skip occasionally came along and tried to enjoy it. At times he actually did, until he felt the pressures of work and time constraints.

God was very active in our lives, and now God had another plan for me. He was not about to leave me idle. I would have been very happy not working. Now what he wanted me to do in Evergreen was very clear.



“Reverend Catherine?” I asked as I looked around the corner and into her office.

“Yes, can I help you?” she asked with a look of sincerity.

“I believe you and I have something special to do here at Church of the Transfiguration. Have you heard of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd?” I asked.

“Yes, but I know little about the program. Tell me about what we are to do,” she responded.

“It’s about the child, their covenant relationship with God that God initiates from the day they are born. A place is prepared for them to walk and talk with God, a place to call their own. I am a catechist,” I explained.

“I’d like you to meet the members of our vestry so we can get started right away. If this is something God has asked you to do here, and he has asked us to do, then we must,” Reverend Catherine explained.

“Thank you,” I said. Then I added one more thing. “This is your first assignment, correct? Have you ever wondered why you, your last name being Tran, were assigned to this parish?”

“No, I never realized the significance,” she replied, and was lost in her thoughts as I left her office.

During the next year, I selected five parents to train and got started on the work I had been asked to do. No one turned me away or made excuses why they couldn’t find time to do this work. They willingly wanted to help

bring Catechesis of the Good Shepherd to this church. I met with the vestry. I prepared myself in prayer and read the program materials over and over. I ordered a few of the parable story dioramas from a source that was now making them by hand. I found volunteers willing to make the small tables, chairs, and altar. I went to antique stores and found miniature patens, chalices, and candlesticks. I made three-dimensional relief maps of the holy land and Jerusalem. All had been prepared.

The night before training began, I received an interesting phone call.

“My name is Maria. I understand you are training catechists to start the program at Transfiguration. I am head of Christian education at Christ the King. We are a Catholic church, but God has put it on my heart to bring my people to you. I have five people who are willing to train with you beginning tomorrow morning.”

The voice on the line paused, and I took a deep breath, one that breathes faith in and holds it there. I was amazed by what she'd said, and I didn't hesitate in accepting her gift.

Sometimes gifts came to me unexpectedly, and I had to do everything possible to set aside my own limited understanding and just agree to receive them. Were I to stop to think about what it might take to accomplish His will or how much it might cost me, it would destroy the moment, and I might never have it again. It was in this moment that I completely accepted what someone else was offering to me. They were offering themselves, open and vulnerable.

Maria and I became instant friends, forming a level of fellowship that I've rarely experienced with someone.

Months went by, and we met for training as the atria were being readied. We painted the walls a soft mauve in the lower atrium and deep burgundy in the upper atrium. It was the work of many volunteers. Tables were finally set, and linens were pressed and folded in the miniature sacristy. Everything waited for the children to arrive.

One evening during training, I suggested we read a story from the Bible, the parable of the Great Banquet. I related the lesson to the last supper of Christ. A king sent out his servant to ask those invited to come to his banquet, for all had been prepared. Each guest explained to the servant that he was too busy to make the journey. When the servant returned to the king, the king sent the servant out again to bring anyone willing to come to his table and share his meal. They came, the blind, the injured, the sick, and the hungry. They could not possibly return the king's invitation, but they willingly accepted his gifts.

In silence, I moved small figures toward a wooden model of a church. Then I paused. I described how each figure journeyed to God's house. Part of the beauty of using the figures was to remain silent while moving them. Only one language was used at a time, silent reading, then movement, and then spoken word. God's message needed to be expressed in each language separately. Silence then brings contemplative prayer. There was a calmness that enveloped the room as I lit a candle and we reflected upon the meaning of the parable.

Then I asked the questions that I asked in the first pages of this book. Have there been times in your life when you have wondered about a day like this, a day when time stands still? *If God appeared before you now, would you know Him?*

Everyone was quiet, but I knew they were listening. The words had stilled them; they were being still to know God. All the years that I had been waiting to tell this parable came to a standstill in that moment when I read His story. The parable had a simple question: "Are you ready?" It had profound significance for each of them, and for me. Several catechists were crying now, but it was a good cry, because they had been welcomed into God's house. They didn't have to wait; they were now with Him in the story.

We accomplished what we set out to do. The atria were filled with children and parents. Before children could enter, they prepared themselves. We would stand at the door and welcome them one by one when they had taken a moment of silence and agreed that they were ready to be with God. Once inside, it was their special place to be with Him—in their own unique way. Everything was theirs, not ours. There was no right way to be with God, only God's way that He offered them. We only gave them a place and a special time to come and be with God. They made candles or worked with different parables connecting God's meaning. They prepared the chalice and poured the wine, mixing it with water.

"Do you know why there is so much water and so little wine?" a child would ask and then reveal the answer. "Because *we* are the water!"

"Jesus walked on water, did you know that?" an older boy would instruct a younger one.

"Yes, but *God* doesn't need water," a younger boy would respond.

These conversations were the grace notes of the atria. I even heard conversations spill out of the rooms and into the hallways.

"I don't know why you like coming here so much," said a father.

“Because *God* is here! He is present in this place,” answered his son. The children had invited Him.

I was sitting in a pew one afternoon, ready for the service to begin and ready to hear Rev. Catherine, when I looked up and saw light dancing around in the rafters. I looked around, but it seemed as if no one else saw it. Then, the sermon began.

After the service, I heard several women talking rather shyly about something.

“I saw it, I’m telling you. It was like the Holy Spirit was in this place today,” she said, begging the others to believe her.

I smiled and walked out the door to sit awhile by the river. It was a beautiful, refreshing day, and I wanted to enjoy it. What I recognized was something I wanted everyone to understand: The world is God’s atrium!

I went home early that afternoon to finish another training session that I was preparing for that night. While there, I received a phone call, an odd phone call from a parish member who didn’t like the program, though this person had never been inside the atrium. Then, Skip came in upset that he was going to have to bring Mary and Max to church that night while I was training. Another phone call, and three catechists weren’t going to be there. When God is present, sometimes fear comes. I recognized it. But fear had no place in children. I tried to reassure each person.

We were running late as we pulled into the church parking lot. Skip asked me why I spent so much of my time at this, so I reached for Mary and said I would keep her with me. She would be fine. Mary enjoyed being in the atrium. Everything there was designed for her.

* * *

I had recently been experiencing several episodes in the middle of the night, headaches that I couldn’t explain, and dizziness. After training, when I had put Mary into bed and had gone to say good night to Max, my eyesight seemed affected. The room was darker than usual. *How strange*, I thought.

A few weeks later, my sister called and asked me to be part of her wedding in Mexico. I was so happy for her and decided to take Mary with me. While we were in San Miguel de Allende, I felt another episode come on, stronger this time.

For several months, I had tried to continue to work in the atria and to work at home, all the while homeschooling Max and taking care of Mary. I knew I wasn't well, but I didn't know what it was. The episodes would come on at the oddest times. I would be feeling great, out hiking and riding bikes with the children in the mountains, and then I felt sharp pain in the back of my head. It would pass, and I would be fine again.

Then, the event in which I lost my eyesight happened and changed our lives. We were never the same. I still can hear God's words from that day. "*You have two minutes.*" I was no longer carefree, enjoying every day to its fullest. Now, suddenly, my life was about sacrifice and healing, and learning what it took to overcome limitations of the body. I was a fallen sparrow that needed support to even stand, and doing God's work required strength. My body was weakened but ultimately my faith would test my capacity to heal.

In search of more appropriate care and treatment, we agreed to go to Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Nearly two years had passed, and our lease was ending. My father-in-law had just completed the renovation of his childhood home across the street from their house in Carthage, Illinois, and invited us to stay there.

It would be a long four months at Mayo Clinic, months that would produce few solutions, but I had to say good-bye once again to a place and something I loved. I had to let go. Maybe I had only been there to begin the program. The church celebrated my accomplishments on the Sunday before we left and gave me a special gift, a gold cross of the good shepherd. It symbolized the church's faith in allowing children to lead the way. I thought about a comment a friend once made to me: "Always grow where you are planted." I had, and I was so thankful for our time in Evergreen with my family and the children.

Life was about making the most of the gifts being offered. Some things were special, and I could hold on to them for only a while. I had been entrusted with their care and then had to let them go. It was only then that they had the chance to thrive on their own. That was what happened in Evergreen. I like to remember it that way. Perhaps for just awhile I was entrusted with making Evergreen forever green by adding a little more color to the landscape of the hearts there.

Offering the Message to Those Willing to Come

You have experienced my story for a while, and now it is time to return to yours. Your journey has continued, and you have met many people along the way. Some have joined you, and some have continued to look away.

You now see millions of footprints in the sand—all left behind by those who have passed this way. Where are they all going? Will they return?

You see a small set of footprints staying close to the prints of a mother, and several prints of children who have run farther ahead than their parents. For a moment, you imagine hearing laughter in the air. One set of footprints is so large and strong that you can't help but try to step into them, to imitate their stride without falling.

You recognize some footprints as left by someone who was very old and who had lived a long life. There are prints that run over each other, leaving no sign of the ones beneath. One set of footprints is so small that you must kneel down and use your finger as you trace the outline.

Then you see one footprint that was made by a person with one leg. You try to balance yourself in this print and hop carefully to the next. You fall in the same way this person must have fallen. While you are down, you try to understand all these many footprints and who made them. What were the difficulties each suffered and endured?

Where did they find their strength to keep on going, to live their lives? Who helped them along the way, accepting their burden and carrying them until they could walk again? Who shared in their joy and love and said, "Come with me; we will journey together so that you are never alone"?

Would you walk alongside any one of these footprints, on the road of life, leaving your own set of footprints in the sand?

Now, you turn as you see that the path is coming to an end. Looking down, you see only one set of footprints. Where yours stopped, *God's continued on.*

For a moment, you forget to breathe, and then—after a long sigh—without further hesitation, you step aside from *your* path and place your feet right into His footprints and continue to the end of your journey.

CHAPTER 10

The Deception of Friends

Misleading words can often scatter God's work into pieces, and it becomes difficult to find our way.

Carthage, Illinois, was a strange little town. Cars passed through it and never stopped. It couldn't be found on most maps. Having a population of fewer than three thousand, it barely existed.

"Mr. Georges, I think your wife would prefer this walker. It has bigger wheels, and she can sit down to rest on the seat. She can use the basket and move things around the house," said the salesman at Sherrick Drug Store.

I looked out the window at the town's courthouse in the square. It was bound by four streets with grass all around. It wasn't going anywhere, and I wasn't either. This walker would make certain of it. The year was 2000.

"What about the cane?" I asked.

"You aren't ready for a cane. You can hardly stand," Skip answered. He was right. I was no longer able to stand unassisted.

My father-in-law, Dr. Coeur, told us he would make the initial phone call to schedule an appointment at Mayo's. As it turned out, his colleague, Dr. Nguyen, made the call. This did not sit well with Skip.

We arrived mid-afternoon at the Radisson Plaza Hotel in Rochester, a hotel connected by skyway to the Mayo Clinics, and went over immediately to register before the appointments began the next morning.

My time at Mayo's would prove to be a long, drawn-out process of tests, X-rays, scans, and more specialists than I could have imagined in one place. The diagnostic procedures began in Dr. Shields's office, the vascular

cardiologist. From there, I went to the arrhythmia/dysarrhythmia clinic, to the electrophysiology lab, and to the Doppler ultrasound for cerebral ischemia by a specialist, Dr. Petty. Then they studied my reflexes and my lung capacity. More and more blood was drawn. My white blood count was excessively low, as was my iron.

In genetics, Dr. Dusica Babovic-Vuksanovic and Dr. Jennifer Hand took five biopsies. They tested my collagen, sent it to Beyer's Lab in Washington, and sent my elastin tissue to grow at Johns Hopkins. They took special infrared photographs of my skin.

Then, I went to the neuro-ophthalmology clinic, where I met Dr. Jacqueline Leavitt, who suspected a malformation telangiectasia of the blood vessels in my eyes.

From the hotel, I called Dr. Hammerberg in Denver. He had been the first to inform us about the strokes. I asked him why the physicians at Mayo had varied, contradicting opinions but kept searching for answers. They were unable to come to an agreement. They had ordered more tests, but nothing shed light on a treatment to prevent further atrophy. He didn't seem to mind that I had called him at such a late hour and at home.

"Katherine, you can put one hundred neurologists in the same room, and they will disagree," he said in a discouraging tone that prompted me to ask the next question.

"If that is true, then how do you keep on going? As a physician, how do you sleep at night not knowing if you have helped someone and still remain hopeful?" I asked him with all sincerity. He thought about this before responding.

"Because—every once in a while—a patient like you comes along. You remain alive when all reason tells us you shouldn't be alive. And then, we know that God is the true physician. I am just here to serve and do no harm." His words were the words I needed to hear in that moment, and I knew they were true.

"Thank you for being so honest, Dr. Hammerberg. Thank you."

On the drive back to Carthage, I became deathly ill. They had performed a trivessel arteriogram at Mayo, and something went wrong. We went to Dr. Nguyen immediately, and she placed me on a heart monitor. Her practice was in my father-in-law's clinic, only a few blocks away from our home. Then she let me go home and sleep in my own bed. I should have stayed at the hospital over night.

I couldn't move for hours, and my mind kept spinning in and out of dreams. Was I conscious or asleep? I didn't know what was happening to my heart, but each time I fell asleep, God kept waking me up. I wanted to tell Him to stop, that I just wanted to sleep. But I couldn't call out; I was too weak. I lay there in the dark, feeling the weight of the heart monitor on my chest. It felt like a hundred pounds or more. Suddenly, I felt shocks that startled me awake. This nightmare went on all night long.

The next morning, my husband drove me to Dr. Nguyen. She removed the monitor and took it with her as she left the room. Soon, she came back with a printout of last night's heart activity. She had a startled look on her face.

"Katherine, I want to schedule you to have a pacemaker installed this afternoon. I'll make all the arrangements." She looked very serious.

"What happened to me last night?" I asked.

"Look at this printout. Last night, your heart stopped several times. You experienced both supraventricular and ventricular ectopic beats followed by long pauses. I showed this report to several nurses here in the clinic and to your father-in-law, but no one believes it. They think the monitor wasn't working properly or that a lead came loose. But it doesn't matter to me what they say. I want you to have a pacemaker. Katherine, this could happen again." Her words came out steadily in one long death sentence.

Skip and I sat there for a few minutes, and then Dr. Nguyen left us to talk privately.

"What if a pacemaker causes more harm than good?" I said. "What I mean is, with everything that's happening to my body, what if being offbeat, then countering it with a steady beat or electric impulse to keep it on beat, is even worse? My body has made it through the impossible. You heard them at Mayo. No one seems to understand why I am still here. Is it possible I *could* heal, and that this is my way of healing? Maybe this sounds crazy but ..." I paused. "What if I make it until Christmas? It's only a few weeks away. If I make it until Christmas, and I am still alive, then having a pacemaker would have been the wrong decision." I said this with complete confidence and sudden, overwhelming faith.

"You have to make the decision," Skip said, "but I support you in this. Christmas!"

"Christmas!" I echoed.

I made it beyond Christmas. Over the next few months, I had episodes of bradycardia and passed out from insufficient blood flow to my brain. I lost

blood volume. My bone marrow couldn't produce leucocytes fast enough, and bleeding began in my lower spine. Extreme pain and weakness kept me from walking.

We went back to Mayo Clinic to find more complications showing up on MRAs and arteriograms. I had white matter volume loss on the right side of my brain, and the fatty sheathing of the spinal cord was deteriorating. I was also showing signs of abnormal blood vessels on my kidney. But months went by, and Mayo's was not providing any treatment. They didn't know what to do. And then, out of my struggle to stay alive, a *good thing* happened.

I had a home heart monitor that I used regularly. One day, sitting in the dining room, I began to sense that awful sinking feeling that came over me when my blood pressure dropped. Skip ran to get the monitor. My blood pressure was fifty-six over thirty. We both looked at the numbers again. My pulse was forty-six beats per minute. In disbelief, we took the reading again. Again, the same numbers! He shook the monitor and changed the batteries. Maybe it wasn't working properly. Again, and the numbers were the same!

He put me in the car, packed up the children, and we drove to Iowa City, nearly two hours away, at eighty-five miles per hour. He didn't stop—he just kept driving. I was in the back seat getting worse by the moment, but I didn't complain. My husband had attended the University of Iowa and had confidence in their medical center.

When we arrived at the emergency entrance to the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics, I couldn't walk or answer anyone's questions. I was extremely tired and dizzy. They took my blood pressure and immediately took me to the cardiologist area. They attached every wire that existed in the world to my body. Foam sticker tabs were on my skin in every place possible. The nurses' and technicians' hands felt extremely cold.

"I don't think we have ever had such a thin patient in our unit before. Call hematology," I heard someone say while I kept my eyes closed. I was so tired.

"She's hypovolemic. Her blood volume is too low from dehydration. Get the IVs started and ..." The words trailed off, and I don't remember beyond that.

The next hours and days were all one blur after another. I felt the hospital bed moving along corridors, turning, wheels being locked. I heard voices talking to me, and my voice was lost as though in an echo chamber. There were no colors, just light and dark and at times red. Everything went from fast

motion to slow motion and back to fast again. Then, I woke up and tried to collect my thoughts.

“Where am I?” I asked as I looked around at the unfamiliar place.

“Hello, Mrs. Georges. You are in the cardiac wing,” replied the nurse. “We are going to keep you here for a few days. Your doctors will be in to see you later today. They make their rounds in the evening. Is there anything I can get for you?”

“My children, where are they?”

“Your husband took them to the hotel and then out to dinner. You have been very sick, and they needed some time away from the hospital. He said he would call in the morning. You are lucky he brought you here when he did. You are lucky to be alive,” she said politely.

“It isn’t luck—it’s faith.” I paused. “Do you have children?” I asked.

“Yes, I have a daughter, who doesn’t live with me. She is in drug rehab right now. She didn’t handle it well after her father left us. He was very abusive and . . . well, I don’t need to tell you about that. She is a little lost, and I worry about her.”

“She will come back to you. You sound like an incredible mother. I’m sorry you’ve had so many hardships.”

Her bleached hair, an uncombed, winded look, and her unkempt makeup showed her vulnerability. I liked her. She was completely willing to tell me her story.

“May I pray with you? I don’t often do this with patients, but I want to pray with you,” she said.

“Of course,” I said. “May I pray for you?”

* * *

The next morning, from my hospital bed, I watched the rain coming down rather hard. It rained off and on for three more days. Physicians visited me, and residents in training came in and went out. I had another electrocardiogram, but not a trans-esophageal one this time. I was thankful. My mitral valve prolapse had resolved itself! Was that an answer to prayer?

Eventually they removed all the heart monitors, and I lay unrestrained in my bed. I could get up now and walk around.

After five days, I met Dr. Tippin. Skip was in the room when he came in with several other physicians—the cardiologist, the electrophysiologist, the

interventional radiologist, the orthopedic specialist from the palliative clinic, the ER physician who had admitted me, and a host of others. But it was Dr. Tippin who made a lasting impression.

One of the doctors said, “Mrs. Georges, your spine is remodeling itself with some unknown material. Maybe it’s blood from lesions on the spine. We won’t know what the lytic lesions are unless we do further testing that could harm you. Your body is too fragile. There’s the white matter volume loss and demyelination again. We can’t get in to look without harming you further. What is causing the progressive atrophy must be the collagen, the glue that holds your cells together. Also, your elastin is defective in areas. Elastin controls pressure in your arteries and veins. Combined defects like these are extremely rare. It could be an unusual hereditary condition, unique to you and your family. We don’t believe there is anything further we can do for you. Good luck to you.”

Then, they all filed out. After the crowd emptied the room, there was Dr. Tippin, leaning against the wall in the back.

“Katherine, I am Dr. Jon Tippin. I am your neurologist. I have reviewed your records and made a study of your case. You are a remarkable woman. I don’t think I have seen anything like this before. I want to offer a few words of advice. You may have only a little time, a year or more. I suggest you go home and put things in order, prepare for what might happen, and make it your best year!” He said this with deep compassion.

“Thank you for being so honest,” I said. “I will.”

* * *

We lived in Carthage another eight months and didn’t have time to put his words into action. Everything went wrong in that little town. Skip’s mother had emergency surgery on her carotid arteries to clear them of plaque. His father had a blood clot in the artery in his leg, and his stepfather was re-diagnosed with cancer and died within a few months. A niece died of cancer. My stepfather nearly died of a brain tumor and had to undergo blood transfusions to save him. My sisters flew to Lake Tahoe to be with him. There was no justice in it, who lived and who died; it was just all part of God’s plan.

My husband and I found little support through these long days, and we realized we were there in Carthage to help them. I was there to show unshakable faith and God’s miracles as He continued to heal me.

I tried to take small walks each day. One day when I was well enough to take a walk, I listened to an unknown artist, Andrea Bocelli, on my CD player. I knew very little about him, but his words and music were powerful. They inspired me and filled me with hope. As I walked across the street, I came to the old Carthage jail, where Joseph and Hyrum Smith had been martyred. Yes, this sleepy little town was where the Mormon leader had been killed. Nauvoo was only miles away on the Mississippi River.

At the jail, a man and his wife kept looking at me and whispering. I walked through the beautiful gardens and then crossed the street again and sat on the steps of the house of my father-in-law's childhood home. It was a restored Victorian five-story home, and we occupied only the lower floor. It was too big even for five families. I watched as a car pulled up in front of the wide driveway. A man got out and looked at the for sale sign.

"I'm Mr. Marriott. These young couples are to be married this weekend." He smiled as he introduced himself and the men and women sitting in the back seat.

"That's wonderful. Can I help you with directions?" I asked.

"No. Are you LDS?" He quizzed me with a hopeful look on his face.

"No, I'm not. The house is listed through my sister-in-law."

"Are you sure you aren't LDS?" He appeared to be surprised, then got back in the car and drove away. I smiled one of those unique smiles that I save for God.



Nauvoo was only a few miles down the road, and I understood why Joseph Smith selected this place. As soon as the road turned and paralleled the river, the scenery was inspiring. Max attended a small Catholic school in Nauvoo, and he and I had often visited the restored Mormon village, which consisted of tinsmith and gun shops, printing office and living quarters. The elders of the church and missionaries each spent time in period dress guiding guests who toured the property. Max, Mary, and I spent every chance we could there.

Nauvoo was reminiscent of Williamsburg, Virginia. I had visited Colonial Williamsburg many times; it was near Chatham Hall. The Farish family had a long history in Virginia after being granted land in King and Queens County in the 1700s. In fact, I had been doing genealogy research on my family and allied families when I met Skip.

Somehow, meeting Mr. Marriott that day, visiting Nauvoo, and listening to the music of Andrea Bocelli daily gave me a new sense of hope. If Bocelli, blinded from a disease in childhood, could live every day to the fullest, if these young couples were willing to marry someone chosen for them without question in good faith, and if missionaries could devote their time to Nauvoo so others could relive the past, I could find hope in my circumstances.

And that was exactly what I did. Yet, no one seemed to believe in me. It didn't appear that anyone wanted me to even try to heal. It would be easier for them if I didn't. Everyone seemed to want me just to accept my circumstances. But faith swelled inside of me, and I wasn't giving up, not yet. God had a plan even in this, and I trusted Him. I certainly would have been willing to give up if God wanted me to, but He kept me alive. I was so thankful to have Him carry me; I could not have done it alone. He held on to this little remnant of my life because of my faith, and I thanked Him continuously.

CHAPTER 11

No Way Down

*Bread from heaven is bread of life. Living water is living life.
I cast my bread upon the water.*

Skip and I wondered where we were going. Our children needed a home, and it wasn't Carthage. Neither one of us wanted to be there. We couldn't go back to Colorado, due to the altitude. We didn't want to return to Houston. We needed a place closer to heaven, where he could raise our children after I was gone.

We decided on Door County, Wisconsin, where I had spent endless summers at my grandparents' lake house. Everything about Door County lived in my memory. It had always been a place where we went for healing, for retreat, and for renewal. The lake house had been large enough to house all the families at one time. Cousins, aunts, uncles—all came together there. We water-skied and sailed. We lit fireworks on the beach on the Fourth of July and enjoyed hayrides at Thanksgiving. We picked buckets of cherries in August and were allowed to let the juice stain our clothes and chins.

The kitchen had been a gathering space where corn was shucked and summer squash was sliced. It contained a cornucopia of smells—baking, fish frying. Outside there was the smell from the orchards as the fruit dried in the sun.

In Wisconsin, I could witness curled ferns opening in the morning. I had to wake up very early to see it, but like a sacred garden, the world was alive and humming. I listened to the constant washing of stones under the waves as they reached for the shore. That is where I wanted to be: in Door County, a healing place.

We decided to take a house-hunting trip to Sturgeon Bay and stayed in a hotel for a week. I interviewed the principal at St. Peter's Lutheran School, or rather, *he* interviewed me. This was the strictest arm of the Lutheran church, the Wisconsin synod. I had no problem with piety and actually welcomed the change. I walked down the hallway with my walker assisting me and was met by the senior pastor. He introduced himself and seemed very determined to speak with me about something.

"What are you concerned about, Pastor Zessin? You look puzzled." I asked this with all sincerity. I wanted to understand why he seemed pensive and uncertain.

"There is a young woman in the hospital," he said. "She had a massive stroke one week ago. She is only twenty-eight years old. I don't know what to say to her or how to help. What do you say to her? You have had strokes. What can you tell me?" He said all this with such concern, and he paced as he spoke.

I wanted to help. I asked him where she was and her name. After wandering the halls for a few minutes, I went to the church's reception desk and told them I would go see her. Within a few minutes, I was in my car driving to Green Bay, an hour away. I felt that I was safe to drive by now but I had not driven this distance in many years. Still, I did what I felt I had to do. I called Skip at the hotel to tell him that I would be gone for a few hours.

As I drove, I thought about what I might say to this young woman I had never met. I couldn't find the words. How could I intervene in her life? How could I be so bold?

I parked my car across from St. Vincent's Hospital, left my walker behind, and entered the reception area. I asked at the desk where I could find Deanna Geitz. For several minutes, the receptionist couldn't find her name. At last, she directed me to the elevators. I hesitated, and again the thought entered my mind, *What will I say to this young woman?* I stood in the lower hallway waiting and then noticed a wooden door with the word "Chapel" next to it. I walked inside, and the door closed behind me. In this small space was a chapel of prayer. There were only a few pews, but it was a sanctuary. I could feel His presence, and I had no doubt that I was entering the heart of the Holy Spirit. I prayed a simple prayer, asking that He give me the words to speak to this woman.

I took the elevator to the Stroke Center. I had not been offered rehabilitation exercise after my strokes. I introduced myself to Deanna and her aunt,

who was with her. I followed them and waited as we watched several other patients in therapy. They all were searching for answers, for some word from God to direct them. One young man had bandages on a leg that had been amputated. Another woman sat in her wheelchair, her head down as if the world had completely forgotten she existed. Another older man lay on a pad shaking his head. He didn't want to perform the therapeutic tasks that were being asked of him. He just lay there.

Then, there was Deanna, a beautiful woman with youth still left and her entire life ahead of her. She was limp, sitting in the wheelchair with her body leaning sideways so that only the chair arm supported her. Her hips were shifted to one side like a lifeless doll's. One arm lay cradled in her lap.

But then I noticed the other arm. It wasn't just resting on the wheelchair arm as you would expect. Though her gaze was downward, and she seemed emotionless, her hand was clasped tight around the end of the armrest. Within this lifeless body, she was very much alive, and that hand represented a sign of stubbornness, the kind of stubbornness that causes one to go above their limitations and survive.

Deanna had been engaged to be married, and her fiancé had called off the engagement just before her stroke. She had grown up on a farm and had worked hard to become a hairdresser, to make people more beautiful. She had the day off from work and stayed around the house, a house that she had paid for. When the stroke hit, she fell to the floor and then tried to inch her way across the room to call for help. They found her the next morning when she didn't come in for work. She had been alone all night, cold and dying.

I looked at Deanna again. Then God gave me the words I was lacking. I bent down to look directly into her eyes.

"Deanna, I know that you think your life has ended and that no one will want you this way. And I know you feel like you are stuck in a glass bottle. You can see out, but no one can hear you. But God has given you a gift in this moment. He has opened a window, a window of time. Time stands still, and He is waiting for you to respond. Life isn't about learning to walk all over again, putting one foot down until it is steady enough for you to stand. It's about where you want to go from here. Life isn't about learning to speak all over, finding each syllable and to speak again. It's about what do you want to say now. Time stands completely still, waiting for you. And God will wait until you find the right words, your words to say to him."

I unlatched the necklace that had been given to me in Evergreen after my strokes and held it ready for Deanna.

“I want to offer you a gift, something special that was given to me. It is a cross of the Good Shepherd. I am going to put it in your hand, the one you are no longer able to use. When you are ready and you can use this hand again, you can find me and return it to me. God is here with you.”

Tears flowed from Deanna’s eyes. She couldn’t speak. The entire room was quiet and staring at us, waiting. Then, she pushed on the armrest with everything she had inside and fell into my arms. She cried for a long time, and I cried with her.

A few months went by, and I noticed an article in the *Door County Advocate* that told of a benefit for Deanna, a young woman who had experienced a massive stroke. I called on the day of the event and talked with her mother. She knew who I was immediately and asked if I could come and see Deanna the next day at her aunt’s cottage. Deanna had recovered her speech and was able to walk. I arrived the next day, and Deanna and I reunited. She told me that she hadn’t known God before the stroke, and suddenly He was there. She didn’t know who had introduced her to Him, but He was now present in her life. She went on to tell me about her dreams of helping others and how her life had changed. We shared many thoughts about God over the months, and then she met someone to share her life with and married.

Deanna’s story of recovery was a gift to me. She gave me much more than I could ever have given her. She gave me renewed hope in people. I was grateful for her friendship and her faith.

* * *

It was February in Wisconsin when we moved into our new home. A fresh snowfall covered the driveway. Our belongings were unloaded from the moving van one by one. I did what I could to unpack the necessities and then got to work on becoming a part of the community. I had made the arrangements for Max to attend the small Lutheran school on the other side of town and enrolled Mary in their preschool program. By all outward appearances, Sturgeon Bay was a welcoming place. We all looked forward to spending time on the beach as soon as the snow melted.

Now I entered the time of my life when there was no way down. I learned the art of survival, not just emotional survival that takes strength from the heart, but physical strength. I learned to become Goliath, a giant!

Everything around me had become a physical obstacle. My health worsened before it improved. Getting in and out of bed took climbing faith. I put a step stool at the side of the bed. Sometimes it took five minutes to just get to a position so I could lie down for the night. The ritual began again each morning, rising little by little until I had the strength to stand. I couldn't hold my arm up long enough to brush my teeth, so I sat in the bathroom with my arm propped against the counter and leaned over the sink for support. Pulling the shower handle just to turn it on meant using the wall for leverage, pressing my hips against it, and applying all the strength I had.

I put a seat in the shower so I could rest. Lifting my arms up to wash my hair and then adding conditioner sent pain throughout my muscles. If I sat too long, the pain shot into my spine, and I couldn't get up to turn off the water until it went cold. I had to nap after the shower for an hour because all my strength was gone. With my hair covered in a towel, I curled up in a fetal position and just fell asleep.

I couldn't make coffee or toast. I couldn't lift the appliance out of the lower cabinet. If I attempted to lift a plate out of the upper cabinet, it would fall to the floor, crashing into pieces. I don't know how many dishes I broke.

This was not the worst of my symptoms. I began to have more dizziness with syncopal spells. And I had seizures, small seizures during which I felt like I was standing in an elevator and the floor would drop out from under me. The seconds between being suspended in midair and falling were grueling. It was a sinking feeling, like that ache in the pit of your stomach before dry heaving during the flu. But of course, it wasn't in my stomach; it was in my heart. The feeling was wretched. Like an empty chamber, blood pooled and valves of tissue stopped, just hanging there, dripping.

Thirty to forty times per day, I had these events. Then more symptoms came on. I had menses twice a month. As soon as I stopped bleeding, nine days would pass, and then it started all over again. It felt like poison was leaving my body. Somehow it was being cleansed, but I found no enjoyment while undergoing the process. It was difficult beyond measure. I didn't take pain medicine. I had tried, but it didn't work. The pain was much too intense. I had to endure and *mentally* massage the pain away to find some relief from it.

There was no way to go farther down, only up. But I overcame and became Goliath. One morning, I had an important conversation with God during which I realized that I could do nothing in my own power, not even breathe, and that I had to release all to Him. So I told God that if He would be with me every step of the way, I could find the courage and the strength to live again. I put pieces of paper around the house that read, “I will with God’s help.”

I became a monument of strength. Every step I took made me stronger. I went daily to the YMCA only a few blocks away and walked around the upper track. I drew strength from watching the children in gymnastics training and playing basketball. Mary often participated in gymnastics, and I enjoyed seeing her. I smiled every step as I made it a little farther each day. Most people thought it was strange how happy I was using a walker.

I imagined Skip in front of me, beckoning me on, waiting for me and then asking me to go farther. God walked with me and became my eyes, my legs. My entire body took on a new form, a new skin. Eventually, I walked unassisted and loaned my walker to an elderly friend across the street. I didn’t plan to need it ever again.

After months of this ritual, I began to discover something new. If I stretched before I walked, the orthostatic intolerance became worse. My brain didn’t get enough blood flow. So, I stretched with slow Pilates movements after my walk. Then, I noticed that using my arms—really using them to propel me forward—made the pain in my calves disappear. I started extending my arms over my head in long, pendulum-like motions as I walked, alternating back and forth every five minutes. Amazingly, I had more strength and energy. Then, the most incredible revelation occurred to me. It was my heart, but not the beat of the muscle or leaking from the valves. All this time, the defective elastin and collagen were affecting my heart. Elastin had elastic properties. It contracted and expanded to keep blood flowing to my heart. Rendered useless in areas, my blood would slow down, then pool and cause my blood pressure to drop below life-sustaining levels. My heart became so weak, causing everything that wasn’t receiving enough blood to simply shut down. Where too much blood pooled, defective collagen—the glue that held my arteries together—then became weak and dissected apart. My platelets, a vital part of my blood, also defective, rushed to heal my damaged arteries.

I felt weak throughout my body as a result of what was happening to me, but I understood it all suddenly. How clearly the image came to my mind’s eye. Of course! Heart patients can’t lift their arms above their shoulders without

passing out, and now I could! This made all the difference. It meant healing was possible. My body was ready to heal.

Two years went by while I strengthened my arms and heart. I tried kayaking on land to see if it would help. The challenge was enormous, but all I had to do was sit and paddle slowly. I had loved kayaking as a child in Aspen. The word *healing* is not strong enough to describe what happened next. Just the constant rhythm of my arms, the back-and-forth motion, healed my heart. Blood flowed as honestly as a boat over the surface of the lake. When I finally entered the water, the edge of the paddle sliced through the water, and the water held itself in place until I had glided forward a yard or two. Then, as I alternated to the other side, it held again. Smooth strokes helped me heal as much as God's presence caused life to pulse around Him. It was a march, a beat, a pulsing in my cells, cleansing me of all illness. I was in health, and I began to picture myself in health, not in sickness.

I was on my way up. I was on my way home.

* * *

It is amazing to me, when I reflect over my time of healing, how suddenly everything changed. Life woke me up, and I found that I needed others to heal. Human life was connected in such a way that lived apart, it had no meaning, no purpose. I had to find a spiritual and physical connection to people again. With people beside me in my walk, along my journey, everything began to heal as we passed by. We walked together in beat to God's music.

CHAPTER 12

Living in Grace

Give me this day my daily bread and open wide the eyes of my soul so I can see good in all things.

While I was healing physically, a spiritual renewal happened in my life, leading me to a higher level of understanding faith. It was now 2003.

Many years had passed, and my mother and I now enjoyed conversations where there had been silence in the past. Our relationship had grown into friendship and even fellowship.

One afternoon, I received a call from my mother and sister, who were on vacation in Mexico.

“I have an incredible idea,” my mother said. “It’s about the retreat center I want to develop. What if I host a retreat in Mexico? San Miguel is known for its doors. I could call it the *Open Door Retreat*. I want you to speak to those who come. You are living in grace, and people need to hear what you have to say. I can only do it if you help me.”

La Puertacita, named for its doors, was a small boutique hotel only blocks from the Catholic and Episcopal Churches in San Miguel de Allende. I imagined walking the stone streets again and the feeling I had when I touched those doors, the shadows on the walls, and the busy voices of people doing their work. It was a perfect place to host a retreat.

“Grace comes to the place where we welcome each other through the door of our faith.” I heard the words spill out like a flowing thought from God. “I would be happy to help you host the Open Door Retreat,” I said to her.

God was guiding me beyond forgiveness. He was offering me the gift of fellowship with my mother, and I realized it from the moment I picked up the phone.

She knew I believed in her again. Helping her would be a gift.



My mother had undergone so much change in her spiritual growth. She had left Aspen and rejoined her old friends in Houston. She'd become a member of Daughters of the King and met with other women in a circle of prayer. She had a singing ministry for patients in the hospital and in a senior citizens home. She sang old songs of her youth, reminding her of the days when she'd sung opera. When I was a child, before violence overtook our home in Houston, my mother dressed us in costumes during holidays. We performed musical evenings for friends. This had been some of the music of my childhood.

My mother, my sister, and I began preparing immediately. There was work to be done. Lists had to be formed, airline and hotel reservations coordinated, and speakers chosen. This was not a small project. I concentrated on the content and why people would want to come to this retreat.

To prepare the three priests and pastors to take their part in the retreat, I worked tirelessly on the meaning of those words that God gave us. The retreat was about grace. *Grace comes to the place where we welcome each other through the door of our faith.* But how could I describe living in grace when I had not written this book?

God's grace is a gift. He gives it to all of us to cleanse, to heal, to forgive, and to sustain us. God offers it as a means for us to be strong, to grow, to stand in, to speak, and to abound in holiness as long as it is available. God's gift of grace comes from faith. It cannot be earned. We cannot seek grace from God, for we will never find it. God gives grace because of the unending love He has for us. Though we cannot choose grace, we can experience grace shining from the life of another person. We can give of ourselves, serving others who may or may not be receiving God's grace. This may sound like words, but words have God's power within them. I lived with God's power within me! Anyone who has experienced complete grace knows that it is unmistakable and it is undeniable.

Why do we need grace? Because we cannot truly be alive without it! Receiving God's grace fills and satisfies our need to be with Him. God's endless

grace is a continuum of giving, accepting, and receiving His love and sharing His love with others.

This became the message of the retreat.

One year later, April 23–25, 2004, after all was prepared to host this special weekend, forty people attended the Open Door Retreat in San Miguel de Allende. It was an amazing time of renewal. The Holy Spirit was very much in the place where those present welcomed each other through the door of their faith. All understood the message of grace. I was thankful for being a part of it. I believed it was my special gift to my mother.

CHAPTER 13

Who Hears God's Voice?

*This little light of mine,
God made it to shine.*

It was hard for me to accept that some people didn't believe. Though I lived in grace, there were people who still tried to take it away.

Sturgeon Bay had one small Episcopal Church in the heart of town, where its red doors opened to a beautiful view of the ship channel. My grandmother had attended services at Christ the King many times over the years, and I was eager to meet the new vicar who had just been assigned to the parish. I received a return call from him immediately, and before long, Father Dave was sitting in my living room.

"You mentioned on the phone that you only arrived last month," I looked at him with questioning eyes.

"Yes, my wife is a deacon, Deacon Kay; she works in Appleton. We met in seminary. I actually wanted to be a Catholic priest, but they didn't accept me. So, I was ordained in the Episcopal Church. This is my first assignment." He chuckled as he said this.

I thought it was interesting that he could shift directions so easily, going from training to be a Catholic priest to an Episcopal one. There were important differences that separate their doctrine of faith as well as similarities that unite them. As the conversation continued, I learned that he wanted to be a priest, regardless of what church he was assigned to. I found him inspiring. I also recognized that he had made a significant career change.

"Father Dave," I began, but then he cut me off.

“Just call me Dave. I am not quite use to all this yet. I guess you could call me vicar. I am the vicar for this parish and two other parishes north of here that close their doors part of the year.”

He sounded unsure of all his responsibilities but was taking it in stride.

He had a great sense of humor and was interesting. He had been a stem cell researcher at Harvard Medical School and then became disillusioned after his first wife left him. I remained silent and listened. They had grown children. After the breakup of his marriage, he had decided to become a priest. He told me more of his story. I accepted his openness and enjoyed the hour-long conversation, though I felt there was something too careless about his faith; but I didn't want to believe this. He talked about doctrine and church history and seemed confined to the ritual.

That Sunday I walked through the red doors of Christ the King, and Father Dave and his wife greeted me. The small church was the size of what was normally considered a chapel. The furnishings weren't grand, but the bishop's chair, pews, and altar rail must have had an untold history behind them. Christ the King reminded me of the country chapels I had seen in Europe, gathering places for people in the community.

As the sermon began, I sensed immediately that Father Dave's style didn't fit these older traditional settings, but he made do. He talked about his personal experience of bird watching in his sermon, and there was a bit of insouciance to it, almost to the point of being “jolly.” The liturgy of the word was very much the opposite. It was quite solemn. I considered how sermon and liturgy made a striking contrast.

Then, as I was leaving that morning and the game of musical chairs began, I met Father Ken. He was a man in his seventies with a baritone voice that commanded attention when he spoke. His smile was entirely disarming. His wife, Grace, was the organist. Her name fit her well, even in old age. She was delightful, and I enjoyed getting to know her. Although she was quite forgetful in conversation and suddenly would wander off, she would then return in midstream, asking, “Now, where was I?”

Not everyone in that church was like Grace, welcoming and warm. Some were her opposite, very determined to keep out people they regarded as intruders. It felt a bit like Alice in Wonderland, but I enjoyed the experience—at first.

Next thing I knew, Father Ken and Grace were sitting in my living room, just as “Dave” had two weeks earlier. However, they came with papers.

“Have you ever heard of Cursillo?” he asked, looking at Skip and me with very honest eyes.

Grace was looking away, distracted by the room's furnishings. He quickly brought her to attention.

“Yes, actually, I have. But in Houston, generally, the three-day weekend retreat was reserved for senior couples in the church, not for those with small children. I never knew what all the secrecy was about. No one ever talked about Cursillo after attending, but I've always thought it would be an honor to be asked to attend. What exactly is Cursillo, Father Ken?” I was sincere in my quest to learn more and was open to the ideas he wanted to share.

Skip sat next to me listening, just as curious as I was. Father Ken had a big, wise voice that echoed throughout the space. He made himself heard.

“You have to make a commitment to be a part of the forth day before you go to Cursillo. It is recommended that couples attend *together*. It is a time of deepening your faith walk with others on the same path. It starts in a few weeks, and I want you to look over this information that I am going to leave you.”

I didn't question him at all. He seemed so convincing when he said that we needed to attend.

I had attended only a few services at Christ the King, and when we moved to Sturgeon Bay, I vowed that I would not take on the role of teaching Christian education or volunteer. I needed time to physically heal from the strokes. But Father Ken sounded so certain that we should just attend the three-day retreat for renewal that it was hard to pass up this opportunity to grow more spiritually. After all, we needed a church home, and I wanted to become a part of the church community. And just as important, Skip, Max, and Mary needed a church home for continued support if the physicians were correct—that I had only a year or so to live. Father Ken was spiritually directed, so, even though I had just met him, I had every reason to trust him.

My vulnerability had never been my faith. It was what sustained me, gave me joy, and filled my soul. My faith and vertical relationship with God filled every need I had. I didn't want to be on *earth*; I wanted to be with *Him*. When I was a child, He had taught me to accept people for the gifts they offer, not for their behavior. I overlooked even the bad, because I believed that people have good intentions. Every child is born into a covenant relationship with God. It is the adult in the child's life that can take it all away and cause the

child to forget if their intentions are not good. As long as I had God, I was willing to be on earth, living the joy and trials, knowing He was with me.

God wanted me to be in relationship with people, living out the horizontal arm of the cross. If I did nothing more than this act of will, I honored Him. To be in continual prayer, to hear His voice, and to be still and know that He is God—there is nothing more life-giving than this; it is grace. He asked us to love one another, and that is the cross that I had been given. It is my soul's purpose for being here. How I live it and accept it and grow from it is my doing. It is my work. My hands are small, but my faith is immeasurable. And faith, I had come to learn, is believing in the testimony of another. Questioning another's holiness or testimony wasn't something I understood.

The weekend before Cursillo, we decided that Skip would stay behind to take care of our children. Really, I wasn't well enough to attend, but I packed a bag full of blood-thinner injections, my cell phone, and enough clothes for the three days. I went with all faith and good intention to grow spiritually that weekend.

As I got into the car with Grace, I told Skip that I would call that evening. Grace had agreed to drive me. I thought she would be staying at the retreat, but I was mistaken.

We arrived in time for dinner. I couldn't eat everything that they were serving due to dietary restrictions, but I tried to fill myself with those things that I could eat. The first thing they asked for was my cell phone. I had arranged an emergency plan with the paramedics near the retreat location in case something went wrong. I had their number programmed in my cell phone, and now I didn't have it.

In the middle of the night, I began to shake uncontrollably. I didn't want to move, but I thought I was bleeding, so I had to get up. Somehow, in the dark, I managed to maneuver around the other cots and out into the hallway. The bathroom was easy to access, and I sat there, bleeding so heavily that I felt I was hemorrhaging. My Lovenox dosage had been increased, and my body was feeling the effects of being over anti-coagulated.

I was cold in my nightgown, and my head was throbbing. Getting out of the bathroom and across the hallway was exhausting. I was shaking violently and fell over one person sleeping on the floor in her sleeping bag and then over another. So I crawled, trying to find my cot. Once in my down quilt, I fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning, I did my best to be cheery and smile. I didn't complain. I didn't want my health to interfere with another person's time that weekend. I put everything I had into enjoying the three days, and I enjoyed them. But it felt like the Christian youth camp, Young Life, I'd attended as a child, making posters and singing songs.

As the weekend came to a close, I was thankful to be going home.

Before I was able to unpack my things, the phone rang. It was Father Dave. He quizzed me about the retreat, told me he didn't like Cursillo, and then told me that he had not invited me. He was head of the parish, and Father Ken had overstepped his boundaries.

I apologized for not knowing. How could I have known or been expected to know?

Part of the commitment to Cursillo was the *forth* day. I was to be included in a group that met weekly. It consisted of Father Dave and his wife, and the senior warden and his wife. But I was never asked to attend. Weeks went by, and no one called me. I tried to reason that it was because Skip and I didn't go to Cursillo as a couple.

I continued going to services but didn't worry about a commitment I couldn't fulfill. My children began to acolyte on Sundays, even little Mary, and I helped by carrying the cruets to the altar. There was something missing though: *God*. As much as I tried to feel His presence, He wasn't in the church. Eventually, I felt so strong about this and compelled to talk to Father Dave about what God had revealed to me. Father Dave told me that no one talks to God and asked me to speak to a psychologist in the Episcopal Church. He said it just doesn't happen! He said no one hears God's voice! If God talked to me, it had to be treated as a miracle and approved of by the Pope for beatification. He didn't believe me, yet I was somehow expected to believe in him as my priest.

All of my life, I had heard clergy and laypeople witness about God in their lives. I had heard people describe how God intervened by healing them. I never questioned their testimony or their faith. People were healed of cancer, saved from major car accidents, and rescued from catastrophes, but now, my testimony was invalid! We had seen 9/11 and the earthquakes in Turkey and Mexico on television. We believed the reports over the newswire, taking the words of a stranger for what happened, but my story wasn't credible? I couldn't prove I had been healed? I couldn't show that God talked to me?

There were no words for the kind of pain this caused me emotionally. Father Dave's words hurt me deeply. I watched the news every day for hours to occupy my mind. Then, world issues began to weigh on me. For a long time, I didn't want to be in Father Dave's church, just with my family. And then I remembered a small chapel on the other side of the peninsula, Boynton Chapel, at Bjorklunden.

Mr. and Mrs. Boynton had built the chapel as an act of prayer. Their son was at war, and until his return, they had spent endless hours building it, carving each pew and the altar. Mrs. Boynton had painted frescos on the walls and decorated it by filling it with music. My grandparents had been good friends with the Boyntons, and my mother had sung at a recital in the chapel. Though it seated fewer than fifteen people, it was a place of God. The doors opened on to an unobstructed view of Lake Michigan, and the view was flanked on either side by twenty-five-foot trees, giving the impression that nothing else in the world existed, and that prayers flowing toward the water and the sky would reach their son.

The property had since been gifted to Lawrence University and had become an extension of the campus, a place of study. I wanted to be at Boynton, so I called and arranged to use the chapel on Sunday mornings for family services. Skip and the children were very willing to participate in this new venture of faith.

Each Sunday we found a large antique metal key waiting for us just inside the doors at Bjorklunden. The doors were painted with rosemaling, the Scandinavian tradition of rose painting. Sis—the wife of Dr. Utzinger, who many years ago examined me at Stanford University School of Medicine—had been a master painter in this style.

No one had used the chapel for a family service in years. And now we were bringing life back to the Boynton Chapel of prayer!

I studied the *Book of Common Prayer* and came up with just the essential parts of the meal and designed a small family service. Skip agreed with the format and decided his part should be to read a parable or story from a children's Bible. Mary carried the cruets of wine and water. Max set the small folding table and lit the candles. I began with a prayer and lesson. Our faith was a simple faith, not confined by rite and ritual. A prayer to open our hearts and a willingness to share a meal—these were the elements. Nothing more was needed except for us to come, to arrive at God's house. No one needed to intercede on our behalf or petition for us. We didn't have to feel condemned

if we forgot to pray before we shared the meal. No pious acts made us more worthy. Our humble cup didn't make us less deserving. We just came willingly to be with God. And God was there with us.

This was how our family kept faith alive for two years while we waited to find a new church home. I thought of the families during wars and famine who kept faith alive in their homes.

Boynton Chapel of prayer sustained us during a difficult time just as it had for the Boytons. My family will always return to its door of faith. Sometimes, even God's house, just the walls within, can offer hope.

CHAPTER 14

Infidelity of the Heart

*Being faithful to God and to every trust
reveals all things that are hidden.*

All of my life, I had valued marriage, the commitment to marriage, and loyalty in relationship with my husband. The most important desire I had in my relationship with Skip was spiritual fellowship. Nothing seemed more important in our marriage. I had valued him almost as much as I valued God. Skip didn't understand the need for daily fellowship the way I did, and it left our marriage unprotected. It left our children vulnerable.

When Max was born, a new love had been added, one on which I focused as much of my attention as Skip did. I had showered our son with love as I had showered it on my husband. I didn't value my husband less or my son more. But giving part of myself to another person when he was already sharing me with God was difficult for Skip. The more people with whom I shared myself, the more this strained our marriage.

Skip became involved in an effort to start a museum for children in Door County. It appeared to be a project full of good intentions with good people offering their time and talents to the effort. Museums had been an important part of our family in Houston. After the board was formed, Skip asked me to offer my creative hand in the design process. I thought it would be a wonderful experience to work with him on a volunteer project. We had never done this type of project before and were excited about helping the community. We thought our experience on boards in Houston would be of benefit to

the group. And we needed to work together, to learn to enjoy helping others again. I felt well enough to offer my time now.

Skip and I worked tirelessly for the benefit of the board to form a structure and foundation of community members that the museum could then be built upon. We looked for a way to fit into the other established community efforts in Door County and collaborate. But the project was seen as a competing force that made it impossible to even make a footprint. Though the people of the board wanted to offer a unique museum to the children, the parents, and the millions of visitors who came to Door County to vacation, not everyone agreed how this would happen. And I wasn't aware that one female board member didn't want me there. I was a competing force for my husband's time and affection. She had become friends with Skip and began to rely on him heavily for support, and he was unaware of her need.

At the end of two years, we shut down the project, and it went on a shelf in the closet. For Skip, it was easy to let go. He was use to disappointments at IBM. It was part of business. But I had invested too much of myself into this enormous effort to let go. I had not handed this over to God. Skip and I had not prayed over this work, and the board did not pray together. Many board members didn't believe in faith. None of us were in fellowship. I understood later that this was the true reason we failed. Every obstacle imaginable was put in front of us. Because God was not present, the work of our hands was contrary to His will. It became a symbol of infidelity of the heart. The heart can be easily fooled.

I had built up an unreal picture in my mind that Skip was physically with me and helping me heal. Each time I needed support to walk after the strokes, for motivation, I imagined that Skip was steps in front of me, beckoning me on so that I could do what I needed to do. With God holding my hand, lifting me up when I fell, carrying me at times, I believed I had the best of both of them. And they had the best of me. I had a God who loved me and cared for me, and a husband who supported me. But Skip wasn't there, not in person. He wasn't taking me to the Y and walking with me.

Something started to be missing in our marriage. It was subtle at first. I thought Skip felt detached from Max. He seemed to be overwhelmed with responsibilities of work. He originally started working from his home office out of a need to be with us, but never allowed us to interrupt him. I tried to establish a prayer time with Skip to pray, but he was uncomfortable. Eventually,

I began to believe that I would never have what I treasured most—fellowship with Skip—and I thought I would be okay without it.

I came to a part of my journey where I would again be tested. Then, something worse was sent to me. Someone befriended me, and he pretended to fill that void, which I didn't realize was there. He touched my spirit. He was the spiritual friend I had been seeking in my husband. I was only looking for friendship, but he wanted more, and I didn't know it. I didn't question his friendship or his fellowship. I had many female friends with whom I shared fellowship, but it was becoming harder to find people I truly connected with on a spiritual level. I was different than most of the people in this community. They had grown up in a small town with their relatives living on the same block. I was from the south and talked openly about God. I was handicapped from strokes, and I had bone atrophy and marks on my face. Also, I smiled continuously and easily approached people. This combination did not invite instant friendships or fellowship in Door County. People hesitated with me instead of welcoming me. People didn't talk about God openly. But he did!

I arrived at the riding stables interested in finding lessons for Mary. I didn't imagine getting on a horse again. I attempted to ride a year earlier, and my right boot just lay limp in the stirrup. But the trainer made me *believe* that I could ride again. *Maybe it would be therapeutic*, I thought. I signed up for group lessons while Mary attended daily riding camp.

"Are you ready for your lesson?" he asked. He was tightening the girth as Honey stood still.

The stables were washed down, and there was the scent of fresh sawdust mixed with urine. He handed me a black velvet helmet and motioned me toward the indoor arena. We walked at a good pace and soon were in the center, standing on freshly raked soil.

I felt confident. I had forgotten so much, even how to ride, after the strokes and seizures. This world was an opportunity for me again. I had to relearn everything and create new memories.

I looked at him with complete sincerity and said, "Let's make a memory." I didn't realize that those words would invite him in.

I put my left knee in his cupped hands, and he lifted me effortlessly over into the saddle. It felt good to be in a saddle again, and I sat there taking it all in. I looked around at the walls of the indoor arena and memorized each angle, each curve. It was geometry, the patterns of the gait. The years of riding started to come back, but very slowly. They lay somewhere deep in the recesses

of my mind. I had no doubt it would all come back—that *I* would come back. This was my opportunity to experience something important to me that I had forgotten.

“Kandy isn’t your real name?” he quizzed.

“Katherine, it’s Katherine, I use both interchangeably,” I answered, then said, “This feels familiar.”

“Katherine, both names fit you,” he suggested with a satisfied look on his face.

“Are you comfortable? I don’t want to take you anywhere you aren’t willing to go. We can take it slow.” He was polite and comforting.

I knew I had to be patient with myself, and I was willing to take whatever time was necessary to learn again. So here was my helper, and he was offering his hand. My spirit opened each time I took another lesson. Just like riding Dixie, I imagined running across the clearing again.

We had something in common; the trainer and I had *many* things in common. He had survived a car accident that year and had only weeks earlier been given the okay by his physicians to ride again. But he hadn’t lost anything. The lessons he gave me weren’t just about riding for him. For me, it was about regaining something I had lost memory of. He asked me questions, spiritual questions that few people ask me. I felt safe, never doubted his motives, never even considered his intentions to be less than honorable. We actually talked about honor in marriage.

One evening I arrived for my lesson. I asked to change to day lessons, but he thought I was questioning his trust, so the lessons remained after dark. The arena was well lit, and the horses in the stable were settling down. I went in expecting to be able to saddle on my own.

“So, I’m being replaced!”

I heard a woman’s voice from behind us. The veterinarian stared at me with a smile that appeared genuine, yet she caused me to be suspect. Her words remained in my mind. What was that about? What did she mean?

We started out walking around the arena, and then I gathered my seat. I pumped the reins back and forth in each hand, massaging Honey’s mouth. This was something the trainer had taught me to do to calm his horse.

“Let go of the reins and look up among the rafters,” he said.

I did this and felt unbelievable calm fill me. I had once known this feeling, but it had been so long ago. I felt I had remet an old friend who was willing to

walk with me. I enjoyed his willingness to help, asking nothing in return. How refreshing it was to be the one receiving, not just the one giving.

The lessons progressed, but there was a growing tension that I felt around the stable women. There was a level of insecurity coming from the veterinarian, and it was being directed at me. I had not given any reason for them to treat me this way. I was just happy. What was wrong with being happy? The look of grace can be very attractive. There was a great amount of talk around the water cooler, and I didn't want to be the object of that talk. To reassure the trainer that I was only there to ride, I asked both of them about this. After all, I was married. She was married too, but apparently I was in her territory, too near to him for her comfort.

I was no longer comfortable at the stable, and I didn't recognize why I was concerned. There are observable behaviors of mares in a stable as they mark out their territory. One mare dominates, and the other horses follow. Perhaps this was what I was feeling.

* * *

One evening after riding, a memory floated back that I didn't need. It was the trainer's stark white truck that triggered the memory. His truck was his pride and joy. Why had I not seen it before?

I was back in memory to the time when I was twelve years old and knew nothing about adult love. I did not want this unwelcome memory to float back into my mind. It came uninvited.

I had met a boy the summer before who made me feel like dancing every time I was with him, the kind of first love that you never forget. We met when I was riding one day with another friend near my stable in Aspen. It was June, and I was waiting for him to come back to his summerhouse in the mountains. His name was Aaron, and he was from an Orthodox Jewish family. Neither of our parents approved, but I didn't know how conditional love could be or what a racial issue this could cause. I was only a child. I had never experienced rejection of this kind.

I was remembering back to a night when Farish had wanted to join his friends in town, at the outdoor mall. Usually, my mother made us walk the three miles up Red Mountain Road, but now my brother could drive. He was allowed to park the car behind the Jerome Hotel and walk from there. He was responsible for me that night, and although I was not welcome, he brought me

along. When we approached Farish's friends, I heard someone complain about my age, that I should be not with them. Farish was busy, and I wanted to go home. Like any older brother would do, he handed me a dime and told me to call home from the pay phone at the movie theater.

It was getting late. I left Farish, looked back only once, and then continued walking. I was near Aspen Sports and turned the corner at the edge of the rugby park. Suddenly, there were several college-age boys in front of me. Some were standing, and the others were sitting on the curb. I tried to walk around them, though they were spread out, and I had to weave in and out. I felt slightly intimidated, but I couldn't find any real reason for my concern. I was twelve, but they were not *that* much older than me. I picked up my pace and headed for the phone.

"Hey, where are you going so fast?" asked one voice from the crowd.

"I'm on my way to the phone so I can go home," I answered quickly and kept walking.

"I can take you home. Where do you live?" One of the boys was in front of me now, blocking my way.

"I live up Red Mountain, near the top." I looked down at my feet as I answered. That was my mistake. I should have looked at him, deep into his eyes, into his soul.

"I live up there. I left something at my house. Come on! I'll take you home." he said with excitement in his voice.

I looked up now and saw a big welcoming smile on his face. The mountain was sparsely lit. It was hard to walk in the dark, three miles uphill, and he seemed to be pointing toward Aaron's house. My innocence betrayed me.

"Really? You live near Aaron?" I smiled back.

"Sure I do. Let's go and try to call your mom." He escorted me toward the phone across the street. When no one answered I gave him directions to my house. Then he yelled back to his friends that he would meet up with them later.

Sometimes a welcome smile is a wolf in disguise. I was unprotected. I was vulnerable. I had no experiences to rely on that gave him away.

That night became an endless struggle for me, one of pain and violence. An hour later, he stopped his truck and shoved me out on to the gravel on the side of the road. The gravel tore at my skin, and I watched the stark white truck drive off, leaving me in pieces. I had fought one hell of a fight. I had not given

in. I had torn clothes. My beautiful blond hair now felt like a rat's nest. I cried, I screamed, and I sat on the side of the road in disbelief.

Many cars passed, but no one stopped. They must not have seen me. The headlights blinded my eyes as they went by. I was yards from Aaron's house and only a stone's throw away from the houses of others who could offer help.

I walked up the hill nearly two miles, and then couldn't walk any farther. The homes that our neighbors lived in were bordered on one side by a long fence, and by the field where we kept the rest of our horses at Red Mountain Ranch. I could hear our horses running in the distance as I approached, but it was too dark for me to see them. I wanted to just see them. I stopped at the McBride's house and sat down on their porch. I just needed to rest.

Suddenly the door opened. It was Mr. McBride, who drove our carpool when his wife was too busy.

Startled by my appearance, he asked urgently, "What are you doing out here? What's happened to you?"

I couldn't answer. I was crying.

Then Mrs. McBride came to the door. They whispered to each other, and I heard her say that she did not want to bring me inside. Her children were inside, asleep.

A few minutes later, I was in our kitchen at home, and there was Farish, up close, yelling into my face.

"Where have you been? I looked for you for hours, and now I am in trouble."

My mother tried to stop him, but it was too late. The words had already come out, the kind of words that sting. She told him what had happened. I watched him back away and lean against the cold glass window. He was wearing the shirt I had made for his birthday, and jeans; a striking contrast to the black and white tile on the floor.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it," he said.

The next morning, I sat in Dr. Burkhardt's office. He had examined me, and my dignity had been violated again.

"Kate," he said to my mother, "it wasn't a completed event, so officially, it isn't rape. She told me she kicked and bit him off. She must have put up an incredible fight. It isn't necessary to report this incident." He was looking at me, but he was speaking to her.

"Good. I'm glad we don't have to report it. You know what will happen if it gets in the papers. It's best this way," she said as she left the room.

Then, he looked at me with a gift in his eyes and said something very powerful.

“Don’t let this ruin your life.”

If he had only known what I had been through in my life and what his words meant to me in that moment. No child should have to experience the things I had. But I took his advice, and I went home to live my life. I thought about his words as we drove. I wrote a prayer on my heart that day that kept me close to God forever. It read, “Don’t ever let my heart become hardened.”

Those words are why I never let go of God’s hand.

Aaron called later that summer. He was old enough to drive by then. I told him what had happened. He just looked at me, said nothing, and drove me home. We didn’t speak again.



Now, I was back in the present. I stood looking at the stark white truck in front of the riding stable. Remembering the truck I had been pushed out of that night so long ago in Aspen, I now looked with disbelief. Nearly thirty-four years had gone by. After all those lessons, feeling alive and believing that I had met a friend, I felt now that this man was under my skin and that it had happened all over again. He never touched me, but it felt like he had. I felt violated. There was a reason this memory had come back. He did want more, and I was a married woman.

The feelings of joy and fellowship I had known with him, something beyond friendship, something I had longed for in my relationship with my husband, now came crashing to an abrupt end. The smile of innocence had betrayed me again. The look of grace had rendered me unprotected and vulnerable. I had to leave the stable and leave a friend. I didn’t want to, but how could I ever explain this to him or to my husband?

I recognized the evil power around me now. Skip and this man had been born on the same exact day. They had celebrated the same birthday their entire lives. That was not a coincidence. It was a test—a test of my resolve. I understood that this man was the vehicle of temptation, but not the source of it. He was being tested just as I was. All I wanted was friendship, fellowship, but there was another element in this that wanted something far greater.

I felt a great loss and I felt betrayed, but I could have lost so much more. However, I was forgiving. I have always been forgiving. I could never be sorry. He had helped me ride again!

I went to the stables one last time. I wanted to impart goodness in this place. I asked if I could walk in the arena. As I walked very slowly around, I touched the walls and prayed. I wanted all darkness to be touched by God's light. Then, I imagined riding to each point in the arena. He watched me from a glass window until I came to a stop and exited the gates. I thanked him and left. I never returned to the stable. I didn't look back.

* * *

But now I was angry at life. I wanted off this journey. How could so many different trials come to one person? I had been through the trial of my body, of my mind, and now of my spirit.

I just shut down. If I attracted temptation, then I needed to be unattractive. The look of grace was innocence. The gifts of God were in my paintings, in my writing, in my home, in my music. Everything I touched had God's grace within it. As I shut down, so did my healing. I was no longer the vessel of grace, and it stopped flowing through me.

Losing the Invitation

Your journey has not been easy, and you are lost in thought as you continue along the path to God's house.

You have fallen so many times and find it hard to stand. Often you are weakened, but you are still willing to go on. With little left of who you are, you keep walking. Do you wonder why this journey was meant for you? Do you worry that you will not have the strength to carry on?

You stumble over a small stone on your path. Everything now becomes an unforeseen obstacle. Another rock is in your way, and then another. Suddenly you are aware that God's invitation is no longer in your hand. Where is it? You search the path but to no use. You are filled with unwanted emotion. Did you accept the task from God without a full understanding of what was being asked of you, only knowing that you are to deliver His psalm to the world?

You take a deep breath, so deep that you feel it in your soul, and stare into your own mind. Do you sit on the side of the road with all the others who have stopped along their journey? Have you forgotten what it is that you must do?

CHAPTER 15

Still Here

*Be still and know that I am God
and I will be with you.*

The following year, the tsunami hit Southeast Asia, Lebanon was bombed, and in late August of 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. I felt compelled to help. I couldn't go out of the country at the time and leave my family, but I could go to the Gulf. I had to!

Max and I left for Gulfport fourteen days after the hurricane. In Wisconsin, not many people were mobilizing relief efforts. Everyone was still in disbelief. I couldn't reach the Gulfport police, so I called the mayor in Biloxi, Mississippi. Mayor Holloway explained that volunteer assignments were being given out at the high school in Gulfport. With only a place to report to, and with no expectations, we prepared ourselves for the hard work ahead. We took tents and sleeping bags, knowing the only hotel reservations we could find were 150 miles from the gulf. All hotel rooms had been filled by families who had fled the Mississippi coast.

We drove down Highway 49 south of Hattiesburg. It was five thirty in the morning. All electrical lines were down, and with all the lights out, the roads were extremely dark. We had been warned not to buy gas below this point. It might contain water and stall the engine of our car, leaving us stranded on a dark highway. The only way out of this place was by vehicle.

It was an eerie feeling to drive into the town of Gulfport on Monday, September 11, 2005, the same day President Bush was due to arrive. It was too dark to see any of the destruction from Hurricane Katrina, but we headed

to the high school, which had been turned into an army barracks. After a long wait and filling out a volunteer questionnaire, there appeared to be no assignments. We asked five different people how we could help, but no one seemed to be organized. The Church of Scientology and a Baptist group were gathering their volunteers for a meeting under tents near the army barracks, but they weren't interested in our services. They seemed overwhelmed. Frustrated, we left to look for a point of distribution—a POD—and the American Red Cross.

By now it was light, and we could see the damage. We drove past the K-mart building, where boxes of clothing littered the entire parking lot. As we passed, I thought about the woman we had met at the last hotel. She had described surviving in the K-mart parking lot for a week with her four young children.

Just a few blocks from the beachfront, I stopped at the railroad tracks and could see what was left of the office buildings in downtown Gulfport. The road was blocked from this point on by army soldiers in Humvees and by barbed wire. I was not prepared for what we saw next. Driving parallel along the tracks, two to three blocks from the beachfront, we witnessed the devastation Hurricane Katrina had wrought. There wasn't a house left unaffected; every house on every block had been severely damaged. Trees were coming out of the roofs, cars were smashed, and boats were flipped over. You couldn't tell where one house started and another ended—and *people were inside!* This area had not been evacuated in advance.

Five or six people were sitting over small makeshift stoves in their yard, while power lines hung only three or four feet over their heads. Some of the lines had been restored and occasionally touched, sending a powerful zing sound through the air. Nonprofit organizations with Disaster Relief written on their vehicles had set up shop on every corner. We, along with everyone else, felt helpless. It was ninety-five degrees at seven in the morning, and people—at least a hundred people—stood on every block. This wasn't just about racism; this crisis was about economics. If you were going to get out and start over, you needed money. The poorest people of the town were hit the hardest and were unable to finance their way to recovery. These were people who had lived together for generations. They did not want to leave their friends and neighbors behind. How could they have been expected to leave?

Max and I tried to help by communicating with people, understanding their needs, and trying to find supplies for them. We were finally able to help at a POD set up through the Carpenter's Union. How could people rebuild

their lives in the midst of such great devastation? One organization seemed to be making the greatest effort for the people in its community, and perhaps burning out in the process. World Hope International had set up in Little Rock Baptist Church's front yard just blocks from the railroad tracks. Volunteers were not only feeding and supplying the neighborhood, but they were removing trees from peoples' living rooms, helping patch up roofs and walls, and giving spiritual support. Others were taking advantage of the situation and charging thousands of dollars for tree removal. Few were waiting for insurance adjusters who were overwhelmed in the field. People didn't have time to wait.

Much of this account I must credit to my son, Max, who wrote about the event, but what we learned was a shared experience. I thanked him for going with me. He was fourteen, and this experience changed him forever. It changed me forever.

Max and I learned that the human spirit is greater than governments and economic powers combined, that people with good intentions and common efforts can survive anything. The only radio station still receiving power in New Orleans and Gulfport was WWL radio. Everyone tuned in and called in to report. We learned from WWL radio that the only good advice was not to wait for help to arrive, but to band together and change the circumstances. But mostly we learned that we as humans can do nothing alone.

Then, on the drive home, something happened. I passed a billboard sign and read, "Remember that thing about loving (and helping) each other? I meant it. Signed, God!"

After I read the sign, I stopped the car immediately and got out. I stood under the sign looking up at it, crying helplessly. I had never felt so helpless in all my life. What could I do? My hands are so small.

When we returned to Door County, I tried to help by keeping up with the relief efforts. I wanted to go back. Months went by, and no one was talking anymore about New Orleans or the people who had been displaced. Everyone had begun to forget that people were still there, waiting for help that never came.

Newspapers stopped writing articles, and the major television news networks aired trivial human interest stories that amounted mainly to soap opera and gossip. CNN continuously reported about the Iraq war. Fewer people had died in Iraq over several years than had died in the tsunami in one day. None of this made sense to me.

Months turned into a year, and hope began to disappear in me. How could I bring a message of hope to people in the midst of such devastation? My faith meant nothing if it didn't offer hope. But who was I to offer hope? Had I forgotten what God had asked me to do? Did my story matter? I wanted to hear the stories of all the people in the world who had lost everything they had. Their stories were important and mattered to me. I wanted to help them.

* * *

It was mid-afternoon, and a warm breeze was filtering through the window. My easel was set up outside under the canopy of the gazebo, and I could see it from where I stood. I was on the phone with Dr. Miller, a memory assessment specialist who dealt primarily with geriatric patients. I had begun to experience memory loss shortly before the doctors discovered my carotid artery was dissecting. It was caused from the lack of blood flow and side effects from the heparin. He reassured me that it was only a retrieval issue, and he was less concerned about Alzheimer's being the cause.

"Blood flow to the brain," he said. "Get the blood moving and learn to memorize in new ways."

I took him seriously, and then it suddenly dawned on me—the significance of this conversation. I couldn't believe what was happening to my mind. I wanted to hear from someone who really believed in God. Now *I needed the message* I had been delivering to others my entire life.

I asked Dr. Miller a crucial question. "If I am losing my memory, even short term, then why do I remember how to paint to music? Why do I remember God? I haven't forgotten. I easily remember feelings, smells, and colors of places. If I had lost my ability to paint to God's music, I would never have made it through the pain. So why didn't I lose this?"

I was questioning him as though he had the answers. And perhaps he did.

"God and painting to His music is a vital part of you," he said. "You feel through it, and the memory of all the nuances that go along with painting to His music is stored in every part of you. It will never leave you."

I thanked him, and we ended our conversation. One question remained in my mind. If I somehow forgot all that I knew of God, who would be here to remind me?

* * *

A year later I lost sight of the one person who was here to remind me. I didn't have Skip's fellowship, and he was detaching more and more from involvement with us. He wasn't part of our family any longer. IBM work was consuming him. He woke up every morning, went into his office, and closed the door. He just lived to work hard. We were getting into arguments over the smallest things, and I didn't understand why. Everything revolved around charts and statistics. He lost his ability to express his emotions because he had learned to shut them off. As an analyst for IBM, his emotions had to be silenced. He could show no bias or interest in the information he forecasted and projected to the senior executives. It was part of his job, but it spilled out into our home, our family, and our marriage.

Then, one morning in a brief exchange of words, he questioned my faith. It was an absent-minded comment, and I should have recognized the source, but I didn't. In twenty-one years, I had never before thought that he didn't believe in me, and now I was confronted with his secret. After all the struggles and the triumphs that I endured, after all the joys celebrated without him, to hear that he didn't believe that God spoke to me and that I spoke to Him was devastating. How could I have been with my husband and not have known? Complete silence entered our home.

Faith *is believing* in the testimony of another. He didn't believe my testimony. This was a void in our marriage that I couldn't ever fill, the void he blamed me for because he was lost spiritually. I didn't know how to fill it, though I tried, and now I knew why. It wasn't for me to fill.

I broke! I broke like I had never broken before.

CHAPTER 16

Almost Losing Everything

It was 2006. I was returning from Milwaukee. I suddenly felt a need to get out of the car and breathe in the fresh air. I drove to a small park off the side of the highway near Mequon. I didn't think to grab a map as I entered the woods. I had not been there before. Green shadows hid the pathway through the trees. The smell of rotting logs combined with the scent of invading moss and lay stagnant in the air. After walking for a while, I looked around at the forest, and nothing seemed familiar. I was now alert, but I still couldn't find my way.

Then my mind filled with all the thoughts that I didn't want to think about. As I walked along, I realized that it would be too easy to erase the painful indifference that I felt in my marriage. An enormous space divided us. I felt so much emotional pain that I wanted the space to be even greater. I had lost trust and intimacy with my husband.

It wasn't Skip's one moment of doubt that caused such distress in me. That was only the breaking point after years of others doubting me. I had spent my entire life living in faith and wearing faith on my sleeve. This was my mission, my purpose—to share God's love—and people wanted to take it away, to cause me not to believe as they did. People couldn't believe in something they didn't have. If my husband believed, then the rest of the world's disbelief didn't matter. But I couldn't deny that he held us back from the marriage we were designed to have.

For most of our marriage, Skip wanted me to be happy but never offered me the one gift that would make me the happiest—his own relationship with God in which I could share. I desired to be one with my husband in every conceivable way. Now, I thought that I had failed. If we didn't have an intimate,

faith-filled marriage that was led by being in fellowship with God, how could I talk to people about faith, hope, and love? How could I be credible and be trustworthy in my faith?

Because of his lack of commitment to God and me, I was facing the possibility of being incapable of offering God's psalm and His message of hope. Could Skip be asking me to give up my faith to be with him, to commit to living forever his way? If I let go of God's hand, I wouldn't die, but the light in me would be extinguished forever. I was nothing without God.

The questions began to torment me as they rolled around in my head. Did I love my husband enough? Did I love God so much that it destroyed my marriage? Is that what God wanted? I had reached a point where I felt I no longer had the freedom to make the decision. How could that be? How could this be happening? My reason for living had always been to share God's love with others. I could only share love that I had already received. Did I desire fellowship with my husband more than fellowship with God? This last thought sent a chill through me, and I understood fear for the first time in my life. I feared losing Him, losing God!

As I wandered among the trees, I couldn't contain myself. The tears spilled from my eyes and made it difficult to see where I was going. I needed to release. I cried and continued crying. I didn't even try to hold it in. My shoulders became limp, and my feet were hot in my boots. I had fallen, and my hands were soiled and left marks on my face as I tried to wipe away my tears. I wanted to turn back. Still, I kept walking. Finally, when I came to a narrow opening between the trees and saw light beyond, I stopped. The opening was so small that I had to turn my body to squeeze through. I heard the breaking bark catch on my shirt and pants. The heel of my boot scraped against the trunk and exposed roots of the tree.

No sooner had I stepped through the trees than I found myself standing on the edge of a cliff. I had no idea it was there. How majestic and beautiful! It had a narrow ledge, no more than three feet wide. I nearly slipped on the grassy ledge, which was still wet with morning dew, and lost a breath trying to catch my balance. My arms flung upward from my sides, and I felt like a bobbing toy stuck to the dashboard of a fast-moving car. I steadied myself, and when I dared to look down, forty feet beyond the tips of my boots lay the shore. I slid my feet back two steps, using my legs like stilts to make only the smallest movement.

Then I was ready to take in the expanse that lay out before me. The water was amazingly beautiful! I was standing at the edge of one of the Great Lakes, and it felt like I was at the edge of the earth. Wow! I moved my eyes over the horizon's panoramic view to take it all in. *This must be like the firmament that separates the waters above from the waters below*, I thought. I exhaled a deep, long breath. I blinked my eyes, but it didn't go away. It was still there, and I was standing right in front of it.

Seagulls hovered over the shoreline below, floating in midair, allowing the wind to just hold them suspended. Waves crashed hard and fierce at a steady pace onto the broken rocks that dotted the shore, but the rocks remained planted there, monoliths that were unmovable, unshaken. This is what God wanted me to see. Like a child in awe, I was seeing God's world and all that He had made through His eyes.

"Oh, God, help me. I am so sorry," I said as I crouched down and wrapped my arms around my knees. I put all my weight into my feet to remain balanced and began to think deeply about my life.

It was all too much for me. I had come *too* far. How was it possible that the one person I valued most in this world didn't believe I talked with God? How was that possible? Didn't God put us together to share this journey?

I thought our marriage had been perfect. I'd had everything I ever wanted in my life from the beginning. We were happy years ago—really happy. He was happy. He believed in my faith more than in his own; I knew this to be true. Sometimes one person's faith is enough for two, isn't it? When did it all change? Why did he stop being happy? Had I failed in fellowship with my husband? Had I caused it by wanting it so much?

Suddenly I wanted answers about my marriage! I wanted to be in *this* conversation with God.

But God didn't give me the answers, and my mind didn't suddenly fill with profound thought or revelation as I expected. God just sang to me the psalm that I have always known.

*I am God.
I am your God.
You have always known who I am.
I have always been here with you.
I love you!*

And I responded, looking out over this great expanse that He created just for us, just for me, and I felt complete peace.

*Yes, Lord,
I have always known who you are.
You have always been here with me.
I am not afraid!*

I drove home that day searching inside myself for understanding, and then I had the conversation with Skip that brought reconciliation and eventual resolution. I was finally ready to hear.

I wanted him to be there, at home. I had not felt this way in a long time. On many occasions I'd come home wishing I could have the house just to myself for a few hours. I was more than accepting of the opportunity to travel and spend the night in a hotel away from the house and him. Now I wanted to know he was there, and I wanted to be home.

I drove into the garage, noticing that the light was still on in his office. Then it was time to make the unexpected bend—the bend that repairs all relationships. One person had to give just a little, to be open and vulnerable to the possibility that something was still there. I knew forgiveness would come and that grace would come if I welcomed it. We had already begun the process in previous conversations, trying to heal our marriage, but there were words still waiting to be said.

I stepped into the doorway and saw him standing by his desk.

“I have to know, did you ever believe me, that God *talks* to me?” I asked as I stood in his office, staying near the doorway. “Did you ever think our marriage was perfect, and were we *really* that happy, or was it just some illusion in my mind?” And then I asked the question that I wasn't certain I wanted the answer to. “Why are you still here?”

We stood there, silent, looking at each other, but I was patient, and I waited for him to collect his thoughts before he responded. Skip was a man of few words, and he rarely expressed his emotions. He once was passionate, but he didn't put it on display very often. We were like two ships that crossed paths on a big ocean. At least this was our relationship now. We needed to be on the same ship, on the same course in calm waters.

He valued his independence over interdependence. He valued self-sufficiency and hard work. But he also valued sincerity, and now he had to be honest with himself.

His childhood had not been any easier than mine. The death of his brother, Dana, had been the hardest. A car accident had left his brother paralyzed. Dana committed suicide ten years later. Skip was brought up by his father and was separated from his mother and youngest sister. Skip had always felt the loss of separation. This should have driven him to seek fellowship with me, and I should have been the one to understand.

Our marriage hadn't always been like this. He used to feel deeply. When we met, he was the responsible son in the story of the prodigal son. This was his role in his family, to be successful. By all measure, he was the son who had achieved what his brother could not. His accomplishments were rewarded, and his efforts known. But he thought I was looking for principles when we met. Instead, I offered purpose. I thought he was looking for integrity. Instead, he came to offer truth.

Over the years of living in a world that measures quality of life by self-fulfillment and quantity of life by accumulated abundance, other people's ideals had begun to weigh heavily on us. Neither of us cared for recognition or acknowledgment. For years we had talked about how good it felt to give without expecting anything in return. The world didn't always honor this, and it goes against corporate and social norms to think this way. We didn't value competitiveness, and we were living right in the midst of a competitive community. We had lost our closeness and began to drift away from God's presence in our marriage. Two stopped being one, and our home stopped being the sanctuary it had been.

"There was only one moment when I didn't believe that God spoke to you," he finally answered.

I had never seen him more sincere or serious. He wanted to give me the gift of himself in his answer. He didn't want me to be left wondering anymore. We had grown so far apart because he didn't talk to me. He knew how much he had hurt me because he was hurting so much inside. And I knew I had hurt him. And now he was offering all he ever really could own, his own response.

"I have always believed in your amazing relationship with God. I have always believed He speaks to you in a way He doesn't speak to many people. I wish I had that. I only questioned it when God told you that you were going to die soon, shortly after the strokes. I couldn't believe that was true. I couldn't

believe that I would lose you. I'm sorry that I never told you." His voice fell silent as tears filled his eyes.

He had never been this honest, and he could barely stand. I walked forward and took his hands as he continued.

"I have always believed in hope," he said. Tears spilled down his face and mine. "That is what brought me to you. I need hope, and I need you. I need your faith, and I want you to show me how to accept God's love. Show me how to pray with you and God."

He finished, and we were together again. The space between us was gone. We began praying together.

The words that filled my mind in that moment were, "Thank you ... and I need you too." And I thanked God because I had finally learned how to deliver His invitation.

CHAPTER 17

Remember Me

Time stood still long enough for forgiveness to enter the world.

I came to the end of this part of my journey realizing that I had been tested in every way. I had endured physical, mental, and spiritual trials, ones of the heart and soul. All I had left to give was a message of hope that God is still here with us and always will be. This was the lesson I had learned. Like the king in the parable of the Great Banquet, all he had left to offer was a meal that he prepared with love, and he wanted friends to join him. Why?

For thousands of years, the smallest gift in Christ's last temptation had been overlooked. Only when I had experienced all the trials that could have destroyed me and my marriage could I understand this truth, the spiritual truth that had been with me since the day I was born. I had never let go of His hand because *He loved me!* I wanted to be with God. And ... *He wanted to be with me!*

I had remembered His love, when I was to serve, and when I was to be served.

Christ had often been tempted and confronted with His own humanity. He had overcome all trials but one. In the beginning, God made man so He could walk and be with him, and it was due to God's love that He remained with man. He never let go of the hope that one day He would be with people again. God wanted fellowship at such a level that when He was separated from people, He went to the ends of the earth to reconcile what had been lost—His love. Then God opened Himself to the one who would betray Him, who would destroy Him. Into His heart came a special kind of love, into the most

vulnerable part of God. It was the love of forgiveness. God forgave before He was betrayed. After He had invited each one of His friends to be with Him, it was fellowship that had betrayed Him. Christ must have felt the pain of brokenness, no longer able to walk with God or talk with God. It is often forgotten that Christ died in human form. So much must have been lost in that moment. God had to feel separation as a human being.

If betraying Jesus was too much for Judas, to the point that he took his own life, I can only imagine how much more Christ felt as man and as God. Christ gave His life to spare us the act of betraying Him and dying spiritually. It was the only gift left to offer us that we would accept.

God was able to forgive, even Himself. Then He knew He could forgive the whole world. It was the price God paid, the spiritual brokenness that brought redemption and offered salvation. He died in spirit, in mind, and in body. Death is the only way to lose memory of Him. Christ had to die to allow His love to endure so we could remember and God could establish an everlasting covenant that this would never happen again. It caused us to remember too that God and His love are the way back to life. "Remember me," He said. Remember His love and share it with others. That was all He really asked us to do!

What an amazing story God lived as a human. What an amazing journey we all take, and what amazing stories we offer each other. All of our stories contribute to the one large story of humanity, bringing us dignity, and in the end, bringing us to know ourselves, our souls. No matter what we loosen or bind, there is everlasting love waiting to be offered as the smallest gift.

* * *

People search their entire lives for meaning, for purpose. Some never find it, never recognize that *they* are the purpose, to extend themselves in His love, to grow and mature in an unconditional love of others. We are here to help one another.

I offer this invitation, offer myself as a gift, unopened, but ready and willing.

Knowing what to do when that invitation arrives takes a lifetime to determine.

When a friend arrives at the door with a gift in her hands, do you thank her for what she offers you? Is it what you wanted or needed? Do you set it on the

table and never open the gift? Do you later toss it away because you don't care for it? Is it wrapped the way you expected?

There will always be special individuals chosen for your journey, just for you to travel with along the way. When that person meets you on the path, walk with him a while, and share the gifts each of you bring. It is the truth we all seek, to be known for the gift that we are. This is fellowship, true fellowship. Giving, accepting, and receiving God's love and sharing His love is exactly what happens when we share ourselves, our spirits. God placed love on the earth before He created man. This is the reason love never dies. This is the reason for *life not death*.

Every day of our lives, from beginning to end, love is the only endless thing God made. No child enters this world without first knowing God's love. No seed is planted in the soil that doesn't know God's love. It is the ingredient in all of life. Why would God make anything less? Why would God's heart desire anything more for us? He made this world for us, just for us. He designed all we know and gave us the ability to know how He did it. I don't doubt His intentions for a moment. He is God, and I require His love to remember Him by!

This is why I have believed and remained in fellowship with Him. Perhaps this is the reason God trusted me with His psalm.

Human beings are odd creatures. When they encounter faith, unlimited and unshakable, they are jealous rather than welcoming. Why is that? They can easily give testimony to and be witnesses of a person's accomplishments—their wealth, their families, and their health. But faith is treated as though undeserved, easy to receive. Yet, I can tell you that faith is the quest and journey of a lifetime to live by and by which to seek the truth. It takes integrity of self at the very source to achieve, and even then we die before we fully reach spiritual maturity. Is it because the reward appears to never be attainable while we are alive that we rank it at such low value?

I hope my story is an invitation to all who read it, that it opens the gift of your heart. In the moment that it does, you will be standing inside the door of God's house. And I will have delivered my final message of hope, His love.

* * *

In March 2007 I received a phone call, one that I will always cherish.

“Hello. It’s your father,” said the voice on the other end. “I haven’t called in awhile. But I just don’t feel like living anymore. I’m slowly dying. I might not be here much longer. You are the only one I can talk to who really understands.” His voice trailed off as he began to cry.

Each word my stepfather spoke became more difficult for him. I could hear his cries in the background as he tried to gather himself together to continue the conversation.

“I know. It’s okay,” I said. “Sometimes life gets that hard. I’ve been there, but I also know that God gives us a life worth living and that He’s always been with you.”

“You know that we once had everything, and that I really loved your mother? I’m just so tired.” There was honesty in his words.

“Yes, I remember.”

I was happy to acknowledge the things he had done.

“I love all of you—Kalli, Kara, Farish, and your mother. Your daughter sounds like a wonderful little girl. I have never met your children. I wish you could come to San Miguel de Allende to visit me. Kara has been very good to me by bringing me down here. I messed up everything with your brother and Kalli. I’d like us to all be together some day.” My stepfather was right in the moment as he spoke. He became a father to me once again.

“They are all incredible people, every one of them. Dad, I love you, too.” I said.

He needed to hear my words, and I know that he did hear them. There were no more tears, and there was no more pain. He was ready. We didn’t say good-bye that day. The conversation just ended.

A few weeks passed, and when the next phone call came, I was expecting it. I answered, and Kara said our father was in the hospital and might only make it a few more days. I asked her to tell him that I forgive him. I’d told him this many years earlier, but I felt he needed to hear it again. I hoped he had also forgiven me. Forgiveness brings grace even in the last moment.

Early the next morning, I awoke at four o’clock as usual. I prayed and read for a while. Suddenly I had this feeling that someone was choking, but it was on light. Light was entering the person. I went into my children’s rooms, and then I checked on Skip. They were quiet and asleep. Then I saw him clearly; everything was white as he took his last breath. My sister called me a few minutes later, at four forty-five, but I already knew what she was going to tell me.

My sister made the arrangements. In a few weeks, we all came together in Houston, went out on a boat, and Kalli held his ashes up to the wind. I said my last good-bye as we threw yellow roses with small yellow ribbons attached to each stem into the air. They flew up into the sky and caught the wind.

He didn't destroy us; instead he made us stronger. And healing did come. God is very present in *all* of our lives.

Sometimes we find hope in each other, and it takes us beyond where we ever thought we could go. It takes us on a journey to discover ourselves, and then deeper, to find the music of God's Love, *His* unsung psalm.

CHAPTER 18

Life Goes on in an Endless Psalm

Music was lifted high above the mountains.

I am in St. Vincent's Hospital. It is present day 2007. The vascular surgeon has decided that there will be no surgery to the damaged artery due to the risks involved. I am waiting to go home.

"Mrs. Georges. We found this manuscript in your bag. We thought you might want to have it with you." Two nurses stood next to me, and one handed me a large manila envelope.

I looked down at the words on the envelope. Then I asked the nurses, "What is this?"

They looked at me, puzzled, and then responded. "It's a story, a story about God. You wrote it. Don't you remember?" Their faces changed and they fell silent.

"Your husband has been praying for you all night, Mrs. Georges," they added.

"He has?" I said.

"Who is God?" I asked curiously. Then, amazing smiles came across their faces, smiles that changed their entire countenances. They almost were radiant, and I wondered where the light was coming from. What kind of light could cause this change?

Then one of them answered. I noticed that her nametag read *Mary*.

"God is a friend of ours," Mary said.

"How do you know Him?" I asked.

"You introduced us," she said.

“Is it a good story?” I asked, looking at the envelope in my hands and at the messenger who had just delivered it to me.

“Yes, it is a very good story,” replied Mary.

I was suddenly comforted by the memory of God, whose eyes were filled with compassion and gentleness, and a distant question filled my mind: “Will it be an easy journey?”

I opened the envelope and took out the stack of white pages. Then I laid them gently on the table beside me and began to read *My Unsung Psalm*.

For just a moment, I thought I heard singing and then ... *the grace note*.

Arriving at God's House

Now you have reached the end of the journey that you began at the beginning of this book. In the distance, you see what appears to be a small chapel. You have been on a journey to God's House.

You don't even know how far you have come or how many people you've delivered God's psalm to. Some welcomed you and wanted to listen, while others made excuses. Some pushed you into the cold night; some shut the door to you, while others just threw you away. You never blamed them, only thanked them for their valuable time. It wasn't your role to bring them to God's House, only to be the servant and extend the invitation, to be His message of hope to the waiting world.

You were scarred, and your clothes were torn. You were hurt, and you felt their pain. You were mocked and your testimony went unheard, but in the end, you had fulfilled your purpose and done the one thing God asked of you.

And now you are standing at the door to God's House.

The evening has come, and all falls silent around you. The door is standing open, as if someone were ready for your arrival. But no one is there. Are you surprised? You look in.

It's empty! *Maybe they didn't believe*, you wonder. Maybe ...

You walk inside to find a low table in the corner and flour on a flat, wooden board. There is a well in the flour where leavening has been added. You see an apron hung over a chair that has been pulled out from the table. A pitcher of water is waiting next to the flour.

"Who left this when there's work to be done?" you ask.

Without further waiting, you take up the apron, tying it around your waist. Now, you begin.

You pour in the water. You gently press the flour inward, soaking and spreading the leavening throughout. Your hands work, folding, kneading the body of the dough until it is formed. You cover it with fine linen, and you set it aside to rise. The yeast grows within as you prepare this meal. You smell a sweet aroma.

With care, you fill the cruets with fine wine.

You place the risen dough in the ovens above the flame. The scent of baking bread fills the entire house. No one will be hungry or thirsty this evening.

You see that the banquet is laid, that the tables are set. You light the candles one by one. You remove the apron and look up to see guests entering through the doorway. They arrive, and more and even more keep coming, filling His House. You smile at the sight.

His house is now filled. *Where did all these guests come from? You wonder. How did they find their way?*

As you listen to the guests, there is excitement in their voices. Their hearts are open, and their spirits are ready to receive, to partake in this meal.

The moment is here. You can feel it as you look around.

He is here. He wasn't here before, you are certain. Now, He is coming to you.

He removes the loaves of bread that you have baked and places them on the tables. Then He breaks the bread. He pours the wine for His guests and raises His cup.

Everyone is thankful to have come.

Now you notice something you hadn't seen before. All the seats are taken. Not one is left for you. You are happy God's house is filled, and you turn to leave. Perhaps you weren't invited. Perhaps you are only there to serve and not to share in this special meal. You try not to be sad. You never expected anything in return.

Then, you stop. All is silent. You hear the cantor, and then the chorus begins. You turn and see in amazement as, one by one, they all begin singing *God's Unsung Psalm*. It is a symphony joined by voices in an unending round that rises to the rafters of God's House. Then, in anticipation, He motions you forward, and everyone embraces you like an old friend. And you realize that this moment was meant for you. This is your moment!

You hear God's voice as He asks, "Will you share this meal—with Me?"
And then *you* accept God's hand.

If this journey really happened to you, would you take His hand?

*I am God.
I am your God.
You have always known who I am.
I have always been here with you.
I love you!*

*Oh, Lord.
I feel so lonely and afraid.
Give me the courage and strength
To live my life!*

*Yes, Lord,
I have always known who you are.
You have always been here with me.
I am not afraid!*

A Final Message from the Author: Cover Ten

I hope you have read my story and witnessed that hope *does exist* in this world. God is here with us, and He loves us.

And now you are wondering what you can do in the midst of change, seeing the pain and the joy around you every day. You are a witness to change on the news, in the streets, in your home, and your neighbors' homes.

If you have been inspired by *My Unsung Psalm*, then I invite you to begin your next journey. While writing this book, God offered me a vision of the world that I call Cover Ten.

Cover their needs: *spiritually, physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually, financially, professionally, educationally*, and give them *life* by making them a part of your *family*. These are the ten needs of all people which can offer hope and deliver peace.

Some people will need more covering than others and at varied times but each of us has the capacity to give generously of ourselves. We are free to decide how we dispense of our gifts. This is the true meaning of tithing our share, our portion of God's grace.

Reach an understanding with each person who truly needs you. Ask them to join you, and allow you to serve their unmet needs. Let them know that they can count on you; and

establish a covenant between yourselves, and with God. Then, ask them to do the same for ten more people because their needs are being met. People will change and their needs will change because you care. You may already be covering more people than you realize.

Cover each other until the entire world is covered in God's love. Consider the exponential factor as our combined efforts are multiplied in this relationship. Only God could have designed such a simple solution to such a profound problem. It can happen if you believe in Cover Ten with me.

Thank you for your valuable time. I have enjoyed sharing my *life* and *My Unsung Psalm* with you.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to my family and friends who have encouraged and supported me over the years. My husband and children, sisters and brother, their families, and my mother, are precious reminders of all that I have worked hard to accomplish. They have always offered love, a smile, and open arms, especially when I needed them.

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I wish to reach out my hand to the readers of this book, for allowing me to share my story with you.

About the Author

Katherine's life is about her daily walk with God. She makes a daily commitment to her healing and she assists critically ill survivors in their struggles to overcome. She nearly died after several strokes and aneurysms and understands the journey we all walk in life. Katherine is a motivational speaker, a life coach, and a spiritual writer. She develops topics for women's retreats and spends her mornings in conversations with God.

Katherine is also a watercolor artist who has exhibited at the Aspen Institute gallery and the Celebration of the Arts. Her original works and reproductions are in private art collections.

She attended Episcopal schools throughout her childhood and volunteered at Wildwood School and Young Life in Aspen. Professionally, she worked in architectural design and real estate consulting firms but her passion was to work with abused children at DePelchin Children's Center and Crittenton Adoption Center in Houston. As a trained catechist, she taught children at St. John the Divine and Church of the Transfiguration.

She enjoys spending time with her family at home in Door County, Wisconsin, and traveling to historical locations in Japan. Her walk of faith continues where ever she goes and her family grows by helping others in their walk with God.

Visit: Georghome.com

Katherine's Helpful Resources

Cenacle Retreat House
420 North Kirkwood Road
Houston, Texas 77079
Phone: 281-497-3131

Cenacletreathouse.org

St. Joseph's Retreat Center
3035 O'Brien Road
Bailey's Harbor, Wisconsin 54202
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Daily Strength Online Support Groups
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