

A COLLECTION OF POETRY AND ESSAYS ABOUT
REDEMPTION IN THE FACE OF DARKNESS

Set free

Published by Ericka Clay

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A Collection of Poetry and Testimonies About Redemption in the Face of Darkness

ERICKA CLAY

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Dedication

To every person who has resiliently shared their heart in this book and for all those craving light in the darkness.

*The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
Psalm 27:12*

Disclaimer

Some of these pieces involve hard topics like child harm and sexual abuse. But each story points to how God has taken the worst parts of His children's lives and used them for good.

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Romans 8:28

Seeking God in the Suffering

By: Pat Fyffe

My name is Pat Fyffe. After losing my teenage years to a trauma-induced mental exile, I emerged to find that I was an heir to a strong legacy of faith left when my grandfather passed. But to inherit that legacy, I had to sweep away the family that he had built with my grandmother and have faith of my own. Now I use the pain and grief from those times to forge myself into a weapon to fight against the kind of hopelessness that the abusers and their enablers tried to push onto me. To do all of that, I had to become, as Scripture describes, a new creation. I became a disciple of Christ. Here is how that happened.

For over thirty-three years of my life, I went through just like many supposed Christians do, knowing about what Christ did on the cross, but it was as if hearing that was a school lesson. Just information but without real understanding. I went through my own share of troubles, trauma-induced depression, bitterness, and anger at many who had hurt me either real or imagined and thought I had the answers I needed.

I didn't realize this before but the Holy Spirit had already been working in me for decades and speaking to me to help me make the lifestyle choices I made. My dad, Danny, is a smoker and has been for longer than I have been alive, and I can't remember how old I was when this happened, but one day when I was either one or four he put a used cigarette butt down still smoldering, and I picked it up to try it, not knowing any better. I remember coughing so hard it hurt, and he tells me that I ended up with tobacco all over my face, which I don't remember, but in any case, I remember hearing someone or something say, "You don't want to do that again do you?" and I knew right then that I never would.

The second time the Spirit spoke directly to me was when I was eight, and I started seeing TV ads talking about how many people are

killed every year in drunk driving accidents. Even at that young age, I understood what a terrible thing that is and how it has ruined families. I started wondering what I could do to never contribute to that horrible statistic and if possible what I could do to stop it. Then one night in bed, I heard a voice again telling me that if I never drink then I would be guaranteed never to kill anyone by driving drunk. That night in my bed at the young age of eight was when I swore that I would never drink a drop of alcohol, and I keep to that promise to this day.

The third time happened when I was twelve and in junior high school. At least three of the girls who were in school with me were pregnant at the time. I had been starting puberty and had an idea of what was going on, but I saw that the girls' lives became a mess because of what had happened, and their children's lives were harsh too. That got to me and made me hurt inside for them, and I knew that I didn't want to make a mess of anyone's life that way either. That was when I heard the Spirit for a third time (though I still didn't realize it at the time) telling me that if I waited until I was married to have sex then it would be much more rewarding and that the children born from that would be blessed. At the time it was more from a desire to protect because I know now that I could have caused just as much pain and suffering by taking many different women to bed and having children with them from that age on, but I made the vow that I would wait for marriage because no girl's life would be turned upside down because of my having sex with her outside of marriage, and no child would be brought into this world by me unless it was with the woman I married.

That point was also where my depression started because of the rotten sense of pride. I had the idea that I was somehow above others who did these things or was somehow better than they were. When I would get slapped down by the authority figures for saying something about what was going on, it would hurt, and it made me angry.

This was in late 1987, and that was when other things happened that made me retreat into a shell. My parents had been having problems

and they divorced just before Christmas that year. For a twelve-year-old who had strong opinions and was put down by supposed friends because of those, the divorce hurt pretty badly. The following March, my grandfather (my dad's dad) passed away from a heart attack. I had been around him and my grandmother quite a lot and I was close to them both, so his passing was a major shock. The family was devastated, too, because he wasn't exactly ruling them all, but they all were either kept in check by him or both loved and respected him. I remember him being kind and loving, but he could be stern when he got angry even though I don't ever remember him being angry with me. He and my dad had taught me what it means to be a man and how to treat women, and he also started teaching me about faith in Jesus. On a side note, my dad had become disillusioned by the church because of an incident at the church we were going to when I was two, and the church refused to help a member family who had literally lost everything in a house fire, so my dad wasn't much for the church in general and still isn't to this day.

The third thing that happened to me happened after my grandfather's funeral when I went back to school. I was understandably shattered and I can't remember how many friends tried to be comforting but some shied away. One girl started getting close to me and was getting cozy, too, but after a few days of this at school, I got the gumption to ask her out, but she laughed me off and asked who would want to go out with me. It turned out that her boyfriend at the time had put her up to it, and she went along. That completely ruined me, and I sank into a deep depression and into a shell, not really wanting to talk to anyone or do anything. The church I was going to at the time was little help because the kids there in the youth group were doing the very things they would preach against and that was making me angrier and angrier, but I was so deeply hurt by all that had happened that I just couldn't say anything about any of it. That was when the bitterness over what that girl did to me set in and festered along with the things going on

with the church youth group I was around. I sat in my shell sad, lonely, and pushing away those who wanted to help, but even in all of that I could hear the Spirit telling me to stop and rest here in the shell, and He would tell me when the right time would be to come out, so I waited, only doing the bare minimum to get by in school and interacting with others as little as possible. This was in early 1990.

In late 1992, I decided to move out from my mom's and move in with my widowed grandmother because I loved the city of Texarkana, missed it badly, and heard the Spirit say that staying with my mom was not what I needed to be to heal properly. My grandmother was a woman of great faith and great strength in many ways, and the things she taught me helped me start truly healing from the things that had happened. Very briefly in that time, I considered suicide because I was hurting that deeply, but a Superman comic came across at the exact moment I needed it. The main character was suicidal himself, but after gaining powers of his own and getting back to his apartment then seeing the gun he was about to use, he said, "It's stupid really, even thinking about killing yourself. Just because all your yesterdays suck, it doesn't mean you should stop tomorrow. Because you never know what it'll bring." That along with the Spirit saying, "Things will get better and your time will come" kept me from going any farther than that.

Flash forward to 2005. I had managed to get through college and was looking for work here that would do well but was not having success. I had started coming out of my shell during college and hadn't found anyone I wanted to ask out. I'd joined eharmony.com and had run across a couple of scammers trying to get me to give them money, but I finally met someone who appeared to be real. Her name was Amy, and we emailed back and forth for a few weeks, then she told me she had cancer. She'd kind of expected me to quietly vanish after telling me that, but she was very pleasantly surprised when about a week later I asked for her phone number. I called her the day after she gave it to me, and we had a good long conversation about a lot, and she was genuinely

caring about so many things. That started a good deep genuine friendship, and we had both said early on that nothing could really happen between us because of her condition, but I knew this was going to be special.

I will spare the details of her initial cancer surgery, but it started in her mouth, and after that surgery, she had to learn how to talk all over again and wasn't able to eat anymore, having to go on a feeding tube.

Amy and I would spend hours just talking about a lot of matters, and I got her turned on to the show *Whose Line Is It Anyway*, and my impressions of the performers made her laugh often when we were on the phone. She'd told me a number of times that she needed to laugh after the things she'd been through. One thing about me I haven't mentioned yet is that I am a movie buff and have been ever since my parents took me to see the original *Star Wars* in 1977 when I was two. I've been enjoying movies of almost every kind since then, but I hadn't had any interest in seeing the *Pirates Of The Caribbean* series until Amy turned me onto them. She'd talked often about how good they were and how well they were made so I watched the first one and was hooked. We shared so many nights talking about them and also about faith in Jesus.

I remind you that I was like many who thought I was Christian but didn't realize that I'd never accepted Jesus in my heart. One thing Amy told me that really started me thinking about a lot of that was a prayer she told me about after her cancer had confined her to a chair. "Lord, this stinks, it hurts, I hate it, but I know You are in control, You have a plan for me, and I'll be obedient to Your will even from my chair." She and I both said a lot of things that made each other think deeply, laugh, and we shared such deep details of each other's lives, mistakes, and experiences that even though we had not met in person, we knew each other so well that we could tell what the other was feeling or thinking in just the first few words even if we didn't realize it.

In mid-December of 2007, Amy said that a few friends had come over and noticed the picture of me she had by her chair. When they

asked her who that was in the picture she said “my boyfriend” and when she told me about that later in the evening after they’d left she asked me if that was okay. I said yes, but after that evening, I really started rethinking our relationship and realized that I had fallen in love with her and had loved her dearly for some time. I told her about this revelation a day or two later, and she said that she’d felt the same but didn’t grasp it until those friends of hers came.

That was when I started making a plan. I was working at Walmart at the time, and the store was being remodeled and almost rebuilt. Nobody was going to be allowed to go on vacations until it was finished in June of 2008. I started planning to take my vacation in August to give the vacation rush time to cool off, but I was going to go to Minnesota, propose to Amy, and hopefully marry her as soon as it was possible. This was the very first time I had been in love, and she had made me happier than I had ever remembered being. All of us knew she didn’t have very long, but I wanted to make her remaining time in this world as happy as she had made me. That was not meant to be because she passed into glory on April 23, 2008, at 8:10 am. We had thought that she had at least a year left and possibly more, but we learned the night before her passing that her lungs were almost completely full of tumors and fluid. The miracle was that she lived as well as she did because she never did get the unbearable pain that many cancer patients have, and she was able to keep pace when playing with her two young nieces just a week before her passing. She was a living and spiritual miracle in Christ in many ways. I told her once that she had a lot of admirers here because of her strength in dealing with her cancer, but she immediately replied that she’d rather the Lord get the admiration because it was His strength that kept her going.

Amy’s passing away was devastating for me, and it was made bearable at the time because of how far her condition had advanced, but that was the Spirit reminding me of that fact. I managed to get bereavement leave to go to her funeral and made it to Minneapolis the morn-

ing of the funeral. I know now it was the Holy Spirit giving me the strength to keep it together because I was one of three who spoke, sharing memories, sharing our love for her and shared that I wanted to marry her. Amy's parents and family were more than gracious and accepted me as if we did get to marry. Her aunt Lisa told me that my being in her life brought a light to her eyes when someone would even mention my name and that Amy seemed overall happier than she'd been since her diagnosis.

After her funeral and coming home, my grandmother noticed how low and how sad I was but that I wasn't as down and depressed as I was after all that happened in 1988. My grandmother was another major influence in my life because I had lived with her through all of this that happened with Amy, she knew how I felt, and how much I loved her and had even talked to Amy herself a few times. My grandmother had been an integral part of my healing emotionally, and she was a lady of faith herself, but she never shoved Jesus down my throat as others had in years past. I moved in with her, and she showed nothing but loving graciousness, and support, and was the wisest teacher in many matters. She needed me though as much as I needed her because she was the kind of lady who wanted and needed someone to take care of, but even with that she knew I was getting better emotionally and taught me that all I'd been through was preparing me for all that happened with Amy. Now it was time to start over in my search to find someone to love, but my Lord had other plans.

For a few months, I muddled through work and still had not made any new friends, had been building my movie collection, but there wasn't any real joy in it or in much of anything. On October 30th of that year, 2008, that night I was sitting at my computer after my grandmother had gone to bed and was watching the fourth Rambo movie again. As horrifically violent as it was, it was making me think about Amy because there was a character who was tougher than most people could have been, and Amy in real life, was still tougher than most peo-

ple had been. I was listening to Stallone's commentary while watching it this time, and the last scene was making me think even more about Amy because Stallone was talking about the character being almost completely alone during all four movies. That made me think about how alone I felt before meeting Amy, and how alone I felt all over again now that she was gone. The very last scene was of Rambo walking all alone on a highway back to His father's horse farm. I was as close to falling apart in despair as I had ever been but that was another time the Spirit spoke directly to me in the still, small voice, but I heard it as clearly as I can hear music when it plays on my iPod. He said "Hey, listen. She's with Jesus now. If you accept Him, then one day you'll get to see her again but here's the best part. You will never ever be alone again." At 10:39 pm on October 30, 2008, I finally accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior after over thirty-three years of thinking I already had. I did break down in tears at that instant but instead of despairing, I was feeling the Holy Spirit coming into me and filling me. I hadn't felt such joy since the first time Amy told me that she loved me. I knew almost nothing about Jesus and didn't realize the extent of my sins but I accepted Him as my Savior because I didn't want to be alone.

Immediately, I could feel the Spirit starting to work in me, and at the time I didn't really have a church home because I had lapsed from attending Trinity Baptist sometime before that. The Spirit told me that I needed a fresh start at a new church home, and I was looking into several churches here in town. Some didn't hold any interest for me, but I got a nudge from the Spirit when I came across FBC-Texarkana's website and started exploring that. I started going on the first Sunday in December and heard my first sermon from Jeff Schreve, then when I went the next Sunday, I knew that this was where the Spirit wanted me to be because I could feel the nudging to move my membership here, but I was held back from going forward and making my profession. I was told to wait for the next week, and I officially joined the church on Dec. 21, 2008. I continued to learn and grow from Pastor Jeff's ser-

mons and learned more in the first three months going there than I did in all thirty-three years I'd lived before that. He and I have spoken a number of times in his office, and he was quite impressed by the choices I'd made in my lifestyle, but it was the Spirit's work in me that made my testimony valid. I learned that I could do absolutely nothing on my own and that it is only through the Spirit leading me and my faith in Christ that makes anything possible.

About three years after all of that, I met a lady online named Heather. We started talking about a number of things deeper than many couples when they are first meeting, such as how we viewed specific matters of our respective relationships with Christ. To her surprise, she and I have agreed on every aspect. We're talking about a lady who is J.B.U. educated and learned more about some theological matters than I have as of yet, so she knows her Scripture and our Lord. For my part, my spiritual education was only a few short years old and mainly from my pastor at the time. When we talked about our lives, we shared everything and frankly, I didn't hold back when I told her about my past. The few women I had started to talk to after Amy died would disappear on me or shove me into the friend zone just as Amy said supposed friends did when she told them she had cancer. Heather was different because she loved the story.

When things turned serious between us, my story meant more to her because in her own words, "I knew that if you loved that deeply before, then you could love that deeply again." She was absolutely right. The only requirement I had in choosing who I would marry was that she at the very least accept the fact that my past was what it was, and I let the Lord handle the rest. She lived in Rogers, Arkansas at the time while I was in Texarkana, but after about five months of talking (almost every day in one form or another as I had gotten to with Amy), we met in person when she came to Texarkana just after Thanksgiving of 2011. We had agreed to meet at a local Baptist bookstore there and after having a coffee we went someplace where we were completely alone and

could talk in total privacy. I did not want the local gossip mill to start working on us, so we talked about more private matters, and in the end shared our first kiss. That moment was when I knew I wanted to marry her. We could have slept together and nobody but us and the Lord would have known. Both of us were sorely tempted, but she had wanted to wait, and I had my vow so as badly as we both wanted to make love at that moment we did not.

That Sunday she came to church with me and knew already that she loved me as much as I had fallen for her, but it became deeper for her when she saw that I was working with the Special Friends class since her youngest brother Dave has Downs Syndrome. My ease working with them (with Downs and those disabled without Downs) made me more endearing in her eyes, but at the time, I didn't realize it. Having fallen in love for the third time (first Amy, then Jesus, and now Heather) and after having been reborn and being rebuilt bit by bit, it had dulled my senses to a degree, but I knew what I wanted to do dealing with Heather, praying that if it was the Lord's will that He would bless the plans I had made and the life I wanted with her.

I was still living with my grandmother, and I had wanted to have her meet Heather, but that weekend I wanted to have time with her by myself to see if it was time for them to meet. The hours at the job I had at the time made it tough for me to go to her, and my grandmother's health was declining so I decided to wait until travel was easier. Christmas came, but on the 27th, my grandmother fell for the first time. Her condition was bad enough that I had her taken to the hospital, and she didn't come home. On New Year's Day of 2012, she passed away. Two days before that she was in a comatose state, and I had my last words with her. Her heartbeat had been high and her vital signs had seemed to indicate that she was in an excitable state. My stepmother and youngest brothers were in the room with us, but when I leaned in to have what turned out to be my last words with her, I told her about Heather.

My grandmother and I had talked often over the years we were together about the kind of woman she hoped I would meet, fall for, and eventually marry. Heather is the woman my grandmother wanted for me because she fits what my grandmother had hoped for in every single way. Able-minded and educated to be fit for a career but willing to stay at home to take care of it and the children we would have, stubborn enough to have a no-nonsense attitude and not take any crap from anyone but knowledgeable enough of Scripture to submit the right way to the man that God had picked, and as willing to love me with her whole being as I would be, with only God being loved more. When I whispered in my grandmother's ear that Heather was the very woman that she had been describing for all of those years, my stepmom said her vital signs slowed, and she seemed to relax for the first time since she had been in the hospital. The peace in my mind over telling her I intended to marry Heather and her relaxing after I told her seemed to be a sign of her giving her blessing.

The next time Heather and I were together was a few days after my grandmother passed and just a day or two before the funeral. This time she stayed with me in my home while my dad and stepmom were there, too, with my brothers. She saw how my family had started to implode and had even sat in on the discussions on how we would deal with the fallout of my grandmother's passing. As hard as it all was, there was the peace of knowing that she was at last with Jesus and not suffering her degrading body any longer. In the middle of the discussions, my middle brother Wyatt said to us that he knew we would get married and that he could tell because of the way we looked at each other.

The signs of divine intervention really showed themselves with the story of my proposing to Heather. After waiting to marry Amy and having her passing happen when it did, I did not want to wait to marry Heather. A lot of prayer and planning went into finding the right ring and the right time to go to her and propose, but I knew the Lord would handle the details that I didn't know about such as a time. I found rings

at Walmart (of all places) that had cross designs prettier than those I had seen anywhere else so those rings were pretty much dropped in my hands. Of course, they needed to be resized, and I had made plans to go to Rogers on a Tuesday to be able to go to a prayer meeting at the church she was attending. The rings had taken longer than expected to be resized because the store where I bought them had accidentally forgotten to send them in when they had initially said they would so the store had the shipment with the rings delivered express. The Tuesday that I had planned to go to Rogers turned out to be Valentine's Day, but I was in the middle of a romantic daze with my intentions, the lingering fear that I would be turned down, the grief over my grandmother, and dealing with the fighting from two of my grandmother's children to realize what day it was. I had arranged a few days off from work to go to her, but I was working that Tuesday and couldn't leave until the freight delivered to that store had been processed and made ready for sale. Calling Walmart didn't bring any news on when the rings would be arriving, but the freight was finished with only 10 minutes before I could leave and make the trip in time to go to the prayer meeting, so I rushed to Walmart to check for the rings one last time, and if they weren't ready then my proposal would wait. That scared me worse than the fear of her turning me down, but when I got to the store they said that the rings had literally arrived about five minutes before I walked in. After a profuse thank you to the store and paying for the rings, I hurried back to my car and started the longest physical drive I had made up to that point. I was absolutely sure of my intentions and prayed that the Lord would guide my actions in this as I ask His guidance in all things. The trip went smoothly, and I went to a gas station that she wanted me to go to so she could drive to her church and have me follow her since I didn't have any idea where it was. It would have been a dumb idea to propose in a gas station parking lot and as crazy as I am, I'm not that crazy. I ended up proposing on bended knee right outside the doors to the fellowship hall just before 6 pm that day.

I had not met any of Heather's family before that night, and she didn't know when I was going to propose. All she had said of me to that point was that I was a friend but that night she was able to introduce me as her fiancé, and her dad was the one who took our engagement pictures. The people who were there had quite the surprise when she introduced me and showed off her ring. That evening was eventful because I met most of her family for the first time. I had brought my laptop with me and was playing a Lego game on it when her youngest brother Dave came to sit in my lap. That was a turning point because Dave can be a measuring point to tell if someone will be a good fit for the family or not. His climbing into my lap convinced everyone there because he hardly ever climbed into anyone's lap.

We didn't do the usual sort of marriage counseling since we lived 5 hours apart and doing it by video call wasn't a viable option so Heather's pastor at the time, Jack, suggested we go to a marriage retreat called A Weekend To Remember that was having an event in Rogers a few weeks after she and I met with Jack to talk about all of this. In another case of divine help, the event was held in Rogers at that time, and my pastor from Texarkana, Jeff, and his wife were two of the headline speakers. Five weeks of counseling sessions crammed into three days was both fun and intensely informative, leaving us more affirmed that we were making the right choice by marrying.

We had a short engagement. I proposed on Feb. 14, 2012, and we married on June 9, 2012. Our marriage had a full list of hard times just in our first year together. From a miscarriage to three full moves, there should have been enough fights, arguments, disagreements, or whatever you want to call them that would strain many marriages. Heather and I however have yet to get into a major disagreement. Our method for dealing with the issue when things get stressful is to step back and see where our irritation/anger over the situation is really coming from and we figure out how to deal with whatever is happening.

The final sad part of my testimony is this. What I meant when I said that I had to wipe away the family that my grandparents built is that I had to break away from almost all of the relatives. My grandparents' only daughter and their youngest son had turned out to have major problems with me since before I was born. I only learned of this through my grandmother's journals, but it did explain some of the coldness I had seen, but I thought it was just personality traits in those two. After my grandmother's passing, the daughter made a few attempts to take as many of the physical things as she could. In her will, she left me everything she had, and I didn't realize the full scope of it until after she was gone. Her youngest son made a few attempts to take all of the money that he could but the will stopped him too. When all of that was revealed, enough things happened and enough things had simply seemed to vanish that I had to formally kick them out of the family. That was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, and it hurt deeply for a few reasons. First was that I had loved them naturally and deeply. When the daughter's husband passed, she had come to the house with my grandmother and me for a while and I held her while she had some of the deepest sobs I had ever seen in person. Maybe it was foolish of me, but I thought that being able to share the burden of her grief would have brought us closer. Later when I tried to correct her for trying to start a public spat with me, she sent her younger son to threaten me physically while her own daughter tried to threaten me legally. For my wife's safety, I had to drive them away and that loss still hurts. From what I have been able to glean, they have not changed. The youngest son tried to convince my dad, who had been named executor, to put aside the wishes of his own mother and make me give him his fourth of the whole thing, but that was quashed quickly. I realized that if contact with the youngest son and daughter continued then they would keep bringing problems.

Secondly, it all happened not long before I married Heather so when the wedding happened, the groom's side of the church was almost

empty. In the midst of such a joyous occasion that was a sting, mild as it was. Despite having to wipe away the family that had been built, the Lord gave me to a lady who truly is worthy of taking up the mantle of matriarch and making a new chapter of our family legacy.

To honor the only past relationship I have, I had wanted to name the first daughter I would have after Amy, but by the time I met Heather, all of the joy and frenzied planning that went into all of our proceedings almost made me forget that part about naming a daughter, but Heather was the one who first said that she wanted to name our first daughter after my late fiancée. I had not brought it up and said that I had planned to tell her about that but had forgotten to say it just yet. We had planned several baby names just in case of whatever might happen. Boy or girl, or twins, both sexes together or mixed, we had the names settled quickly.

In the course of raising our daughter and three sons, we discovered that our younger two sons are autistic and in the process, realized that I am most likely autistic as well. I have not been tested but in all of the research we've done, my behaviors and quirks lined up with those who are very high-functioning. It helps to explain some of why I wouldn't want to interact much with so many guys who just talk about the same sorts of things, why I think and do so very differently than most, even finding aspects of the Gospel in many elements of popular culture. One example of this is the introduction to this testimony since I based it on the introduction to the show *Arrow*.

Even when I get irritated and/or angry, and my feelings get fuzzy if particularly riled up, I've been able to keep a cool enough head to avert real arguments with my wife. Our conflict resolution has never had us resenting each other, and we make sure to keep Christ at the center of our marriage. The rest of my marriage with Heather has had a lot of struggles but whatever has happened to us has only made our bond stronger. From family trouble on both sides, to money troubles/job loss, to our spending habits, and even down to how we wanted to

arrange our home every time we have moved, so far the closest we have come to a real disagreement is which actor was the best to play Alfred in any version of any of the *Batman* franchise. Much of the time we, have such a connection that we think of the same things before the other says it. Praying about how to deal with things the right way has proven to be the best way since many times our own way would have been disastrous. Having Christ as our center just shows us that trusting Him in all we do is the only way to have any kind of good life, whether in times of plenty or in hard times of whatever nature.

About the Author

This is the testimony of my friend, Pat. He lives with his wife, four children, and shares his story of autism and redemption through Jesus.

Trading Lies for Truth

By: Anonymous

Life is lots of things. It's tragic, traumatizing, sometimes unbearable, and sometimes painful, but life can also be full of joy and laughter. The funniest and sometimes incredibly frustrating part of being a child of God on this planet is that nearly every moment here on Earth is a lesson.

Regardless of what you are going through, God is good. He didn't create your terrible circumstances, but He will definitely use them for your benefit. For instance, I was molested by my mother from at least four years old for years, and then when she finally stopped, a man molested me for years. And because of both of these people, I grew up believing I was gay.

I was so disgusted by what my mother made me do to her that when she stopped and the man took over, I was so glad to not have to touch her anymore, and I saw the man as the one who saved me. So being with him in that way seemed like a relief, and I grew up thinking I must be gay even though I had no idea what that meant because I falsely believed this man was my savior.

The devil twists everything. I should never have even known what the female form looked like at four years old, so the devil used that to deceive me into thinking I must be gay, and I believed that for almost forty-six years. Luckily, the Lord never stopped pursuing me, and after years of sexual, mental, and violent physical abuse, I finally reached out to a family friend with a deliverance ministry for help. I had been forced into a conversion cult for three and a half years as a teenager. That did nothing but further traumatize me, but this time, I was ready instead of being forced, and the Lord delivered me.

I had also been lied to in the womb because my mother and father prayed fervently for me to be a girl, so I was born thinking I was already wrong and unwanted. So actually for the first forty-four years of my life,

I thought I was transgender because I had the wrong parts. After seeking the Lord and listening to my Christian counselor who told me that when I became a Christian, I became a brand-new creation, I stopped claiming the identity of a homosexual and instead, claimed my identity as a child of God. My counselor also told me about how God stitched me together in my mother's womb Himself, so if God stitched me together, and God doesn't make mistakes, then He must have intended for me to be a boy.

I can't say that when I started these deliverance sessions that all of a sudden I felt the need to go find a woman, but I can tell you that I'm experiencing a level of freedom today that I never knew was possible. The trick is to identify the lie and learn what the truth is and then decide to believe the truth and renounce the lies. It's not easy but it *is* simple.

About the Author

This is an anonymous testimony by a friend of mine who is now set free by Jesus.

Glass House of Nightmares

By: Rhea Fontenot

You know me as Rhea Fontenot. But today, I want to introduce someone you don't know. Fancy Morgan. Fancy Morgan is a six-year-old girl who has been through the hardest things a child could go through. She endured abuse in every aspect: mental, emotional, physical. Things a child should never see, let alone be put through.

See, from three to six, Fancy was used as a trading pawn by her mother. She was a piece of trash discarded by the woman who gave birth to her, left at a shelter with a random woman because she wasn't wanted. Then, the birth giver realized she could be an asset to her, so she got her back. Fancy became the payment to any man who would give her mother her drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes. The youngest of these was just sixteen. At some point, he had been led to believe that this was okay to do. But it didn't end with him. She was used by her uncle, her grandfather, her mom's boyfriends, random guys that came and went. Her birth giver would be in another room and wait. These men could do whatever they wanted. They could beat her, they could rape her—whatever they wanted. This was considered completely acceptable.

When Fancy was six, she was finally taken by the state, and with her baby brother, she was placed in four different houses before being placed and adopted in the final house that would become home. I wish I could tell you her nightmares ended there, but they didn't. The home she was adopted into was a Christian home. But they were never told what this girl had been put through, so early on in her small life, they knew she needed help and love and care and a lot of therapy, but they didn't know how bad it was. Whether consciously or not, they made her worse.

A child in the foster care system is not allowed to be roughly handled in any way. So discipline had to be creative. Her parents would send her into the backyard in the dark and move tree branches back and

forth for however long it took to "learn her lesson." Fancy was terrified of the dark for good reason. But they didn't know why, so as any parent would, they just said it was ridiculous to be scared of the dark because there was nothing in the dark that wasn't there in the daytime.

But they didn't know Fancy had borderline personality disorder. This meant she would see things that weren't real. Fancy created friends that would protect her. She would talk to these creatures, and as time passed, she would start to believe them and the things they said. There was no hope, there was no help, and the "Christian" parents she now had determined that she was playing with the devil and must have done something to deserve punishment. They were convinced that she was doing something she shouldn't. She wasn't.

These creatures were her protectors. They were there when everyone else left. Let me explain why I say creatures. One was dark, black, and long-bodied with claws in place of hands. It would show up when Fancy felt alone and worthless and felt like she needed to be in pain to feel anything because she was numb. This was her own demon. Then there was a black wolf. He would come when she needed protection. He would come and warn her to brace herself and be ready for a fight, whether the fight was emotional or physical. He was there by her side and told her how to get through it. There were many others, but they would mostly yell obscenities and remind her regularly how worthless, useless, and just a waste of space she was. They told her nobody could love her, and she would be better off dead, and the people around her would be much happier and even grateful if she killed herself. Even now in her nightmares, they chain her down in a dark room, and they yell at her to end it. To relieve those around her of her miserable existence. This is her fight every day.

You know Fancy by a different name. You know her by Rhea. This destroyed, violated, little girl was me. I have grown into a woman I am proud of being. I broke that loop I was in. I became a mom who loves her kids more than anything in this universe, a wife who protects her

husband and stands as a rock with him, a loving friend who will not hesitate to defend and die for those around her. That little girl learned to fight at three years old and still fights to this day. Meet the woman that God created through trauma and absolute evil.

These are memories and reports that were made in Fancy's case. As you read these, I want you to put yourself there. I want you to see what she saw. Feel how she felt. Then, at the end, ask yourself where you think you would be if this were you?

01/28/1998

Worker feels parents do not want Fancy and has been told by mother that she does not care about Fancy after she has the new baby.

03/11/1998

Mother puts down Fancy. Has been heard by worker calling her a "bitch." Puts Fancy down by bragging that her new baby brother will be better than her and saying that she always wanted a little boy. You could tell Fancy's feelings were hurt.

03/18/1998

Fancy took worker to her room and showed her the Barbies she had. Worker witnessed Fancy calling her barbies hateful and vulgar names such as "asshole" and "bitch." Worker returned to the living room and saw mother holding the now one-month-old baby in front of her and telling him firmly to stop crying. Worker has explained that babies do not have the ability to understand orders this young.

10/23/1998

Mother has informed that father threatened to burn Fancy alive to "get rid of the problem." When asked if this had happened, father denied and stated that mother was lying because she was angry he had known she left Fancy with a stranger to meet with a guy in a hotel. Mother left angry and has not returned to the house.

10/26/1998

Mother has still not returned to the home.

08/10/1999

Reporter states, "Mother leaves her children all the time with random people and runs off. Does not care where they are or who they are with. Recently asked friend to take her children." Reporter also states that mother blames Fancy for almost costing her job as a paper delivery driver. States Fancy was molested just two and a half weeks previously. Mother says she would have reported it but did not want to lose kids. Mother also leaves Fancy alone, locked in trailer to care for baby brother. Mother gives the kids' grandmother all dairy from WIC and does not keep food in the house for kids."

08/13/1999

Worker has asked to interview Fancy alone and was told by mother that it was not necessary. During interview mother was observed making gestures and interrupting Fancy on everything she stated. Fancy told worker that she was often left alone with her baby brother and that she would wake up and be home alone. Mother stated that this was not true. (Even though it has been substantiated that this did in fact happen on a regular basis.) Fancy continued and told worker how her mother's friend had touched her thigh, her private area, and legs. Even gesturing to show the way it happened. Fancy also states that he held her throat and pushed her back to lie down. Mother says this never happened and that her roommate had coached her to lie so that she would be taken away. Fancy states that another man "wiggles his tongue" at her. At this point she demonstrated. Step-father intervened at this point and stated that he had asked their friend if he had done this to Fancy, and he had denied it so it was obvious Fancy was lying. Mother admits her brother-in-law had molested Fancy before, but he got away with it. Has requested to be notified when case is closed.

Worker Notes: Due to past years of molestation and sexual abuse of Fancy, I believe it is important to believe her and protect her. Mother would not allow me to check for food as she stated they were packing to move again.

08/27/1999

Detective reported mother cancelled appointment that was to video record Fancy's interview. Detective believes mother is purposely not allowing this and that there is more abuse going on.

09/09/1999

Mother is reportedly with a new guy and moving again. Has not responded to any calls.

09/10/1999

In an interview with Fancy today, she relayed that a man had taken her throat with two hands, pulled her hair, hit her and pinched her breasts. The man spanked her on her private areas and rubbed between the crack. She also demonstrated that he had stuck his finger in her butt. He then threw her to the couch and then threw her into the door. He told her that if she screamed he would kill her. Fancy states she was bleeding but did not scream. Her mother was in the other room while this happened. Mother states that she asked if her friend did this, and he denied it and said he didn't remember doing that and Fancy is lying again.

09/29/1999

Ex-boyfriend came to the house and asked to talk to Fancy to see "what she had told the worker."

09/30/1999

Worker is concerned for Fancy's safety. Teacher reports that Mother has told her that Fancy has told her everything she said was a lie and to not believe anything she tells them. Mother stated that although Fancy has lice, she does not have the funds to get products to help get rid of lice, and she will just shave her head. Teacher and worker have begged her not to do this as Fancy is already being bullied at school and ostracized by the other children.

10/05/1999

Fancy's father has stated he is worried about Fancy and that the mother will mess her and brother up just like she is messed up. Worries that mother is selling sex. Mother has been told to keep Fancy from the guys she is bringing over and has outright refused.

10/06/1999

Fancy has been diagnosed with PTSD with depressive disorder problems. Her behaviors are anxiety-related and show many adulting and caretaking behaviors.

10/07/1999

Mother has advised Fancy has an ear infection. Does not plan to see doctor, states ear infections are hereditary, and she will just let it run its course. Have substantiated emotional abuse, chronic emotional, educational and medical neglect and exposure to unreasonable risk. Recommends removal of both children.

Mother and father were both home with children when police escorted workers to remove children from home. Mother was yelling, stating she has never abused the children, especially Fancy and that there were no broken bones, or bruises. Worker explained different types of abuse and that these had all been substantiated.

10/08/1999

Temporary home has stated that children need sleep and she has never seen anyone eat the way they ate. They had to stop them both from eating too much.

10/13/1999

New home. This is placement four. Foster mother has stated she loved Fancy and feels that she is a very special little girl.

10/25/1999

Foster family has asked to adopt both children at this time. Foster mother states that Fancy does not present herself as angry as other foster kids often do. States Fancy has not requested to talk to her mother at this time, and when asked, she has said "no." Order of protection has been put in place to protect Fancy from a previous molester.

These are just a few of the many reports made to have me and my brother removed. I wish I could tell you this was a happy ending. It isn't though. My nightmares continued. During time in foster care, a child is not allowed to be roughly handled. Therefore, foster parents are

forced to come up with more creative ways to discipline kids. I was a very stubborn child. I had been through enough trauma to last a lifetime, and it had turned me into a fighter. If I got angry I posed a threat to those around me. My would-be adoptive mother would have to sit on the floor and wrap her arms and legs around my small body to protect herself, my brother, and even me from the anger I would lash out.

They were never told any of this when I was placed with them. They had an idea but not to the extent of what it was. A lot that they did to help me made me worse as I got older. My adoptive mother's anger rivaled my own defiant anger. As the teen years came, my coping became worse, and I became someone I hated with every fiber of my being. They had good intentions, but because they didn't know details, it left me in a very bad place.

As time wore on, I attempted suicide over and over. I would cut regularly, but I would do it in places I knew they wouldn't look. My stomach was my most hated part of me, so I used it to cut on. I wanted to feel something. I had become numb. I would play the part of a happy and bubbly girl. I would dance the part of a doll. Inside, I was dying and trying to kill the demons inside me. I wanted to know what it meant to be happy. To be really and truly happy. I had mastered the art of acting, and I was tired. At sixteen, I had my note written, and I was ready. A friend had made me knives, and I was ready to use them. I said goodbye to my friends and headed down the alley. I failed that day. I sat there and cried and screamed silently. No one knew I wanted to die so badly. They just saw my smile and heard my laugh.

When my eighteenth birthday came, I was graduated and getting married to my high school best friend. I actually felt happy for the first time. It wouldn't last. By nineteen, I had given birth to my daughter and my heart was so full. My heart would break three years later when my husband told me he no longer loved me and was with someone else. My daughter had already begun calling this woman "mommy." My fairy

tale was ripped away from me, and I returned to being an angry and hateful woman.

I would go through toxic and abusive relationships for the next two years. Only one was wonderful, and I destroyed it. I will always be grateful to you, Trevor. You tried to save me, and I was still too broken to see it. I ran away and turned back to an alcoholic, hateful person. This led to a relationship that I believed I wholeheartedly deserved—a guy that would repeatedly beat me when he was drunk but was so nice when he was sober. He would have killed me if my adoptive father had not stepped in. I ran again. Then came the last guy. He was so caring and sweet, for a little while. He got me away from friends and even convinced me to move to Louisiana with him. I applied for college there and was accepted, so I agreed. I left my daughter with her dad where I knew she was safe, and again, I ran. I had gotten used to running, and this would be no different. Once we were away from anyone and everyone I knew, he changed. He became controlling and angry all the time with me. I wasn't allowed to close the bathroom door to shower or even use the toilet. He would tell me that I had not been given permission to talk when I interjected into a conversation.

In July of 2017, I would meet the most loving and protective man. We worked at a casino together, and one night, I was getting off work at 2:30 in the morning and needed an escort to my car. He was asked to do it. He walked me to my car, and I knew there was something different about him. I already felt an attachment just after a five-minute walk. A few weeks later, I would tell my boyfriend I was done and leaving. He bought a rope and tape. He told me he was going to kill himself if I left. I was scared, but I stood my ground and said no, I wouldn't stay. I called the cops and my new friend. He came over and held me after the cops took my then-ex away.

In September 2017 my new friend proposed to me, and I said yes. We moved into an apartment together, but I was fighting so many demons again. I felt happy, but I still wanted to die. I would overdose a

few months later. I begged the paramedics to let me die. I didn't want to live anymore. I had found a couple of messages from my husband to another woman and my heart had shattered. Everything I had suspected for years was true. I was unlovable. I was worthless. I was a waste of space. I was nothing.

When I woke up after having my stomach pumped, I woke up to my husband next to my bed, begging forgiveness and crying. I had never seen a man cry before, and I was in awe of him. I forgave him. When we were moved into a new room the doctor came in and told us congratulations. We looked at him questioningly, and he told us we were pregnant. I was going to have a baby. I cried harder than I had ever cried before. I was being given a second chance to redeem myself and to have the gift of being a mother. I swore I wouldn't fail this time. Our relationship would continue to have similar issues for a while.

In the end of 2020, we were not in a good place and were put in a situation where we would have to leave Louisiana. We decided to move to Arkansas where we knew some friends. That friendship would end a few months later. We were completely on our own. My husband became a stay-at-home dad, and I would work. I enjoyed it and so did he. We soon realized that he needed time out of the house as well, so he started working again.

We are now in 2023, and I wish I could tell you it was all a happy ending and that everything was perfect, but I can't. I am still fighting nightmares, and I struggle with my demons a lot. I will tell you that I am happy though. For the first time in my life, I can honestly tell you I am happy.

After years of abuse, after fighting all my life, after this worthless feeling for years, I am happy. I have my husband who supports my passion in photography. I have children I love with all my being. Most of all, I'm proud of myself for being the woman I am. Ask yourself, who would you be if this was your story? Where would you be if this had

been your life? Before you judge the darkness in me, think about it and tell me who are you?

About the Author

This is the testimony of my friend, Rhea. Rhea lives with her husband and son and owns Storyteller Photography¹.

1. <https://www.facebook.com/storyteller93/>

But God

By: Gary Florence

On August 3, 2022, when I arrived at work, there was a message from my wife, Robin. She was crying and said, “I think I’m having a stroke. I called my sister, and she’s on her way.” My workplace is thirty miles from our home. She was taken by ambulance to our local ER where she also works. So the drivers knew her, and her coworkers knew she was coming.

When I got there, I was met by her nurse and my sister-in-law, Wendy. The nurse said Robin was having a CT scan and that they believed she was having a brain bleed, and a helicopter was on its way. When Robin got back to the ER room, she was in a lot of pain. A few moments later, she let out a blood-curdling yell and fell into a coma. Her nurse ran past me and yelled, “Respiratory stat Room 7!” The announcement was made over the intercom, so now her co-workers knew this was Robin’s room, and they were getting very concerned.

Seven or eight people came rushing in and started to converge on Robin. I was pushed back into a corner, and all I could think to do was outstretch my hand toward her and let the Holy Spirit lead me in prayer. We found out later that when the ER doctor saw her scans, he said, “This is bad. This is very bad.”

The helicopter arrived, and she was flown to another hospital sixty-two miles away. While driving there, I received a phone call that said, “We are in a fatal situation and are doing everything we can to keep your wife alive on the OR table.” I still had about a forty-five minute drive. Something (or should I say someone—Holy Spirit) rose up on the inside of me, and I felt this authority come over me. Inside I said, “No, no” out loud. I spoke, “In the name of Jesus I command the Spirit of Death to leave the OR now.” I once again let the Holy Spirit lead me into how I ought to pray.

When arriving, the receptionist met us and said, “You have the best of the best working on your wife.” God knows the beginning to the end and the end to the beginning. He was dotting all the I’s and crossing all the T’s weeks, months even years knowing that August 3, 2022 was coming. When the surgeon was in his mother’s womb, God was weaving the tapestry of his life, putting the giftings and callings to be a surgeon within him, knowing that one day His daughter would be suspended between death and life, and this man would have to be called upon. Through prayer and the grace of God, she survived.

The surgeon said they go by a severity chart of one to five with five being the most severe. He said your wife was at the top of a five. He also said when someone is at a five, one-third will die before they get to the hospital, one-third will die on the OR table, and of the one-third who do survive, one-third of those will leave the hospital permanently disabled.

When I walked into her room after surgery, she was lying there on life support. There were so many IVs sticking out of her. They had shaven her head right up the middle and placed a plastic tube in it and was draining blood into a bag. I took one look at her, turned toward the wall, and began to sob. I thought that is not my wife to whom, just a few hours ago, I said goodbye, love you, see you tonight.

The next day, one of the team members came in and pointed to Robin and said, “That lady should not be lying there. It was that bad. It truly is a miracle.” She spent the next forty-two days in the hospital, twenty-three of them in ICU on and off life support in and out of comas.

At my job, they were so good to me and allowed me to be off so I could be with the love of my life. I drove every day (one hour and thirty minutes each way) so I could hold her hand and be there for her. I did not sit at her bedside begging, pleading, making deals with God. I sat as a son co-laboring, partnering with my Father, calling those things that be not as if they were. I spoke life, healing, abundance, acceleration, etc.

day after day. I watched with my own eyes my wife go from death to life. I saw miracle after miracle take place in her body. I saw “but God” moments, sudden God moments taking place throughout her journey.

While in the ICU she would have severe spasms in the blood vessels of her brain and they would have to do an emergency procedure called an angiogram. I got a call one night at 9:20 and they said we need to do this procedure now. The next day, I went in, and the doctor who did it stood over her, moving her right arm all around. When he left, the nurse came up to me and said, “I am sorry to inform you, but your wife’s right side has been compromised, and as bad as it is, she will never regain full strength or mobility.” I said, “Ma’am I believe in the power of prayer.” She told me that she is a Christian and also believes in prayer. So I told her to get on one side of Robin and I will get on the other side and let’s pray about it.

That night as I pulled into the driveway of our home, I heard as close to the audible voice of God I have ever heard. I heard such a strong resounding word in my Spirit “Who’s word are you going to believe, man’s word or My word?” I began to weep sitting in the car and I yelled, “I choose to believe your word.” The next day I was in her room and this same Dr. came in and asked me how I thought my wife was looking. I said a lot better than twenty-four hours ago, and he said I do too. No sooner did he say that than Robin threw her right hand over her head, and he said “Okay, now she is just showing off.”

She now has full motion, range, and strength. She is not compromised in any way, is fully healthy, and has recovered remarkably.

On November 7th, she went back to work part-time and even drove herself. On December 1st, she returned full-time. I am so proud of my wife. She did not belly ache, “Woe is me. Why did God allow this to happen?” Her faith grew and became more resolved. She’s not only my wife and companion, but she is my best friend, and I am honored to be her husband.

About the Author

This is the testimony of Gary Florence. Gary lives with his wife Robin, and they wanted to share their story with those who need "but God" moments in their own lives.

My Hope

By: Llewellyn McKernan

lies sick

on a blanket
in a dark alley. Her body
swells, steel-lined
with regret.

I clutch

her fevered hands, iron-
wet with sweat, her hair
strung with the blood
of holding on.

I kiss

her lips, a licorice-colored
death, her lungs
ice-cast, lice crawling
among the sickening
splendor of her
flesh, eyes getting
smaller
and smaller.

I gather up

the tiny bundle
of her tears, the slumber
she has yet to sleep. I feed her
the light, sifting it

through her
heart's shrinking
sieve until it is gone.

I take her home.

She lives through the night.
This gives me hope.

Exorcising My Wits

By: Llewellyn McKernan

I'm too shattered
to show you the pieces
being held together
by the glue of these words.

My sorrow
is so great, it's hiding
from the horror
of its own face.

I'm too sick at
my stomach to talk
like Maalox.
Consider this page
blank but for
the vomit.

I'm too empty
to overflow in the long
sounds of PROSE. You'll

find me between
the rings of the telephone,
in the shape your mouth

makes when it cries
O, in the mark
on the page that

turns like a doorknob
without a door, a
door without a room, a

room that's sky
full of clouds.

"Exorcising My Wits" was first published in The Awakenings Review.

Mother, After Alzheimer's

By: Llewellyn McKernan

She smiles,
the glove of her face
breaks into a thousand wrinkles.

She reaches
for my hand, the geography
of hers trembles, each
black vein blurs.

She turns over
in bed, her body shedding like
a chrysalis a century
of memories, I cup each
white flake

in my hands, like I do
hours filled to the brim
with her dirty plates, soiled
bedclothes, and body. Again &

again, the Angel
of Death watches over
her shallow bubbled
breath, again &

again I gather up
from His dark corner
the feathers
He left, stuffing them

in a pillow I sleep
on. I dream mother and I
hold onto the sides of a tiny
gold boat plowing
the seams of a silver
river. Sometimes I
wake, and banked by its

willows, I sit by her bed,
soothing away the pain
that, paler than her skin
or mine, rises in
a halo about her face
and shoulders.

"Mother, After Alzheimer's" was first published in The Awakenings Review.

About the Author

Llewellyn McKernan has a Master's Degree in English from the University of Arkansas and a Master's Degree in Creative Writing from Brown University. She has had seven books of poems published for adults and four for children. Her poems have been published in many journals, including Artemis, Kalliope, Nimrod, and others. They have been included in sixty anthologies, and they've won 107 regional, state, and national awards and prizes. Her writing mantra comes from the French novelist Colette's advice to a young writer: "Look long and hard at what gives you the most pleasure, but look even longer and harder at what gives you the most pain."

Now We Can Talk

*By: Anonymous
(as told to Ericka Clay)*

He was raised in Shafter, a small California town where things could have been ideal but never were. He was raised by a mother who did the best she could but was married to an alcoholic, and he saw the way booze sought to destroy.

One day, he'd try to shoot this man his mother had married.

He was sexually abused by family friends while still in elementary school, a vile circumstance that bore a hole in his heart and birthed a darkness he carried for years afterwards.

Growing up, he did all the wrong things. He and his buddy, Shane, were best friends, connected through quiet pain and the never-ending search to silence something that never spoke out loud. Drinking, smoking weed, coke, meth, chasing girls...one thing after another like little bricks stacked inside a swaying tower. One time, he met a good girl, the preacher's daughter. He went to her home and there was her father, the preacher, sitting on his chair in the den, smoking his cigar and drinking his whiskey. His mouth was foul. It told him all he needed to know about Christians.

If the good wasn't so good, then might as well be bad and not lie about it. At the very least, he had fun.

He was poor and didn't have the money to do the things he shouldn't have done, so he and Shane started to sell weed. Things progressed as they often do and soon he was selling coke by eighteen. He sold a lot of it but used a lot and got hooked. He robbed his mother to feed his habit. He saw a lot of things during that time that he won't talk about. "There was no good out of it," he says.

At this time, he was involved with Tanya. He thought they were going to be married but then she got pregnant. She changed. Everything

he did was wrong. He was all wrong. They had a baby girl, but things didn't last between them.

He ended up going to prison for four years, almost as if trying to prove Tanya right. He could have gotten out in two but did three and a half because he didn't appreciate their programming. When he got out, he started coke again but turned himself in. He went to prison a second time, this time for six months. He did a year clean, a word that would look better in quotation marks. As his parole officer loosened the reigns, he started back up again.

He was working in the oil fields for most of that time. This go round, meth was his drug of choice and he started selling again. He was married to Debbie, a wonderful woman that he still misses and who didn't do a thing wrong in their relationship. But he walked away from her, and maybe that's why he misses her so much.

It was two years before he got busted again, a sentence of twenty-five to life staring back at him through the barrel. He beat his case with a lie. He wonders now how he can contribute this to God. How God could ever redeem a situation when the dark parts were only beginning to unfold.

He had to do a year in county, and the day he got out, he started doing meth again. By this time, he had possibly fathered two children in California, but the one woman, the one after Debbie, disappeared and her mom wouldn't tell him where she went. He's not really sure if it's his or not.

He has nine children all together. That one would make ten.

He stayed in Shafter for six months after beating his sentence and decided death or prison were no longer viable options. He decided to move out to Springdale, Arkansas where his grandmother lived. Fresh start and all that.

He told Shane. The plan was to get on his feet, get a place, and then send for his best friend. So he did it. He moved out to a world wholly unlike California and found a place to stay. He called his mom, told

her to go to Shafter and get Shane. She asked her son if he was sitting down. And then he knew.

Shane had passed.

The pain back-talked at him so he took the last gifts Shane had given him: some meth and an ounce of weed.

He stayed with his grandmother for a week then moved in with his cousin, Christina, and her husband, Mitchell. They were Christians. They wanted him to go to church with them on Sundays. We refused to go and used the time to staunch his pain with the drugs his dead best friend gave him. There was a dichotomy here: his cousin went to church but then she smoked weed and cussed. It was the foul-mouthed preacher all over again.

Eventually the drugs dwindled and the boredom set in. So one Sunday, he went to church. It wasn't until Brother Larry spoke one Sunday that he felt compelled to give his life to Christ. He was twenty-five-years-old at that point.

He started serving. He participated in "Church in a Day," and he went and built a brand new church in Bebe where the old ladies fed his hungry belly Southern delicacies.

He met a girl. Her name was Pam, but she was still in the world and not a slave to Christ. He married her anyways.

As quickly as he followed Jesus, he stopped walking. He made a detour to follow Pam instead and started doing meth and coke again. He even started drinking, something he vowed never to do so he'd never be like the man his mother married. The man he almost killed.

They were married for five years. They had one child together.

After Pam, he had a one night stand with a woman who claimed to be on the pill but wasn't. Her name was Ellen. They end up having a set of twins together. He named the boy after Shane.

He was doing electrical work at this point. Things were okay. But then he met one of the neighbors, Joe. He had been drinking and smoking weed, having kicked the harder stuff. But Joe did meth.

He started doing it again, quit working, and started selling it. Joe's friends taught him how to make it, too.

He realized it's worse than California. In California, it was one big party. In Arkansas, he knew what darkness felt like.

He even lit an apartment on fire, making meth with another guy. A twelve-year-old neighbor claimed it was his fault, that he left a pan on the stove. Everyone knew the real reason, except the cops.

Things fizzled out with Ellen, which didn't surprise him. He never loved her anyways.

His buddy, Mark, invited him to stay with him. And that's where he met Brandy.

Brandy had two kids that he now claims his own. But it wasn't a picture-perfect family. He did drugs with Brandy. She came and stayed with him off and on at Mark's place. They did meth together, and eventually moved in with another friend, Lynn.

He tried working again. Lynn had a moving company.

He worked hard. He trained up guys. He was shown gratitude in the form of a pay cut. He went to work for another guy, another moving company that did him the same way. He decided to start his own moving company.

He ended up having his business for twelve years. He and Brandy quit doing meth. They got focused. They made money. They had two kids together. They lived in a nice house. They bought four cars. Things were relatively better, except for Brandy cheating on him.

But it was par for the course and the course was exceptionally greener nowadays. He took all the jobs, even the small ones and built the business up to support five crews. Most importantly, his kids didn't want for anything.

And then he lost everything.

It started with the pills. One of the guys who worked for him offered him a "hydrocodone without any aspirin in it" one day when his shoulder was hurting again. He felt great and was able to work pain-

free the rest of the day. The next afternoon, his shoulder was hurting again, and the guy offered him another pill. He opted to buy a few, and when Brandy started to complain about her shoulders, having thrown around cases of soda at the Murphy's gas station she managed, he offered her one of his newly purchased pills.

They spend a rare weekend off together, both of them sick. *Summer flu*, he thought. But then another weekend rolled around and they were sick again. At this point, he'd spent thousands of dollars. He was in withdrawal and knew the only way to get off the pills was three days of pure torment. He decided they needed to start doing meth again to numb themselves from the pain of detox.

During this time, he got arrested for not paying child support and stopped taking on moving jobs. He was on and off again with Brandy, splitting time between their relationship and getting arrested for various reasons. He got a tooth abcess, and the doctor put a trach in. He started coughing up blood. They had to split his chest open to get to the artery to stop the bleeding. Everything went black and then everything lit up again. The earth under his feet was rolling and pitch black. There were streams of lava all around him. He realized he was dead and in hell. He begged God not to leave him, to let him get back to his kids. As soon as he called out to God, the demons came, and he tried to fight them off. Everything went black again, and when he opened his eyes, he was back in the hospital room, his soon-to-be ex-wife standing over him.

It didn't change much. He ended up living with his buddy, Bobby, after leaving Brandy. Everyone did drugs there, himself included now. He started selling again and firmly planted his feet on the path of self-destruction. He told Bobby, "I'm standing here, looking at the abyss, and I just want to fall in." And Bobby would say, "Let's just do some more dope." The "so you forget about that" was implied.

One of the guys he sold to was working with the cops. He got put in jail and had drugs sent to him in the paperwork the cops gave him.

The paperwork was fake unbeknownst to them but the high was real. For the first three months, he got high all the time.

They ended up sending him down to a rehab program in a Texarkana prison. The volunteers came in sometimes to share the word of God. He never went. After dinner, they made the church call, but still he wouldn't go. Until one day, he decided to.

He went to one of the volunteers, Larry, the Jehovah's Witness. They had a lot of discussions about Larry's beliefs, about what the Bible said. He was always the last one to leave, and one night he was sitting alone in one of the pews. He looked at the picture of Jesus on the wall, and said, "Okay, now we can talk." He gave His life back to Christ.

He ended up working for the chaplain. The other prisoners came in sometimes, and he saw it on their faces - the way he used to feel on the inside. He talked to each one, told them where he was in his walk with Christ, where he had come from. Some of the guys started going to church, looking for Jesus.

One of his prayers was that he would find a place to stay after his parole date. He prayed and prayed and soon, it was two months after that date. He wanted to stay at the Phoenix Recovery House, a halfway house that was near his kids. He put in application after application. He had his mom call them but no answer.

God firmly shuts the door on that option. But then he thought of Nancy.

Nancy owned the sister company to the moving company he used to own before he lost it. He was close to her husband, another Larry, before he passed. So close that they would loan him money to pay his guys between jobs. The last time he saw Nancy was during the dark place when the pills had a hold of him. He had called Nancy and Larry up to borrow a substantial amount of money, this time to get high, not pay his guys. He never paid her back.

That was four years ago. What if she didn't pick up?

His mom called Nancy. She said she'd help.

Two weeks later he left the rehab program at the prison.

He looked at it from all angles: he had prayed to God and God gave him a house, a room he didn't have to share with anyone else, no ankle monitor to wear, access to a vehicle. He had a job because Nancy hired him on as one of her movers, and he was even closer to his girls than he would have been at the Phoenix Recovery House. And across the street? A church. He started going every Sunday.

He was grateful beyond measure.

He looks back sometimes, on everyone and everything that played a part: the guy his mother was married to and his drunken heart; the pastor with his glass of whiskey; his best friend, Shane, and the destructive blood running in both their veins; Debbie who a part of him still loves and Ellen who he never truly loved in the first place; how he got out of California on a lie and what it's like to go from rags to the riches he traded for pills. His children whom he loves immensely and the God he loves the most.

He thinks about all of it, not shutting the door on any of it but quietly wearing it all like the young boy he used to be.

About the Author

Ericka Clay wrote this testimony for her friend who chooses to be anonymous. Ericka writes raw, real, relatable books that have a heart for Jesus. You can learn more at erickaclay.com¹.

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

Learning to Be an Artist for Jesus

By: Veronica McDonald

“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” Galatians 2:20 (KJV)

Ever since I was four years old, I wanted to be an artist and storyteller. The artist dream was mostly extinguished by the time I became an adult—when I became an atheist and nihilist and lost joy in nearly everything I once loved. It wasn't until Jesus saved me about four years ago that the love of art was reawakened in me, and I believe God gave me back that desire to pull me out of my depression and the frustration I was experiencing because I wanted to tell the world about Him and didn't know how. Shortly after I was saved, I felt highly motivated to paint a picture of Eve. I had a canvas and some paints tucked away, and I finished the painting of Eve in less than twenty-four hours. As soon as it was finished, I wanted to paint more. So, I created more paintings of women in the Bible as I read through the scriptures, and found that painting calmed my impatient mind, and helped me slow down and digest God's Word.

Painting led me down a path where God slowly showed me direction, one step at a time, with no clue as to what the future would bring. I was led to join an art guild, develop a friendship with a non-believing artist (who I pray for daily), show my work in galleries and juried art shows where I met lots of believing and non-believing artists and admirers. I garnered praise, sold some prints, and even had my work make the cover of a couple of magazines. I say all this not to brag, but to point out that none of this was according to *my* plan for my life. It was more like, I felt Jesus tugging at me, putting me in certain places or putting certain people in my life, helping me down a road I would have never taken on my own.

The praise I sometimes receive for my work makes me feel like an impostor. I know better than anyone (except for, of course, Jesus) that the only work I am actually doing is painting (which is the desire He gave me) and saying “yes” to the opportunities He puts in place for me. I’m never reminded more of my unworthiness than during the actual creation process. Whenever I start a painting, my little studio quickly becomes a timeless vacuum that sucks me in and forces me to confront my sins head on: selfish ambition, frustration, envy, impatience, ingratitude, self-absorption—they all weigh down on me and my hands, and I can’t make anything beautiful come out. I literally paint in circles, going over the same lines, over and over, and expecting something wonderful to happen or for something stunning to emerge. It’s not until I call out to Jesus in my frustration and bitterness and ask Him to help me—to make me not so *me*—that I begin to let go, feel those sins lift off me like smoke, and I can find the joy and worship in creating, and the excitement in working for Him and His kingdom. When I experience this joy, I feel the tiniest pang of sadness that I have such a short amount of time on this Earth because I want to do this forever.

As I work on a painting, I can actually witness Him guiding me—placing ideas and helpful techniques in my path, or in my head, that I couldn’t find on my own while painting in circles. And I become so grateful and amazed, and I wish I could explain it to whoever compliments my work, and say something more profound than, “I couldn’t have done it without Jesus, or “to God be the glory,” because they never truly get it. I have a hard time telling people in a short exchange the miracle that occurs when I paint; how, every time, it starts with me and my sin, and ends with grace, forgiveness, and the weightlessness that comes from leaning on Jesus. In the process, I’m reminded of the goodness of the Gospel every minute.

I’m grateful this post has given me the opportunity to say what I sometimes have a hard time saying:

1. Without Him, I’d be dead in my sin, and I wouldn’t be

painting.

2. Without Him, I would never finish a painting. (Side note: as insignificant and strange as it sounds, Jesus actively makes me better at painting. I could show a slideshow of the stages of each of my paintings, and point to the exact moment where I got stuck and Jesus stepped in. It's like night and day.)
3. Without Him, I'd have nothing but doubts, a heavy dose of meaninglessness, and no direction. I only paint because of Him. Because I truly believe that this is something He wants me to do.

I love being an artist for Jesus, though this is all fairly new, and I'm still a bit clueless. I often feel conflicted about how to serve others with art without becoming lost in the world of envious comparison and serving my own ego or mammon, but I'm not convinced this is something I need to have all figured out. Right now, I'm focusing on directing it all towards Him, and then, with time, I know He will show me how to use my art for others in a way that doesn't put me and my "talents" smack dab in the middle of everything, like a sad little shrine to myself. I pray that opportunities keep arising, that seeds are planted, interest in the Bible is sparked in nonbelievers, and that His will is done, in whatever way that includes the art He puts in my heart.

About the Author

This is the testimony of Veronica McDonald¹. Veronica is a painter, writer, and the editor of Heart of Flesh Literary Journal² and Pure in Heart Literary Journal³.

1. <https://veronica-mcdonald.com/>

2. <https://heartoffleshlit.com/>

3. <https://pureinheartstories.com/>

The Life of a Christian Comic Book Artist

By: Daniel Brian Mobley

Lord willing, come January 13, 2021, I will have been in the Lord for exactly twenty years. It's been a long journey that has gone much too fast. Twenty years full of great blessings, godly deliverance, and devastating losses—but God bestowed strength. Endurance. Perseverance. All of these things have allowed me to live a life that is so much better than I deserve.

When I was in the fourth grade, a friend of mine brought a Wizard Magazine (look it up) to school, and I officially fell in love with comics at nine years old. It became my obsession. I studied the medium and the creators in the industry, planning to be a comic book artist superstar someday. Nine years later, I would find myself on the cusp of accepting Jesus Christ, and I was determined to transplant this dream of achieving comic book superstardom into God's will. Submission to God is a concept that we, as human beings, often struggle with, and I was no exception. As I grew in faith, I learned that submission is not a one-time act but a daily choice.

When I was added to the church I had never once considered that my goals might change. Even more so, that my goals might need to change.

I was naïve.

Whether I knew it at the time or not, I was under the impression that serving God was being added to my itinerary rather than becoming my itinerary. If I had to cite the primary difference between being in the comic book industry as a Christian and not, it's that the Christian does not create his or her art to entertain first. The Christian creates with the mindset to first glorify God and then entertain. This is a foreign concept in the commercial art industry (comics are essentially commercial art) as the audience is often perceived as the ultimate "god"

involved—it's a sales-driven arena—therefore all content is geared toward selling to the demographic.

I slowly began to realize over time that the industry I had been training to be successful in was not very welcoming to people of the Christian faith. I had thought that my belief in Christ would not only not interfere with my ambitions but would propel me ahead with forward momentum. But the industry I had come to love as a kid seemed to be taking an ever-increasing passive-aggressive stance against those who didn't share similar beliefs to the majority active in comics. My comics aren't drawn in a Marvel or DC house style. They don't contain NSFW elements. I omit, censor, and/or unglorify swear words, gratuitous sexual imagery/innuendo, hyperviolence, and anti-Christian philosophies. In an industry that has largely been geared toward adults since the late 1980s, this can hurt your popularity and momentum. To discover that my refusal to include these things in my comics caused my efforts to be lost in the shuffle was devastating, and it took many years of struggling with depression, self-reflection, and constant prayer to recover from it.

Flashforward to 2020, and I'm in a healthy place creatively. One thing that I had been in denial about was the talent God gave me to write and speak. It was always commented on throughout my childhood and adulthood, but my response for many years was, "That's cool, but I want to be a comic book superstar." It wasn't until I had a short story professionally published in an anthology book in 2015 that I felt I could no longer bury that talent. I've now finally come to a place of maturation that allows me to not compare myself to other artists around me.

I'm currently writing the first draft of what I hope will be my first novel. The working title is *Lunar Romance*, and I'm having a blast doing it. The ideas are flowing and the pressure is gone because I now fully understand that God is in control. He's always been in control. And I am so thankful that He was merciful enough to allow me to catch up

to His rhythm for my life. Submission to God's plan for your life makes living so much easier.

I still make comics. I just no longer make them with the intention of following in the footsteps of those around me. I create with the intention of following in Jesus' footsteps, and although that doesn't match up with the dream of a love-struck nine-year-old who pored over Death of Superman comics instead of doing his division classwork, that's okay. In fact, it's better than okay. It's golden because none of us are long for this world, and some things are more important than dreams. Life is more important, and more important than that God, because God is life.

This has been quite a challenging year for us all, but my hope is that 2021 will be full of victories, both great and small.

I'd like to thank Ericka for allowing my voice to be heard on her platform, and I look forward to continuing to use my words and pictures to entertain in a morally significant way; for that is my goal every single time I put pen to paper, or finger to keyboard.

About the Author

This testimony is written by Daniel Brian Mobley. Brian is a comic book artist. You can find him on Instagram¹ and June Bug Press².

1. <https://www.instagram.com/danielbriannmobley>

2. <https://junebugpress.storenvy.com>

A Confused Heart

By: Anna Hawkes Cabral

Tangled in a web of emotion
My heart drowns in the turbulent ocean
Of confusing thoughts and feelings
Of contradictory desires and meanings

O that I could return to simplicity
O that I could relinquish my iniquity

Of doubting instead of trusting
Of wavering instead of persisting
Of fighting instead of yielding

Lord, set me free from the mire of despair
Lord, lift me out of this dark lair

Then I will see Your light once more
And praise You Lord like times before

Two Forces in Tension

By: Anna Hawkes Cabral

Two forces in tension:
Purpose and beauty

Not a china doll, only to be seen
Not a tool, only to be worked

Not a flower only to be observed
Not a root only to serve

Tender, yet strong
Breakable, yet tough

Woman,
An intricate symphony
Of purpose and beauty

Now I Am Free

By: Anna Hawkes Cabral

I fear pain, death, and slavery
Yet, You tell me I'm free
The chains of death no longer hold me

In my moments of fear
I listen to the father of lies
Telling me I'm an orphan
Abandoned, chained, fallen

Then You rush in with
Your breath of truth and light
Showing me I am free

If it were up to me
I'd be back in the grave
Yet, You have taken the penalty
It is done, finished
Breaking the power of death
Jesus, You have won the victory

About the Author

These poems are written by Anna Hawkes Cabral. Anna is a devotional writer¹ and creator of Unique Mums².

1. <https://amzn.to/4cwHSXZ>

A Proverbs 31 Woman, My Mother

By: Mary Grace van der Kroef

Have you ever asked yourself, “What is a Christian woman, and how can I endeavour to be one in a world filled with crooked paths and crumbling spiritual infrastructure?”

Do you find yourself confused, or discouraged as you strive to be more like the woman described in Proverbs 31, or Ruth in her humility, or Queen Esther in her bravery?

Perfection will never be ours until we are standing in heaven before Father God and throw our crowns at the feet of Jesus. In our journey to get to that moment, we can get so tired, lonely, and disparaged. Is there a cure for this? Let me tell you about someone who has helped me on my journey.

I come from a long line of God-fearing and God-following women. I can't imagine what my life today would be like if even one of them was missing from our family tree. They are each a testament to the beauty of womanhood, and the one closest to me is my mother.

Her name is Karla, and she was born in rural Indiana, USA, to a carpenter/farmer named John and his wife Lorna. She is a Proverbs 31 kind of woman. She is like Ruth, and also like Esther. What makes me say this? The three qualities I see in her that shine the brightest are compassion, loyalty, bravery, and a healthy dose of an adventurous spirit. I often see these qualities working together in her life.

When I was growing up, she used to tell us stories about when she moved up here to Canada, to a small northern town to help her college friend's mother care for twenty-one foster children. Can you imagine the laundry piles in that house?

Then, when I was around twelve years old, we went to an evening service at our church (we crossed the USA/Canada border multiple times a week for this) and met three beautiful people from Central America. They only spoke Spanish and were looking for help. They told

Mom, who speaks a bit of Spanish, that they were looking for a way for the woman with them to cross the border safely. She was pregnant and in danger from people in her hometown.

After the service, Mom piled all of her kids into her twelve-seater van, and we took this woman home with us. I remember pulling up to customs and the border guard saying, “Hello! On your way home from church?” They were just about to wave us through when Mom made direct eye contact and said, “Today, we need to come in.”

This dear woman lived with us for about six months as her paperwork passed its way through different levels of Canadian immigration. Mom took her to Catholic services every week, even though we were attending a Pentecostal church. She took her to all her prenatal appointments and helped her find Spanish-speaking friends in town so she wouldn’t feel so lonely.

I’ll never forget what it was like to watch Mom interact with this woman. I don’t think she will ever fully realize the impact her act of obedience to the Holy Spirit has had on me. To this day, Mom loves to drive places and meet new people. She’s extended her hands of compassion into too many lives to count.

The last two years have been especially difficult as she’s helped care for multiple family members as health problems have threatened to take them from us. I’ve seen her tired, I’ve seen her broken, I’ve seen her spark for adventure dim just a bit. But never once has she let go of Christ and his call on her life as a believer to love deeply, and walk boldly with Him.

Mom isn’t perfect and there isn’t anyone that knows that better than herself, but she shines Christ’s light so brightly.

Yes, I have a string of legacy layers that have come before me, and Mom is just one of them. I often wonder how my small brick of time is going to rest alongside theirs. Then I remember, my brick lies on top of their strong straight lines, and they rest on Christ.

Do you have a woman like my Mother in your life? Maybe you are the first Christian in your family, the first to line your time brick with his cornerstone. If so, I am so proud of you, and I want you to know you are not alone.

Look around you at the people God has brought into your life. Look at the ones who bear his image. Do you know why he's gifted them to you? To lay your brick beside theirs and start your own legacy of Christ's followers.

Do you also come from a line of believers? When was the last time you sat back and thought about the lives of the women who came before you? I thank God for His Word, the Bible, and also his generous gift of mothers, sisters, grandmothers, aunties, friends, teachers, and anyone else I come into contact with who shares my faith.

We are not meant to do this 'being a woman of Christ' thing alone. When we realize this, it opens up the possibility to be part of rebuilding, re-aligning, and refocusing that crumbling spiritual infrastructure I mentioned at the beginning of this post.

This all sounds really grand, doesn't it? But I also want to remind you that great things always start with small things. Every wall starts with one first brick, and as long as we let that first brick be Christ himself, great things will come from each small one.

About the Author

*Mary Grace van der Kroef is a poet, writer, and artist from Ontario, Canada. She enjoys the simple things in life, like a good cup of coffee and heart-to-heart talks with friends. She uses her writing to highlight those simple things while encouraging others and exploring what it means to be human. Her poetry books *Words of Weight* and *The Branch that I Am* are available online worldwide, and her home on the web is www.marygracewriting.ca¹.*

1. <http://www.marygracewriting.ca/>

Yesterday, Today, and Forever Right Now

By: Anne Stanton

Dateline: Yesterday

Exterior/Interior Scenes: I'm walking in the rain down our country road with my daughter's umbrella in hand. The thick, overly-large sweater, hat, and long pants I threw on after discarding summer shorts are welcomed warmth. The wind kicks up. The sun dodges clouds and lands on me. Our black cocker, Miss Molly, whom I've come to respect as an ace watchdog, and love as part of our family, amuses me with her escapades and devotion. She's taken to darting ahead in what appears to be scouting missions, only to return to assure me, all is well. I stand under the junipers when the downfall begins. Raindrops speckle my pants. Molly sniffs, then positions herself at my feet, alert to the lowliest movements, as I watch earth and heaven connect.

The filtered sun flashes highlights onto humble ground. Iridescent gold flecks rest upon split pea yellow brush, which stand in equal number next to fallen kin, stark gray branches that have succumbed to the desert heat. Diamond-like beads glisten everywhere. Lightning launches, an arrow. I count: 1001, 1002 . . . nineteen miles away. Then it strikes me—an awareness that children probably have studied, but I at forty-two, am only discovering in the moments following the peal. I listen for the sound, as it rumbles past me into someone else's ears, no doubt. Had someone counted to 1020, 1021? Had someone stopped at 1001? Were there other counters? In that revealing second, I open to the fact that sound travels, and we, those of us who hear, are mysteriously connected by it.

Dateline: Today

Interior Scenes: I stop in my tracks to ask God for a sign. Even though He's given me His peace about this particularly large step of faith (a surety in itself), I want a tangible confirmation from Him. As

soon as I ask, I repent of my lack; nonetheless, I add, “It would be helpful, Lord.”

It’s my day ‘off.’ It’s a cherished day afforded me by a husbandly love that understands my need for occasional solitude; a day when he takes our precious ever-inquisitive children out so that I can read and write in undisturbed quietude. As I sit to finish the book that came by way of his hands, too, I read about the beginning of the universe: “. . . violent explosion . . . continues as the galaxies hurtle outward into unknown space. What our radio telescopes are picking up now are echoes of the sound of that primal explosion so long ago that it is scarcely expressible numerically.

As the echoes of the beginning linger, so too, all that we say moves outward in gradually diminishing but neverending sound waves.” (Madeleine L’Engle, *Walking on Water*, 1982)

I realize after reading those sentences that God has laid the sign before me, and more! He’s seen fit to answer my prayer immediately and open my mind more to sound waves just to increase my awe of Him. Joyful dives into mysteries, too deep to comprehend, befit answered prayers. We dive and we are refreshed in Him.

It’s to His glory when we peek into how our God, the Almighty One, whose being spans the universe, whose mind planned galaxies and whose utterances thrust substance forth in its purest form (faith) to bring everything into being meets us. That God, who is infinitely and indescribably more glorious than any natural handiwork we might bring forth, more unbelievably credible than the invisible physical phenomena we barely catch hold of (like sound waves) does something that appears simpler than creation, but astounds me more. He, who transcends time and space, hears me and allows me to tap into His faith to cover my pocketed childlike parodies.

Dateline: Right Now

Interior Scenes: I ask myself, if He left an open-ended spectrum of perfection to become mortal flesh—flesh that hung upon wood, which

He called into existence, wood that pushed upward through His created earth into His sunshine, wood that bore nails (created ore), which first pierced His flesh and would not let go until He finished His purpose, and He, taken down by man, fashioned from dirt by His hands, and His limp form regarded as dead as the stained wood they pulled him from—then why, after humbling Himself in those ways, am I amazed when He speaks to me?

Perhaps it stems from the same awe I experienced in intuitively understanding sound waves. We know, intellectually, we are God's children, that God loved us and sent His Son as prey for Satan to devour in our stead. We believe He appeared, undisclosed, to enact a cunning exchange on our behalf, knowing Satan could never sniff out such a love. We can know all these things and still not trust He hears our prayers! That onus is on us.

The next time truth flashes, listen. And in its passing, count the moments infinite, believing His voice won't stop with us, but move onward, constantly onward, to where we know not; but still, pray. He wants us in His loop of awareness—one with His mind in the Father.

Perhaps, within that meeting place, in that time of right now, the connectedness we experience will be so beyond our everyday concept of reality, that all there's left for us to do within that present Presence of Eternity is to give what is due to the One who loves and connects all of us. He longs for us to know Him well—with our whole soul.

To those of us who do hear, we shall find, somehow, we are changed forever; as changed as any tree, bearing the mark of a jagged arrow, a flash of light. Lightning strikes trees unawares. Trees stretch toward light, or die. They bend with the wind, or break. They bear fruit, and reproduce their kind. They know not how. Yet, it is enough. They are what God created, and He marks them as He wills. Rest in the growth we do not make happen. It's happening right now.

About the Author

This piece is written by Anne Stanton. Anne is a novelist¹ and you can find her at Anne Stanton, Here².

1. <https://amzn.to/3P95Tu7>

2. <https://annestantonhere.wordpress.com/>

Let Me Pray

By: Joan Spilman

I grew up in the era of generational porch sitters. The Greatest Generation was nudging into their fifties and would sit on their porches in the evenings, visiting with family and friends. As I rode my bike up Pike Street, crossed on Church, and whizzed down Harrison, a chorus of big hellos would sound from each porch. Supper hung in the air.

Everybody knew everybody. In fact, there are some people that I don't remember meeting because I can't remember a time without them.

I do, however, remember meeting Pat Chapman.

I was in the fourth grade and was on my way to the restroom during class time. Did I need to go to the restroom? No. Was I heading to the one directly across the hall? No. I was going to the bathroom built as part of the new addition because I wanted to check out the new hand dryers. They sounded like tornados. I wanted to press all three at the same time.

As I passed by a classroom, I noticed a boy leaning against a door jamb. His head was tilted at an awkward angle while his arm was held high and tight against his chest. From his wrist, the hand dangled. I'd no sooner noticed him than a high-pitched scream ripped through the air. It came from a redheaded girl standing across from him and still holds a place in my tonal memory. The teacher came to the door.

"He got a hundred! He got a hundred!" The red-headed frenzy, Debbie Purdue, was jumping up and down, holding a paper in her hand.

The teacher replied, "Debbie, I know you're happy for him, but you can't disturb the class like this."

He took his spelling test orally because his grip wouldn't allow him to write. The teacher had given him extra time, and Debbie could understand his labored speech because she lived next door.

Pat's suffering began at birth. He cried continually due to a sensitive digestive tract and could only tolerate goat's milk. His first steps were to his sister, Carla, but they were taken when he was six. He was thought to have spastic cerebral palsy. This type of CP causes more pain than the other types because of enhanced muscle strength. A trip to St. Barnabas Hospital in New York would rule out CP. There were certain things he could do that CP patients weren't supposed to do, and certain things he couldn't do that he should have been able to. Pat would remain without a primary diagnosis all his life, but the spasticity was real, and he was strong. Once his arm was cast straight up behind his back, but he began to complain of pain, so his father cut it off. Underneath was a huge skin ulcer. In addition, he had arthritis, bursitis, and a sensitivity to barometric pressure. When he ate, he was forced to throw his head back to swallow so he wouldn't choke, and as he grew older, his teeth would have to be pulled. His speech, which was always laborious, would deteriorate, and when he did speak, it cost him. A simple sentence would leave him shaking and sweating.

There's a special type of pain involved when people who are extremely handicapped are extremely bright, and to say Pat was intelligent would be an understatement. He had an auditory memory as well as an eidetic one, and there wasn't a subject, if given a chance, in which Pat didn't excel. Special education was far on the horizon and I'm glad for two reasons: our class wouldn't have gotten to know Pat and he wouldn't have gotten to know us.

We weren't the most scholastic, athletic, or even cohesive class. In fact, we were the group that most teachers dreaded. I remember asking Doris Neal, the school secretary, what was "wrong" with our class, and after a long moment, she said, "Your class was loud." She looked like she had something to add, but this was at a funeral and Doris, ever a lady, wouldn't say more.

Yet, no one teased Pat who, by this time, was also known as Rosie or Pickles.

Today I read horror stories of special needs students being bullied, mocked, or excluded. I can't remember one instance when he wasn't, to the best of our abilities, treated like one of us. Coach Bernie Stone made him the football team manager in Junior High, and he treasured the acceptance of guys like Harry Purdue, Steve Daniel, Jerry Leggett, Jim Scheidler, Terry Jordan, David Martin, Tim Bias and others. I know this because he told me. In a junior high photo, he is surrounded by a group of cheerleaders, one of them giving him a kiss. He kept our high school yearbook within arm's reach, and if you attended the Milton Baptist Church and were close to his age, he knew your baptismal date.

After graduation, Pat's social life was curtailed, but he wasn't a recluse. He knew his neighbors and friends still visited. The schools in our town hadn't been torn down, and schools have bands and band practice. His house was their stopping point, and he'd wait on the porch to talk to band members. I don't know how many years this went on. Church people visited, he had music, television, and family, but he wasn't out and about like he'd once been.

Pat's condition was worsening. This was after he'd had extensive testing at St. Barnabas. While his diagnosis was inconclusive, the doctors tried to override the synapses in his brain—those flares that caused him to contort and spasm—with electrodes. Unfortunately, these were powered by a backpack, and his flares were so strong that when the attached electrodes tried to override them the impact would knock him off his feet.

His sister-in-law, Sharon, urged me to go see him. It had been a while, and I wasn't sure how I'd be received, but Sharon kept saying, "Go over and visit. He'd love to see you."

So, I did.

I was going through a painful journey of my own. I was questioning my faith. Or rather, I was questioning everything I'd been taught, because I wanted to know for myself. I was also wanting immediate an-

swers to all the hard questions in the universe, and at the top of my list (right after “how did evil enter the world, if God is good?”) was suffering. Why do people suffer? Why is this world full of pain? Unlike Pat’s, my experience could be classified. I was going through a dark night of the soul.

Pat was the focal point in my argument with God. Here was a person who had done no one any harm, never asked for pity, and always had a smile on his face. I think I was hoping I’d learn something that day which would allow me to let go of the whole business.

I walked through the door, and there sat Pat, looking happy to see me.

There were new lines of pain on his face, despite his smile, and he seemed smaller than I’d remembered. Older, thinner, more bent. I didn’t intend to talk about God, but Pat mentioned the Milton Baptist Church and within minutes we were off and running.

I don’t remember how the general topic of God moved into the specific area of suffering, and even more specifically to Pat. I voiced all the questions about suffering mentioned above and then some. Mildred, his mother, said she’d never understood why Pat had to endure so much. There never seemed to be any answers. She spoke from a mother’s heart, and I took the stance of a Doubting Thomas.

Pat was quiet. For a while, he didn’t speak, but when he did, it was a long, labored sentence that cost him because he was sweating profusely by the end. No, he was not mad at God. He loved God. God loved him. God had told him that when he died, He would send a chariot with six white horses to take him to heaven.

Pat looked for my reaction.

I looked for the chariot because I wanted God to come right now, and take him to a place where pain, and the memory of it, would fade forever.

I'd visit several times more before I moved to Wichita. After that, every time I came home, I'd visit Pat. Richard, my husband, got to know him as well.

Pat's life changed dramatically after he got a computer. He got a good one and good people to help him, specialists from Marshall University who were accustomed to helping the handicapped, and the computer was made to fit his specifications. That meant Pat could use the one finger that spasticity hadn't folded, plus the mouse could mostly be controlled by his feet, where he had the most mobility.

He loved communication. He emailed several times a day, stole email addresses from emails I sent him, emailed strangers and got replies, wrote poetry, played computer games, and endlessly browsed the net. Pat was most interested in the planets and space. His father, Carl, said he was up every morning at six-thirty and didn't go to bed until midnight.

He was free.

Meanwhile, I was in Wichita and under strain. An illness had invaded our family that had turned our life upside down. Anxiety was the new norm. No news was good news, but we got bad news every day. I was in Mildred's shoes, for though the circumstances were different, all mothers suffer the same. I didn't confide this to Pat for quite some time and then one day, it spilled over.

He told me he would pray.

I said fine.

Every day after that, I'd get an email telling me that he was praying. Sometimes, several a day.

He flooded our family with prayer. I was grateful, but I also began to feel guilty. Why should someone with so much suffering of their own (the computer made him happy, but it didn't change his physical condition) pray for my needs? I felt needy, greedy, and shallow. I felt that he should use his energies to pray for himself. I think what I finally said was, "Don't worry about it."

The answer was unacceptable to Pat.

I'm going to quote something although I don't have the text beside me. It's an email from Pat. I could put my hands on it if I wished because I ran them off and saved each one before we moved, but I don't need to. The words are burned in my brain. He wrote:

Every morning for as long as I can remember, I wake to two things, light and pain. I mean real pain. Sometimes it's so bad it makes me cry. Then, I pray to Jesus and he takes it away. You're not used to this. Let me pray for you.

I've always thought that one of the highest points in Christian thought occurs in Psalm 51:4 when David cries out, "against you alone have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" after his spectacular sin with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah the Hittite. Sin is horizontal because it hurts others, but it starts out vertically because it is scorn of God.

But that's inspired text.

This was from someone whose personal suffering had been a block to my faith.

You're not used to this. Let me pray for you.

Pat's comment presupposed a lot of things. He acknowledged there was a spiritual battle going on and I'd never had so much at stake. There was spiritual interference due to fear, and I couldn't pray with any measure of assurance. It was a matter of life and death. Finally, his determination was born of love.

He'd learned this through pain.

But let me be clear. I don't believe God put Pat on this earth to suffer so that he could let fall a spiritual gem, or for me to write a particular line at a particular time because God knew I'd blog it and someone else would have an "aha!" moment. I think God suffered with Pat and his family because, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our suffering. . ." (Hebrews, 4:5). I think his deep spirituality was produced not because of, but despite the pain. He willed his

spirit to work with the Holy Spirit and so produced words that, years later, still bring tears to my eyes.

Also, a little anger at what passes for Christianity today. The syrupy sweet slogans or stickers referencing a holy God. Jesus likes country music best. Since when? Angels visited and left star dust on my pillows. Wash your sheets. Then there's the health and wealth gospel. The name it and claim it tribe. The puffy haired tele-evangelists with their Gulf Streams who prey on the poorest of the poor. The wacky teachings directed at women. Christians debating the existence of aliens, which is beyond stupid. This place is a mess; no intelligent creature would come here.

You're not used to this. Let me pray.

Every time I recall those words, a blade of truth cuts through the muddle, and I'm reminded of what my spiritual journey is about. It's about glorifying God and praying for those put my path.

My dark night of the soul is over. Pat has been dead for years. The questions which troubled me don't trouble me anymore because I know that, even if told the answers, I wouldn't understand them. I'm mortal, and my mind has been dimmed. "Why do you ask my name?" said the angel of the Lord, "since it is beyond comprehension?" (Judges 13:18.)

I'll see Pat again, but I don't know when. Different theologians have different theories for when time ends, what judgements occur when, and who belongs where; but in the midst, I hope there's something like a recess. I can well imagine Pat sneaking off to watch the formation of a new universe.

He'll be back in a couple million years.

About the Author

This piece by Joan Spilman is written about her friend, Pat. Joan writes a Substack called Harshbarger Mills¹. Joan holds an MFA from

Wichita State University where she was awarded the fiction fellowship. She writes short stories and novels, the latest being "Silver Bottle" found on Amazon or Kindle.

1. https://joanspilman.substack.com/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=substack_profile

Letter to an Old Juggalo

By: Justin Lacour

The night after you went to jail
Dylan covered “Stella Blue” in Barcelona
encored with “Every Grain of Sand”
you should know
there’s still music shining somewhere
the way trees turn the color
of flame once a year
the way suffering clarifies love
how much you are loved
even the hairs on your head
your voice on the recorded line
slight delay b/c you’re speaking
from a hole in the earth a hole
where light shrinks so it can
crush you where words
weigh less than your tears
the hole where Christ lives
until Christ comes again

About the Author

This poem is by Justin Lacour. Justin lives in New Orleans with his wife and three children and edits Trampoline¹. He is the author of Hulk Church² (Belle Point Press 2023).

1. <https://www.trampolinepoetry.com/>

2. <https://bellepointpress.com/products/hulk-church>

The Poem as Providence

By: Richard Spilman

Inspiration, God's breath
infusing Eden's dust—like the clay
you mold into bowl or cup,
hands and feet inured to the pace
of common ware, transfigured
for a moment by an inner music
you cannot comprehend,
there as you turn the wheel.
Now comes art, for inspiration
is never enough: to prune
darlings and pack the survivors
into the shape of a waking
dream, each revolution
as decisive as the will of God;
to whorl the walk of faith
around music fit for dancing.
God's breath transfigured
into yours and you into Adam
in his perustration of the Garden,
naming, throwing the world
to the shape of His desire. Is this
Providence, or merely making
yourself, by idiosyncrasy, owner
of a paradise you did not create?
For sure, you've blurred His gift
with constant reimaginings.
Yet from these cups, so snug
to the hand, the world drinks,
from the bowls they eat—

and share your stumbling art
of seeking God to erase Him,
and by erasure find Him again.

Seeking God

By: Richard Spilman

Begin with lights that swim and whisper
on the ceiling on moonless nights.
Add breaths that creak, twitter and sigh
like the stridor of a sickly child,
a painful crackling of skin, the blush
of hands waking from winter numbness,
and the perfume of loss, the otherness
that bodies seek like deer coming to salt.
Meld them into the brine of dawn
that rankles every waking tongue.

About the Author

Richard Spilman was born and raised in Normal, Illinois. Thus his Substack page, Far From Normal. He is the author of one book of poetry, In the Night Speaking, and two chapbooks, Suspension and Dig. He is also the author of two collections of short fiction, Hot Fudge and The Estate Sale. Most of those are out of print, but you can still find Dig and The Estate Sale on Amazon.

Hope That Never Stops Growing

By: Ericka Clay

I wasn't always so callous to the idea of God or even having faith in Him. In fact, as a child, I remember knowing God was real and felt he heard us when my mom and I would pray for our family and friends at night. But something began to shift in me.

I was raised Roman Catholic, and for those who don't know, Catholicism tends to be a more formal, tradition-based denomination. And, at least when I was younger, there wasn't very much encouragement to read Scripture on your own. We did, however, hear short passages from the Old and New Testaments during Mass on Sundays, and I remember when I was around ten, sitting in the pew, hearing about the church in one of Paul's letters and literally thinking to myself, "Oh, that sounds really great. I wish that's what church was really like." Because for me, church had become incense and vestments and a weekly requirement to take the Eucharist and praying the rosary on rotation. And because I'd never asked God to be the Lord and Savior of my life, these things lacked significance for me.

My relationship with God (if you could even say there really was one) began to peter out in middle school. In the sixth grade, I became obsessed with feminism. I requested the works of Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan (both matriarchs of second wave feminism) and had absorbed the book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* before even hitting high school.

When I wasn't worshipping at the altar of feminism, I was doing the same thing with my other favorite idol, modern American consumerism. I was the only child to parents who did well financially and the only grandchild to a set of grandparents who also did well financially. I never heard the word "no," and spent my youth traveling to Disney World or Mexico or the Caribbean and naturally assumed everyone else did these things, too. Because literally, everyone I was raised with also lived this sort of life. I went to private schools all my life, even attend-

ed an all-girls academy where I had to wear a blazer all day long and my only real goal was to be smarter than other people and make sure they knew it. This all ultimately became my undoing. By the age of sixteen, I was severely depressed, anxious, and even at times, suicidal. I was the girl who, from the outside, had it all: the right schools, the Coach bags, the gated community—but on the inside, I was spiritually bankrupt.

My parents weren't sure where they had gone wrong and have even verbally lamented this to me. But honestly, I don't blame either of them for my mental and spiritual demise. They have always been so good to me and would throw themselves in front of a moving train in a second to save me. I do believe if we all would have had a better Biblical foundation supporting our faith, that maybe we would have spent less time keeping up with the Joneses and more time keeping up with Jesus. But ultimately, God knew how this story would play out, and not a moment of it has been wasted.

I eventually graduated high school and after several wrong turns like following my boyfriend at the time to college in Massachusetts to then following my parents to Texas to attend school by the ocean (all the while dealing with debilitating depression, anxiety, reclusiveness, body dysmorphia, and exercise bulimia), the next steps in my journey landed me back in Arkansas, a place I had vowed to never return.

I had enrolled in the Creative Writing department at the University of Arkansas where I met my husband, Matt. Those last two and a half years of my college experience were the most fun I've ever had for all the wrong reasons. I had gone from a straight-laced Catholic school girl who was appalled and personally offended to know that some of the people in her high school drank on the weekends to hosting a co-ed sleepover at my sorority while our house mother was out of town only to nearly get kicked out of said sorority. The board ended up only taking away my drinking privileges at our formals because I was the only one who attended the party who came clean about it. But I then decided to quit anyways because doing anything without drinking seemed

like a total waste of time at that point. What I thought was me merely being your run of the mill college student, was really becoming a problem, but I couldn't see it at the time because everyone I knew drank and nobody wanted to hang out with anyone who didn't. Also, during this time, I was becoming stronger in my feminist ideals and decided to add a few more. I became a strong proponent of gay marriage and the LGBTQIA+ community. I had a very "anything goes" outlook and it made absolutely no sense to me that somebody should get their feelings hurt if I decided to live differently than they did. In my opinion, it was none of their business.

I carried this attitude into my marriage. We had a Catholic wedding and Matt even converted to Catholicism, but we never intended to actually go to church. For us, it was like being a member of a club but not actually deciding to go to any of their meetings. As a married couple, we were best friends, but we both drank heavily every day, which I justified as being a normal routine since we were young, and I was a writer. If Hemmingway had to destroy his liver to write *The Sun Also Rises* then why did I think I was any different?

I remember during this time most of my energy went into drinking and writing. I was writing the Great American Novel, obviously, and this took precedence over *everything*. But then I kept getting rejections and decided to have a baby because babies solve everything, right? I feel fortunate to be able to say that I stopped drinking once I knew I was pregnant and truly enjoyed every second of my pregnancy. I loved having a child, and it felt natural to me even though I always thought I'd remain single and an English professor at some small liberal arts college in Massachusetts. But as the days wore on and my daughter grew up, I started drinking again. I started writing again, too. And my only concern was to publish a book and become best friends with Oprah. Everything else was not a major concern.

So, this is the state I was in when we moved to Louisville, Kentucky, and God thankfully wrecked my life. We moved there after selling half

of the business we owned with my parents and decided we needed to get a fresh start, not realizing a fresh start begins within and has nothing at all to do with your environment. But we moved anyways to be closer to Matt's two sisters and their families. One of his sisters, Lindsay, saved my life. She and her husband had recently become Christians, which really grinded my gears. She used to be my fun sister-in-law, the one who drank and did a few other things that I won't mention here and was always the life of the party. She knew everyone at every bar in Louisville, and it was like being led around by a celebrity whenever we'd go bar hopping downtown. So, it was an affront to my senses when she had traded that kind of life to go to church, which to me meant living a boring and burdened existence. I mean, why would anyone swap freedom for chains?

She, of course, didn't see it that way and asked us repeatedly to attend church with her. This would of course send me and Matt into a tirade of how asinine it was to be a part of a patriarchal, homophobic organization that told people all the things they couldn't do and horribly judged them for being human. I also remember arguing that if she's going to join any Christian religion, she should convert to Catholicism since they had an actual lineage that started with Peter, the first pope. She politely refused my requests and continued attending service at Southeast Christian where Kyle Idleman is now the head pastor.

So, she spent a good year trying to break down our thick-headed barriers to no avail. Things would have continued on this way until everything took a very dark turn for me. At the time, I religiously practiced yoga. It wasn't just mere stretching for me. It was very much a spiritual practice that spoke to my sensibilities because it let me be in control of my journey. I had finally landed a literary agent who had helped me find a publisher for my first novel, which is all I ever wanted, but I quickly realized the life of a novice writer is a hard road, and Oprah doesn't just magically show up on your door step the moment you sign a book deal. Rude.

Yoga felt like the perfect way for me to unwind and re-center myself, until of course, it wasn't. One night, I went to bed like any other night. I kissed Matt goodnight and settled in to sleep. Only, I didn't sleep. All of a sudden, I was awake. I could see everything. My bed, my closet across from my bed, Matt lying next to me. Except I couldn't speak, nor could I move. I was paralyzed. I remember things getting darker, which is strange because it was already dark. But it was more of a feeling than a visual experience. Suddenly, there was something at the foot of my bed. A demon. I knew it before I understood I knew it. It was something scaly and slow, and it seemed like it was enjoying my torment. I turned to scream and wake up Matt, but I couldn't do a thing about it. I can't describe to you my fear. I can hardly describe to you what the thing looked like. I try to remind myself daily of what I saw so I never forget it, but what I do remember is the death-like feeling in my chest and the sudden realization that there was no God in that room. So, I said His name. I said "Jesus," and it went away. I was able to move. I was able to speak again. I was still terrified.

I kept that first night to myself, chalking it up to bad Mexican food the next day. I reasoned that the "vision" or whatever I had was simply a product of my over-active imagination and a stomach issue. And the only reason it stopped when I said Jesus's name was because I had cerebrally associated that name with my childhood, a time of fancy and wonder, which helped ease me back to reality. It was fine. I was fine. It was just a fluke, and I'd be back to my old self in no time. Except that it kept happening every night for three months straight. Every evening, complete body paralysis and a different demon. One time, the demon looked like an alien, which is why I wholeheartedly believe anyone who says they've seen one. They've certainly seen something. It's just not what they think it is.

In addition to being invisibly strapped to a bed and gagged while watching the pit of hell dance in front of me in my bedroom, I also had the super neat honor of knowing what it feels like to leave your body.

I started to unwillingly astral project at night during this time, meaning I was spinning in circles on the ceiling while my body was on the bed below me. I hated this, but a part of me also enjoyed it because it felt so powerful. During these particular experiences, something was telling me to hurt my husband and my daughter but without saying it in words. That's when it stopped being fun, and I really had to dig deep on a soul level to keep that feeling from consuming me. Again, I'd say Jesus's name and it would all go away. Three months of this. It was exhausting.

A couple of weeks into my nightly dance with the devil, our sister-in-law asked, yet again, if we would go to church with her. Guess who didn't say no this time? I told Matt we should go just to get her off our backs. I'm sure he could infer why I really wanted to go since I had confided in him what was going on at night. I was afraid that I would snap and do something to him or Ava while they were sleeping and wanted him on the ready. I'm sure that would freak out most husbands to learn that their wife wasn't sure if she could *not* murder them, but Matt, being the ever logical and analytical human being that he is, took a second, looked to be pondering on it and told me the chances of me actually pulling it off and overpowering him were quite low. That did little to calm my fear, but alas, he tried.

We ended up going one Sunday and the first thing that hit me was that there was a full-on coffee shop in the lobby of Southeast Christian church. I'm not even kidding. In fact, I think it could put Starbucks to shame. At first, I was incensed. I mean, as a Catholic you would never even *think* of drinking coffee during Mass unless you wanted to be the next in line to be excommunicated. But I quickly forgot my visceral undercurrent of pent-up rage when a caramel macchiato started calling my name. My self-righteous indignation would have to sit this one out.

Steaming coffee in hand, my husband and I followed my sister and brother-in-law to the row where they usually sat. Southeast is a megachurch, and it felt more like I was about to see Britney Spears

commence her come back tour than sit through a church service, but very soon, I realized I was indeed in church. When Kyle Idleman gave the sermon on what love really is, my heart began to melt. I didn't want to admit it, but every word he said that day felt like he had specially handcrafted it for me.

"So, that was interesting," Matt had said when the service had ended, and we had picked Ava up from the kids' wing.

"Yeah, you know, they've asked us so many times now. And we've been kind of combative about it. Maybe we just go next week again with them, you know, like to just make sure it counts, and they leave us alone about it."

"Uhhh...okay?"

Obviously, I didn't just want to go back. I knew on a very deep level that I needed to go back. I just had a hard time admitting it to anyone, including myself. We ended up going every Sunday. I started to see a change in us, one that I was grateful for. But I was still suffering from demonic attacks at night with no end in sight. Until one particular evening.

One night, before I shut my eyes and the onslaught of terror began again, I gave my life to Jesus. I told Him that I was sorry for everything, that I knew He could save me and that I wanted that very much. I didn't want to live like I had been living, an existence of darkness and evil hiding in the shadows. I wanted to live in the light.

I closed my eyes, not sure of what would be waiting for me once my lids drew shut. But then I experienced it: my first blissful sleep in months.

I never had another attack again. Not one. A month later, I was baptized at Southeast. I vividly remember it. I chose a brown t-shirt with the word "free" on it to wear before entering the baptismal pool. I remember the way the water felt, not too warm, not too cold. I remember not being scared or afraid even though I'm naturally an introvert and hate things like public speaking and people looking at me, but I

had no fears that day. I felt like I was on a mission. That every moment before this one had led up to this, and I was merely a character playing the part God had written for me. I remember the release of falling backward into the murky waters of my past, my wrong thinking, my poor choices, my defiant behavior, and then the upward thrust of a new beginning, a paradigm shift that rebuilt and renewed the “me” God had originally designed.

I can truly say I’m different now. Vodka is no longer my god nor is the trappings of this world. I pray for discernment every day and the reminder of what life used to be like, so I never walk down that road again. I could spend a whole hour talking about what else God has renewed for us on this journey, but instead, I’ll just leave you with this: you will encounter non-believers as you persevere on the path God’s created for you, and when you do, ask the Holy Spirit what you need to do in that moment. Maybe in that particular instance, they need to see Jesus more than hear about Him. Maybe they just need you to hold their hand. Maybe, they’ll call you a lunatic and laugh in your face. Don’t be undeterred and don’t let your bruised ego respond. Because you never know the unseen battle a person is facing and how the seed you plant in their heart, however small, may break the earth and give birth to a hope that never stops growing.

About the Author

Ericka writes raw, real, relatable books that have a heart for Jesus. You can learn more at erickaclay.com¹.

1. <http://erickaclay.com>

Thank You

Thank you for reading. May God bless you and keep you.

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Romans 5:3-4¹

For more free books, please subscribe at erickaclay.com².

1. <https://dailyverses.net/romans/5/3-4>

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