

Man of Colours

Letter to a Suffering World



Cynthia Cárdenas-Kolak

Man of Colours

Letter to a Suffering World

Cynthia Cárdenas-Kolak

Kolak Group Inc.

Houston, Texas

Copyright © 2020 Cynthia Cárdenas-Kolak

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the Publisher, except where permitted by law.

Published in the United States by Kolak Group Inc., Houston, TX

17527 Ginger Fields

Tomball, TX 77377

www.kolakgroup.com

Cover image, photo, and print format for the story by Cynthia Cárdenas-Kolak

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the New American Bible, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Disclaimer: The stories depicted in this book are based on real people and situations known to the author. Her thoughts and beliefs are not necessarily the thoughts and beliefs of the individuals in the story. All stories are told only from the author's point of view and with her best recollection. All conversational sequences are approximated from memory and are not direct-verbatim quotes.

For other inquiries, email us at 333cinderella@gmail.com.

URLs in the notes may change or expire over time.

Cárdenas-Kolak, Cynthia

Man of Colours: Letter to a Suffering World

ISBN-13: 978-0-9822675-3-0

ISBN-10: 0-9822675-3-3

This Work is Dedicated
to the
Prince of Peace
and the
Queen of Heaven and Earth

Acknowledgments

This book was a labor of love. Several individuals offered up their time, hearts, and helping hands to bring it to fruition. First, I wish to start with my immediate family who enabled me to spend time away from home and away from some of my responsibilities to study, travel, reflect, and write over the years. They gave me space to grow, so I could become a better wife, a better mother, and a better servant of God. I thank my husband, Michael and my son, Steven.

I also wish to acknowledge six women who spent a great deal of time with me, watching videos, listening to my stories, and providing me with helpful feedback as I read each of these chapters aloud to them over several weeks. The group included: Madeline Kotila, Kathy Arabie, Margaret Wilson, Catherine Dunn, Mary Lambea, and Kerry McGuire. I am also grateful for the editorial assistance I received from Carolyn Kiesewetter Wright and Gary Thome. I thank them all.

I appreciate those who've served as my spiritual directors over the years, namely Ruth Dinges and Anna Cisne as well as the others I encountered on retreats and special occasions.

It does take a village. I appreciate the patience, love, and support I received from the clergy and parishioners of Prince of Peace Catholic Community. I thank everyone mentioned and not mentioned in this story.

Last, I thank my parents, Raymond and Anita Cárdenas, Roy (my father-in-law) and my siblings, Susan, Carolyn, Jaqueline, and Thomas for being there for me with their mercy, patience, love, and support.

Table of Contents

Only God creates. The rest of us copy.

~Michelangelo

Letter to a Suffering World	i-ix
In the Name of the Father	
Chapter 1: Better Days	1
Chapter 2: Oh Father	13
Chapter 3: Calling All Angels	27
In the Name of the Son	
Chapter 4: Crazy	43
Chapter 5: Little Wonders	63
Chapter 6: The World I Know	79
In the Name of the Holy Spirit	
Chapter 7: Ordinary World	97
Chapter 8: Stars	115
Chapter 9: Alive and Kicking	129

As it was in the beginning,
is now and ever shall be world without end.

Amen.

Letter to a Suffering World

“I am a little pencil in the hand of God, writing a love letter to the world.”

~ St. Theresa of Calcutta

Dear Friends,

A friend once called people like me “Italian drivers” because we tend to go and be all over the place. I ask you to please bear with me. I am going somewhere with this letter. In fact, it is my goal to provide you with some background knowledge before driving into my story, *Man of Colours*.

I am a child of the '80s, a part of the MTV, Music Television, generation. I know song lyrics better than *Bible* verses, and the visual imagery that those music videos presented are forever

Letter to a Suffering World

cataloged in my mind's eye. Every chapter in this book is named after a song for many reasons. Language, all on its own, has its limitations. Music can go places where words can't reach or stoop. Language, melody, rhythm, and sound can work together to be far more expressive, honest, and true than any words I could put on paper alone. In some cases, the music videos for the songs provide visual images that best illustrate key ideas in that chapter. Whether or not you care to see any of these videos is up to you. However, I cannot stress how remarkably well each one fits the set of vignettes I've recorded for you in this true story of how the power of love can transform a person, a family, a community, and even the world—even when it appears to be an impossibility.

I have always been crazy about anything Australian, which was very weird for a little Mexican girl from Texas. As far as I was concerned, Koala Bears and Olivia Newton-John provided clear evidence that everything in Australia was sweet, cuddly, and kind. Okay. Give me a break. I was a little girl. I didn't know that there was a strong likelihood that the rest of the wildlife Down Under could kill me. Nor did I know that the British once set up penal colonies there to ship criminals and prostitutes to what most of us would have thought was their very own Island of Misfit Toys. But it was sacred ground, and the people there were no different than you and me. Somehow, I intuited this.

Let's just say that one of my greatest desires was to escape to Australia for a life-changing adventure. After all, I was under the influence of *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. Yeah! I could relate to that lad. Everything went wrong in his life one day, so he summed up that it would be best to go to Australia. At least, that's the American version. But then I grew up and had my own. I couldn't get to Australia fast enough. Within days of my arrival, I met the musician who wrote the song from

Letter to a Suffering World

which I took the title “Man of Colours”. I came back a completely different person. I couldn’t understand what happened to me and searched for a way to explain it. It drove me bonkers! And yes, I went all over the place to figure out just what occurred.

Now, seven years later, I’ve come to understand that I was prepared to deliver an important message. You are greatly loved. Yes, it’s true! I mean you are loved beyond reason. It can’t be measured. It can’t be adequately described with a song or a video. You will never really know just how far your personal ripple will go out into the world and reach other people under the influence of love. That’s huge. So, make all your words and actions count! They matter. You matter. When we speak and act with love, anything is possible.

I’ve been part of preparing and hosting funerals for several years now. One thing I’ve learned from watching people remember and bury their loved ones is just how much they adored their family and friends. It’s in these moments that I’ve often wondered if the dearly departed ever really knew just how much they would be missed and how much they were greatly loved.

Funerals present a time for people to honor the deceased, and I feel both privileged and humbled when I hear the stories shared about the real-life characters who impacted the lives of the attendees in profound and meaningful ways. I laugh with families. I cry with them. And I pray with them. But what really makes me sob, I mean, cry ugly tears, are the times when a person acknowledges the regret they feel for not having had the courage or the words to tell their cherished parent, child, lover, or friend how much they loved them while they were still alive. Make no mistake. You are greatly loved, and it is important to tell others you love them too.

Letter to a Suffering World

I once thought I was a simple nobody. In fact, I thought I was more like a zombie. I wasn't dead, but I wasn't fully alive either. But then I got a whole new perspective on zombies when a friend in college invited me to see the movie *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. I can recall sitting in the darkened theater when the screen turned completely red with a notice that the movie was based on a true story. My friend grabbed my arm and buried her head into my side.

Highly perturbed and on the verge of giving my whisper a voice, I snapped, "No! You didn't tell me it was a true story! Now I'm going to have nightmares!"

"Sh! Tell me when it's safe to look. What's happening?"

"A doctor just declared a man dead. Now, he's being buried, but he is alive. There are tears coming from his eyes, but he can't move. They are burying him alive," I reported as my friend sat up, faced the front while covering her eyes. "Quit being such a big baby. You're the one who wanted to come to this thing. You should be telling *me* what's going on," I whispered as I sank into my seat.

We sat through the harrowing and fictitious story of how an ethnobotanist dove deep into voodoo culture while seeking a poison that turned people into zombies. Unbeknownst to us, the Indiana Jones-like author, Dr. Wade Davis, would soon be on our campus to share his take on the whole affair. He went to Haiti to find out how an individual was declared dead and buried, only to be resurrected as a "zombie", doomed to live out his afterlife as a slave. While an exotic and scary plot was flashed on the screen in the movie theater, we learned that his real story was far more docile and academic in nature, but nonetheless quite intriguing.

After taking the opportunity to meet Dr. Davis, I found a seat front and center in the university ballroom to have a listen to the

Letter to a Suffering World

well-spoken and incredibly gorgeous gentleman. I was just like the girl in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, who sat in the front row of the class who batted her eyes at Dr. Jones with “Love You” written on her eyelids as he poured out the details of his latest quest. It was the first time that I attended an academic account of how religion, culture, science, and politics can shape society in such a dramatic and engaging way. While I can’t remember exactly all that our guest had to say, I do recall getting a sense that he was imparting how governments in conjunction with secret societies can exploit the cultural and religious beliefs of people to control them. In the case of Haiti, a poison was concocted and employed by learned individuals to anesthetize those in opposition of government activities long enough for not only these victims to think they died and were buried, but powerful enough to fool even the doctors who certified them dead. Given their religious beliefs, it was easy for these victims to jump to the conclusion that they were indeed zombies after they were unearthed from their graves. Talk of culture and religion along with all of the photographs presented in the lecture made for a challenging and shocking night for me.

I was taken aback when Dr. Davis used the Catholic practice of distributing communion at Mass as a ritual that some people could construe as a form of cannibalism. I mean, we were talking about flesh eating zombies. Right? I recall thinking to myself in silent outrage, “That’s gross! Catholics don’t really eat Jesus at Mass!” I couldn’t and wouldn’t fathom that people in present times could entertain such a notion, as I looked around the ballroom to see if anyone else was as shaken by his comment as I was. What’s more disturbing was the fact that I was in the process of becoming a confirmed Catholic, and I had completely missed the memo on the mystery of the Eucharist! Catholics do, indeed, believe that the bread and wine offered upon the altar become the actual body and blood of Christ, but I thought that it was all symbolic. After all,

Letter to a Suffering World

those little hosts did not look like they turned into flesh, nor did the wine remotely have the consistency of blood. All I knew was that it was connected to the idea of having eternal life in either heaven or hell.

Let's just say, that I was learning that maybe, just maybe, I was among the living dead—a person just going through the motions, who'd been buried alive, living in a self-assigned tomb with walls thicker than Croatian coffee. I'd spent most my earliest years, living as quietly and invisibly as possible in the shadows. And while a part of me wanted to walk out and be seen, I was afraid. I was overtaken by fear. I know I was meant to sit in on that lecture since a lot of what I learned came back to haunt me years later. In fact, the best lessons learned were those that had a transcendental quality about them. They were the same lessons that I saw in movies, heard in songs, read in books, and received at sermons in church.

And now in the year 2020, I sit in my living room switching news channels, watching all that is unfolding in this world. I see people walking in the streets like angry zombies wreaking havoc, with hungry eyes, having forgotten the valuable lessons humans have been taught over at least a couple of millennia. They don't know the most basic truth—that they are loved. If they really knew they were loved, there would be no fear or need for gossiping. There would be no mudslinging and smear campaigns against our fellow man. There would be no violence. There would be no uncontrolled anger. There would be no "isms". There would be no death. There would be no need to "change the narrative". The serpent upon a staff would be a symbol of healing and the rainbow, an image representing God's promise to us that he would never abandon us.

But like Indiana Jones, people hate and are afraid of snakes. For others, the image of the rainbow represents an affront to God.

Letter to a Suffering World

Claims that science, not God, can free us from the suffering we experience in one way or another have taken front and center. Yet, it doesn't take a brain surgeon to see that the scientific models that government officials used to inform their choices of action during the outbreak of Covid-19 couldn't help them make fail-proof decisions about the health and welfare of our communities. This was large because the greatest issues that had to be addressed and overcome to save the most people were related to the suffering that stemmed from attacks on the spirit.

For years now, we've declared that we have an environmental crisis on our hands. But it's safe to say that this time of crisis reaches far deeper than the surface of the Earth. We are in the midst of a national identity crisis, an issue of the spirit. We are in the midst of a crisis of trust. We don't know who or what to believe anymore. We are in the midst of a crisis of faith. These are issues that science alone cannot begin to solve. Therefore, faith and reason must go hand and hand. We've tried to keep them separated, and that's where we've gone wrong. We're entering a time when more than ever, we'll need to come together and live in community the way God intended with peace, collaboration, and a new respect for self and others. To address the needs of the spirit, it's important to take stock of our lives and get back to church.

But you might find yourself in the same shape I was in over seven years ago. While I heard the summons to obedience and the warning of impending judgment in the song "All You Zombies" in my early youth, I was beat up spiritually and disconnected from the church. I didn't trust organized religion, especially because of the sexual abuse scandals that have been revealed in many a house of God in recent years. I didn't know who to trust or who to believe, and Lord knows I had a lot of additional baggage. I

Letter to a Suffering World

struggled with balancing faith and reason as a Christian and as an academic.

Not everyone is given the same start in life. I struggled to comprehend if the light I saw in my life was of God or of the devil. After all, Lucifer was described as a beautiful angel of light. I was surrounded by both believers and nonbelievers. Words like obedience and judgment slowly but surely grew out of fashion. And as far as I could see, not a single soul out there was purely good all their lives or purely evil. We are all sinners, capable of doing both good and bad things, both intentionally and unintentionally. This makes reaching for the light risky business unless you have a strong guide who has walked through this terrain, a person who firmly recognizes and knows the truth. Otherwise, we are all at risk of succumbing to the author of lies, who made it his business to grow his legions of mindless zombies, totally consumed by their own desires. Doomed to never really know true love. Doomed to remain disconnected from both the community and the self. Doomed to be enslaved for all eternity, caught somewhere between death and resurrection.

My guide was Jesus Christ, the man who was crucified at around the age of 33 and rose from the dead 3 days later. I came to recognize Him as the Man of Colours. His illuminating and merciful rays allowed me to see myself as I truly was. I was among the spiritually and socially dead—dead in the sense that I was a sinner who was not living up to my full potential, nor was I employing the many gifts I was given. I was disconnected, isolated, and living in my own tomb. But then one day, through His grace, that all changed, and this zombie emerged from her icy fortress of solitude much like the dead that emerged from their graves after the crucifixion of Christ according to Matthew 27:52-53. I became like one of the many unknown “bodies” willing to rise, stand, and

Letter to a Suffering World

witness to the glory of Jesus Christ, who loves and is love! This is my story of how the Man of Colours helped me weather the storms in my life and how he can be a beacon of hope and love in yours.

Sincerely,

Cindy Kolak

Chapter 1

*Better Days*¹

It was a Saturday night when I heard that a call came forward requesting that Pope Francis submit his resignation as the head of the Catholic Church.² It came on the heels of a scandal that emerged in the summer of 2018. A U.S. Cardinal was accused of sexually abusing seminarians and minors. The call for the pope to resign was an official “Code Blue!” According to musician Iva Davies of the rock group ICEHOUSE, “Code Blue” was an Australian military signal meaning, “Go for it...This is your mission!”³

And I did. I had just completed a manuscript designed to illustrate what it would look like to turn the tables on evangelists that came to my door. The concept was inspired by an actual event where two LDS missionaries approached my home and were bewildered when they learned that I was Catholic. After all, I told them that I had gone to Sunday school with Mormon friends for

Better Days

many months when I was younger. I also explained that I had been to many different houses of God.

“But why did you end up in the Catholic Church?” one of them asked?

“Oh, that’s a long story. It’s actually on YouTube.”

“What?”

“Oh, yeah. I put it all on YouTube. Here’s some water to take with you. I appreciate your efforts to tell people about Jesus.”

And that was it. I let them go. Later, that evening, I just about kicked myself when it occurred to me that I could have invited them into the house to sit down for an extended chat. It was a missed opportunity to evangelize in the opposite direction, an idea that stuck in my head. It wasn’t long before I was integrating the true accounts of my spiritual journey with a fantasized story of how a couple of LDS missionaries came to my door but were compelled to stay with me due to a violent storm. Thus, it set the stage for me to answer that question, “But how did you end up in the Catholic Church?”

I resolved to publish the book later that fall, but when I learned of the call for the pope to resign, I felt like I had to act. I went to work that night, audio recording my story, and affixing them to slides I prepared to upload to my YouTube channel. Then I executed an official launch of my story: *Code Blue: A Walk into the Kingdom with the Ghost of Time*.

I played my best St. Catherine of Siena⁴ card and sent letters to people all over the world, asking them to listen to at least the last chapter of the story for its message of hope and love.

I’d come a long way from the days when I was a quiet, little girl. Mom and Dad weren’t regular churchgoers. In fact, I had long

Better Days

suspected that my father was sexually abused by a priest. And he wasn't the only one.

Not only did I grow up hearing negative things about the clergy and the devout from my family, I had friends and influential adults in my life who also vilified the Church. I heard all kinds of stories about a woman who had been beaten and raped repeatedly when she was a child while living in a Catholic orphanage years ago. Then some individuals relayed horrible experiences in the confessional. Pile that on with how the general media—TV shows, films, and news agencies—depicted Catholicism, it was no wonder to me that even pastors from other denominations declared the Catholic Church the Whore of Babylon.⁵

Like so many other people today, I was misinformed by both outsiders and even Catholics who knew very little about Catholic teachings. I was led to believe that being a Catholic meant being part of an institutionalized, hierarchical structure of a men's only boy's club that had the power to dictate how I should think and live. So, to say I was like a little red riding hood⁶ who was lost in the forest was an understatement. She was told to stay on the path. But what do you do when you're not quite sure where it is? I spent years in and out of different houses of God, looking for the truth within a world that seemed to be mostly made up of falsehoods and lies.

I didn't know who I could trust, so I relied on research studies and books written by experts to navigate the darkness that seemed to permeate life all around. By the time I was 45, my life was completely in shambles. My marriage was on the rocks. My child was in crisis. My career had been turned upside down, and death seemed to loom large. I lost four family members within five years. Having lost a sense of where I was and who I am, it all seemed like I was destined to be swallowed up whole by the big bad wolf.

Better Days

In desperation, I called out for God in the name of Jesus, and that's when the healing began. For someone who thought religion was all about power, I was completely dumbfounded when Pope Benedict XVI let go of the Chair of St. Peter just days after my plea for help.⁷ Admittedly, the only time that I had ever tuned into the pope was when he came to Yonkers, New York in 2008. I was drawn in by the desire to listen to Kelly Clarkson⁸ sing "Ave Maria" for him. But the day he stepped down from his office, was a day that left me completely shocked. I'd been working in a public high school to observe instructional practices and found classroom after classroom abuzz with "pope-resignation fever". Those who seemed to be hit hardest were non-Catholics who were just as confused as I was. I heard a variety of questions being asked.

"I don't know much about the Catholic Church, but aren't popes supposed to die before another pope takes office?" asked a student

"Does this mean that the Catholic Church finally decided that no one has the final say in what Catholics are supposed to believe and do?" buzzed a teacher.

"Is this the beginning of the end of the world?" inquired another student.

"Are you Catholic?" the teacher asked me point-blank.

"Yes."

"Can you explain why the pope resigned?" she continued.

"I'm just as surprised as you are," I shrugged.

I was more than surprised. The contradiction between my belief that power is desired by most people and the fact that the pope was detaching himself from power, just blew my clueless mind—and ultimately opened me up to new possibilities, new realities about what the Catholic Church was really all about.

Better Days

There was a lot of speculation going on as to why Pope Benedict XVI resigned. I personally wondered if it had to do with the seriousness of the sexual abuse issue that seemed to rear its ugly head time and again. Lord knows, there are no easy answers when it comes down to searching for the truth. As a survivor of sexual abuse, outside of the church, I understand how very damaging this violation can be to an individual's whole sense of self and being. It makes you feel ugly and dirty. I know how risky and difficult it is to come forward to disclose what happened to you. Not everyone will believe you or know how to appropriately respond. Not everyone is comfortable with revelations that force them to have to reconfigure all that they know or thought they knew about people, some of whom they love or are dependent on.

No matter what, it's a painful, bitter, and dicey predicament. Some individuals muster up the strength to find their voice and confront their assailant, heal and move on. Others lash out, self-destruct, or simply white-knuckle it through their lives in silent pain, only to go to their graves, grief-stricken with shame, despair, and feelings of utter loneliness and abandonment. Needless to say, many of these individuals struggle with or completely lose their faith, especially when these crimes are at the hands of a trusted clergyman. Unfortunately, some make false accusations as well, seeped in their own personal agendas, making it that much more difficult for true survivors of abuse to make their claims, be heard, and find justice. Any way you look at it, there is a great suffering for both the accused and the accuser, and all who know and love them.

Given the current sexual abuse scandal taking place in the Catholic Church, a recent Pew study found that 37% of Catholics are not sure if they will remain in the Church.⁹ They are finding themselves in the exact same spot I was in when I was deciding whether or not to be confirmed in the Catholic Church as a young adult, and then again, when *The Boston Globe* published a

Better Days

“Spotlight” story in 2002 that exposed how a Catholic bishop may have turned a blind eye to accusations of sexual abuse when he moved priests to other parishes as opposed to surrendering them to authorities.¹⁰ Many people have and are suffering from a crisis of faith. This doesn’t take into account that the second-largest religious group in our country is former Catholics who have already left for one reason or another.

Things don’t look so bright for other Christian groups either. Our dinner table was abuzz as a religiously diverse group of friends grieved over the whole phenomena.

“I heard about your church,” a friend mentioned while leaning over towards me.

“I was crushed too when all the stuff came out about the PTL. A lot of us were totally blindsided. A lot of people completely lost their faith,” another friend added.

“Oh yeah. I forgot all about that! And there’s been many others too,” another friend joined in.

“PTL?” asked an individual at the very end of the table. “Yeah. You know. *Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker Show*¹¹ from the Praise the Lord Network? The ‘TV evangelists?’” my friend began to elaborate.

“Oh yeah!” chimed my husband.

“Did you catch the article about the Mormons earlier over the summer?” another individual added.

“There are problems everywhere, not just the Catholic Church—our schools, daycares, sports teams. Even adults can be victimized,” I continued. People are losing faith in all our institutions these days. It’s like we’re going through a world-wide identity crisis.

Better Days

“Yeah, but don’t you think the ‘me too’ movement has gone too far?” asked my friend.

“Not far enough!” another individual charged.

“People are being accused and assumed guilty before proven innocent. Weren’t we supposed to be protected from all of that in the United States?” asked my husband.

“Maybe, we’re not so united anymore,” his friend offered. “It’s the beginning of the end!”

The comments came from every direction, as the group recognized that current statistics among young adults indicate that many are choosing not to affiliate with any faith tradition. They are walking out of their churches and navigating a moral path better suited to their own “truth” and identity.

“Been there, done that!” I admitted. “And boy, did I have a lot to learn. We talk about the fragmentation of our churches, our society. How about the fragmentation of the self? I didn’t even know who I was until I started to reflect on my past and reconnect the broken pieces to get an idea of where I needed to start. It wasn’t easy. There were a lot of tears of both sorrow and joy. I was so beat up and confused, but then something amazing happened.”

The members of the group just gazed at me in silence. They knew that I’d been writing for some time about the spiritual path I was walking, and now, I was fleshing out all I could to provide breadcrumbs for others to follow suit if lost in the forest like I was, not knowing which way was up anymore.

So, within the pages of this book, I retrace how I recovered from my crisis of faith, given the sex abuse scandals that threatened to separate me from my family, my church community and from God in conjunction with a crisis of identity with help from who I gradually came to know as the Man of Colours,¹² Jesus Christ

Better Days

Himself, through the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is my hope and prayer that by sharing my story, others will be graced with reliable guidance along the path to finding healing from the anger, shame, and doubts that can come with a crisis of faith and identity of this magnitude.

Not everything in life is either black or white. Many of us have found ourselves at one time or another, caught between at least two arguments that both hold true and yet spend time chasing our own tails searching for the one definitive answer thinking it must be found on one side or the other. But the reality is, the truth is far more complex than that. Higher Truth dwells somewhere in the in-between, in a place higher than bipolar oppositions¹³ or “holy tensions”, as if hidden in a cloud of unknowing¹⁴ made up of a myriad of individual water droplets. When His light shines through them, we begin to see a form that draws us in and enchants us as a cascade of brilliant colors streams across the sky on any rainy day.

According to St. Ephrem¹⁵, known as the “Harp of the Holy Spirit”, “The Lord has colored his Word with many hues, so that each person who studies it can see in it what he loves.”¹⁶ For me, that meant seeing my own natural father in the color red, the color of blood and love. I saw my husband in the color orange, the color of spirit and fire. I saw a rock star in yellow, the color of remembrance and enlightenment. In green, I saw my pastor, the color of growth, healing, and harmony. In blue, I saw a psychologist, representing trust, surrender, and loyalty. I saw a bishop in the color indigo, the color of passion, justice, and service. And finally, I saw a Passionist priest in the color of violet, a color that represented fulfillment and balance.¹⁷

I learned that the Lord has a way of meeting you and reaching out for you right wherever you are to grace you with His love, no matter where that place might be, what state of mind you are in, what level of maturity and experience you have attained. Nothing can separate you from the love of God. Unfortunately, most

Better Days

people do not really notice Him until their vision is corrected by the prisms of their own tears. It's a special grace to be able to see the rainbow through the rain.

Like a rainbow, each chapter here unfolds with a brilliant color that overlaps the next. This means that you may come upon echoes of other chapters in any one section of the story. No color is better or worse than the others, as collectively they all make up the fullness and depth of the light that can be shed on how to move forward from a broken to a burning heart.

Better Days

Notes

1. Music video by The Goo Goo Dolls at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-kHL...> Presents what appears to be a confrontation between the self and inner child in search of peace, love, hope, and faith in a dark forest.
2. Pentin, E. (2018). Ex-Nuncio Accuses Pope Francis of Failing to Act on McCarrick's Abuse. National Catholic Register, <https://www.ncregister.com/daily-news...>
3. Davies, I. (1990). Code Blue press kit. http://www.spellbound-icehouse.org/codebluepresskit_frontcover.html
4. Laywoman, mystic, and Doctor of the Church, St. Catherine of Siena “had a keen sense of the ‘unspeakably crazy’ love of God and the liberating power of his mercy.” (Murray, 2020, Word on Fire Catholic Ministries) Known for aiding the sick during the plague, for sending letters to the clergy, politicians and even the pope with her concerns. She died at the age of 33.
5. Reference to Revelation 17-18 in the *Bible*. Rebuttals to fundamentalist claims that the Catholic Church is the Whore of Babylon can be found at Catholic Answers, <https://www.catholic.com/tract/the-whore-of-babylon>
6. *Little Red Riding Hood* is assigned the number 333 in the Aarne-Thompson Classification System for folktales.
7. Pope Benedict XVI resigned on February 28, 2013.
8. Kelly Clarkson was the first winner of “American Idol” and has since garnered many awards and graces two American TV shows, *The Voice* and *The Kelly Clarkson Show*.
9. Gallup study: “Many U.S. Catholics Question Their membership Amid Scandal” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/247571/c>
10. Carroll, M., Pfeiffer, S., Rezendes, M., Robinson, W., (January 6, 2002). *Church allowed abuse by priest for years*. Boston Globe. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/special-reports/2002/01/06/church-allowed-abuse-priest-for-years/cSHfGkTTrAT25qKGvBuDNM/story.html>
11. Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker were a religious couple who founded the network for “people that love”, made millions of dollars and became the focus of one of the biggest sex scandals in televangelist history

Better Days

12. Name of 1987 musical recording album from Australian pop-rock band ICEHOUSE

13. Binary oppositions common in dualistic thinking; characteristic in the Gospel of John

14. Name of a book by an anonymous author. Clouds symbolize God as an unknowable, obscure presence in and among everything.

15. St. Ephrem the Syrian was a deacon, Doctor of the Church and an evangelist who took the secular songs of his day and converted them into hymns to preach the Gospels.

16. Quote taken from Agape Bible Study at <http://agapebiblestudy.com/documents/St%20Ephraim%27s%20Advice%20on%20the%20Study%20of%20Sacred%20Scripture.htm> 17. Carl Jung and his wife Emma would most likely describe this “chorus” of men as my animus, the masculine side of my identity which gives rise to my sense of self

Chapter 2

Oh Father

Red. Everything begins with love and ends with love. So, evil always targets the most important and loving bonds people experience in their lives, starting with their families. While some families are healthy and facilitate strong relations among members, others suffer from an array of dysfunctions. Perhaps the most prevalent in the U.S. is the father wound. This malady is brought on by the physical and/or emotional absence of the father. This separation best enables the enemy and his minions to wreak havoc on any soul by distorting what true love is. He creates silence when there is a need for speech. He creates speech when there is a need for silence. He creates division using shame, guilt, and fear to achieve his selfish goals. I thank God that my father, although very wounded himself, reflected the light, love, and passion that is Jesus Christ. Through him, I learned to stay in the game of life and just keep trying no matter how many times I stumbled all over myself and others.

Oh Father

I was baptized in the Catholic Church but attended Sunday school for the first time with friends who invited me to a Presbyterian children's program where I learned to sing "Jesus Loves Me". Later, while my father was away from home on military orders, a family friend urged my mother to enroll me and one of my sisters in catechism to prepare for our First Reconciliation (confession) and First Eucharist (communion). Mom thought about it and opted to go ahead and register us for faith formation.

Looking back, I must have driven my catechism teacher crazy. She couldn't field my questions. In fact, I was taught that I wasn't supposed to question. I was supposed to just believe. But that just didn't make any sense to me, especially when one of the pictures in my catechism books appeared to be a little on the fantastical side. I mean, there was a picture of a ladder with the name of a sacrament on each rung that reached up into the clouds: baptism, reconciliation, communion, confirmation, holy matrimony, holy orders, and anointing of the sick. Truth be told, a lot of it was Greek to me. "Surely, there was no such thing," I thought to myself. But when I inquired about it, my teacher assured me that there was a stairway to heaven in the church. So, I spent the next six weeks or so, looking all over the church for it. I eventually drew the conclusion that it just wasn't there. There wasn't even a ladder! After telling my teacher that the stairway was not in the church, she gave me "the look". It was the same look I got from other adults who were unhappy with me and my behavior. She just glared at me with that look, shook her head, and walked away.

I was an inquisitive child but had a hard time with all the details that seemed to be mentioned in class but not discussed at any length. I wanted to know who was sending all the letters that were mentioned in the Mass and why. Crickets.

When my protestant friends invited me to their churches, I was usually told that we Catholics don't read or believe in the *Bible*. What could I say? I didn't even know who was writing all the

letters! And I wanted to know more about Jesus and how he loved me, but that didn't seem to be as important in my catechism class as staying quiet and remembering that I was a sinner, even though I felt it totally unfair that we were blamed for something that other people did a long time ago.²

My protestant friends had to lug around and study a Bible. I had to only memorize prayers that were a lot like 'The Pledge of Allegiance. I didn't really understand what it meant to "pledge allegiance" much less what it meant to "Hail Mary"³. But no one really asked or checked to make sure that we or anybody else *understood* what we were supposed to learn. I tried reading *The Bible*, but I couldn't crack the code in which it seemed to be written⁴. I figured my protestant friends probably didn't understand it any better than I understood the prayers we recited. I remember receiving a Rosary⁵, but no one could explain what it was or why I should have one other than my mother. I remember her simply suggesting that I just hold it for the pictures we took after our big day in our white dresses after making our First Communion.

So, as you can see, my introduction to Catholicism didn't exactly get off to a good start. In fact, I accepted all invitations to go to other churches with friends who would ask. The little girl who desperately searched for that stairway to heaven remained very much alive and well in me.

From my vantage point at the time, there weren't major differences between each denomination. In fact, I was completely captivated by the very thing that was consistent across any Christian church I visited. It was the teaching that Jesus shed His blood and died on the cross for our sins. Because of this, we were already forgiven for anything we did against God and were accepted as His children. And so, it was in the image of Jesus crucified in His passion that I was able to grasp a sense of hope and an indomitable spirit. I believed because it was consistent teaching, and I believed because I *wanted* it to be true. I *needed* it to

Ofi Father

be true. With the innocence of a child's heart and mind, I feared that deep down inside, I was a bad person because I let a man touch me.

I remember the afternoon that I ran into the enclosed patio of a family friend's home to get a drink of water after playing outside in the Texas heat with my sisters. There sat an elderly man, around the age of 70 or so who called me over to him. He was sitting alone in a chair watching us play, as my parents and all the other adults sat in the house visiting. He seemed like a sweet, gentle soul, and yet I picked up that he was somehow troubled.

"Hi, there! It's hot out outside. Isn't it?" he called out to me.

"Oh, yeah! But we're having lots of fun," I offered as I shuffled passed him.

"Hey! Come back."

"Yes sir. What do you need?"

"I'm lonely. No one likes to talk or visit with me. Would you at least give an old grandpa a kiss?" he asked as he pointed to his cheek.

I walked back to him, leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek and then turned to make my way into the house, when he called out to me again, "Hey, wait. Can you do me a favor? Can you help me get up, so I can get in the house too?"

Seeing that he looked rail-thin and fragile, I assumed he needed the help. When I walked over to him and leaned over to help him up, he reached out with his index finger and immediately pressed it against the areola of my small, undeveloped breast and circled it, as he asked, "What have you got here?" At the same time, he grabbed me by my shorts with his other hand and pulled me forward, causing me to lose my balance, as he now slipped the hand that had been on my breast down into my panties. I twisted

my body over to the side, as I fell to the ground to get away from him.

I ran into the house to find my mother. I clung to her as I struggled to find the words to explain what happened. It seemed like there were people everywhere. I grew overwhelmed with the voices and images all around and completely froze as if I had seen the gorgon Medusa⁶. I never said anything about the incident until the day my dad decided that he should sit me and my sisters down to explain the birds and the bees. He told us that boys would one day want to plant their seeds in our gardens. I didn't have a clue what he was talking about since none of us had gardens. I sat puzzled that Dad would even be spending so much time on an issue that didn't seem to affect any of us. So, I began to daydream and focus on other things, trying to appear somewhat respectful.

When Dad stopped to give us a chance to respond, I spoke up, "I really don't get any of this Dad, and I'm the oldest. If I don't get it, chances are, the rest of us don't."

"Well, this is where babies come from. You should never let boys plant seeds in your garden until you are married."

"But Dad, what are you so worried about? None of us have planted anything since the time that we put beans in the cups in kindergarten. And we didn't need boys to help us do that."

"No!" Dad uttered in frustration. "Your garden is your private parts. This is where babies come from, and you're not supposed to have babies until you are married to someone you know really well and who loves you. Don't let anyone into your garden before you get married. Only *putas* (whores) have sex before marriage!"

"Sex? Putas?" I thought to myself as I sat there, terrified, wondering if I was one of these *putas*—whatever that meant. The way Daddy said the word made it sound like they were horrible people! I sat there wondering if I was one since that man had

touched my “garden”. I wondered if “*puta*”-hood was permanent or something that could be changed. Surely, I wasn’t born this way, right? Immediately, I thought of Jesus on the cross. “I am already forgiven,” I thought to myself.

I opted to tell my dad all that had happened to me, including another incident that occurred when a 14-year-old boy tried to get on top of me when I was 5. Dad sat quietly and then asked for details such as names, places, and time periods. Other than that, he sat there looking at me and said nothing as I answered him. It was the same look I got from my Catechism teacher. All I could register was a cold and disappointed expression on his face. There was no way at the time, that I could have ever understood that most likely Dad had been trying to protect me and my sisters by telling us about these kinds of things early, only to find out that the unimaginable had already occurred. He must have been crushed and at a loss for words.

The silence that continued was unbearably painful for me. I was completely silenced that day and learned to adhere to an unspoken rule, “Don’t ask. Don’t tell.”

“Oh, no!” I thought to myself. “He thinks I must be a *puta*! But I can change. I won’t be a *puta* anymore.” I left that whole conversation with the intent to keep the boys away.

And boy, did I do a great job of that—so much so, that when I look back, I regret how I must have hurt some of them. Hurt people, hurt others. I even hurt myself. I made *all* men the enemy, not really understanding what that could do to my psyche and my relationships. And here’s the real zinger. When it came to tales of sexual abuse in the broader culture, people always seemed to report the horror and physical hurt of it all. But in my case, the real enemy was cunning. I’d experienced no pain. In fact, the experience with the 14-year-old was pleasant and did nothing more than unlock my curiosity. This made abstinence even more difficult and painful for

Oh Father

me. While I grew up thinking I was no longer a virgin, it wasn't until later on that I came to understand what Dad was trying to explain that fateful day.

In the meantime, I prayed and promised God that I would live as holy and puritanical a life as earthly possible because I was under the impression that I had to atone for even those things that were completely out of my control. Not only had I been involved in those abusive encounters, but I wasn't going to church regularly anymore. Dad received orders to work in Alaska. Therefore, I lost the connection I had with others who brought me to their churches. By the time I was twelve, life in Alaska grew and refined my skills at being the ice queen, frozen in time and space. I avoided the outside world and turned a cold shoulder to all that it had to offer me. I engaged in a lively inner world of calm and peace—a place where I was perfect and always got everything right. This focus only intensified when my father grew weary under the pressures of the job and family life and began to drink more than he ever had in the past. And with each binge came bouts of anger, grief, and torment. At one point, Dad had grown so very enraged that I raced down to the basement of our house to retrieve the splitting ax he kept downstairs and buried it deep under the snow outside.

On the surface, Dad did his best to act as if all was hunky-dory. Don't we all? But deep down at the core of his soul, he was hurting and doing the best he could with the hand life dealt him. Shortly before my family moved back to Texas, we visited the Prince William Sound. I found my father standing beside the American flag with the breathtaking Columbia Glacier in the background. I asked Dad to strike a pose, so I could take a picture of this Vietnam vet I knew as my father. He stood with both arms straight out to each side, grasping the railing right behind him. It's the first time I saw him physically resemble Christ crucified, standing before me in his passion, both a man in great pain, but ultimately a pillar of

Oh Father

great strength. I hoped that he had forgiven me for being the imperfect daughter that I had been, at least in my own mind. I tried to be an obedient daughter and to stay out of trouble as much as possible. Meanwhile, Dad did his best to be a supportive husband to my mother and protective father to me and my siblings.

When I came home upset with a failing grade for the first time, my dad tried to make me feel better. I was studying *The Scarlet Letter* and was required to predict how I thought the story might unfold using text evidence from the first few chapters I read from the novel. It was a story about a woman named Hester, who was forced to wear a red letter “A” because she had committed adultery while her husband was away and birthed a baby daughter. She refused to name the man who had fathered her child. And so, while her sin was public and she was ostracized by the community, the sin of the father, the community’s pastor was kept secret.

I suggested in my paper that Hester’s husband, Dr. Chillingworth would murder her lover, Reverend Dimmesdale, by poisoning him. After all, the author, Nathaniel Hawthorne, mentioned poisonous plants in the story. I didn’t believe that it was coincidental. My teacher thought otherwise and berated me after class and called me a poor reader. She warned that I would fail her advanced course and that she would have me removed if I didn’t purchase *Cliff’s Notes*⁷ to help me survive the rest of the semester.

I maintained my composure until I arrived home and broke down in tears. My father took my essay, read it, and admitted that he didn’t know much about the novel. He bought the *Cliff’s Notes* for me and reminded me that we were only going to be in Alaska for a few more weeks, and I wouldn’t have to deal with the “old bat” of a teacher anymore. Mom and Dad knew that I wasn’t the strongest of readers. English was perhaps my most difficult course due to its heavy reading load.

Oh Father

Upon returning to Texas, Dad found an article in the newspaper that illustrated that I wasn't necessarily a poor reader after all. I simply paid attention to things other readers usually missed. The article referenced a study that was published in the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine*, citing the possibility that Reverend Dimmesdale might have been poisoned by Dr. Chillingworth in *The Scarlett Letter* given all the plants and bushes that were mentioned in the novel!⁸ Why was this such a big deal for the medical community? Because doctors take a Hippocratic oath to first do no harm. And particularly, in this case, it was evident that this murder had gone undetected in the literary world for years. For me, the whole *Scarlett Letter* thing turned out to be about secrets and how they can fester and silently destroy people from the inside out. For Dad, it was all about hypocrisy. For many an English teacher, it was a story of how sin or any kind of indiscretion, including judgment, poisons all of the community. Little did I know that this story would continue to haunt me for years to come.

Dad declared me vindicated and formally acknowledged my penchant for attention to details, a skill that usually pained him, especially when it came down to our father-daughter debates. We would take on a problem in the world and often butt heads in defiant opposition as we searched for the best solutions. Mom would play referee, keeping things respectful. She made sure that our love remained intact by the end of each contest. That was the primary role in our family. She worked to simply hold things together when they looked like they were going to fall apart.

Mom's pain was beyond me. It was so deep; I couldn't understand it. Her life had been so very painful that she often adhered to the strategy of playing invisible woman. Most times, it seemed like she wasn't even with us. She too had been silenced years ago when her mother and little sister were killed in a car accident. Her family's station wagon slid across an icy highway into

Oh Father

oncoming traffic on Christmas day when she was only nine years old. By the time she was sixteen, she believed that God took her mom away because her mother was too good for her father. He abused my mother and her sisters, some mentally, some sexually. Her faith was attacked because her father was an active member of the Church they attended. Ashamed of the façade that family members were forced to maintain over the years, Mom had inadvertently learned to agree with my dad. It was better to remain at home and keep God in your heart, as opposed to going to church to be a hypocrite.

Mom found the strength to endure by seeking out the silver lining whenever dark clouds rolled in. She could turn tension into great humor and steer us all away from destructive paths. In her, I found indirect reinforcement to face the cross, embrace it, and transform it into something more positive. This whole ritual worked to strengthen my intellect and helped me develop the resilience needed to get through college.

It was in college that I began to discover some of my gifts, among them, teaching and leading, as I took on a variety of leadership roles in campus activities. I also developed a keen appreciation for religion as I could be found in and out of different houses of God on any given Sunday. But through a friendship with a spirited young woman who made sure I made it to Mass every Wednesday, I found myself becoming a confirmed Catholic. She maintained a warm patience with me, as I worked through my feelings about the Church.

The Newman Center was run by a nun, who held small group meetings each week. My trust grew out of my relationship with her. She was a feminist who took the readings for each Mass and changed every “he”, “him”, “his” and the word “father” to the word God.

Oh Father

“Some people have a hard time connecting to God as a father because they had negative experiences with their own dad.” She explained when I inquired about the changes.

Her statement rang true, at least for me. I don’t know if I would have become a confirmed Catholic had the center been run by a priest or deacon. I needed a motherly guide to hold my hand because I struggled to trust men.

Confession was made available at the center too. Given my wariness of males, especially in one on one situations, I kept my activities squeaky clean and convinced myself that I didn’t need to go. When it came time to commit to the Catholic faith, I told myself that I could always walk out the door if something was amiss, or if I ever felt forced to do something that made me feel uncomfortable. For as far as I could see, everything was good. Admittedly, that’s usually the case when you buy into a “Don’t ask, don’t tell” culture.

“So, why Catholic?” one might ask. For me, it was both a risk and a great hope. The fact that one of my three college suitemates told me she was a practicing Satanist made me consider my faith. All indications in the popular culture presented a sound impression that the people you call when you deal with the devil usually don a white Roman collar, and I wasn’t going to be able to switch rooms until the end of that first semester. Even though I was an “equal opportunity” worshipper of Christ in any church, I felt safest doing the Catholic thing with my friend by my side.

I kept my “confirmation” low key because I felt like I was betraying my father in some strange way. These feelings usually ensured that Dad and I would get into fights when I’d come home from school to visit. I’d stomp out of the house and leave my mom and siblings behind. “Why did I feel guilty for loving God? Why did I feel as if I was doing something wrong?”

Oh Father

There was a year when I came home for Christmas, when Dad went off the deep end, creating quite a ruckus Christmas Eve. I wasn't quite sure what set Dad off. Lord knows, I'd shouldered much of the blame over the years. Seeing my baby brother terrified and sobbing in the corner of his darkened bedroom, broke my heart. My eyes were opened to the reality that I might have gotten away from his periodic outbursts, but the rest of my family was stuck and had nowhere to go. The poison that filled my father's veins was sucking the life out of the rest of the family. It was at this point that my only resolve was to finish school as quickly as possible to set up a respite for family members to get away from all the darkness of my father's past that kept debasing the present and debunking any future outlook. Before I let myself fall into the spell of self-inflicted punishment over the whole ordeal, I spied Dad the next morning, tuning into the preachers he loyally watched on television every morning. Whether he was wrong, or I was wrong with what happened that night, it reminded me to hang on to God and to keep my eyes on the cross, no matter how bad things got. This was the first step necessary to begin the process of getting closer to Jesus, to learn to trust and to let go of the past.

Daddy, I remember that night so vividly, mostly because I remember you packing your things and threatening to leave. I thought you were going to abandon us, but you didn't. You always stayed. You were always there. Not everyone can say that about their dads. I don't know what my relationship with God would have been like or what I might have done if you had left. Thank you for always being there and loving me, no matter what. I was just afraid you thought I was damaged goods. I was afraid that you thought you were too. We are just different people with different experiences in time and space. Language proved to be a barrier. I said one thing. You took it for another. I felt misunderstood and mischaracterized. So, when you said things, I was left wondering, uncertain about whether I was hearing you correctly or not. I didn't know how to ask you

Oh Father

to find out. I knew that feeling misunderstood and mischaracterized hurt. I never wanted to hurt you, Dad. I know now that you never wanted to hurt me. Thank God we eventually got our wires uncrossed. You taught me my first important lesson:

Always look to the cross and never give up.

I love you!

Oh Father

Notes

1. Music video by Madonna at [YouTube](#). Presents what appears to be a story of a young girl whose mother passes away, leaving her father in a grief that causes him to abuse her, and thus results in the young girl's struggle with an abusive relationship when she is older. The video is shot with a backdrop of snow and ice, perhaps representative of the love that has grown cold in her home and ultimately in her life. It reminds me of my mother and the grief she endured with the death of her mother.
2. Genesis 3: 23-24. Because Adam and Eve bit into the fruit of the tree of knowledge, they were banished from Eden, paradise. What I couldn't recognize as a child was this act of original sin, disrupted what was original innocence and created disfunctions in families that could be passed down from generation to generation without family members' conscious awareness of these inherent and often covert weaknesses in their character or physicality.
3. A Catholic prayer based on Luke 1:42, when Elizabeth greets Mary upon her visit to the hill country
4. I did not know that I needed to have an understanding of the Jewish religion sufficient enough to understand that the prophecies of the Old Testament were fulfilled by Jesus, the Messiah in the New Testament.
5. String of 52 prayer beads for meditation. Prayer beads are common in religions across the world, many with a 33 and 3 configuration of some sort, including the Chaplet of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the Catholic religion where 33 small beads are employed for the prayer, "Sweet Heart of Jesus, be my love." As an ethnographer, I'd point out that this pattern among prayer beads appears to represent a universal call to prayer and meditation.
6. Medusa the Gorgon was a mythological creature who was once a beautiful woman who rejected the sexual advances from the mythological god Poseidon, who then raped her in the temple of the goddess Athena. An enraged Athena turned Medusa's hair into a ball of venomous snakes and made her so hideously ugly that anyone who would dare look into her eyes would turn to stone. The image of Medusa today, is often associated with rape-victim blaming.
7. Booklets that summarized literary works.
8. Khan, J. (1984). Atropine poisoning in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The England Journal of Medicine, 311, 414-416.

Chapter 3

Calling All Angels

Orange. Whenever I felt defeated and at a loss for what to say or do, especially after an episode like the one that transpired at Christmas, I always defaulted to spending hours walking in circles while listening to music. For me, it was a means to engage in contemplative prayer. By reaching out to God in this way I was shielded from continuous attacks brought on by the devil. It was my dad who first introduced me to the idea of reflecting upon my world with songs. And through music, I dreamed the impossible dream, asked, and was granted a husband. But little did I know that my marriage would eventually become a battlefield in which I spent hours kneeling, circling, rocking, and eventually calling out in what I thought was defeat.

Mom says that I used to roll under the stereo to listen to music before I could crawl. It was there that she found me happily cooing and reaching my arms and legs up towards the source of the

Calling All Angels

sounds. By the time I was five, I was very attuned to Dad's copy of *Best of Bee Gees*². I could easily identify it because it had an orange album cover. Dad listened to "I Started a Joke" over and over again, singing along as if he was the one who wrote and meant every word of it. I often wondered why he liked such a sad song and eventually asked him about it. I was no older than ten when I began my interrogation. I wanted to know what it meant, why there was so much rhyming, and why he played it so much. Dad did his best to offer up some insights.

"Good songs have a way of meaning different things to different people. The meanings can even change for a person over time. They never really grow old. It's possible to listen to a song that's been around for a while as if it is new. That's when you know it's a great song. So, what do you think 'I Started a Joke' could be about? Have you ever said something you wish you could take back?"

I thought to myself, "Oh, yeah! I wish I'd never told you about that man and that boy!" as he continued on, "Have you ever cried or were upset about something only to find others laughing?"

Images of the time that I had been falsely accused of breaking a new playground rule in the third grade came to mind. I remembered how those kids ganged up on me and made me the target of their mean-spirited joke. New sliding board rules were put in place because several kids had broken their arms that year on the playground. Worse yet, the teacher on duty rarely paid attention to what was going on. She didn't know me. She didn't even notice me. I was the little girl who usually spent recess walking alone in circles all by myself, reviewing the day's lessons in my head.

That new rule was ironclad. I had been accused, and the punishment was a spanking with the belt. There was no

Calling All Angels

investigation. Just the mere accusation by a group of students made me automatically guilty, and that teacher on duty dragged me into the principal's office to receive my "just" punishment. I was going to be made an example of how the new rules would be strictly enforced.

My teacher happened to walk into the office and saw that I was a total mess, full of tears. The other teacher argued full-on, that I needed to get my spanking, as my teacher pushed back, defending me. She told them that she knew me well and that I would never break any rules. She knew I was a loner. She also knew I was an easy target. But the principal sided with the woman who seemed to have some sort of vendetta against me.

At that moment, my teacher argued, that because I was her student, she should be the one to administer the corporal punishment. Those words traumatized me. I couldn't believe it. It appeared to me, that she completely shifted from being on my side to being on their side. How could she turn against me so easily? I was heartbroken and overwhelmed with all of the drama that was going on among the three adults.

The relieved principal agreed with my teacher right away and handed her a long, black, leather belt. He then directed us to the administrative restroom for privacy. My teacher took my hand and proceeded to take me into the small room. Once she closed the door, she told me to hold the rim of the ceramic sink and lean forward to bend over. I stood there already sobbing and trembling, readying myself for the first strike. And while my teacher took that belt and very gently tapped it across my lower extremities a couple of times, I experienced a complete social death. I, that little girl who had so much promise of coming out of her shell that year, retreated into the darkness of complete isolation.

Calling All Angels

In an instant, I recognized that the melancholic melody of that song Dad was listening to, seemed to describe how I felt about these kinds of memories better than any words, and I got it. I figured out that he was reliving different times in his life and how he felt about them, as he listened to different pieces of music.

I took up the second volume of that orange album and found a song that became my first prayer, although I really didn't know it as such at the time. I listened to "How Can You Mend a Broken Heart" a song that stayed with me, especially during those times when Dad flew off the handle. I played it for me. I played it for him. We were people in need of great healing. Almost every song on that orange album and my special prayer featured the beautiful glissandos of the harp, and those sounds made me feel like everything was going to be okay. At other times, I swear I could hear the voice of God speaking to me through other discs that played at 33.3 revolutions per minute on the turntable.³

It was while I was in college that the voice of God was amplified quite louder than I had ever heard it before in the past. I chaired the entertainment committee for our student program council. It was baptism by fire into the world of show biz. My most memorable program was the concert for homecoming in 1988. We brought in my idol and role model, Pat Benatar⁴, the female rocker whose songs provided me with biblical-like teachings on feminine self-respect. This was in spite of the fact that several of my committee members tried to persuade me to consider an Australian band, ICEHOUSE⁵, whose album "Man of Colours"⁶ was doing very well on the college scene at the time. They so wanted me to buy into the band that they loaned me their CDs to listen to songs and melodies that were mostly written by lead singer Iva Davies. But when I listened to those songs, I could swear that some of them had been written as if Mr. Davies had been sitting

Calling All Angels

in the corner of my room, watching me and recording what he knew about me into his songs in ways that could have only been known by God. The thought of bringing him to our campus terrified me.

So, I didn't even pick up the phone to see if he and his band would be available to celebrate homecoming with us. When I stopped to think about it, I realized that this was a rock band with a real-life man, not God, at the lead vocals. He was a rock star which was really scary for me on three fronts. First and foremost, there was my fear of men. But then, I also had preconceived notions about people in show biz. In my self-righteousness, I held a prejudice given everything I saw on TV when it came to rock stars. As far as I could tell, they were inherently dangerous due to their penchant for not just bringing on a near occasion of sin, but going all out with sex, drugs, and rock and roll! I didn't want my God-image of Mr. Davies to be tarnished in any way. And third, I feared that Mr. Davies could come and call me out on what I thought was my crazy. I wasn't ready to face the truth of who I was. So, I did not inquire about his band, although a part of me desperately would have loved to have seen them grace the stage at my school. It's sad, but I let fear, prejudice, my idol, my own expectations, and self-fulfilling prophecies keep me from facing the truth, beyond the superficial, go along to get along posture I took way back then, just to survive the exhausting everyday interactions that always made me feel really small and defensive.

I graduated from college shortly, thereafter, became a teacher, and worked in some of the most at-risk schools. One of the most challenging days I faced was the time when one of my students claimed that another boy in my class had sexually abused her. Given what I knew about the boy, I had no doubt that my student's claims were true. Hurt people hurt others, even children. She and

Calling All Angels

her parents were in the conference room with several other people working to get to the truth of the matter. I was called in to join them. All of the hairs on my back stood up when one of the individuals in the room made the charge, “These things just don’t happen between children, and your daughter has been known for making up stories.”

In a flash, I recalled the time that a boy pulled down my pants and got on top of me when I was five, and I looked into my student’s eyes as they welled up in tears, and I felt her anguish, shame, and despair, and I had to speak up.

“Yes! These things do happen,” I erupted in tears.⁷ “I was molested by a 14-year-old when I was very young. I told my parents, and they didn’t know what to do about it at the time, and I’ve had trouble with men ever since!”

At that moment, my principal suggested that I step out with the woman who did not believe the child, so she could wrap things up with the parents. I stood up and followed the woman out of the conference room. She walked down to one of the nearby rooms and searched through her things. She eventually found a piece of paper, looked up at me with a smirk, and pressed it out towards me while shaking her head. It was a caricature of a young boy literally standing on top of the shoulders of a little girl, with a bubble that read, “Does it feel good yet?” I figured she was making fun of me and making light of a very serious and painful time in my life, but I couldn’t find the words and choked.

Rage overtook me, as I could feel my whole body posture get ready to haul off and smack the woman, but then my principal happened to walk up behind me and placed her gentle and loving hand on my shoulder, and my anger instantly subsided. I turned to find my student right behind her. She had a huge smile on her face,

Calling All Angels

and she ran forward to hug me like she didn't want to let go. I knew, then, that I had done the right thing. Her parents shook my hand before turning to leave the office. In the meantime, my principal directed me back to the conference room.

“You have been through a lot. I have a pamphlet here for you with numbers for all of the district-approved therapists. Why don't you go home and make an appointment with one? Don't worry about your class. I'll make sure it is covered.”

I freaked out. I felt like she was calling me out on my masquerade of pretending to be normal and wondered what she thought of me. I went back to my room to get my things, got into my car, and started to pull out of the parking lot while turning on the radio. By the time I turned onto the main road, the radio DJ announced a new song by Duran Duran⁸, and I could swear, I heard the voice of God and was enchanted. It really was a rainy Thursday⁹ just like Simon Le Bon sang at the start of the song. The chorus was just what I needed to hear. I needed to let go of the past and chose to just move forward and keep on learning. As long as I was sorry for my screw-ups, I was forgiven. Things were going to be okay. God had a respawn button for me.

I went home that afternoon, hid in my closet, squatted down to lean against the back wall and just rocked, wondering what I was going to do, while desperately singing those words I heard that afternoon from Duran Duran's new song, “Ordinary World”¹⁰. With it, I prayed for a way to fit into the world that was totally alien to me most days. I wasn't sure how long I could stand it. I assumed that my principal thought I was a basket case until the day she invited me to pursue a doctorate with her.

“You are the teacher my son needed,” she told me when I asked her why she was including me in her small group of study buddies.

Calling All Angels

I was stunned, and little did I know, I was going to get divine intervention whether I wanted it or not. While in a course concerning administrative relationships, I learned that I was interpersonally blind after taking a valid and reliable battery of tests. And with that God-given knowledge, I began the process of refining my interpersonal skills, which resulted in the topic of my dissertation and the ability to navigate social interactions well enough to land a dream, my husband, Michael.

With my newfound communication skills, I married in our neighborhood Catholic Church, had a child, and operated a successful business, that is until all hell broke loose. The fire in my marriage turned to ice, a familiar state for me, and I longed for the warmth that once kept our home on holy ground. I turned to a family therapist for help, read books, and tried out a variety of strategies to win my husband back, but nothing seemed to bridge the gap that was created by the constant assaults on our relationship by his mother. She played interference as if there was something, she didn't want me to know about him. The fact that he let her only worked to make me that much more resentful.

She was agnostic and had quite an influence on everything my husband did and believed. I'd grossly underestimated her stranglehold on him. She was beyond overprotective! She taught him how to skirt the truth, especially when it came to facing the troubles that plagued our family. I was certain that I didn't know who my husband was anymore. I thought he was a gift from God, given the way that we first met, but things changed after we married.

It was his elementary school principal who directed him to call me just before the Easter holidays. He barged into her office with a tongue in cheek complaint.

Calling All Angels

He jokingly cried out, “Here I am, a single guy in a school district where most of the teachers are around the age of 28 or 29, and I am stuck at the one school where most of the ladies could be my mother! Find me a woman, or I’m out of here!”

Mike’s principal had dinner with her sister, the woman who was the librarian at my school. They laughed over what Mike said and did that morning and opted to call me to see if I would entertain receiving a phone call from him. “He’s tall, dark, and handsome, but very quiet. He’s the strong, silent type, but definitely Renaissance material.” I was told over the phone. “We thought we’d put your name and number in his box at school with a directive to call you at 7 tomorrow night. Is that okay? We think you’ll like him.”

What could I say? I had to say, “Yes.” I had just spent that very same morning with a group of ladies who made a special pact. We all drew up our personal wish-lists of what we wanted in a husband and shared them out loud with one another. We agreed to introduce each other to men that fit the profiles. The next morning, Mike found a note in his teacher’s box from his principal with my name and number on it. He called me just as he had been instructed. I can still hear him in my mind’s ear the day he called.

“Hello. Is this Cindy? My principal told me to call you.”

“Yes. I was waiting for your call.”

“Well, I have an important decision to make. I either need to do a load of laundry or go down to the store to buy some underwear.” I broke out in laughter. “I don’t do laundry until I’ve saved enough aluminum cans to turn in for change at the recycling machine down the road!”

Calling All Angels

It was a God-given love connection. We just clicked. I learned that he played the clarinet, danced ballet, and took ballroom dancing in college. Because he could square dance and it was what the kids were learning in physical education at the time, he was hired into the district on the spot as a PE teacher. He also had a black belt in Karate. I figured with his background, he had to get one, especially after he told me about the year that his mother made him dress up as an ear of corn for Halloween.

He was a professional student with college hours totaling several degrees worth of study. While still trying to figure out who he was supposed to grow up to be, he decided to cash those credits in to become a teacher instead of an accountant or professional fencer with a sword in hand.

We were inseparable for the following three years once we opted to meet in person, days later. It all seemed perfect on the surface, but we all held secrets. I, for one, was certain, I was crazy and did all I could to hide it. While I attended our neighborhood church for the first few years of our marriage, I eventually quit going. Our pastor was moved to another church. Then news of how a bishop simply moved priests who sexually abused children around to other parishes broke months earlier and opened up my interior Pandora's Box¹¹ of horrors and insecurities. I lost my footing and didn't know what to believe anymore. I struggled with not only my faith but with my mother-in-law who had her own awful experiences in the Catholic Church, which she never hesitated to bring up again and again. I felt like I was on my own with my internal image of Christ struggling to convince me to trust Him.

I longed for the days when I felt at home in the church when all was new and exciting. I wanted to hear the songs I listened to for hours that made me feel close to God. So, I called a friend to

Calling All Angels

ask about this YouTube thing she had been talking about in passing. It wasn't long before I found the compositions and music videos of Iva Davies and his band ICEHOUSE on the platform. It was like feasting on fried chicken and macaroni and cheese, comfort food! And I was reminded of who I was.

But I wondered, "Exactly, who had I become?" I felt more like a punching bag. At least when a piñata is beaten, lots of good things eventually come of it. I felt like I was absorbing all the hurt and pain my mother-in-law ever felt with every punch she threw to get me to become who she wanted me to be. But I clung to the past, listening to those ICEHOUSE songs. Given the pressures I faced to be someone else, the weird girl that I didn't like in some of those songs sounded far more appealing than the alternative person my in-law constantly badgered me to be. She even brought me a copy of Machiavelli's *The Prince*¹² to study, and I quote, to "...grow a pair".

Thank God for those ICEHOUSE songs! While on-line, I learned that they had albums that were foreign to me, so I sought them out. I was able to order them from a website for fans. Among them was "Code Blue"¹³. According to the liner notes inside, "code blue" was an Australian military signal meaning, "Go for it! This is your mission." But I also learned that "code blue" was the signal in many hospitals meaning, "death is imminent". One thing was for sure. My marriage had been on life support for many years, and I feared for the worst.

One of the songs on "Code Blue" offered me hope at the bottom of my Pandora's Box in some crazy way. "Where the River Meets the Sea"¹⁴ had me mesmerized and felt like a summons. But where exactly, and for what reason? I hadn't a clue. I'd always hoped to go to Australia one day. I did have an insanely special interest in all things Australian since before the days I went to

Calling All Angels

kindergarten, which most people thought was funny. After all, I was a little Mexican girl, worlds away from Australia. But I knew about it because I loved Olivia Newton-John¹⁵ and her song “Don’t Stop Believin’”. I also adored Koala Bears.

Eventually, there was a shift in the wind, and my mother-in-law shocked me by returning to church early that fall in 2010. She even made sure that my father-in-law was baptized. She made claims of being sick for years, but with these events, I figured something serious was going on. She passed away shortly thereafter on the first day of the new year. I was dumbstruck and wondered what made her change. In the meantime, my husband grew more distant and eventually confronted me with an angry charge.

“You are autistic¹⁶!” my husband called me out. But I wouldn’t hear of it. I turned a deaf ear because I was misinformed about autism and thought being autistic would mean that I was at fault for the failure of our marriage as a disconnected and aloof individual. Lord knows I tried very hard to interact and engage. I wasn’t aloof and was certain he had the wrong idea about me because I thought I was just crazy, whatever crazy was. All I knew is that my experiences didn’t seem to fit what most people would call the norm. I worked to deny and ignore my interior sensibilities, though I knew deep down inside that they were real. As a consequence, I lost my fire.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, was the fact that my mother-in-law had been calling me on it all along. But because of how defensive I was, I couldn’t see it. She only wanted me to find my fight. Funny how it is that we can confuse the very people who are trying to be of help as the enemy. But that’s exactly what the real enemy wants. He wants to create division. He prowls on your fears and insecurities, working to fuzzy up the line between what is right and what is wrong.

Calling All Angels

Now, my husband was onto me too. I desperately tried to throw him off the scent. I went to lectures, read books, sought out published research papers to have all the proof and evidence I needed to debunk his theory. I had already been in therapy and the subject never came up, at least about me. But then the world of therapists, doctors, and scientists can't know and answer everything. With conflicting scientific studies and viewpoints, I got turned around, upside down, and over again. Thinking that I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, I prayed out loud to God to tell me who I was.

Weeks later, because I had a cousin who was getting married to a girl from Brisbane, I found myself with an airline ticket to Australia in hand. The evening before my flight, my husband brought me a special gift, which was quite out of the ordinary, so much so, that I was at a loss for words when he brought it to me. It was a colorful tapestry of a southwestern house of God.

"I saw this and thought, 'This is your mission.' So, I got it for you," he offered up. I was stunned. I had never mentioned "Code Blue" to him, but it seemed to me that this was the message I was supposed to receive. "But what was it with the church?" I wondered. It was just a matter of time before I came to understand what was going on. My prayer was answered, but it was delivered in a language I had yet to learn.

I sat amazed, realizing that my husband had a knack for responding to the promptings of the Spirit. He seemed to know what to say and do at just the right time in mysterious ways. Up until the time that he gave me that tapestry of a church community, he just made me feel crazy. But there was something very mystical that happened when he handed it over and said, "This is your mission." It was the point at which I began to recognize that all was happening for a reason. So, I opened my heart and set aside

Calling All Angels

all that I thought should be, to learn to dance in step with what was going to be, whether or not I liked it or understood it.

I received divine intervention as I accepted Mike's gift and looked forward to what lay ahead in the land Down Under. The enemy had been prowling around, trying to destroy my marriage. With prayer and the willingness to listen for what God had to teach me, however, I received additional gifts and graces that I never thought to ask for, because I didn't think I deserved them in the first place. Despite all the good things I learned and did in my life, I still felt very much like a fallen woman. I felt like no matter what I did, I couldn't be a winner. Life was seemingly an uphill climb. But then, I was given reason to hope.

Beloved husband, you first called me at 7 in the evening on Holy Thursday after receiving a note from your principal to call me. You've always been attentive to the promptings of the Lord in ways that amaze me. Thank you for making me a mother and for loving me in your special way. I am certain I'll never really understand it, but I can live with it. Life with you has reinforced the importance of the second lesson I had to learn:

Pray and Listen

I love you.

Calling All Angels

Notes

1. Music video by rock band Train at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaG9SDxwPBg> The clip features the band in a forest playing in the rain, immersed in the color orange as the lead singer follows a white dove, overcoming dark clouds, escaping a tornado, confronting troubles of our time in relationships and industrialization and rising up to a mountain peak to see the world below with awe and amazement
2. The Bee Gees were a trio that sky-rocketed into fame during the disco era with the soundtrack to *Saturday Night Fever*. “Best of Bee Gees” was a compilation of their earlier works.
3. Record players can be adjusted to spin discs at different speeds: 72 revolutions per minute (RPM), 45 RPM, and 33.3 RPM.
4. Pat Benatar is an award-winning soprano who ruled rock radio in the 80’s.
5. ICEHOUSE is an Australian pop/rock band, led by Iva Davies.
6. Top-selling ICEHOUSE album named for the song “Man of Colours” about an aging artist.
7. 33% of sexual abuse is committed by juvenile offenders, according to Safe Haven training, June 2020.
8. 80’s band best known for their exotic videos.
9. The song “Ordinary World” begins with a reference to driving down an avenue while it is raining on a Thursday.
10. “Ordinary World” was a number one hit from Duran Duran’s 1993 release, “The Wedding Album”.
11. When Pandora’s Box was opened, all the evil spirits of the world were set free. The only one spirit left at the bottom of the box was hope.
12. *The Prince* expresses a political philosophy that the “ends justify the means” and lays out strategies to obtain and lord power over others.
13. “Code Blue” was an Icehouse album released in 1990, full of songs about unsung Australian historical figures.
14. “Where the River Meets the Sea” is a song off of the Code Blue album that suggests a certain eternal loyalty to another, much like the covenant between God and man.

Calling All Angels

15. Olivia Newton-John is a singer, actress, and health/environmental activist who garnered many awards in the 70's through the 80's for her music. Perhaps her best-known role in Hollywood was Sandy in "Grease".

16. Autism Spectrum Disorder (Conditions) "is a condition related to brain development that impacts how a person perceives and socializes with others, causing problems in social interaction and communication. The disorder also includes limited and repetitive patterns of behavior. The term 'spectrum' in autism spectrum disorder refers to the wide range of symptoms and severity. Consulted <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/autism-spectrum-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20352928?page=0&citems=10> (June 12, 2020)

Chapter 4

Crazy

Yellow. Some things are simply unexplainable. Had I not opened myself up and embraced the supernatural, I would have completely missed the fireworks that unfolded while in Australia and beyond. This was at first, a tough step for me because everything in our culture teaches us that we need to seek scientific validation for everything and to practice self-reliance above all else. And that seems to be the trouble, at least according to Robert Cardinal Sarah. In his book, *The Day is Now Far Spent*, he suggested that “The supernatural is swallowed up in the desert of the natural. We become deaf, autistic, and blind to the things of God.”² But what happened in Australia provided me with a set of corrective lenses through which I could clearly see for the first time, that there was indeed a sense of perfect design in all that was occurring in my life. Those blips collectively made up a bigger picture that indicated that God was with me the whole time. Before

Crazy

my experiences abroad, sadly I thought “synchronicity” was just the name of a Police album! But everything related to the chance happenings in my life was more than just chance. They were clear signs that everything in my life was being mediated by the Holy Spirit. Sounds crazy, I know! But it’s very true.

Everything about my trip to Australia screamed, “You are autistic, and you’re going to be okay!” Not only did I meet one of the world’s leading experts in Asperger’s Syndrome, Tony Attwood in Brisbane, but two days later, I met the rock star who I imagined sitting in the corner of my room back in college, Iva Davies, later that week on March 21, 2013, at a charity event in Sydney³ to raise money to support music therapies for those with autism and other disabilities. I was bewildered.

My mom and I flew into town that early morning and visited the sites in and around Darling Harbour. Later that day, we spent some time in a lovely garden just outside of the venue where the charity event was held. We sat together on a park bench and took in the majestic scene. I could see that some dark clouds were rolling into the bay, as a flash of lightning shown on the horizon. “Grandpa,” I whispered under my breath. One of my cousins and I had been up the first evening we spent in Australia back in Brisbane talking about having the feeling that our grandfather would die while we were abroad, and that his passing would begin healing for all of our families, given the abuse he inflicted upon our mothers in their youths. He wasn’t ill or experiencing any difficulties. We just felt a deep sense that we would return to the United States, and he would be gone. That flash in the distance was an omen.

We made our way into the gathering space and waited for the others who would be joining us at table number 33. It wasn’t long before the whole place was flooded with people all around. The

Crazy

whole experience was surreal, especially when a young man with autism took the stage and performed a couple of songs for the group with his music therapist at his side. When I learned of this young man's history and how music facilitated his personal development, I sat in complete wonderment as I began to recognize how significant music had been in my life. I used music to pray, relax, and reduce my anxieties as I walked around in circles for hours on end. Then in my professional career, I adopted teaching methods using music therapies and accelerated learning approaches that integrated classical and baroque music to teach students English as a Second Language. I even offered and taught seminars on how to use music for instructional purposes.

I began to connect what I learned just a couple of days earlier with Dr. Attwood in Brisbane with what I was seeing and hearing before my very eyes and realized that a musician was sitting up front whose music had been a God-send for me during some of the most challenging and impressionable years of my life. In fact, when I stopped to remind myself that I had asked God to tell me who I am, I understood that I shouldn't have been surprised that I'd be led to find this "rock" star. This time, instead of snapping back to "reality" and dodging the opportunity to see this guy up close and personal, I made a bee's line to the front of the room.

I introduced myself and confessed that I totally dissed his band when I was in college and lived to regret it. He was very gracious and treated me so much better than I deserved or could ever imagine. I asked him to sign my Pat Benatar t-shirt I brought to compete in the old t-shirt contest they were having that night. He went from being a figment of my imagination sitting in my corner to being real. And when I thanked him and turned to walk away, he called me back, and my heart cracked open.

Crazy

I told him all about Pat Benatar and how she sang “One Love (Song of the Lion)”⁴ at soundcheck at a time when our campus had problems with all the same issues that we are facing today, sexism and gender issues, racism, elitism, attacks on religion and suspicions of foreigners. There was so much I wanted to say. I wanted to thank him for being in my corner, but then I was struck with something very powerful when I dared to look into his eyes. There is no language I can use to adequately describe what I thought, felt, and understood at that moment. It was like God was downloading a special program into me. And I felt as if I was a little chick, first hatching out of her shell and realizing that there was whole, other world out there. My eyes were opened, and I knew him. And I knew a whole lot of other things too. I became acutely aware of additional gifts and charisms that I always had but failed to embrace them for fear of what it meant to have them in the first place. I wasn’t so much crazy as I was very gifted, and we’ve all heard the old adage, “To whom much is given, much is expected.”⁵

Not only did I experience the supernatural, but it left me with a profound inner knowing that I was being sent on mission. But who or where or how? I didn’t know. All I knew is that this musician, Iva Davies, became an instant special interest, who merely served as the hook that connected my communication line with the biggest fish of them all, Jesus Christ!

I heard the “code blue”. I also saw the future. Mom and I learned the next afternoon while sitting in our airplane back to Brisbane that my grandfather had indeed passed away. My cousin and I locked eyes with a special knowing when we were reunited. The family gathered that Friday night to pray for him and to celebrate the nuptials that were going to take place the next day over dinner in a local restaurant.

Crazy

Later, while at the reception of the wedding, a woman approached me. It was one of the bride's aunts. "Something happened to you. You are glowing. You have a story to tell. Write it all down until you feel the butterflies," she directed me. I hadn't a clue what she was talking about. I just noticed that her mannerisms reminded me of my mother-in-law. One can only imagine how surprised I was when I learned that she indeed shared my mother-in-law's name too. At that moment, I knew I needed to do as she suggested.

As I wrote, I felt a strong presence guiding me and could concretely identify the fingerprints of the Holy Spirit all over my story. I thought people would surely think that I was mad if they ever read what I was putting on paper, but I continued in obedience. I had a feeling that to stop writing would mean that I was turning away from God.

It wasn't long before my mom pointed out that everything about the trip to Australia had something to do with the number 33. I hadn't really noticed it until I started seeing it in photographs and in other reminders of what I experienced there. I had no idea at the time that the location of the charity event in Sydney was located on the -33° latitude, where a river does meet the sea! My obsession with that number drove me to the Jung Center⁶ to try to figure out what it meant. I took courses on-site and listened to recordings of others that were available in the bookstore there. I'd also done quite a bit of writing by that time.

But then, I spied a new publication one day on special display in the bookstore. I had quite a visceral reaction to the image on the cover of it. It caused me to remember a poem I wrote in the third grade about a candle that was afraid to blow out in the dark. I remembered it vividly because of the "look" that many parents directed at me at open house at school when they read it posted on

Crazy

the wall of our classroom. But the image on the book seemed to continue that story I put into that poem. It seemed to describe what happened to that candle after it blew out. The smoke rising up from the wick in the image seemed to reach out to point to the moon as if the candle had been transformed into the moon. And I felt it! It was true! The little light was transformed into a bigger one! It never really blew out! Then I snapped back into reality and thought, “This is all lunacy!” as I left the book behind to get to class. But then came the announcement that a new course was going to be offered on that book, *Hauntings: Dispelling the Ghosts Who Run Our Lives*⁷. I had to sign up for it.

By that early fall, I started to have a reoccurring dream of tornadoes chasing my family and me across open fields until we would come upon culverts to hide and take cover. The tornadoes would disappear at the last minute as they approached, and I would awaken with anxiety. My husband noticed that I was waking up each morning at precisely 3:33. The dreams continued for over a week until they came to a dead halt. Just as I was starting to feel better, I emerged out from a school in which I was consulting one day and found a real tornado in the distance coming straight toward the school. I turned to the cafeteria and saw the children holding up their cellphones up to the windows to take shots of the twister. Before I could turn around to head back into the school, the low-pressure system vanished, and I found the young man that was walking out to the parking lot with me checking his cellphone for the pictures he took. I couldn't deny it. A tornado came and went away, but what did it all mean?

“He wants you to be the tornado!” my friend interpreted over the phone. She called me seemingly out of nowhere. We hadn't chatted in years! She also happened to be the girl who loaned me her “Man of Colours” CD back in college.

Crazy

“No! I don’t think he wants me to be the tornado. He wants me to be the girl in the moon!” I chuckled, hoping that she’d recognize the ICEHOUSE song in that comment. Crickets. “Weren’t you the girl who was ‘crazy’ about ICEHOUSE in school? You loaned me your ‘Man of Colours’ CD.” I prompted, hoping she would make the connections to both the songs “The Girl in the Moon” and “Crazy”.

“Well, that’s because I wanted you to like that song “Electric Blue” as much as I did. I really didn’t listen to the other songs on the CD,” she came back.

“Then girl, you’re missing out! It’s full of great songs!”

“Yeah, well,” she giggled.

It was great to reconnect, and I appreciated getting the chance to talk to someone about my hauntings. I told her about meeting Iva Davies, figuring she’d get a kick out of it, but also had the chance to share some other things that were on my mind. I had been studying the Grail Legend⁸ and attending that class on hauntings like shame, regret, and betrayal while staring at an unusual piece of art⁹ that hung on the classroom wall. It was a big fish made up of the bodies of a woman and a man.

“The body of Christ is made up of both men and women,” my friend noted.

A crash of lightning and thunder shook the house, and my friend decided that she probably needed to let me go. I sat alone in the corner listening to the wind and how the raindrops plopped against the glass windows and just wondered. Where was I supposed to go? What was I supposed to do?

Crazy

I went to my computer to write and searched for my “Code Blue” CD to play in the background. When I did not find it, I went to YouTube to find the song “Where the River Meets the Sea”. It was then that I noticed that a new song had been posted by a group called White Pearl with the exact same name. Out of curiosity, I had a listen, and much to my surprise, the female vocalist sounded as if she was responding to Iva’s version of the song. I knew something was going on but again, I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

Long story short, I ended up at a church where each sermon seemed to zero in on the very things with which I was wrestling in my manuscript. By the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, I felt certain that I found the church where I was supposed to report for active duty as a soldier of Christ. After all, I heard the code blue and with the military father with whom I grew up, I knew the drill.

Every word that I heard in the sermon was loaded for me. It was as if the homilist had been standing in my kitchen with my husband that morning as I discussed the Grail Legend before he snatched my manuscript in my office to quote it during his talk. He concluded with the question, “If Jesus walked up to you today, would you recognize him?”

I was a mess. I came home crying to my husband in hysterics! “He talked about the Holy Grail! And he mentioned Dr. Stone¹⁰ out in space in the movie ‘Gravity’! And he talked about recognizing Jesus and Indiana Jones!¹¹”

“Calm down! Calm down! You’re not making sense,” my husband said as he worked to get me to catch a breather.

“What are the chances?” I sobbed. “What are the chances that he’d repeat some of the things we were talking about this morning as if he had been eavesdropping on us? He was specific. He was

Crazy

talking about Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. So were we! He talked about the Holy Grail and knowing which one belonged to Jesus. We talked about that too. It's just too coincidental! Don't you think that it's a little too coincidental that he mentioned the Holy Grail and Indiana Jones after we talked about it this morning?"

"Well, I guess it all depends on how you look at it," he responded unaffected.

I didn't want to believe my ears! I wondered how my husband could just dismiss such a weird coincidence. It didn't seem to touch him in any way. I thought, "Maybe he just thinks I'm out of my mind."

I'd come to learn that "crazy" was a word I used to describe when things were out of whack or when things were too good to be true, and as far as I was concerned, only the Holy Spirit could have caused that homilist to tap into some things that would be very meaningful to me. Chances are, those same words could have meant very different things to other people, and could have been just as impactful. I was open to the possibility that God was talking to me through this man, who could tune into what He wanted him to say at just the right time.

By December 8th, I rejoined the Church in full communion¹². I officially registered as a parishioner the following fall in 2014 after taking my time to make sure that this was where the Lord wanted me to be. By the Spring of 2015, I had a manuscript ready to share. I gave a copy to the spiritual director with whom I discussed it and put one in the mail to Iva Davies with a note giving him permission to take the story and to do something creative with it since he'd scored ballets and worked on other projects. By the end of July that year, I was certain that the rock star got it. He released a live

Crazy

album over the summer with an image that looked as if he was posing as a crucified Christ in His passion. Some of the things he said in interviews came across to me as vivid and on the mark as the homilist had been that day that I came home to my husband in a frenzy. This was especially true when Davies talked about his song “The Girl in the Moon”. I would have bet the house that he had at least skimmed the manuscript and read the last chapter.

But alas, the unopened parcel was returned to me with the letters NATA on it, “not at this address”. And so, the box just sat on my kitchen table for days as if ignoring it would make the fact that it came back less disappointing. Then came the morning that my world was rocked once again. I got up and made myself comfortable on our sofa and prayed the Rosary, a new ritual I adopted since attending a retreat earlier that spring. After the last prayer, I looked up into the blackness of the television screen before me and could only make out the reflections of the faint outlines of myself and all that was around. I glanced down at the cable box, 7:32. It was almost time for my special mantra. The clock turned 7:33, and I prayed a little request I started praying ever since I had that conversation with my friend from college, “Lord, make me shine like the moon, reflecting your light and love in the darkness. Use me as your instrument. Make me full!”¹³

I hadn’t a clue how powerful that prayer was. In fact, I knew very little about the Blessed Mother. Just a few months earlier, I found myself baffled when I learned that Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Lourdes, and Our Lady of Fatima, were all the same lady! I was still very much in my Catholic infancy. So, it was out of sheer innocence and ignorance that I had conjured up such a prayer after being inspired by the image on that book cover for *Hauntings*.

Crazy

I reached for a book, *My Life with the Saints*, and took in the chapter about the author's special relationship with Mary and his reference to the feast day for the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary¹⁴.

"August 15th? That's today!" I thought. When I looked up, I was virtually blinded by a strong ray of light that came into our living room through the window over our doorway. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed an image that appeared in the blackness of the television screen before me. It was the reflection of my round face, illuminated by the light of the sun. Nothing else was on the screen—no evidence of my torso or arms, not even a clear reflection of my facial features—just a round ball of light surrounded by complete darkness. I sat and stared in silence as the tears came.

"What is this?" I asked the Lord. "I don't understand. What do you want from me?" As the light shifted through the window, the image on the screen went through phases like that of the moon. I was both fearful and overjoyed, paralyzed for a few minutes until the image faded away. I sat in complete silence for a while, before I eventually broke free from my trance.

I eventually turned on the TV and without changing the channels, I found Catholic Bishop Robert Barron talking about a church dedicated to the Blessed Virgin in one of the vignettes for the "Catholicism" series he shot years ago. The graphics on the screen showed the layout of the church as a woman and how a large labyrinth can be found, positioned where one might find her womb. Each day, when the sun shines through the huge stain-glass circular window that sits above the doorway, it reflects its brilliant colors onto the labyrinth—her womb, from where Jesus was brought into the world.

Crazy

The imagery overwhelmed me, and then my eyes were flooded with tears again when Bishop Barron quoted Venerable Fulton J. Sheen with “Mary is like the moon. Hers is always a reflected light coming from a greater source.”¹⁵ I sat bewildered, sobbing, and searching for what it was that I was sensing. I used the same metaphor to describe my transformation within the last few paragraphs of my manuscript! And a mysterious light came through the window over my door and reflected my face on our television set, much like the light that shown through the stained-glass window onto the labyrinth on the floor where Mary’s womb would be. “She delivered Jesus from her womb. What was I to deliver on TV?” I wondered.

Twice before, I had been urged to put my memoir on YouTube. Given that the reflection of light that came off my face was directed to the TV, I drew the conclusion that perhaps the Holy Spirit wanted me to offer up my story too. So, I began the long process of recording myself as I read each chapter aloud and creating a slide for it to represent a core concept from that part of the story.

The process compelled me to draw, paint, take photographs and learn how to navigate the world of connecting each slide with related links to music, professional photos, articles, and books that I mentioned in each chapter¹⁶. It was a labor of love that I worked on tirelessly over the next couple of months, hoping to begin posting it by November 6th, the release date for the movie “Spotlight”¹⁷. It was a movie about the team of journalists from the *Boston Globe* that broke the sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church back in 2002. I desperately wanted to share my story of how I learned that the Church was so much more than the negative stories I heard. I found far more good things happening in my parish than anything I’d experienced elsewhere.

Crazy

While working on a slide for Chapter 8 of my story, “Rosa Mystica,” I made a startling discovery. Prior to this finding, I knew “Rosa Mystica” as the name of the album for Therese Schroeder-Sheker’s musical compositions featuring the harp¹⁸ to provide support and spiritual healing to the sick and the dying. But while on retreat, I learned that Rosa Mystica was one of the many names associated with a Marian apparition. When I went to go look for more information about this account, I learned the story of how the Blessed Mother appeared to a young nurse in northern Italy in 1947, grieving over the notion that her priests and religious were not honoring their vows of chastity.¹⁹ She requested an “Hour of Grace” each December 8th at noon, beginning with three recitations of the 51st Psalm²⁰. She promised a stairway to heaven and many more graces for those who would pray for the conversion of souls.

I was taken aback, given the name I gave my narrative, *I Let the Music Speak: How a Heretic Found a Stairway to Heaven*.²¹ To pile on, I had returned to the Church in full communion on December 8, 2013! But what totally blindsided me was another discovery I made while fashioning my channel and recording my story. I had just placed an image of Rosa Mystica on a slide when I reached into the side drawer of my desk and found the cover to my “Man of Colours” CD. I caught my breath, grabbed the CD case out of the drawer, and held it up to the image I had on my computer screen.

The two images were strikingly similar²². Both presented an image of an individual with three flowers, one red, one yellow, and one white. While reading about Rosa Mystica, I learned that the red flower represented sacrifice. The yellow flower represented penance, and the white one represented prayer. I intuited that the music of ICEHOUSE must have had something to do with the Blessed Mother, and anything tied to the band could bring me

Crazy

closer to her. It was just a theory, for the time being, that is until I went to my first and only ICEHOUSE concert two years later in a beautiful garden in Melbourne, Australia.

The setting was perfect for a mystical experience, and I hoped to have an encounter with the Blessed Mother. It was Transfiguration Sunday²³ when I got up, got my bearings straight, and found a church to attend Mass before heading out for the gardens. By the time ICEHOUSE hit the stage, the brooding clouds that floated overhead, broke open and showcased a magnificent full moon. I was astonished and spent the majority of the time just staring at the moon and stars that sat perfectly under an observatory that was there on the lawn. I thought about the gospel reading that morning at Mass and intuited the struggles that were on the horizon, especially after seeing a news report concerning accusations of sexual abuse made against an Australian Cardinal.

Then, I was brought back to the concert when the crowd reacted with cheers and whistles as Davies stood on the stage in that pose that resembled Christ crucified in His passion as he sang the melancholic “Don’t Believe Anymore”²⁴. But the light of the moon, wouldn’t allow the whole scene to get too dark. This was especially true when Michael Paynter, another musician on stage, sang his hair-raising version of Davies’ mystical “Man of Colours”²⁵ about an aging artist, as Davies accompanied him on his oboe.

I left Melbourne the next day, set on mission. I took a narrative I had written that covered all that transpired between the time that I finished my first story in 2015 through early January 2017 and continued to add to it because it was clear that the story was not finished.²⁶ I continued recording my thoughts, prayers, and happenings that unfolded over the course of the following year up

Crazy

until I read in the paper that 33 Bishops from Chile met with Pope Francis to discuss accusations of sexual abuse and submitted their resignations 3 days later in the summer of 2018.²⁷ Later that week, it was reported that a statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe was crying in a small town in New Mexico.²⁸ And then everything came crashing down as an ex-Nuncio from the United States wrote a formal letter calling for the resignation of the pope after a major scandal broke out concerning the sexual abuse of seminarians and children at the hands of a Cardinal.

With perfect timing, I was in a position to release my new story *Code Blue: A Walk into the Kingdom with Ghost of Time*²⁹ on my YouTube channel. It was a story calling for unity and prayer while reflecting on who Jesus was, who he is, and how he would be reflected in the future.³⁰ It wasn't long before I began to receive feedback from individuals who visited the site. Among them was a special email I received from a friend who urged me to take a look at Slide 8 "Touch the Fire"^{30b} in *Code Blue* and to see if I could see what she detected in that image. It was the shot I took to show what the light looks like when it shines through the window above my front door. After I responded with a few observations, she pointed out that you can clearly see the image of the red flower of Rosa Mystica in the light. She attached a scanned copy of a brochure that was made to explain all of the artwork and stained-glass windows that don the same image of that flower in our Mary Chapel. That flower was even embroidered on all of the vestments that the clergy wore when celebrating Mass in the chapel. I was simply enchanted and felt a warm inner glow spread out from my heart on out to each of my extremities.

Bishop Barron once described God as an artist who can see the totality of His painting, having blended a variety of colors and shades to make up His masterpiece.³¹ I didn't have a clue what the

Crazy

big picture was all about, but I felt a strong connectedness that made me feel as if I was alive in every one of the Lord's strokes upon the canvass. By looking both inward and outward, I was blessed with both a literal and figurative glimpse of the Man of Colors. And in receiving that image, I caught a glimpse of myself.

I saw a picture of a woman in a painting created by an unnamed painter and the slew of flowers that poured out of a simple man's tilma in the sketch of the gentleman upon the "Man of Colours" album cover. It not only reflected the image of Rosa Mystica, but it seemingly mirrored what St. Juan Diego³² must have looked like just before the flowers poured out of his tilma and miraculously revealed the beautiful image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. I prayed to be like her, and now the Lord was answering my prayer as I gazed at the stars and moon while listening to a band that was originally called Flowers.

Iva Davies, just a few short weeks after that concert, a photograph was published of you and Michael Paynter completely encapsulated in yellow. It was a powerful image, but not nearly as powerful an image as you reflecting Christ crucified in His passion while singing "Don't Believe Anymore" closely echoing Matthew 27: 47, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Unrequited love, bad breaks, and real challenges in life burn and purify. It amazes me how our sufferings can really bring about so much goodness to others and in it comes resurrection, new beginnings, new possibilities. With Christ, anything is possible.³³ Thank you for your kindness, generosity, and the precious time you spent with me if just for a moment. Through these experiences and the depths of your songs, I've learned a third important lesson:

Embrace the Supernatural

I love you.

Crazy

Notes

1. There are two music videos for ICEHOUSE's song "Crazy". The Australian version depicts the lead singer encountering instances of lucky breaks and near misses. The International version closely mimics the storyline from the movie "Play Misty for Me" starring Clint Eastwood, where a crazed fan stalks a radio disc jockey. The Australian version can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TSDjivoy-0>. The International version can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRpJaZbt0uQ>.
2. Cardinal Sarah, R. (2019). *The day is now far spent*. Ignatius Press. p.49.
3. Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy Music Quiz
4. Song written by Neil Geraldo and Myron Grombacker about troubadours such as Bob Dylan who sang songs reflecting the life and mission of Jesus Christ. The song was released on Pat Benatar's 7th album, "Wide Awake in Dreamland", the one she was supporting when she came to sing at our University.
5. Luke 12:47-48
6. Place where individuals interested in the teachings of Carl Jung convene for lectures and courses in Houston, TX.
7. Hollis, J. (2013). *Hauntings: Dispelling the ghosts who run our lives*. Chiron Publications.
8. Jung, E. and von Franz, M. (1998). *The grail legend*. Princeton University Press, 2nd revised ed.
9. The piece was called "Anima/Animus" and incited my interest in Emma Jung's book, *Animus/Anima*.
10. The name of the character Dr. Stone was significant to me, because while in the course with Dr. James Hollis called "Hauntings", he once asked if any of us suffered from a Medusa Complex. He followed up his question, "Are there things that make you turn to stone?" I was discovering through the writing process that I had suffered from a Medusa Complex, where I turned to stone before men, including God, with a hardened heart—a heart of stone. The homilist described Dr. Stone in the movie *Gravity* as a woman whose heart had turned to stone after a great tragedy and found herself completely disconnected from the world as a result. I could relate and saw my transformation from candle to "stone in the night's sky" as an indication that God can find a use for even the negative aspects of our lives. Even my stone-cold heart, could be transformed and used to reflect the light of love of the sun/son, Jesus.

Crazy

11. Fictitious character in a series about an archeologist. In this case, he was seeking the Holy Grail.
12. I went to confession on Saturday morning, December 7, 2013, making me eligible to receive communion the next day, Sunday, at 10:45 Mass on the 8th.
13. Unbeknownst to me at the time, St. Mother Theresa of Calcutta desired the same thing, to be a “saint of the darkness” whose light could help others out of the dark.
14. This was a Holy Day of Obligation meaning that I should have been in church that morning. The occasion commemorates the Blessed Mother’s ascension into heaven, body and soul.
15. Bishop Barron quotes Sheen in Episode 4: Our Tainted Nature’s Solitary Boast: Mary Mother of God, of the “Catholicism” series from Word on Fire Ministries.
16. The process of putting the presentation together closely mirrored what one of the members of my dissertation committee envisioned for the future with regards to sharing research findings by linking data elements to electronic copies of references and other supportive materials online.
17. My original intent was to have the story posted by November 13, 2015, the release date for the movie “The 33” about the Chilean miners who were trapped underground for 69 days.
18. Therese Schroeder-Sheker was founder and dean of the School of Music-Thanatology at St. Patrick Hospital in Missoula, Montana. She developed methods in music thanatology using voice and the harp to support those actively dying (last 24-48 hrs.) and those projected to have less than six months left to live, based on the death vigils practiced by French Cluniac monks that were part of the Benedictine order in the middle ages.
19. This story was compelling to me in that I’d spent my life concerned with my father’s perception of the church as a place where sexual abuses were committed; and now, there was a reported apparition where this particular concern was heavy on the Blessed Mother’s heart as well. This apparition is currently an unapproved apparition by the church due to the lack of a supernatural element.
20. This Psalm is of great repentance, requesting God’s mercy and forgiveness.
21. I named my first narrative “I Let the Music Speak” after the song on ABBA’s LP “The Visitors” of the same name. The song most closely reflects the way I experience music as prayer and a form of synesthesia. “How a

Crazy

Heretic Found a Stairway to Heaven” came to me as a subtitle while in spiritual direction. I had no idea at the time that I would later learn of how Rosa Mystica offered a stairway to heaven, perhaps in my mind, the stairway I had been looking for when I was young.

22. I learned at a retreat that most likely, Jesus looked a lot like His mother, given that God made flesh only had Mary to contribute to his human image. In the Catholic church Jesus is the New Adam and Mary, the New Eve.

23. March 12, 2017

24. Concert video footage can be found at “Don’t Believe Anymore Drum Solo 40 Years LIVE Icehouse” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gfTDMBwKtA>

25. In interviews, Iva Davies explains that the song “Man of Colours” is a compilation of a variety of influences, including his mother, who was an artist whose eyes were deteriorating at the time. He also explained that the song “Man of Colours” just came to him and was completely written and recorded within a three-hour time span. Concert footage for “Man of Colours” can be found at “Man of Colours 40 Years LIVE Icehouse” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ncCXFgsVrc&t=257s>.

26. The working title for the manuscript was “Code Blue: Reflections on Becoming an Echo of God.”

27. Harris, E. (2018). “Pope to meet Chilean bishops, discuss ‘devastating’ impact of abuse crisis.” EWTN News.

28. A friend told me about the crying statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe and later cut the article out of a newspaper to give to me.

29. The timing mystifies me still today. I had been in the movie theater to see the limited release of “An Interview with God” on August 20, 2018. A major part of the plot was the protagonist’s inability or perhaps, incapability to see that God had really come to him after a desperate prayer for help. As a Christian, he did not recognize God. His grief made it difficult for him to see who was in front of him all along. The movie inspired me to finish editing my story *Code Blue: A Walk into the Kingdom with the Ghost of Time*. The call for Pope Francis to resign came later that week on August 25, 2018. By that time, my story was in good enough shape to post to my YouTube channel.

30. Named after an Icehouse song with a music video cluttered with Catholic and Marian symbols which can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hgRYNh6YH-Y>.

Crazy

31. Bishop Barron presents this simile in Episode 10: World Without End: The Last Things of the “Catholicism” series from Word on Fire Ministries.

32. St. Juan Diego was a simple man who encountered the Blessed Mother on the way to Mass. She asked him to go to the local bishop to tell him that she wanted him to build a church atop of Mt. Tepeyac near Mexico City. The bishop was reluctant to take the man seriously, until he finally told Juan Diego to ask the woman, he met to send a special sign that would prove that she was in fact the Blessed Mother. Long story short—Juan Diego returned to the bishop with his tilma full of Castilian roses and a beautiful and mysterious painting of the Blessed Virgin on the rough material that Juan used to carry the flowers. The event caused several of the native peoples in Mexico to convert to Catholicism and caused corrupt Catholics to clean up their act! The cloth has been analyzed and studied over the years. It’s made out of material that usually only lasts for up to ten years. The tilma was 120 years old before someone thought it might be a good idea to encase it in glass to help preserve it. Over another 300 years have passed since then, and it is still in good shape. The colors haven’t faded, nor can anyone figure out what the pigments are made from either. The most striking detail for me personally is the notion that the stars on her mantel mirror what would have been the constellations in the night sky on December 12, 1531 when the image appeared on the garment.

33. Matthew 19:26 and the name of an Icehouse song “Anything is Possible” off of the “Code Blue” album.

Chapter 5

Little Wonders

Green. I would be less than forthcoming if I said that I always acknowledge and accept the supernatural in my life upon the first impression. When I experience something that I don't quite understand, I am ultra-vigilant to first face facts and follow the evidence to triangulate the incident by using multiple methods to collect relevant information about it to understand it from different angles. While as a researcher who subscribes to the belief that the world is full of patterns, meaning and intelligibility, I seek the Truth, knowing that at the end of the day, there are some things that are simply unknowable. For many years, however, I thought that everything and everyone could be investigated, categorized, and dissected, to understand their inner workings.²

It was to be expected. Like so many of us of a certain age, I spent most of the 90's taking a variety of personality tests. The

ideas behind all these assessments was to find out what your natural strengths were while identifying areas in which there was a need for improvement. I was happy to sharpen my skills and work to continuously grow my capabilities. Truth be told, I'd be happy to be a professional student. I was a lot like a Star Trek Vulcan who cried all the time over the beauty and the sadness that I saw in the world. I was uber-sensitive, observant, and highly intuitive. When I entered graduate school to pursue a doctorate, I was asked about my research interest, and boy was it loaded. In a way, I wanted to delve into the tension between faith and reason, but I wasn't quite sure how to verbalize it.

"I'd like to know how I know what I know," I reported to my professor. He smiled and simply wrote the word "methods" next to my name. That's exactly how I ended up in the field of research methodologies. While I was interested in unearthing truth, I meant to say something related to the fact that I was interested in finding out how I "knew" to pay attention to the fact that the author Nathaniel Hawthorne mentioned the names of the plants and bushes in *The Scarlett Letter*. I wanted to know why I had dreams that alerted me to things that were going to happen before they actually did. I was curious about the workings of the supernatural in my life, but I was diverted into the field of ethnography, where I learned to observe, study, and describe people.

I had no idea at the time that I would use the methods I learned back then to take the four narratives⁶ I'd written about my life for six years to take a closer look at who I was, where I had been, and what kind of life patterns and habits I exhibited and developed over time.

I took care to record my life experiences and feelings about them as honestly and as accurately as possible while gathering as many artifacts to corroborate and support the stories. Then, I

Little Wonders

puzzled over the many elements of my narrative like a child trying to decipher a Rubik's cube.¹⁰ Many people believe that the devil is in the details, and yet this is where I found the most beauty and truth that gave credence to the notion that God has a plan to prosper each one of us.¹¹ This was most evident as I organized sequences of events into golden strands that seemed to keep my life together. Perhaps the most compelling strand was the story of the Eucharist.

I recall sitting with my pastor, planning my wedding, moons ago. When it came to deciding whether or not to celebrate Mass, I was adamant that I didn't want to stir up trouble with what I called the whole "communion thing" with no real understanding of what I was saying or doing. Not everyone would be able to have it because many of my family and friends weren't Catholic. In my ignorance, it just seemed a little improper to sing a song like "Table of Plenty" that invites everyone to have a bite, except for those who seemingly needed it the most.¹⁵ Communion to me at the time was like *The Scarlett Letter*, where one person's sin was made publicly obvious, while others' sins could remain totally covert. In a "fake it 'til you make it" world, the "don't ask, don't tell" mantra reigns supreme. I skipped confession for a long time. Remember, I was the kid that went looking for the stairway to heaven. It was never my intent to profane anything about God. It was quite the opposite. But in my ignorance, I did so.

I figured Jesus broke the bread and shared with the others as a family. That's what we all do at our dinner tables, eat together and visit. That's how the story is supposed to go. Right? But to invite guests over, bring out the bread and wine and say that only certain people can have it seemed ungodly to me, especially at a wedding.¹⁸ To me, it was all symbolic anyway.¹⁹

Little Wonders

When Father began to ask me questions about my upbringing and why I had mentioned that my parents wouldn't have communion, I looked at the clergyman, took a deep breath, and let out a reluctant, "Well." Silence. My eyes started to well up as I leaned forward to stare at my feet. "Father, I can't be 100% sure, but I believe that a priest sexually abused my father. Something is awfully wrong. He won't go to church, but he watches preachers on the television all the time. Sometimes I even feel guilty for being Catholic. I don't want to believe some of the things he says," I uttered, just a notch above a whisper.

Father was very understanding, apologized, and switched gears to talk about it. He didn't pull any punches either. He validated the possibility that my intuition was correct. He didn't deny anything or try to convince me otherwise, and it made me feel like I wasn't just grasping at straws. I felt safe and even began to reconsider having communion when Father simply moved on to the next item to consider for the wedding. I was relieved.

So, Mike and I married in the Church and forged forward with no communion at the wedding. It wasn't until one of our neighbors started to ask me questions about communion that made me start to wonder about it. He'd been in a horrible car accident with other passengers in the automobile when they slid over a patch of snow. Everyone survived, but he had an experience during that time that he never forgot.

He first asked me if I was Catholic. I nodded my head.

"You eat that wafer thing, I think communion? Isn't that right?" he inquired.

"Yes."

Little Wonders

“What do you guys put in that thing?” he pressed with eyes wide open in all seriousness.

“I don’t understand what you mean?”

“When I was lying there in pain, thinking I was going to die, a priest came and confused me for my brother-in-law who is Catholic. He put one of those wafers in my mouth and all of a sudden, the pain was gone, and I was happy to die. I knew in that instant that I was going to be okay.”

“Wow! He gave you communion, and you felt totally different?”

“It was amazing. Never had that type of experience before. But I know there had to have been something in that bread. It got me all fixed up and ready to go.”

I sat in silent awe. Sadly, I didn’t know that the answer was Jesus. All I knew is that I desperately needed to hear his story. It came with perfect timing, because I had been in and out of church at the time. My pastor was moved to another parish, and when the “Spotlight” team at the *Boston Globe* broke their story, I had no one I trusted to talk to about it at church. I was overwhelmed with emotions and was floundering. I was in and out of church over the years that followed. I was even considering converting to another denomination, but the testimony I heard that day, made me think twice.

As a matter of fact, it made me think a lot about the Eucharist. “Why was it something that wasn’t shared with everyone. If it had healing power, wouldn’t we want everyone to have it?” I just couldn’t wrap my head around what came across as an exclusion thing that separated the good sheep from the bad sheep. I was grossly misinformed.

Little Wonders

When I returned home from Australia after that first trip and found a church in which to serve, one of the things I took advantage of was an adult catechism class.²¹ Different guest speakers came in to talk to us about a variety of Catholic topics and themes. No longer the self-conscious, shy, woman I once was, I raised my hand up over and over again to ask all the questions I wanted to ask when I was younger and new ones as well. At one point, I stopped a deacon after he used the word “liturgy” repetitively. It occurred to me that I really didn’t know what he was talking about.

“Um, forgive me, if I sound totally ignorant, but I really don’t know this. What do you mean by the word ‘liturgy’? I hear it a lot. Can anyone define it for me?” Crickets.

The silence was uncomfortable while the deacon racked his brain, trying to remember.

“It’s a form of worship that requires participation,” a young woman announced. “I Googled it!”

“See. There you go. Thanks for looking that up,” the deacon responded with relief.

“Ok. I think I get it.”

“Yes, other churches require that the congregation just sit and listen and maybe sing. A liturgical approach to worship involves oral and physical responses.”

“Got it.”

One night, as we were walking out of class, another participant approached me to thank me for being willing to ask questions that no one felt comfortable asking but were dying to know. It wasn’t long before I realized that many folks were just as confused and

Little Wonders

curious about Catholic teachings as I was. Funny, how I don't recall anyone coming in to talk to us explicitly about the Eucharist, but God had His own plan for me.

Eventually, I was approached to lead a small group.²² I hadn't a clue what a small group was, but again, since that trip to Australia, I was all in! "Yes!" I offered up in my cluelessness. I attended a short meeting to find out that all I needed to do was to call some people from a list I was given and to get us all together to read scripture from a booklet and go over the guiding questions. As a former classroom teacher, I assumed I could handle it.

Soon, I had a small group of women who took turns going to each other's houses to study together. I was absolutely fascinated by one of the participants who spent a great deal of time living abroad in places where people were not free to worship. Like me, she had been exposed to a variety of faith denominations, even outside of Christianity. When she shared brilliant stories about the faith of others, I wondered what made her remain a Catholic. One day, I chose to broach the topic.

"So, what is it that you appreciate about being a Catholic?" I mused.

"Oh, the Eucharist!" she shot back joyfully.

"The Eucharist?"

"Oh, absolutely! I couldn't turn away from Jesus!"

I just nodded, puzzled at how she called the Eucharist Jesus, and continued with, "I have a friend who bakes bread for communion in a different denomination. What makes Catholic bread so special?" I inquired with the story of my neighbor's experience with the Eucharist in mind.

Little Wonders

“It’s the body of Jesus,” she replied as if she was surprised, I didn’t know the answer.

“I get that. I hear that all the time. But it still doesn’t really answer my question, because my friend would answer my question in the same way. There must be something else.”

Crickets...but not for a lack of not knowing the answer. No. There were crickets because the ladies were shocked that I didn’t know, and I was the group facilitator! Eek!

Finally came the answer. “I believe in the consecration.”

“I hear that word a lot. I don’t think I’d be able to spell it. What does it mean?”

“The host literally becomes the body of Christ. It’s not a symbol. It is Him.”

I paused to take her response in to hold it for a little while, before asking,

“You mean the host is transformed into Jesus, literally?”

“Yes. When God said, ‘Let there be light,’ there was light, right?” “Yes.”

“So, when Jesus said, ‘This is my body,’ it became his body because he said so. He is the Word.”

I had to stop and think some more, and really consider what I was being told.

“It’s like a special miracle. It changes into Him,” the woman worked to massage the idea, as she could tell that I was struggling with the concept. I just nodded my head to take some of the tension out of the air. Then, it occurred to me that I had indeed

experienced the otherworldly and had accepted that some things are unexplainable and undefinable, but they are—just like love, very real. So, I decided to just accept it that day. The Eucharist is really Jesus, an invisible reality and grace that is made visible for us to grasp and see as a sacrament.

Just as the whole idea of the Eucharist being the real presence of Jesus was starting to sink in, I began to wonder about the rules that seemed to govern who could have Jesus and who could not. I wanted to know where in the *Bible* it said that only certain people could have it.

“Chapter 6!”²³ was the answer I became accustomed to hearing. Which really didn’t answer my question. Other folks just shrugged their shoulders and said it was in the catechism. I wondered how it was that we got the catechism. Surely all of this stuff is in the *Bible*, right?²⁴ My super sleuth persona wasn’t always a welcomed guest, so I learned to tone it down after a while. I zipped my lips and doubled down, by joining more classes, going on retreats, and attending *Bible* study, always looking for how it was that some people could have Jesus and others could not.²⁵ My need to find out more about the Eucharist fueled my need to face facts and follow the evidence to triangulate an understanding that would make rational sense to me. Again, it just seemed so ungodly to deny the very people who probably needed Jesus the most, sinners. Even so, if we were supposed to be a field hospital for the sick,²⁶ how could we withhold our best medicine?

It was incredible the way God led me to people and other resources for help. He appeared to use the number configuration of 3 and 33 as breadcrumbs that could help me find my way out of the forest. A two-year subscription to *Magnificat*, a monthly booklet with daily Mass readings in it, costs \$3.33. So, I ordered it. Fr.

Little Wonders

Michael Gaitley has a series, “Hearts Afire”, consisting of 3 books, the first, *33 Days to Morning Glory*. You get the picture. Right?

As it turned out, I needed to make a major shift in my thinking. It wasn't until I came upon Scott Hahn's *The Lamb's Supper*,²⁷ that I began to get a sense of how it was that only certain people could have communion. According to tradition, a worthy sacrifice was to be offered up to God, which usually required a robust and unblemished lamb. Hence, Jesus *fit* the bill and *paid* the bill for us. As a member of the mystical body of Christ and to be part of a worthy sacrifice, an individual needed to be “clean”. Of course, all of us are sinners, but by going to confession, we could receive the grace to be worthy of participation in Holy Communion. I got it.

I equated it all to the process of scaffolding that we teachers talk about amongst ourselves. To help students, learn and change their behavior, we offer a great deal of support, especially if they really struggle. Scaffolding is like holding the seat of a bicycle while a child grows in confidence to be able to balance and ride on their own without help. Likewise, the sacraments help us move to greater states of holiness and closeness to God, by making grace more tangible and visible for us, such that we become what we eat, Jesus. For years, I avoided the confessional, when it was a sacrament that I sorely needed. I just didn't trust that Jesus would really be there for me in the confessional.²⁸ As a consequence, I paid for therapy. Funny thing is, even Carl Jung believed that many people could be cured of their mental illnesses if they would just go to confession, and he wasn't even Catholic!²⁹ I tried to do things on my own, but the reality was, I really couldn't. Most of us need a lot of love and a lot of handholding, err, scaffolding.

Okay. The rules governing the Eucharist, were not there to make the Eucharist unattainable to certain people. No. They were meant to be helpful, to support people as they worked to make real

Little Wonders

changes in their lives. The blessing came when I realized that no one pressures you or really watches you. Accountability is all yours. It's strictly up to each individual to either accept the help or not. Some of us use the railings going up and downstairs. Others don't. Either way, the danger of falling is always there.³⁰

Once I began to understand more and more about the Eucharist, I began to see the Mass in a whole new light. I grew the desire to become an EMHC, Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion, a layperson who helps distribute communion at Mass, so I signed up to go to the training. At the time that I was preparing to be officially commissioned, I began posting YouTube videos of me selecting a song and explaining why I thought it was a great prayer or meditation. The week before I was commissioned, I posted a commentary for the song "Little Wonders" by Rob Thomas. I talked about all the little synchronicities that reminded me of the Lord's providence in all that I experienced. When it came time to take my oath, the homilist at the Mass happened to speak about all the synchronicities that remind us that Jesus is always with us. It was a double pleasure, for sure! I'd come a very long way to that precious moment. And I knew that Jesus was really with me.

More recently, I happened upon my pastor at a retreat who married me and my husband so many years ago. I sat down with him to have a special talk. I just jumped right on in with, "Father, I wanted to thank you. Because of you, I'm still Catholic. I was encouraged by others to just go to a justice of the peace. I was really teetering there for a moment, but then when I told you that I suspected that my father was abused in the church, you handled me wonderfully. You earned my trust that day. Sad to say, when all that stuff came out just after the turn of the millennium, you had already moved to another parish. I had no one I trusted to talk to about it, and I almost left for good. Then, my marriage started to

Little Wonders

fall apart, and I have to admit, you were right that I should have had a Mass.”

The retired clergyman just tilted his head, puzzled with what I was talking about.

“Father, of course, my marriage was going to be troubled from the get-go, because I had uninvited Jesus to the wedding!³¹ I didn’t understand it then. I so get it now. It took me a while to come around, but I did. When I saw you were available for confession at this retreat, I thought I’d mention it to you, while getting cleaned up.”

Father just smiled with twinkling eyes, and I saw Jesus alive and well in him.

Father, when I came to you to revisit the past, I appreciated your assurances and suggestions. You always made it easier for me to face facts and follow the evidence to draw my own conclusions with a fatherly sense that I’d eventually come around to learning what I needed to know. Never had I prayed the Magnificat³² with such justification and spirit. The Lord has done great things for me!³³ Thank you for holding my hand when I needed it the most. Through you, I learned a 4th important lesson embedded in my quest for understanding what the Eucharist means to Catholics. I would have never come to understand that mystery had I not buckled down to ask questions, listen, study and

Face Facts and Follow the Evidence

I love you.

Little Wonders

Notes

1. Music video by Rob Thomas at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6wZhd8M848>. The song was part of the soundtrack for the movie “Meet the Robinsons”. The video opens up with rain.
2. I let reason trump faith and many cases, common sense.
3. Some of the tests included Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory, Kagan Affect Sensitivity Scale, and True Colors to name a few.
4. Logical being from a science fiction television show that does not express emotion
5. Systematic study of people and their cultures
6. Collection of information, notes, journals, diaries, photographs, letters
7. I equated God with a being for which I could not understand, therefore things that happened that seemed unreasonable, I chalked up to God.
8. Although my experiences might have been questionable, they consistently happened in patterned ways over time.
9. 3D toy that was popular in the 80's where the object was to twist the cube to achieve sides with solid and consistent colors.
10. Jeremiah 29:11
11. While I experienced synchronicities, I found that the scriptures usually explain their meaning.
12. The real presence of Jesus Christ in consecrated bread and wine.
13. John 6:51-58
14. I hadn't a clue what the Mass was all about.
15. I later learned that many Catholics did not go to confession, but still received the Eucharist.
16. I was influenced by Protestant teachings that you can take your sins to the Lord alone. I didn't understand that confession offers a grace that satiates the human need to hear from another person that one is forgiven, has a clean slate and can try again.

Little Wonders

17. I didn't know the story of the Wedding at Cana, where Jesus celebrates the nuptials of a couple who runs out of wine. In Catholic circles, "running out of wine" symbolically means to "lose joy". Therefore, if Jesus is not a guest at your wedding, who's going to turn your "water", drab, unhappy life into "wine", joy?

18. I did not recognize the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

19. I saw this as an indication that he might go to church with me one day, because he trusted him.

20. The class was called "Oasis".

21. Small group participation was encouraged, since our parish had close to 10,000 families registered. Continued learning and accountability to the faith was best facilitated by small groups of parishioners meeting regularly in each other's homes to learn more and about the Catholic faith and fellowshiping together.

22. "I am the bread of life" set of scriptures where Jesus says, "Whoever eats this bread will live forever". John 6:58

23. The Catholic catechism is based on both the Bible and tradition. What I did not understand at the time, is that the Church Fathers were the ones who decided which books would make up the Bible. So, there were understandings that went beyond the Bible, many of which were grounded in the Jewish faith as well as the decisions that had to be made as the Christian community grew over time. For example, nowhere in the Bible do we learn that Peter was crucified upside down. This understanding was handed down as part of the teachings of the early church.

24. I read the entire New Testament thinking that the answer would be in there somewhere. What I didn't understand was the fact that I wasn't going to really understand the New Testament, unless I considered what was written in the Old Testament. I learned this important lesson while taking a course on "Revelation".

25. What Pope Francis said the Church needed to be

26. Hahn, S. (1999). The lamb's supper. Doubleday.

27. I had a hard time thinking about priests taking the role of Jesus in the confessional, because I viewed them as men who could misjudge, be inappropriate, or damage me in some way. I had a hard time with trust, and I myself was very judgmental.

Little Wonders

28. According to Jung, “The Roman Catholic Church provides a chance for people to get away from their complexes and back to mankind with confession and the age-old therapy was consecration by initiation which included the avowal of sins.” Consulted <https://carljungdepthpsychologysite.blog/2019/12/30/carl-jung-on-catholicism-anthology/#.Xubcv0VKiUk> (June 14, 2020)
29. Todd, E. (1985). “The value of confession and forgiveness according to Jung”. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 24, pp. 39-48.
30. The church teaches participation in the sacraments to stay on the path to salvation.
31. A reference to the story of the Wedding at Cana
32. The Canticle of Mary (Song of Mary) from Luke 1:46-55
33. Luke 1:49

Chapter 6

The World I Know

Blue. Facing facts and following wherever evidence took me didn't automatically mean I trusted. I still questioned everything I was discovering and dragged my feet, mostly because there were things about me that I wasn't willing to face or admit. God wants us "all in", not just parts of us. He wants us to follow Him by taking up our cross and embracing it. I'd always heard that phrase "take up your cross"², but never really understood what was meant by it. I figured it meant to keep moving forward even if it hurt, just as Jesus carried His cross to Calvary. I later came to understand that it meant to be true to Jesus, even if it meant you'd die in the process. This requires full loyalty, full surrender.

In that jam-packed December of 2015, I attended a meeting to decide if I wanted to participate as part of a team to conduct a retreat for other women. The theme came from John 21:17 "Lord you know everything; you know that I love you." It was the verse

The World I Know

that preceded Jesus' request to Peter to feed His sheep, or rather, preach the Truth of the Gospel, even if it could result in death.

The whole notion of the Lord knowing everything just tingled all over, as I recalled the day I found the card with Jeremiah 33:3 on it: "Call to me and I will answer you; I will tell you things beyond the reach of your knowledge". "Of course, He would!" I thought to myself. "He knows everything, even how much I've tried to be a good daughter and how much I've listened to Him, especially when He spoke to me through music. He knows that I love Him. And that's how I grew to know what I know. It was the answer to my original research question. I'd always engaged in prayer." Through a homilist at my church, I learned that even people like Forrest Gump could be an echo of God, and Dad made sure that if nothing else, I was more than capable of feeding a crowd. He taught me all the tricks of the trade he learned in his early days in the military as a cook and baker before he was commissioned an officer.

And so, the command I heard most loudly and clearly was to feed the Lord's lambs.³ It made perfect sense. Everything that I'd experienced in life seemed to prepare me for this new stage, this new calling. But then the shadow of my past kept coming up again and again as I continued to study, write, and explore parish life. It was as if I was dealt a hand of four aces flanked by a suicide king. Although, I was quite gifted, I had a fundamental weakness that only God could help me overcome.

Prior to my first trip to Australia in March of 2013, I was on the brink of a total nervous breakdown, as I prayed for God to tell me who I was. It was the result of reading books, refereed studies, attending seminars, and watching lectures that were posted to YouTube on everything related to the autism spectrum after a

The World I Know

family therapist suggested I read a couple of specific books on the topic, each, incidentally, with the name Tony Attwood on them.

The difficulty in researching anything these days includes the ability to identify reputable sources of information from those grounded in agendas and bad science. There were many contradictory ideas, attitudes, and suggestions, based on very different presuppositions and orientations. To muddy up the water, the DSM 4, nicknamed the *Bible* of psychological disorders and mental illnesses, was being updated. The new guidelines were not going to be available in the DSM 5 until the late spring, early summer of that year.

In the meantime, my marriage was falling apart. My husband and I suspected that undiagnosed autism was causing our problems. We each had our fingers pointed at the other, and I was very well aware that there were things about me that I'd kept secret for years, too afraid to let them out into the light. It never occurred to me that I was autistic.

Within a few weeks, after I offered up a prayer for the Lord to tell me who I am, I stood in front of psychologist Dr. Tony Attwood⁴ in Brisbane, Australia, bewildered yet overwhelmed with a kind of joy I can't explain. The way he and his research associate, Michelle Garnett⁵ discussed autism with great understanding and compassion made it seem so much more appealing than remaining defensive about it. It was the first time I mentally tried on the label to see how it would fit and feel. And although I had no real answer as to whether or not I was, in fact, autistic, I did leave Brisbane with a much better outlook about it.

I also came to recognize that the sexual abuse I experienced in my early years was still very much a specter that was running my life and negatively impacting my marriage. The session I attended

The World I Know

opened up conversations about sexuality, the effects of pornography, and sexual addictions within the context of learning more about autism spectrum conditions. Many of us experience the world and ourselves in varied ways, given the sensory issues that can accompany such a diagnosis. I understood this very well when I remembered that while I am extremely sensitive to touch, my husband is the complete opposite. He needs a great deal of pressure to register a sensation even while shaking his hand. This was just one difficulty we faced, among others. I grew to understand that there is much confusion and misinformation about sexuality with overgeneralizations and other assertions that can be detrimental to the spirit as well as the body.²

The whole session caused me to think more deeply about the human condition, given the struggles I faced conceiving a child. I was shocked when I found so very many young couples seeking the same help I was at the clinic. I recalled that years ago, my mother-in-law had me studying books like *Our Stolen Future*⁶ that told of genetic anomalies that could give rise to all kinds of dysfunctions in the animal world like the development of weak eggs that would crack open before the creatures inside could fully develop. I remembered seeing pictures of two-headed snakes, six-legged frogs, and creatures with deformed sex organs. All of these irregularities were attributed to pollutants in the water, the air, and the food supply. I had to stop and wonder, “Who’s to say that the way we have treated our natural resources and environment has something to do with some of the anomalous issues surrounding gender identity, neurodiversity, and yes, sexuality today?” There are many more questions to be asked and so many more answers to be found. That’s not to say what people experience is not real. No. What they experience may be very well attributed to something beyond their control or choice. It doesn’t make their experience normal either. It makes it different due to the tampering of natural

The World I Know

law, through how we've handled the environment. Normalizing these kinds of differences without fully understanding the root causes of them, only enables us to possibly continue to abuse the world we know. It doesn't create acceptance or unity either. Only love, the will of the greater good for the other, can create acceptance and unity. No wonder Pope Francis keeps talking about climate change!⁷

I recalled the days when I sought out other biological reasons for some of my idiosyncrasies and experiences in my late twenties. I learned through a conversation with my father, that exposure to Agent Orange could cause an individual to have symptoms of Bipolar Disorder.⁸ He told me how a doctor at the Veteran's Hospital explained that many soldiers had been exposed to the chemical weapon in Vietnam and suspected that my father had been one of them. I wondered if that could have affected me and my siblings and if so, how? I also came upon studies revealing that DDT was a powerful chemical used in farming that was known to wreak havoc on the physiology of an individual exposed to it over time.⁹ Mom's mother had been from a migrant family and was most likely exposed to the substance. The possibilities appeared to be endless. "What is normal?" I began to ask myself.

Fast forward to 2017, and I was ready to surrender and face the whole truth, not just the parts that I wanted to or was willing to acknowledge about myself. I was back in Australia, this time attending three-days of training to learn how to work with adults and adolescents on the spectrum with Dr. Attwood and Dr. Garnett. And for those three-days, I sat up front, hanging onto to every word that the good doctors uttered. They were talking about me, not by name, but by the description they gave to a specific group of people. I could no longer deny it. The evidence was all there. I could have been their poster child with all of my social

The World I Know

confusion, anxiety, depression, repetitive stimming behaviors, unusually focused special interests, and sensory issues.

Over the past four years before I participated in those classes, I found wiggle room to give me pause and make me consider that maybe, just maybe, I was dealing with something else. I mean, most of my friends to whom I disclosed my suspicions about being autistic were surprised and doubted that I was. While it was refreshing for me personally to hear them make their observations, I had to remind myself that they didn't know me when I was younger, and that I worked hard to refine my interpersonal skills ever since I started work on my doctoral studies that were completely focused on researching microsocial communication systems with specialized methods. "Was I healed then? Had I learned to compensate?" I wondered.

Dr. Attwood shared his experience with individuals he treated when they were very young children and noted that some of them did in fact learn to compensate such that their condition couldn't be immediately detected. As a result, an updated diagnosis could be given to recognize these individuals because autism is not curable. It just doesn't go away. So, "subclinical" was the term used to identify those who could compensate.¹⁰ Just the word "subclinical" rang true since I'd already been diagnosed "subclinical" for other things in the past. It seemed like I had always been caught somewhere in the in-between. I understood very well that individuals could have all of the characteristics of autism and eventually learn new behaviors to compensate. I recognized that the methods I studied in graduate school offered hope for other individuals like me. I began to wonder if any of the psychologists in the room had ever heard of them. I raised my hand and asked the group if they had ever heard of Interpersonal Process Recall.¹¹ As it turned out, not a soul. It's then that I knew

The World I Know

that I had been given something very powerful that could help others, especially after many participants expressed interest in them.

By the end of the third day, I blubbered and carried on with waves of tears filled with joy and appreciation. It all started when I noticed that the session was getting ready to come to a close, and I thought I'd pen a quick note to thank Dr. Attwood. I wrote about the times that he stood before the class with his arms stretched out to each of his sides, head looking down, posed as a person getting ready to jump off of a building, resembling a crucified Christ in His passion. And while I learned that when attempting to talk an individual with autism out of suicide, it's more effective to appeal to things like pets or special interests like "Star Wars", I suggested that some people don't follow their plans to jump when they've had an encounter with the Holy Spirit. I explained that I came to the training sessions he and Dr. Garnett presented with a song in my heart that illustrated this point called "The World I Know".

It features a man standing at the top of a building getting ready to jump with both of his arms stretched out to each side, posed as a crucified Christ in His passion when a Pigeon lands on one of his outstretched hands and frees him from the desire to end it all. In his joy, he feeds the bird, the ants, and finally desires to feed the people below as he tosses his cash off the ledge. The whole video itself causes me to hear an inner voice in my mind's ear say, "Feed my sheep."

Admittedly, those talks about suicide during the training, brought up memories of a very disturbing time in my life when I was in junior high. I was floundering and couldn't find my footing. To make matters worse, I had another teacher who seemed to dislike me immensely. After being absent from class for seven school days, stuck home with strep throat, I returned to class on a

The World I Know

test day. When she handed me an exam, I reminded her that I hadn't been in class.

"It's your responsibility to get all your assignments and to do them at home, so you can be ready when you return. I will make no exceptions for you!" she snapped at me in front of my peers. "Here. Here are the notes. You might want to look them over."

I was so livid that I took a look at the handouts and absorbed them by making a mental image of them in my mind. I took that exam and regurgitated all the correct answers. The teacher accused me of cheating and demanded that I take it again at her desk. Again, I dropped all of the correct answers back onto that test before her eyes. But that wasn't the end of her bullying.

She distributed a list of titles she wanted us to use to select a book to read and draft a formal report that we would have to present in front of the class. I made my selection and was mortified by the subject matter, once I got deeper into the plot. It was a story called *Steffie Can't Come Out to Play*. It was about an unhappy teen who ran away from home. As it turned out, she was forced into prostitution. I made the best of a bad situation and poured my heart into that assignment, working diligently to show that mean teacher that I was in fact, a good student, undeserving of her taunting. When it came time to deliver my report, I had everything well planned and in order. I made sure I fulfilled every requirement for the assignment. It mustered all of me to stand in front of the class to share it. When I was finished, I thought I had won over my peers for a change, when they clapped and cheered enthusiastically. My teacher on the other hand, smirked and fired, "What a nasty book! Do your parents know you read smut like that?"

The World I Know

All activity in the class came to a halt, and I was very publicly shamed. I returned to my desk with my tail between my legs. School was hard enough as it was. I'd already grown from walking in circles on the playground when I was a little girl, to walking in circles in my bedroom, listening to music as a teen to escape the cold that crippled me. It seemed like I couldn't get anything right. And while music was my escape and prayer, it got to the point where I just couldn't handle the cruelty from my peers and the coolness that came off that woman who seemed to come from hell.

So, I signed up to see one of the school counselors to talk about what I was experiencing in class. When I told her that all my peers expected me to be like them and were mean to me, she responded with,

“Who needs them anyway?”

“You're right. I don't need them!” I agreed.

“You're better off alone!”

“Well, I guess I am!”

“You don't need any friends!”

“Okay. I guess I don't!”

“Sounds like you've solved your own problem. Now, get back to class!”

I left her office wondering what happened. I didn't feel like she understood me, nor did I get a chance to even mention my teacher. Everything was such a mess, and it appeared that there was no fixing it. By the time I got home, I'd decided that perhaps the best way out was to just end it all. I figured Mom and Dad were already burdened with feeding all the other mouths in our family. They

The World I Know

wouldn't miss me. It would probably give them some relief. My thinking was so twisted that I actually thought that If I wasn't around, it would work to reduce the stress my mom and dad experienced with raising a big family. With me gone, the others could have more. So, for the next few days, I contemplated a plan. I needed a clean, quick way to do it.

I thought of *The Little Match Girl*, a children' story about a girl who drifted off to sleep, as she could imagine all kinds of warm and inviting things surrounding her as she froze to death on Christmas Eve. "Yeah! I could do that! But not on Christmas Eve. That would make Christmas even worse than it already was for Mom. No," I thought, "The sooner the better." I figured that I could just walk into the woods and freeze outside, but then another thought entered into my mind as quickly as my resolve to get lost in the woods. I worried about being found and forced into prostitution like that girl Steffie in that book I read. That would be just the worst! "I couldn't let Dad down like that," I thought. But then, before I could get a finalized plan nailed down, an ad for an HBO special that was going to feature Stevie Nicks in concert appeared on the TV. I loved Fleetwood Mac and how beautiful Stevie Nicks looked in their music videos. I just had to see it. So, I waited for the show to be broadcasted. It was a recording of her White Wing Dove Tour, and I was mesmerized by her song, "The Edge of Seventeen" and how she made herself look like a dove with her beautiful white shawl. The whole spectacle captured my imagination as she sang lyrics that acknowledged that perhaps, she too, used poetry and music to find better days.

I had to have that album, "Belladonna". It had an image of a beautiful Stevie Nicks on it all in white holding upon her outstretched hand, a white bird. There, I found songs to soothe my restless wild heart¹². I must admit that years of writing and

The World I Know

circling around the different vignettes of my life, helped me to discover that had I not had that album, I wouldn't have looked up the meaning of the word belladonna. I wouldn't have ever known it meant beautiful lady and had another name altogether—nightshade—one of the poisonous weeds mentioned with henbane and dogwood in *The Scarlet Letter*. “Aha! That's how I guessed that Reverend Dimmesdale would be poisoned in the *Scarlett Letter!*” I thought to myself.

So, writing that note to Dr. Attwood on that last day that I was in Sydney, having witnessed him standing in a pose reminiscent of Christ crucified in His passion was very emotional for me. I was very grateful that I had been able to come all the way to Australia to learn all I could about autism in adults and adolescents in a relaxing and inviting environment with people who genuinely cared about their work with great passion. As I left the training that final afternoon, I stepped onto the sidewalk and took one last look at the three towers that flanked the office building where I attended the courses. I felt particularly moved by the fact that they looked like the flowers of Rosa Mystica. Each had petal-like awnings sticking out beside each one of the windows. The first building's were yellow. The next were in white, and the third in red. Just gazing upon them made the hairs on my arms stand up. I later learned that I was looking at a new development called Barangaroo.¹² It was the site where Pope Benedict XVI celebrated World Youth Day in 2008.¹³ The scripture chosen for the theme that held it all together was “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses.”¹⁴ I made my way to the airport, reached Melbourne, and settled in to rest up for the ICEHOUSE concert that was to follow the next day.

It was going to be a special refuge, much like the times when Dad would load us all up to go camping in any forest, near or far

The World I Know

in “The Great Land”—that was Alaska. For although there were many times that I felt the darkness creeping into my psyche, weekend trips together as a family interrupted my negative thoughts and worked to take me where all of God’s creation harmonized to soothe my anxious soul. I experienced a different kind of “climate change”. It was in the forest that I found a respite from the negativity around me, the bullying, the pressures, and uncertainties of everyday life. And when Dad took us camping, all was alive with the sounds of music. The birds, the bugs, the cracking sounds of melting ice, the rush of the waters of the rivers, and the simple ebb and flow of the waves upon the sea came together as a grand symphony.

It was in the forest that our family was happy and came together around the simplest things like a ferocious game of Old Maid or Go Fish. For as long as I can remember, we always stole away to the mountains, where all was peaceful. We could search for the northern lights in the stillness of the darkness all around. It was a place where all was calm, and all was as it should be. In many ways, our weekend excursions into the woods were our means of creating a holy ground in which we could all play as God’s children, pointing up to the night sky to marvel at the stars and the occasional satellite that sashayed across the heavens. The forest was a place of renewal that made it easier to face the labored days of the week ahead.

I sensed that it was going to be no different in the great southern land¹⁵ of Australia where a different set of sounds could be heard within the forest garden. The Lord never fails to offer fantastical surprises no matter where you are. It was a dreamy celebration of flowers—flowers that brought me to the foot of the Blessed Mother, full of graces, for Flowers was the original name of ICEHOUSE before they had to change it for legal reasons.¹⁶

The World I Know

They were celebrating 40 years of making music that year, and I was elated to be able to join in on the festivities. The trip over to Melbourne gave me time for deep reflection. I'd already summed up that my encounters with the people and places of Oz had burned me black, a phrase I adapted from the ICEHOUSE song "Great Southern Land" within the pages of my other story *Code Blue: A Walk into the Kingdom with the Ghost of Time*. On more than one occasion, Davies went on the record to explain how it was that his song "Great Southern Land" alluded to the time when his father taught him that much of the flora and fauna of Australia require the yearly bush fires to crack open their tough seeds, so they can grow. Hence, those fires blacken the landscape with fire, so that new life could emerge from the ashes.

This insight reminded me of John 12:24-25, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life-loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. I didn't know it at the time, but I spent a great deal of time hiding from the rest of the world for fear of who I was. I refused to take an honest look into the mirror until push came to shove. I didn't trust that other people would accept me, so I flew under the radar and failed to understand that we all struggle with something. I lacked faith in others. The key is to embrace the "shadow side" of the self to allow the burning flames of the Holy Spirit to turn that difficulty into one of our greatest assets. In doing so, we become living testaments of the strength, love and mercy of God.

I realized that I needed to stop worrying about any label I might acquire to describe myself. I was more than any one descriptive term. Autistic, yes. But there was so much more to appreciate about me than that label. Now that I confronted the very thing that

The World I Know

I was most afraid of about myself, I was free to integrate it into my sense of self and surrender to the image and expectation of who God wanted me to be, not who I thought I should be. I understood that I was a child of God with gifts and potentials I hadn't even ventured to explore, but I found a new excitement in embracing what my life would be like under His direction and plan.

I came home from that pilgrimage and dove right into a book club that was splashing into a study of biblical women titled, *Who Does He Say You Are?*¹⁷ Although I knew I was a child of God, I also understood that He was growing me into the woman I was intended to be—one who most closely mirrored a woman who most likely knew the Blessed Mother really well and wanted to be like her—the Magdalene. Jesus healed her of seven demons—most likely some form of mental illness. Her name was smeared when Pope Gregory the Great collapsed the stories of multiple women named Mary into one narrative.¹⁸ From that point on, she was mistakenly thought to have been a prostitute. She never was¹⁹, just as the Catholic Church was never the Whore of Babylon. She was simply the one who witnessed the death and resurrection of Jesus. Her story and contributions to the Christian community were relegated to mystery as she simply disappeared from the *Bible* after the Gospel of John. I couldn't help but feel the inspired call to live out and write a modern-day story of what her life could have been, given my newfound willingness to embrace the cross.

I'd like to close chapters 1-6 here with a quote from Michael Paynter from his commentary about singing the song “Man of Colours” while on the 40 Years LIVE Tour with ICEHOUSE:

“I think everybody can relate to feeling like a man of many colours and not being one dimensional. But you know, you're grumpy one day. And you're happy the next. And you do things that you're proud of, and you

The World I Know

do things you're not so proud of and things you wish you'd changed. I think that's what being a Man of Colours means to me in terms of just being a complex person and appreciating the complexity of the human condition.”

Dr. Attwood, I love how you teach with humor and great passion. Your sensitivity to the needs and sufferings of individuals on the spectrum really enabled me to connect with you. And that's why I keep coming back to your workshops, over and over again. I guess it's official. I'm a groupie. Through you I learned another important lesson:

Be Honest About Yourself and Embrace Your Cross

I simply love the beach boy²⁰ in you!

The World I Know

Notes

1. Music video by Collective Soul at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7LLTjqUyog>. The clip is completely shot in shades of blue until the end sequences where color is returned to the world all around. The video depicts a depressed man who climbs atop of a building to jump. A bird lands on one of his outstretched hands, and he is suddenly filled with joy.
2. Matthew 16:24
3. In reference to John 21:17
4. Noted expert in Autism Spectrum Disorders and Asperger's Syndrome and is an adjunct Associate Professor at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia.
5. Clinical psychologist and founder of *Minds and Hearts*, a clinic specializing in Autism Spectrum Disorders in Brisbane, Australia.
6. Colborn, T., Dumanoski, D., and Myers, J. (1997). *Our stolen future*. Plume.
7. "Pope Francis on climate change: time is of the essence". Vatican News, May 2019 at <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-05/pope-francis-on-climate-change-time-is-of-the-essence.html>
8. A doctor at the Veteran's Administration Hospital counseled my father and recommended medication therapy, given his symptoms and personal history. The doctor suspected that he had been exposed to Agent Orange, and thus expressed symptoms mirroring Bipolar Disorder.
9. From the book *Our Stolen Future*
10. Listen to Dr. Attwood discuss the subclinical profile at "Subclinical Autism and Asperger's" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPOoIrbqWVU>
11. An interpersonal theory, training model and research method used to help individuals refine their interpersonal skills using audio and video recordings in partnered and group settings to receiving feedback from other members of the interaction.
12. Song and title of Stevie Nicks 1983 album "Wild Heart"
13. Learn about Barangaroo at <https://www.barangaroo.com/>
14. Learn about World Youth Day 2008 at wyd2008.org.

The World I Know

15. ACTS 1:8

16. Name of Icehouse song “Great Southern Land”

17. According to Fr. Miguel Guadalupe, flowers in the Aztec culture, during the time when the image (painting) of Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared on the tilma of Juan Diego were “considered the embodiment of God on Earth.” (p.191) The painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe was “a ‘masterpiece’ of the divine Artist. (p.204) from *The Seven Veils of Our Lady of Guadalupe: “The New Evangelization” in Light of the Apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe.*

18. Mitchell, C. (2016). *Who does he say you are?* Franciscan Media.

19. This occurred when he delivered Homily #33.

20. The Catholic Church declared the depiction of Mary Magdalene as inaccurate in 1969. Pope Benedict XVI acknowledged her as an individual who played a lead role in the Gospels. Pope Francis recognizes her as “an Apostle of the Apostles”. See <https://drawingontheword.com/myth-of-mary-magdalene-as-a-prostitute/> for more information

21. A play on the words “beach boy” to create a connection between Jesus and Dr. Attwood. Jesus, a beach boy, was on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius when he directed Peter and six other disciples to lower their nets on the right side of the boat to catch fish. Dr. Attwood shared that he is a big Beach Boys fan.

Chapter 7

Ordinary World

Indigo. Once I embraced the cross, I was ready to take action and explore how best to offer up the gifts I received throughout my life and to serve God's people, especially after that extraordinary time in the garden in Melbourne. I arrived home, participated in our parish women's book club, and then I was off, dragging my husband to a special function. Bishop Barron was in town to launch his new Catholicism series, "The Pivotal Players".²

We drove into the parking lot across the street from the co-cathedral downtown. My husband crossed his arms and rolled his eyes when he spied me taking a snapshot of the license plate on a car parked just a couple of spaces down from us.

"What on Earth do you think you're doing?" my disgruntled husband moaned. "The number is 3333! This is going to be quite a night!" I cheered while checking my camera to make sure the picture was clear. We made our way across a walkway over to a

Ordinary World

restaurant to get a bite to eat. I had no doubt that what the bishop had to offer would ensure we were well fed.

Once inside of the ornate building, we took a seat close to the front, so I could get a good glimpse of the bishop. He simply radiated the light, love, and passion of Jesus up there on stage. He shared excerpts from the episodes he did on St. Francis of Assisi³ and Michelangelo⁴, and my heart was burning with a great desire to be a pivotal player too. Even my husband was impressed and started to ask me questions about Bishop Barron. I explained that I'd been watching his YouTube videos for a while. I simply loved all of the more direct explanations Bishop Barron offered to questions about the Catholic Church.⁵

The bishop imparted the Word in a way that I could understand it, complete with historical references, allusions to art, music, poetry and good literature. He also echoed the pope. When Pope Francis came forward on December 8, 2015, to announce an Extraordinary Jubilee of Divine Mercy⁶ and suggested that Catholics go back to read and study Dante's *Divine Comedy*,⁷ Bishop Barron not only echoed that call but echoed it twice. The timing couldn't have been better for me.

I'd just discovered that the 33 and 3 number configuration appeared to serve as some sort of prompting for me as if God was leaving breadcrumbs for me to follow wherever He wanted me to go. When I saw Bishop Barron's videos about *The Divine Comedy*, major chords were struck deep inside of me. I'd never read the work in the first place, so when I picked up the first book, *Inferno*, and learned that it was one of three books with 33 *cantos* or rather, 33 songs each, aside from the introduction, I was ecstatic. My story, *I Let the Music Speak: How a Heretic Found a Stairway to Heaven*, had 33 chapters, each named after a song that helped me write it. I was just as excited as I was when I found out that St. Theresa of

Ordinary World

Calcutta⁸ also desired to be a light in the darkness while studying *33 Days to Morning Glory*⁹ that winter. I began to see that my life had reoccurring dates and numbers and names¹⁰ that were just as loaded with meaning as those that were found in the *Bible*, which only worked to fuel my curiosity.

“So, I’ll have to check him out,” my husband responded after I probably unloaded more details than he wanted to hear. For a moment there, I thought he might want to be a pivotal player too, especially when Bishop Barron took the time to address science teachers who were present that night in the cathedral. He explained how important their role could be in the evangelization of youth who think that faith and reason can’t go hand in hand. He reminded all of us that it was a Catholic priest, Georges Lemaitre, who initially proposed the Big Bang theory.

“Great! I’m sure you’ll find all kinds of things to look over and ponder,” I responded, glad that my husband might actually take a step forward to learn a little bit more about what I was learning and experiencing. Then, I shifted the conversation to my support group for adults with Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome.

“I need to follow-up on reserving a room to hold meetings for my aspie¹¹ meetings,” I exclaimed.

“You think you’re ready?”

“Yeah, it’s time. We’ll be able to meet without any distractions and with lots of privacy. You should come.”

“Oh, no. That’s your thing. You’ll do just fine.”

I set the time and place for my first support group meeting for individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome and High Functioning Autism, employing the book *Been There. Done That. Try This! An*

Ordinary World

Aspie's Guide to Life on Earth.¹² I bought the book while in Australia and found it to be a great help for our monthly meetings. Unfortunately, the topic of spirituality was not an issue covered in the book, so, I kept my eyes out for one that we could use to discuss this important dimension of our lives. I personally felt I needed help with integrating my religious experiences with the realities I experienced as an individual on the autism spectrum.

It wasn't long before I discovered a book written by Australian psychologist Rachael Lee Harris¹³ titled *My Autistic Awakening*.¹⁴ She penned a memoir which included a time when she wanted to become a Carmelite nun but found that she wanted to have a family as well. Many of her life experiences were remarkably similar to mine,¹⁵ so I took a particular interest in another one of her books titled *Contemplative Therapy for Clients on the Autism Spectrum*¹⁶ with a Forward written by Tony Attwood. Upon the front cover was an image of an individual walking within the circles of a labyrinth, which spoke volumes to me!¹⁷ I was so inspired that I couldn't wait to get started on my own research and publish methods to help others form better communication skills, empathy, and theory of mind.¹⁸

I took up an additional endeavor that seemed to compliment my work as a funeral coordinator at my church. It was a ministry in music thanatology, the art of playing prescriptive music for the sick and dying. After reading *Consoling the Heart of Jesus*,¹⁹ I was moved to pick up the harp to learn to play it in hospitals, hospice centers—anywhere I could play for those in need of the calming and majestic sounds of the harp. It seemed like the perfect fit for me as music was my passion and means for prayer. I was attracted to the idea of praying with music to bring spiritual healing, peace, and serenity for those who probably needed it the most. I could

Ordinary World

learn to play an assortment of beautiful chords and improvise original tunes for each patient in my care.

I'd learned about music thanatology, in the early '90s when I was studying accelerated learning methods.²⁰ I used the concept to better serve my students who were learning English as a second language. Through a related training in music therapy, I discovered songstress and harpist, Therese Schroeder-Sheker, and her school for music thanatologists. I bought some of her recordings and placed them in a listening center in my middle school classroom. There, I provided a variety of selections in addition to Schroeder-Sheker's for students to listen to, relax, and recharge after completing their assignments.

One student, in particular, had a track record of constant visits to the principal's office. To the amazement of the other teachers, his behavior positively changed. They knew I was doing something in class that was motivating him. A counselor approached me to find out what I was doing to bring about this positive change. I had no idea that the young man had such a "bad" reputation and was happy that he had turned things around. When questioned by the counselor, I simply didn't know what I had done to bring about his transformation. The next day, I asked the student what was making him do so well in all of his classes.

"Oh miss! It's that woman who sings to me in the listening center! Her music makes me feel so much better, and I can sleep. My mom and dad have been fighting, always threatening to get a divorce, but when I listen to this lady sing, I know things are going to be okay."

I was amazed and made a mental note that maybe, one day, I could buy a folk harp and learn to play it. So, after working through the program *Consoling the Heart of Jesus*, those early embers were set

Ordinary World

aflame, and I envisioned myself sitting at the base of the cross, playing for the dying Jesus. I just had to find a harp and pronto!

I found one in a little shop on the outskirts of the Houston area, run by a couple whose names were Mary and John. Just the sound of their names together made my heart flutter. Mary scheduled my first harp lesson for 3 p.m. on the Friday before Good Friday. She and I immediately connected over “the Little Flower,” St. Thérèse of Lisieux.²¹ Then, she disclosed that she had a background in music thanatology and even assisted in writing a curriculum for it. What “luck,” right? After the first five lessons or so, Mary moved to support her sister who was gravely ill. I soldiered on, intent on learning how to play the harp on my own. I wanted to learn to play it before committing to any of the online classes and begin formal training and internship components.

A year later, I tried my hand with playing in a hospital for the first time. I played for my father-in-law. We thought we were going to lose him. I brought my harp up to his room and stayed with him, playing intermittently. I played the Chaplet of Divine Mercy²² for him at 3:00 in the afternoon and again at 3:00 in the early morning each day. He eventually recovered and walked out of the hospital; he is still with us today.

The next time I felt compelled to play my harp was for an ailing parishioner who had been in a coma in the hospital for some time. Our church community kicked it into high gear to support her family, and I wanted to be a part of that endeavor. I was nervous about talking to her husband about playing, but a dear friend, who knew him well, asked him if he would be interested in having me come play the harp for her and her family. I received an enthusiastic, “Yes!” So, I loaded up my harp and brought it over to the facility where she was being monitored. I checked an online

Ordinary World

schedule where parishioners could sign up to take turns sitting with her to ensure that she had someone with her as often as possible.

When I looked, no one was scheduled for that afternoon, so I thought, “Great! I can go in and play and not have to worry about striking a wrong chord or getting nervous in front of the others.” When I got to her room, I set up my harp and began to play when her parents arrived. Other family members began to file in one after another until a small group of 6-7 people was there to visit. Little did I know, it was her birthday! The family simply embraced me and the idea of playing for their loved one. Eventually, they left me to play for her in private, sensing that I was pretty nervous. I played a couple of songs before I began to improvise. When I finished, staff members in the nurse’s station began to ask me questions about my newfound ministry. I was glad to share all I could about it. One thing was evident. It was a great way to evangelize and to reiterate the Gospel while reminding others about what Jesus did on the cross for us. I actually envision, playing for Jesus as he died on the cross each time I play.

Months passed and my sweet patient hadn’t made any significant progress. She was eventually moved to her home and placed on hospice care. At first, I was able to play for the family only. As more and more individuals came to visit, I grew more comfortable with playing in front of others. Although I was nervous and made mistakes, I allowed the music to speak. It wasn’t long before a family member asked, “Can you play the Chaplet of Divine Mercy?” I nodded and began to play it.

A few days later, she inquired about the song “On Eagle’s Wings”. I took in a deep breath and tried my hand at playing it by ear for the first time. As the days passed, the reality of death started to sink in. I wondered if I’d have the strength to play as she neared death. This sweet lady was teaching so many more lessons than I

Ordinary World

could ever learn in any classroom or training session. Nothing is more real, sobering, and intimate than being with individuals who are not long for this world. Her family was so very gracious and allowed me privileged access into their private life, so I could play the harp and learn to minister to a grieving family. I apologized for my many shortcomings. The family was very supportive and loving, allowing not only me but many others to come in, visit, and pray together. Naturally, I was heartbroken when my “teacher” died.

My third patient was my uncle. He was a musician who played the saxophone. A photograph of him and his musical group with Chuck Berry²³ graced the den where the family received visitors. He’d been sick for quite some time before he went into code blue and death was imminent. The doctors in the emergency room were able to revive him, but it was a clarion call for the family to consider hospice care. I brought my harp over to his house and played for him. My aunt particularly liked to hear me play “Here I am Lord”. I thought he would be gone within weeks, but he held on for another ten months. I was with him alone, just a few short hours before he passed away, and I was blessed to witness an incredible occurrence.

He lay in the bed, in and out of consciousness with a familiar rattle on his breath as my fingers gently pulled at the strings of my instrument. I set my harp aside when my aunt came in. She thought it might be a good idea to turn on a mixed tape of some of his favorite recordings. I sat there a while beside him and prayed. A lively song came on, and he sat straight up with a newfound surge of energy, smiling, and pointing to the ceiling and, keeping to the beat of the melody as if he was conducting an imaginary orchestra of angels! It was the song “An Old-Fashioned Love Song”²⁴ by Three Dog Night. I sat and cried. The lyrics suggested that those

Ordinary World

love songs never really leave us, just like Jesus never leaves us, nor do our loved ones when they move on. When my uncle leaned back to lay down, I caught him and gently lowered him down into the bed, and I thanked him for that lovely performance. I told him that I listened to the Cardinals that flew in and out of my backyard and blew them kisses. I asked him to come to visit me before he went to heaven. He smiled but not at me. He must have been seeing something or someone else. By then, my cousin's wife came in, a nurse, and took a seat on the other side of the bed to be with him. We talked about his progress, and then I chose to step out of the little room with my harp to make sure there was enough space for more visitors.

I met my aunt in the living room and told her that I was going to go home. She called me later that evening to tell me that my uncle had passed shortly after I left. I sat in the stillness, listening to her give me all of the details that followed. Then she asked, "Will you please play your harp at his funeral? You don't have to play it during the Mass. You can play it as people are arriving and sitting down before everything gets started."

I couldn't refuse. The next morning, I woke up, said my prayers, and read my books and devotionals with an air of expectancy. I heard the sound of a Cardinal singing in my backyard. I stepped outside on the patio to listen to his song. I spotted him in the tree with his beautiful red feathers. I appreciated the majestic melodies he produced. I applauded his performance and blew him a kiss before he spread his wings and flew away.

I was nervous about playing at my uncle's funeral. I'd play for just a little while and then go sit down with my husband and son. I learned that there would be no cantor or accompanist to lead in song during the Mass. I thought, "How could there be no music at a musician's funeral?" The priest who was going to preside over

Ordinary World

the celebration asked me if I was going to play during the Mass. I had no choice, but to agree to play. Just when I started to wonder what I was getting myself into, I recalled how I had been asked if I could play “On Eagle’s Wings” weeks earlier. I’d been prepared to play for my uncle’s funeral. I learned that song and some of my other favorites, especially one based on the 23rd Psalm, “Shepherd me, Oh God”, that I heard at all of the funerals I helped coordinate in my parish. I took a deep breath and prayed for the Holy Spirit to help me.

Those in attendance at the funeral were gracious with compliments and inquiries about the harp afterward. Knowing that I had to cover for several mistakes, I thanked the Holy Spirit for pulling me through with great generosity. All was somber, as we loaded up my instrument and headed for the reception.

When I returned home, I sat down with Dad at our breakfast table. It had been an emotional afternoon. We talked about my uncle and the eulogy. I turned to Dad and made an open admission.

“Dad, I don’t think I really know a whole lot about you. What would you hope I’d say about you at your funeral? I mean, have you ever seen the movie, ‘Big Fish’? It’s about a young man who heard all kinds of stories from his dad while growing up that were so fantastical that he knew that they were heavily embellished. He returned home to his dying father hoping to get to know who he really was. Sometimes, I feel like that young man, like I don’t know who you really are.”

Dad sheepishly gazed at me as he quipped, “Well, I am a liar.”

There it was an honest and direct answer. I realized at that moment that I didn’t know anyone who always told the truth. Even I lied but I usually got busted. I just didn’t have the talent to pull it

Ordinary World

off as others did. Because I was interpersonally blind, I just didn't understand the social rules people used when they lied. I could see when happy people were really sad, but some social norms teach us that we're not supposed to ask about it or mention it depending on other variables such as context, time of day and other factors, seemingly too complicated for me to keep track of especially when I was tired. Over time, I grew more skillful about inquiring about a person's day to measure up whether or not I could state observations "honestly".

Therein is the problem. We allow ourselves to play the game of mirrors and masks because we believe we have to hide who we really are and how we really feel. We are all sinners and at times, even believe our own lies. We buy into the idea that the lies will win us favor, make us powerful, and protect us. While these notions may hold true in the present, in the long haul, they are very destructive. People understand this intellectually, but they may still have trouble facing and accepting the Truth, especially when the truth hurts. We can turn that hurt into a gift for someone else when we open up and allow for the Holy Spirit to redeem us from the lies, we once believed.

For me, that required some big-time house cleaning. It was time to reconnect with a friend who offered to lead me through a prayer of deliverance based on the book, *Unbound*,²⁵ by Neal Lozano. He thought it might be a ministry I could use to help others in need of spiritual healing. She thought I'd get a better sense of what it was all about, if I went through it myself. So, I reached out to her to inquire about moving forward with a prayer session. A date was set for me to meet with her and another woman who would serve as a prayerful intercessor.

The event itself required a great deal of trust between myself and my friend Shannon. I met her in the fall of 2016 shortly after

Ordinary World

inquiring about a program she was conducting at our church. The minister in charge of the event, loaned me a copy of her book, *Exposed: Inexcusable Me, Irreplaceable Him*.²⁶ I read it that night, and reached out to her after I noticed that her contact information involved the number 333 in her email address.

When we met over coffee. I was shocked to discover that she was called to her new ministry while in Sydney, Australia when she participated in World Youth Day in 2008. A woman approached her out of nowhere and told her that she had a story to write. She left the gathering with the number 333 in her head and the focused intent to put her experiences on paper. She took that number and fashioned a logo of three interlocking hearts for her service organization, Hopeful Hearts, designed to help survivors of sexual abuse find their voice. I noticed all of the parallels between our lives. One thing occurred to me. Things could have been much worse for me, as I retraced all of the times that I could have been a victim of continued abuse as a child and even rape while I was in college. I was afforded so many more graces than I had originally acknowledged before meeting Shannon.

We stayed in touch after that initial meeting. Right before my second trip to Australia, she suggested that I read the book *Unbound*. I read it while abroad and it so heightened my senses, that I had to put the book down. I was spooked realizing this was all serious business.

When I returned from Australia, we met in her office for the prayer session. She introduced me to the intercessor who would pray for me throughout the whole process. After an hour of personal inquiry, we were ready to begin. She took all the major themes that came up in our discussion about my past and walked me through a kind of check-list of sorts of all the things that I needed to denounce and reject in the name of Jesus. It came off as

Ordinary World

a litany of sorts as I was coached to pray, “In the name of Jesus, I rebuke the feelings of shame and unworthiness that stemmed from the sexual abuse I experienced as a little girl,” before moving onto the next issue with, “In the name of Jesus, I rebuke...” and so on and so forth. It took around an hour to get rid of all of the baggage I’d been carrying all my life. Once the session was over, I felt very light. The heaviness of life was lifted off my shoulders. In fact, I was giddy, even more so, when the intercessor spoke up just before I left.

“I’m so glad that you said something about feeling light, because the whole time I was praying for you, I had a vision of you in an open field floating in the air with butterflies all around you.”

I was visibly shaken. I’d never met this woman, nor had I ever told Shannon about a painting that hung in my sister’s house.

“You just described a painting that one of my sisters has hanging in her living room. I’ve been threatening to steal it for years because it’s an image of what I want to experience! It’s a painting of a woman in a yellow dress levitating in an open field in a forest with butterflies surrounding her.²⁷ I took a picture of it. I could show you, but I didn’t bring my phone. I’ll have to send it to Shannon when I get home, so you can see it for yourself. What a tremendous gift! Thank you so much for choosing to mention that to me! Oh. My. God! He is so great!”

I was ecstatic, walking out of Shannon’s office that day. When I got home, I texted them the image of the painting. I couldn’t have received a more perfect confirmation that I was on the path to holiness. Having read the book *Unbound*, however, I was well aware of the spiritual warfare that could be levied against me. Truth tellers are rarely popular, but alas, that’s what we are born to do.

Ordinary World

I took up my paintbrush and created my own painting of a woman levitating in an open field as opposed to stealing my sister's. Instead of a yellow dress, I painted her in a red garment because I usually wore something red when I attended spiritual retreats and religious events. In addition to the butterflies, I painted three Cardinals to provide the music I would listen to while communing with all of God's creation. Then, I painted a twin image of a woman floating up above the forest among the stars in a white dress to shine as bright as the moon! It was in prayer with God that I could recharge my batteries and be filled with the hope and love that enabled me to serve others in a proper spirit. I aspired to be a pivotal player like Bishop Barron.

Shannon was a Godsend whose work served as a gift. She allowed me to revisit some very painful events in my life in a healthy way. Before long, I was ready to reach out to my father to reconcile the deeply embedded feelings I harbored when I first told him about the abuses I suffered as a little girl. I knew it was going to be a tough conversation but learned to trust that the Lord would provide a way of making everything unfold the way He knows is best.

Bishop Barron, thank you for the enthusiasm and energy you put into sharing the faith. That's passion! You make it very obvious that Jesus is very much alive and well in you, as you go after the sheep that truly need shepherding. And you also recognize that while methods of the past can still be very useful and relevant today, there is a need to engage the culture in ways that incite awe, wonder, and intrigue. Bishop Barron, you are beautiful,²⁸ and through you, I've been reminded about the 6th lesson I learned:

Share Your Gifts

I love you!

Ordinary World

Notes

1. Music Video by Duran Duran at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqIACCH20JU>. The video depicts a bride walking the grounds of a garden. “Ordinary World” is from “The Wedding Album”.
2. Learn more about “Catholicism: The Pivotal Players” at <https://store.wordonfire.org/collections/catholicism-the-pivotal-players>
3. St. Francis of Assisi was a Catholic church reformer who served the poor and founded the Franciscan order. Learn more at https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=50
4. Michelangelo was a revered Renaissance artist who painted the ceiling and the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel and carved the famous “David” and “Pietà” sculptures.
5. Visit Bishop Barron’s YouTube Channel at <https://www.youtube.com/user/wordonfirevideo>
6. Normally, the pope calls for a Jubilee Year every 50 years. Pope Francis called for an “extra” jubilee to revisit the last one from the year 2000, when St. Pope John Paul II called for a Jubilee Year of Divine Mercy.
7. Dante Alighieri wrote *The Divine Comedy*, perhaps the greatest work in the world literature, in the language of the ordinary, everyday man (Italian, not Latin) and was full of pop culture references from its time. Each book of the three-part series ends with the word “star”. The first book *Inferno* takes Dante through hell. The next book, *Purgatorio*, takes him up the mountain of purgatory, while the last, *Paradiso*, takes him from the garden at the top of the mountain, up into heaven. It tells a story about a soul’s journey to God and is largely based on the teachings of St. Thomas of Aquinas, the author of the *Summa Theologica*, which was influential in the early development of the Roman Catholic Church’s catechism.
8. St. Theresa of Calcutta was the founder of the Missionaries of Charity. They establish homes for the poor who are dying, as well as orphanages and schools.
9. Special program geared to prepare individuals to consecrate themselves to Jesus through the Blessed Mother Mary over a period of 33 days. The book 33

Ordinary World

Days to Morning Glory was written by Fr. Michael Gaitley, of the Congregation of Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary.

10. The most popular numbers in my personal story are 3, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12 and 33. For me personally, the numbers 3 and 33, set in any configuration such as 33 1/3, 33.3, 33:3, 3:33, 333 and so on represents the death the resurrection of Jesus Christ—a time of some sort of transition, transformation, or transfiguration. The most popular and prominent names in my story mean “God’s graciousness/gift”. The month of March with the dates 3, 12, 21 and 25 are most prominent in my story aside of December 8.

11. Term of endearment for friends who have Asperger’s Syndrome

12. Attwood, T., Evans, C., and Lesko, A. (2014). *Been there. Done that. try this!: An aspie’s guide to life on Earth.* Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

13. First Australian psychologist with Asperger’s Syndrome.

14. Harris, R. (2015). *My autistic awakening.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

15. Dr. Harris tells of a time that she was bullied on the playground in the 3rd grade. While I was a coward and caved, she fought back.

16. Harris, R. and Attwood, T. (2017). *Contemplative therapy for clients on the autism spectrum: A reflective integration therapy™ manual for psychotherapists and counsellors.* Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

17. I’ve spent my whole life praying and/or listening to music while walking in circles.

18. The ability to “read” the emotions, motivations, intentions, and thoughts of others as separate and possibly different from the self.

19. The book *Consoling the Heart of the Jesus* was written by Fr. Michael Gaitley of the Congregation of Marian Fathers of the Immaculate Conception of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary. A special program designed to introduce individuals to the spiritual and corporal works of mercy in reference to the teaching of St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

20. I studied and practiced the techniques of Georgi Lazanov, using Baroque, Classical and other musical styles to teach students English as a second language and core content area vocabulary and concepts.

Ordinary World

21. St. Thérèse of Lisieux was a French Catholic Discalced Carmelite and Doctor of the Church who taught her “little way” of working to find simple ways to love each day as often as possible.
22. Prayer delivered from Jesus to St. Faustina Kowalska to spread His message of Divine Mercy and devotion. Learn more about Divine Mercy at marian.org.
23. American musician nick named “The Father of Rock and Roll”. He was a singer and songwriter who employed local bands with which to play gigs while on tour in around 1965, one of which was my uncle’s band.
24. In three-part harmony did love songs come from heaven according to Three-Dog Night. Have a listen for yourself at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8oiXpHojBjg>
25. Lozano, N. (2010). *Unbound: A practical guide to deliverance*. Chosen Books.
26. Deitz, S. (2015). *Exposed: Inexcusable me...irreplaceable him*. Hopeful Heart Ministry.
27. Information about the artist Duy Huynh can be found at <http://www.duyhuynh.com/artwork/>
28. Of the three transcendentalists, Bishop Barron teaches that the new evangelization should lead with beauty, since people today no longer value the truth or the good due to adherence to a relativistic world view.

Chapter 8

Stars

Violet. By sharing my gifts, I found great joy. I found the place between the physical and spiritual realities that brought great balance and integrity to my life. No longer defining the church as the institutionalized, hierarchical structure that had some sort of power over me,² I grew to understand that it is a community of imperfect people who love and support each other as Jesus commanded despite our differences and imperfections. I moved forward with a renewed freedom as the truth of the past illuminated my future.

I reread all of my writings as I worked to fashion a testimony to present at a women's retreat in the spring of 2019. I started a draft with Mark 15:34 "My God, my God, why have you forsaken

Stars

me?” and followed it with the story of how I’d been accused of breaking a playground rule in the third grade.

But alas, what we want and what the Lord wants can be very different things, and usually, He has much better plans in store. First, I was discouraged from mentioning the supernatural happenings in my life. I felt as if the “family” had been removed from my “Thanksgiving feast”! I desperately struggled to wrap my head around the notion of taking the Holy Spirit out of my story when He was the Superstar of it! After much prayer, I came to understand that He didn’t want me to just talk about Him. He wanted to make Himself known and visible through my words and actions.

The challenge of writing, without mentioning the Advocate directly, led me to a special conversation I had with a friend. She suggested that my selected verse carried more weight than I’d ever imagined. She pointed out that the verse was an echo of Psalm 22 that prophesied both the death and resurrection of Jesus. With that tip, I began to unpack the Psalm and research other commentaries about it. Before long, I found an interpretation that came from one of the early authors of the Catholic Catechism, St. Thomas Aquinas³ in reference to its title, “The Deer of the Dawn”. His interpretation of Psalm 22 created a visual image of the risen Christ as a stag emerging from a great thicket undefiled in the morning. I thought to myself, “I’ve seen that image!”

I gazed up to the shelves situated above my desk and fixed my eyes on the artwork my son brought me years earlier explaining, “Mom, I made this for you while I was waiting for everyone else to finish their STAAR⁴ test. See. I know you like the number 333, God’s phone number. So, I drew 3 sets of 3 birds over here.”

Stars

It was an image of a deer standing on a hill facing the rising sun, with a single tree standing to the left of the page while 3 sets of 3 birds flew across the sky! What was once just a simple drawing became a priceless work of art in my home, symbolizing the death and resurrection of Jesus. I was jubilant and left the house immediately to find an appropriate frame for it, so I could showcase it in our family room.

Over time, my testimony came together, little by little, with just enough leeway for me to rehearse its delivery. The whole experience was a joyous affirmation that things may go awry, but the Lord makes all things new and even better. My life story is a testament to that as are the lives of all the other sinners and saints I've had the pleasure of meeting, reading about, and hearing about through stories delivered from other saints and sinners. With that thought, I felt compelled to draft my story of the Man of Colours.

By the end of that spring, I had an outline, complete with names of songs to introduce each chapter. I also signed up to spend some time in prayer and reflection at a silent retreat with a Passionist priest a friend highly recommended. The call was very strong after I learned that the theme of the retreat was taken from a quote a from St. Ambrose: "When we take up the Sacred Scriptures in faith and read them with the Church, we walk once more with God in the Garden." The connection to "the garden" was paramount, but for me, the identity of the retreat master was a much more compelling sign.

The first time I encountered this Passionist priest, I'd just returned from Australia where I attended the ICEHOUSE concert in the Royal Botanical Gardens in Melbourne. Father seemed to see right through me when he announced with great ardor, "Crazy is a woman in love!" I felt like he was calling me out, and I wasn't even wearing my "Crazy" ICEHOUSE t-shirt that I bought at the

Stars

concert. I swear I heard the first few chords of the song “Crazy” in my mind’s ear, as he explained that the word “desire” meant “from the stars”. I was instantly taken back to the scene in Melbourne when I gazed upon the stars that hung in the sky with the full moon. That retreat was all about the Blessed Mother!

Just as I snapped back to reality, I learned that this priest was from the Passionist order, founded by St. Paul of the Cross. Their mission is to help others discover God and His loving compassion through Christ crucified.⁵ While on that first retreat, Father told us of the story of the Crucifix of Limpias⁶ because there was a replica of it in the chapel of the retreat center. I learned that over 8,000 pilgrims have provided written and sworn testimony that they’ve seen the corpus on the cross come to life, turn blue, stare at them and/or look right through them. For me, the message was clear. Christ was crucified, but He lives!

While at the silent retreat with my outline and opening paragraphs for each of chapters in hand, the Passionist opened up the meeting with quotes from St. Theresa of Ávila⁷ and others before he quoted St. Ephrem, “The Lord has colored his word with many hues so that each person who studies it can see in it what he loves.”⁸ When I saw the words “colored” and “hues,” I recorded St. Ephrem’s name so that I could look up the entire quote later. That evening, I spent time in prayer in the chapel. I recalled that my email address used to be roygbiv@flash.net. It was the acronym my science-teacher husband used to help students remember all of the colors of the rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. As I reflected upon each color, I thought of the symbolism behind each one. It wasn’t long before I went back to my room, grabbed my phone, and started to cross-reference each color while looking at my outline. Each topic for each chapter seemed to mirror the colors of the rainbow in terms

Stars

of meaning and order. Before I fell asleep that night, I was graced with a table of contents of a different sort.

Colors	Symbolizes	Other Meanings	Actions
Red	Love	Blood	Look to the cross
Orange	Fire	Spirit, fascination	Pray and listen
Yellow	Enlightenment	Remembrance, leaps of faith	Embrace the supernatural
Green	Growth	Harmony, healing	Face facts and follow the evidence
Blue	Trust	Surrender, loyalty, truth confidence, heaven, intelligence, faith,	Embrace your cross
Indigo	Passion	Service, wisdom, justice, devotion	Share your gifts
Violet	Fulfillment	Balance	Share your joy

The whole experience caused me to be that much more determined to finish the story. I contacted the Passionist priest to request his assistance. I wanted to be sure that I wasn't inciting any heresies with my writing. I also intuited that he might have additional words of wisdom that could help me delve deeper into the development of the concepts in this narrative. So, I reached out to him and asked if he could find an hour in his schedule to meet with me.

He agreed and sat listening intently to me babble on and on about everything related to the story but not the actual story. When I was quiet enough for him to get a word in edgewise, he simply suggested that I would appreciate a verse from Song of Solomon 5:1, "I am black, but beautiful." It struck a chord and a recollection. I'd learned the verse while on a silent retreat, just the year before to learn about the Black Madonna.⁹ I immediately acknowledged that the Passionist and I were on the same page. He went on to mention that we happened to be meeting on the feast day of Mary,

Queen of Heaven,¹⁰ a reference often associated with the concept of the Black Madonna. Then, he leaned forward and asked me if I had ever heard of the Black Jesus. I leaned back and positioned myself to be blown away by the Holy Spirit.

“He’s right there on the table next to you under the lamp.”

I looked at the priest and then looked down at the table and found a crucifix with a Black Jesus on it.

“Do you know the story of the Crucifix of the Poison?”¹¹ Father asked as I marveled at the cross.

“I just read a blurb about it the other day when I received an email about a pilgrimage to Mexico,” I responded.

Father explained that a devoted priest prayed before the crucifix every day and first kissed the feet of the corpus of Christ before doing so. One day, a jealous observer put poison all over the feet of the figure. When the priest came to kneel and kiss the feet of the body on the cross, he noticed that the feet and legs of the body of Christ were moving up and turning black. Eventually, the entire corpus was black.

Father slowly emphasized, “Jesus always absorbs the poison.”

I was dumbfounded; I held in my hands a story that included a motif related to the poisoning of a pastor. I thought about the poison that was in my dad’s veins and realized that it was the poison he absorbed to protect and provide for his family all on his own, not really knowing how to surrender all of that to Jesus! I couldn’t understand it then, but now I was seeing everything with new eyes. We, women, have our “crazy”, but honorable men have their own “crazy” too and could be vilified or even assumed guilty for remaining silent when facing the complexities of life.¹² No.

They take the beating. They become the piñata, so others can have a sweeter life.

“You’re really speaking to me, Father. That really strikes a chord!”

“I thought it would,” he responded. I held out the binder for the Passionist to take.

“Here. I’ve tried to be as perfunctory as possible. I can be long-winded,” I chuckled. “But it’s only seven chapters, and they are short. While Bishop Barron wrote, *A Letter to a Suffering Church*,¹³ from a clergyman’s perspective down to the flock, I’ve crafted my story to come from the bottom up—from a nobody who understands the impact a sexual abuse scandal can have on Catholics and non-Catholics alike. It is my intent to share how I found healing so that others might find it too.”

Father took the story and saw me out the door. And just as I walked across the threshold, I began to think, “Oh my gosh! I didn’t tell him that my story was related to the poison! I didn’t tell him that every chapter was related to a song that seemingly had been written to have a place in the narrative, though they were all well over ten years old—a feat reminiscent of saints Ephrem, Cyril, and Methodios who had a penchant for taking secular songs of their day and converting them into hymns to teach the gospels.” But before the panic set in, I relaxed and reminded myself that all that was happening was all part of a broader process. I trusted that things would unfold in God’s time.

It didn’t take long before I was back at my desk revising the story. I read it backwards from the end to the beginning to make sure the chapters could stand on their own. In doing so, I began to recognize the themes that ran through it. Among them was what I would call the “scarlet strand.” It was a storyline that grew out of

Stars

my shame for having been molested when I was young and my fear of falling into additional trouble if I didn't protect my heart and my body. But there was more. While I intellectually knew in my mind and heart that I was an innocent victim, I was still emotionally wounded by how it all impacted Dad and me. I felt as if I drove a dagger into Dad's heart that day by telling him what happened. I felt the need to talk to him about it and to put to rest the unsettled feelings and emotions that had been so closely bound to the past.

So, I gave my husband a kiss, got in my minivan, and prayed all the way to the little town of Star, Texas, to find my parents, just a few feet away from County Road 333. I prayed all four mysteries of the Rosary and begged the Lord to grant me a window of opportunity that would allow for me to broach the topic of what I called "*puta gate*" with sensitivity and love. The topic was a live wire. Pornography and sex trafficking are huge problems in today's society. Working in the sex industry is not always a choice for people. Many men, women and children are forced into sexual slavery at the hands of organized groups that create rings to feed the unholy appetites of a world gone mad.

I thought I might bring up the topic on the third day before leaving to go home. When I arrived at my parent's house, I could smell the fish and chips that they had prepared for that Friday evening meal. We talked and laughed over dinner before moving into the living room to watch a movie, munch on some cookies and enjoy our time together. Out of nowhere, dad turned to me and said, "Hey! I have to show you a gift that my friend gave me. Apparently, there is some sort of TV show about people buying out abandoned storage units to see if they might find hidden treasures that people leave behind."

"Are you talking about 'Storage Wars'?"¹⁴

“Oh, I don’t know. All I know is that they bought an abandoned storage unit, and my friend’s wife would not allow him to bring it into their home. It’s a hoot. You have to see it.”

Dad got up and rummaged around to grab what looked like some kind of portrait. He turned around and held the image out to me of a woman with teacups sitting upon her ample bosom with the title “License for Prostitution”.

In tears, I cried out, “Oh my God! This is an answered prayer, dad! I prayed and prayed all the way over here, asking the Lord to give me a way to talk to you about when I was little—when I told you about the things that had happened to me. I’ve always been afraid that you thought that I was one of these ladies because of what you said about our gardens and that only *putas* have sex before they are married and...”

“What?” Dad responded, racking his brain to try to understand what I was talking about.

“I never dated. I sabotaged opportunities to date really neat guys all because I didn’t want to feed the belief that I might actually be a “whore”. I didn’t want to let you down. I wanted you to believe that I was a good girl. I love you guys so much and never wanted to disappoint you. I’m not perfect, and I know I get a lot of things all wrong and messed up, but I try. And I’ve been writing a lot about you—things that aren’t so wonderful. I don’t want you to be mad. We all need forgiveness. And this picture you have there is an answered prayer. I don’t know if you really comprehend the kind of miracle it really is to me.”

“I think it is a sign that you are on the right track and that you are writing something important. We’ve all been through a lot. You need to keep moving forward and finish what you’ve started,” Mom declared.

Stars

Dad smiled and chimed in, “Yes. Listen to your mom. I don’t know what you are doing, but I’m fine with it. Don’t worry about it. Do what you need to do. Write what you need to write.”

I knew with confidence that regardless of whether or not I had one of those licenses, he would always love me. I realized that day that Dad always chose to laugh at the ugliness in the world. If you didn’t know that about him, he could appear highly offensive and insensitive. He didn’t mean to be that way. It was a coping mechanism that shielded him from the pain he absorbed from the world all around. He held a lot in while I grew to eventually let a lot out.

That weekend was a time of reconciliation, and the graces came one right after the other. One of my sisters arrived the next day, a few minutes after I finished praying the Rosary and sat down with Mom and Dad for morning coffee. Later that afternoon, my brother joined us.

“So, what brings you out to the country?” I asked.

“Oh, we like to sit out at night and look at the stars.”

I smiled and asked, “Did you see the full moon last night? Wasn’t it gorgeous? We saw it come up just over the horizon. It was so orange and eerie looking, but it was beautiful.”

“Yeah. We should still be able to appreciate it tonight. The stars just have a way of making you wonder.”

“Oh yeah! There’s just something about the full moon and the stars!” I exclaimed.

Dad made his way into the room while we continued to visit and watch a televised concert. We laughed, sang, and drank until we all went outside to take a peek at the moon.

Stars

“This has been such a wonderful weekend!” Dad boomed as we made our way back into the house to share good food and good times. My heart swelled with joy. I’d been touched by the Holy Spirit and was ready to return home more focused on my mission than ever before.

The first thing I did when I got home was research the authenticity of the “Tea Cup Sallie” portrait and license that my father had. I found several other images and licenses issued to this same woman. I called my parents to tell them that the image appeared to be real. After careful cross-examination, however, more questions came to mind, eventually revealing that the “Tea Cup Sallie” story was a hoax.¹⁵ No one knew who the woman was in the photograph, and the license was a counterfeit. She wasn’t anymore a prostitute than I was!

It wasn’t long before I went to visit with the Passionist. I told him about what occurred in Star and was happy to discover that he hadn’t been able to crack open the binder I gave him.

“Oh, good! I’m so glad I haven’t wasted your time. I need to make some major edits given some of the things that have unfolded since I last saw you. I thought I was finished with it, but I am not.”

I got up to step out of his office and noticed the images of the stars in the heavens on his office walls.¹⁶ The images captured my imagination. He even had a picture of Georges Lemaître¹⁷ of the Big Bang theory in his office. I envisioned myself back in Melbourne gazing at the moon and the stars that hung above that observatory, and I recalled a memory from an observatory stationed in the Magdalena Mountains in New Mexico.

Dad took us camping in the Magdalena Mountains each summer before we moved to Alaska. I researched them online and

Stars

learned about the legend that the range was named after Mary Magdalene after a group of Mexicans were saved from an attack by the Apache Indians. Her face appeared on the mountainside and scared the natives, and they left the scene. The mountains were part of the Cibola National Forest and were less than 30 miles away from where I was baptized in Socorro. The telescope I recalled from my childhood is now part of the Magdalena Ridge Observatory. The research lab is located on the 33° latitude, the complete opposite of Sydney, where my spiritual transformation took place seven years ago.

I should have expected it. This discovery was just one more indication among many others that my life was fashioned with a perfect design and a symmetry that was far more mysterious than I could ever imagine. Although I admittedly had a hand in my life story, the more compelling and rhetorical question emerges, “By whose hand was mine led?” It baffles me still today, as I continue to look into the heavens and wonder about all of the stars.

Father, thank you for listening and making me feel comfortable in my space-cadet ways. You had a way of opening me up to mystery, possibilities, and the love of Jesus Christ in His Passion. Your patience, good-natured humor, and your ability to just say things and let them settle, to make me stretch my mind and heart, are true gifts of the Spirit. Thank you for your loving compassion and guidance. Your demeanor reminded me to employ the 7th lesson I learned:

Share Your Joy

I love you.

Stars

Notes

1. Music video featuring Switchfoot singing in the forest while it is raining can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tv-5snutHG0>
2. The Church can only propose, not impose its teachings. I appreciate that each individual is left to exercise free will. I do not follow church teachings or serve out of obligation. I do so, because I *want* to do so and choose to serve through the use of my charisms (gifts and talents) in accordance to the whispers in my heart.
3. St. Thomas Aquinas was a Catholic theologian and Doctor of the Church.
4. State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness used to assess students' mastery of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)
5. Learn more about the Passionist order and Holy Name Retreat Center at www.holynameretreatcenter.com
6. Learn more about the Crucifix of Limpias at <https://www.miraclesofthechurch.com/2010/10/miraculous-crucifix-of-limpias-jesus.html>
7. St. Theresa of Ávila was a Spanish mystic, founder of the Discalced Carmelites, a master of contemplative prayer and Doctor of the Church. She is author of *The Interior Castle* and *The Way of Perfection*.
8. St. Ephrem (Also spelled Ephraim) the Syrian, known as “the harp of the Holy Spirit” was a deacon, Doctor of the Church and an evangelist who took the secular songs of his day and converted them into hymns to preach the Gospels. The quote taken from Agape Bible Study at <http://agapebiblestudy.com/documents/St%20Ephraim%27s%20Advice%20on%20the%20Study%20of%20Sacred%20Scripture.htm>
9. I became interested in the concept of the Black Madonna after learning that Our Lady of Guadalupe is known as a Black Madonna for both her dark/brown skin tone and the conversion of the Aztec people to Catholicism after they recognized her image in a miraculous painting upon the garment of a poor indigenous man as the goddess they were expecting at the time, the multicolored-feathered serpent, Quetzalcoatl. Portraits and sculptures of the Blessed Virgin Mary in dark skin tones have been attributed to as many as three different reasons. The smoke of incense in the churches have caused the

Stars

artifacts to darken. They were painted/carved intentionally to convert indigenous people of different cultures to Catholicism. Others have been found and are simply unexplainable. The most famous of the Black Madonna portraits is the venerated icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa in Poland.

10. The Feast Day of Mary, Queen of Heaven is August 18 when Catholics venerate The Coronation of the Blessed Mother in Heaven, based on Revelation 12:1.

11. The Crucifix of the Poison is located in Mexico, City, in the side chapel of the Cathedral Metropolitana De Mexico.

12. I remembered reading a story about a man who allowed his family to believe a damaging falsehood about himself in order to maintain his wife's family's good name by keeping a grave secret. The story can be found in Chapter 1 of *Hauntings: Dispelling the Ghosts Who Run Our Lives*.

13. The book took a look at the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church and presented the dark stories in the *Bible* and the dark history of the Church, before presenting readers with those things that are great about the Catholic Church, for which to stay and fight.

14. "Storage Wars" is a reality TV show where deserted storage units are auctioned off to interested buys. The winners then rummage through the contents of the units, searching for valuable treasures.

15. See details about the hoax at Snopes: <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/tea-cup-sallie-prostitution/>

16. The first time I went on retreat, the Passionist explained the rule of obedience in the order and how it was tied to the black belts that they wear. I was intrigued, because I had delayed testing for my black belt in Tae Kwon Do that spring and wondered if I still struggled with the discipline of obedience myself. Interestingly enough, the master who awarded me my black belt was also an astrophotographer and was even a member of the same group of enthusiasts as the Passionist priest.

17. Georges Lemaître was a Catholic priest, mathematician, and scientist, credited for proposing the "Big Bang Theory" of the origin of the universe.

Chapter 9

Alive and Kicking

It was a glorious day when I was awarded a black-belt in Tae Kwon Do, for the mark of a true blackbelt is the willingness to wear your white belt again to return to where things began with a new spirit and new sense of sight. For me, that meant going back to the very beginning of my love affair with my husband. It started the morning that our dog walked into our bedroom with what looked like a chew toy in her mouth. When I took a closer look, I immediately recognized that it was the stuffed-animal rainbow fish that my husband left in my apartment when we first met with a goofy poem affixed to it.

I can still remember the words, “meet me by the sea, where you can come and swim and frolic with me”. I thought it was the most unusual and dorkiest gesture, but I was open to the possibility that the “real thing” found me. After all, it was a miracle that I’d even

Alive and Kicking

been matched up with him by friends in the first place. His name, Michael, means “one who is like God”, and he was! He was a simple carpenter and teacher with quite a green thumb. He was responsible for the lush landscaping that was spread about the lake house property his parents owned in Wisconsin. With the assistance of a local contractor, Michael and his father built a hilltop home at the base of one of the larger lakes. You can smell the flowers Mike planted all around the house from the entrance of the quarter-mile driveway that leads to their home in the woods.

These memories came to mind as I stood transfixed with that fish in my hands after all those years, thinking about that poem. Perhaps that’s why I simply loved the song, “Where the River Meets the Sea”.² It has a similar feel to it. It was a summons and a declaration of love.

With that realization, I took the toy and left it on Mike’s side of the bed with my own version of “Meet Me by the Sea”. Little did I know, there was another “big fish” who had plans of His own—a summons to meet Him by the sea, set up scavenger hunt style via tiny whispers to my heart in incremental synchronistic events—crazy, holy graces—that unfolded over time. I’d learned that this was His signature approach to reaching out to me and building my faith.

It all started when I was visiting with a friend and was telling her how that fish resurfaced seemingly out of nowhere. I thought it was lost, just like I thought that my marriage was lost there for a while. And I also mentioned that I was feeling called to go away for prayer.

“I have a couple of friends who suggested that I go to New Mexico to go pray with the Benedictine monks up in Pecos,” I shared.

Alive and Kicking

“No, no, no, no! I know you. You are into the mystics. There’s a better place for you to go. It’s kind of pricey, but I think that you’d really enjoy a visit there. And it’s not all the way to Australia. It’s with the Sisters by the Sea.”

I was intrigued when she said, “By the Sea.”

“I can’t quite remember what the town is called, but it was something by the sea. By the sea. Uhm, the nuns were Carmelites,” she recalled while squinting her eyes. “That’s it! Carmel by the Sea. You’re all into the-little- flower-Lisieux and Theresa of Ávila thing. That’s where you need to go! Check it out. I think they have a website. You can find a place to stay there, and then go pray with the nuns at the monastery. You’ll love it.”

“Carmel by the Sea?”

“You won’t be sorry. You’ll love it, but don’t go during the touristy season. It will take you forever to get there, but the scenery is gorgeous. Yes, Carmel by the Sea.”

“Where is this place? Is there a river that runs into the sea?” I mused.

“Huh?” “Is it where the river meets the sea?” I chuckled.

“At least tell me if it’s in the U.S.”

“Oh, it’s in California! Yeah. It’s on the Pacific Coast Highway. You’ll love it. You need to go.”

I found a map of the state to get a better sense of where this place was. It was several miles south of San Francisco. And sure enough, there was a river that ran into the sea. Check! But I hadn’t received any other confirmations to zero in on this location. I assumed things would unfold in the Lord’s time.

Alive and Kicking

Later that week, I met up with a small ecumenical group of Christian ladies, with whom I studied scripture and mentioned the idea of leaving to go pray by the sea.

“Oh yeah! You know I love to go pray on the beach, and my friend has a beach house we could rent. Let’s all check our calendars and see if we might be able to pull it off.”

The group agreed to return with our calendars to take a serious look at planning a retreat. Just days later, I found myself in the kitchen perturbed that we ran out of coffee filters and had to make an early run to the grocery store. Once there, I walked down an aisle half asleep and found a wall of all sorts of filters and stood there wondering which ones were suitable for our coffee maker. I stepped back to get a better look at all of the products on the shelves and brushed up against a book stand that was in the aisle. I thought it was strange for it to be there in the first place and noticed that it had a single book in its rack. It was the best seller, *Cottage by the Sea*.³ I picked it up to read the synopsis on the back cover, and I admired the image on the front cover of a small home with a beautiful ocean view. I put the book back in the rack and headed for home with the filters I hoped would let me make that cup of coffee.

The following evening, I sat down with my father-in-law to watch an old movie. There on the screen was a home with a gorgeous ocean view. It was déjà vu. I hadn’t a clue what he was watching until a phone call came into a very young Clint Eastwood in the role of a radio DJ. The caller made a request. “Play ‘Misty’⁴ for me.” I couldn’t believe what I was seeing and hearing. It was like the opening sequence to ICEHOUSE’s music video for “Crazy”. I was amazed that the radio station that Eastwood’s character was operating was KRML in Carmel by the Sea!

Alive and Kicking

When I returned to my small ecumenical group of lady friends, I mentioned finding the book, and I mentioned the movie.

“It’s a sign! Should I go ahead and reserve the beach house?” my friend asked with excitement.

I was astonished to see all of my friends raising their hands in anticipation of visiting the beach in the Gulf of Mexico near our home. I thought to myself, “Looks like I’m supposed to go to this beach house with these ladies.” So, in early January of 2019, I found myself by the sea, praying with my friends.

The weekend together was very cleansing. We listened to the “I Thirst” meditation from St. Theresa of Calcutta.⁵ We made prayer journals and spent time on the beach in silence to commune with the Lord. We even went to Mass together that Saturday night with the moon just on the cusp of lighting up the night sky in all her fullness. I was overjoyed with the understanding that I had genuine friends to lean on, friends I trusted with whom I could share my thoughts and doubts, even in the midst of heartbreak or scandal. I knew that I’d have the support I would need to carry on.

I returned home from that haven, eager to join another small group to tell them all about the special refuge. I had been leading a study group on the Blessed Mother since the start of the Christmas holidays. We’d all grown close and comfortable enough to share our adventures, hopes, and dreams with each other. I told them about my time by the sea and then mentioned my fantastical story about Carmel by the Sea and the Clint Eastwood movie. One of the elderly gentlemen sat with a huge grin on his face. He looked down at his cellphone and searched and swiped and before I knew it, I was looking at a picture of him standing next to Clint Eastwood.

“Oh cool! You met Clint Eastwood? He’s so tall!”

Alive and Kicking

“No. That’s a statue of him. It’s in Carmel by the Sea! I’ve been there, and yes! You need to go.”

“If it is meant to be, it will be. I knew I was going to be sent to pray by the sea, and I was! The only way that I would go is if I got a call to conduct professional development in California. Otherwise, I have no reason to be there.”

“I’ll pray that you get that call,” the gentleman responded with enthusiasm in his eyes and hope in his voice. He must have had a strong connection with heaven. Less than two weeks later, I received a call to train in California. I would be traveling in May, which, incidentally, is the month of Our Lady, the Blessed Mother in the Catholic Church. As it got closer to the date, I thought I’d try connecting with Bishop Barron in person since he was based in Santa Barbara, but his secretary told me that his schedule was very busy with all of the festivities during the Easter season, leading up to Pentecost, and preparing for confirmations. I did, however, find out where he was celebrating Mass. And so, I had an important decision to make. I was only going to be in the area over the weekend. After much prayer, I decided to visit Carmel by the Sea. Celebrating Mass would lock me into a schedule that I wasn’t sure I could keep. No. Communing with God in all of His creation was in order. I was going to meet Him by the sea.

While working with the teachers in Los Angeles, I was reminded of all the reasons I went into teaching in the first place. I wanted to make a difference in the world. I wanted to be able to speak up for those who had no voice, who could not speak up for themselves. I wanted to communicate how important it is to use a variety of methods when instructing others because it expands the pool of students who derive meaning and understanding from instruction. We are all individually called to a higher understanding of ourselves and others, far beyond the science or psychology of

Alive and Kicking

the day. No. There are still broader and greater horizons in the human heart and mind we have yet to really explore and understand. While I was with those teachers, I was reminded of the importance and role of love. That exploration always starts with and is appropriately guided by a heavy dose of passion.

I was treated far better than I deserved. The participants in the training invited me out to lunch, gave me directions to Carmel by the Sea, and made other recommendations to ensure that I was comfortable and would get the most out of my visit. I was walking into a higher state of grace, boosted up by the individuals who heard my stories, encouraged me, and guided me to the people I needed to meet and to the places I needed to visit to rendezvous with the One Love who is greatest.

The streets were alive that Friday evening when I arrived in Carmel by the Sea. I could hear a live band playing in the distance as merchants and shopkeepers tore down their stands for the night. I set my alarm to get up in the morning to attend Mass at the monastery. Alas, I failed to recognize that I set the alarm for 6 p.m. and not 6 a.m., so I overslept.

Unfazed, I got up and ignored the time. It wasn't important to be on a schedule for my special day with the Lord. I'd already missed Mass. There was now no reason to watch the time. I pieced myself together and went into the dining area to enjoy a wonderful breakfast, before setting out for the beach. There, I took out my phone and shot pictures of the seascape and my beautiful surroundings. With good-humored intent and a dab of mischief, I playfully used my cellphone camera to record myself complaining that I couldn't find anyone to play "Misty" for me. I breathed in the ocean air and was gladdened that everything seemed to be coming up flowers!

Alive and Kicking

Shortly thereafter, I got into my rental car and started driving down scenic Highway 1. I made my way up a long drive up into a wooded area that opened up to several flowerbeds that surrounded the beautiful Carmelite Monastery. I could see the breathtaking view of the Pacific Ocean down below through the trees as I walked the grounds and took pictures of the statues that welcomed visitors. The silence was piercing as I went into the simple, austere, yet gorgeous chapel. I took a seat to pray all four mysteries of the Rosary. By the time I reached the crucifixion of Jesus, a church bell gonged from above in perfect timing. It continued to bellow out as I prayed the decade of ‘Hail Marys’ that followed the ‘The Lord’s Prayer’. A silence followed as I moved onto the Glorious Mysteries. By the time I got to the resurrection of Jesus, a trumpet sounded from behind the altar upfront. I couldn’t see anyone in the chapel and was startled, but I chose to continue with ‘The Lord’s Prayer’. Suddenly, the cloistered sisters began to sing sweetly from behind the altar. I was in perfect sync with them as I continued on and completed the entire mystery by the time the sisters completed their chanting. I sat there for a while in amazement and in thanksgiving as the silence returned, tears streaming down my face.

I recalled that St. Theresa of Ávila used the metaphor of where the river meets the sea as that of spiritual marriage. I quote from her work *The Interior Castle*, “... spiritual marriage is like rain falling from heaven into a river or stream, becoming one and the same liquid, so that the river and rain water cannot be divided; or it resembles a streamlet flowing into the ocean, which cannot afterwards be disunited from it.”⁶ And it happened. I acknowledged that I was forever walking with the Lord in spiritual marriage. I giggled to myself as I wiped away my tears of joy, wondering when I’d take flight like St. Theresa and the other saints who got to levitate!

Alive and Kicking

I sat a while longer before I stood up and walked forward to the base of the stairs that led to the altar and bowed before turning around to depart. As I was walking down the aisle, I spied a single missalette that was left on a chair. I went over to pick it up to read the gospel for that Sabbath, intuiting that it probably was going to say something about feeding sheep. I had no clue that it really was going to come from John 21:1-19, the story of when Jesus fed His apostles breakfast on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius and requested of Peter, “Feed my sheep.” Even so, I loved those verses from John 21, because the whole scene seemed to invoke scripture verses from Ezekiel 47:1-12 which described beautifully where the river meets the sea. While the warnings of the prophet had been ignored by the Israelites, Ezekiel had a vision of better days to come in spite of the devastation that fell upon them in 587 BC when they were sacked by the Babylonians. It was a vision of new life that would come through both the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. I closed the book and set it back down on the chair, as I smiled and recalled all the times, I heard those verses over the past seven years. The message was loud and clear. Listen. Trust. Follow.

I spent the rest of the day driving down Highway 1 with the majestic and serene ocean to my right. Before long, a beautiful rainbow of glorious colors emerged from the clouds that glazed the mountainside. Not only was I alive and kicking, but the Lord was alive and kicking in me. Let him be alive and kicking in you. For together, our earthly colors make up the color black, grounded in what we want, what we know, and what we think we know. When we lighten up and open ourselves to great hope and possibility, while rising to a higher purpose, beyond our own selfish desires through the prism of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, we become light! Our colors are woven into a golden dream that illuminates the truth that is Jesus Christ—a truth far more

Alive and Kicking

inclusive than any of us could ever imagine, that could solve all of our problems if we only turned to Him.

What's problematic is the fact that few people know the real Jesus because people want to put him back in a box. They want to capture Him, own Him, and define Him when everything about Him is truly undefinable, unmeasurable, and unknowable unless you know love—the will of the greater good for the other. If life is all about you, you'll never know true love. It's not about sex. It's not about getting your way. It's not something you can bottle up and sell. It's an intangible that makes itself known through acts of self-denying kindness and generosity. It does not seek power. It does not seek notoriety. It does not seek wealth. It's self-emptying so that others can be filled and fed. And it does not discriminate. Even the criminal that hung on the cross next to Christ was promised paradise when he turned to Him. He recognized that Jesus did no wrong and did not deserve His lot. But Jesus chose not to fight back, did not accuse others, or think that crazy could be fixed with any sense of rationality. No. He understood that all was in the hands of the Father and that His quiet surrender and obedience would defeat the evil that had plagued the land. These biblical lessons are ours to glean much wisdom. While we cannot change the past, we can choose to face the future with a Truth that will last and not be a fleeting fad. Real love incites surprise and wonder. It gives us a hope that enables us to face trials and setbacks with a joy that will always prove that there is a “respawn” button somewhere. For when we walk with Christ, we too can be transfigured, resurrected, and healed.

Listening to others and being present for them is a tremendous gift. Listening does not mean that you have to agree with them, but it does mean that you have the fortitude and spiritual maturity to tear down the walls that ensure division between people. Division

Alive and Kicking

cuts off communication and therefore limits understanding. To bring these walls down, one must first be willing to

Wait and suspend judgement.

Ask questions and probe for more information.

Listen with an open heart.

Learn with an open mind; and

Seek the best in others.

For “love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

~1 Corinthians 13:4-7

I drove down Highway 1 and flew back into my husband's arms. I was certain that I'd gone up the mountainside of Carmel for the first time, gazed upon the sea, and saw the cloud⁷ with the beautiful rainbow, having seen Christ in the words and actions of seven men. I saw Him in my father, the rock star, the pastor, the psychologist, the bishop, the Passionist, and in my husband. I've even seen a new generation in my son. I've seen him in the people, places, and great works that I have encountered over the span of my lifetime. He is Love. And Love resides in me. He is a Man of Colours. He is risen! He lives! I heard Him in the Word, and I saw Him in the Eucharist emitting brilliant colours onto the monstrance that held Him as Pope Francis prayed for us and offered a blessing for the suffering world.⁸

Alive and Kicking

Now, more than ever, it's important for all of us to count our blessings and get reconnected to the people and places that you know and love while making peace with enemies and those who've hurt you by letting go of the past and forgiving them. Forgiveness for many of us is a process. It's not something that happens overnight, but if we ask for help from the Lord, He will make it possible. Then, we'll be in a better place to resurrect the love that is in us, knowing that while Jesus died on the cross and rose again, the resurrection didn't just happen over 2000 years ago. No. The resurrection can be seen every day when you see things going on in your community like observing a person holding the door open for another, watching individuals feed the hungry, recognizing the emergency team of medical technicians coming to help victims of a tragic car accident and realizing that there are people out there willing to put their lives in jeopardy to save others. This is Christ, alive and well, in our communities.

Listen to that special song I heard from Pat Benatar many moons ago during soundcheck in college called "One Love: Song of the Lion"⁹. It tips a hat to those who have dared to walk the road of hope, preaching the Gospel, or simply planting the seeds of the Spirit in all that they've created and done. The best among them bring people together and unify them with the Truth that is the Love that can be found in Jesus Christ. This is my mission. This is yours.

With Christ, we can withstand any crisis that may come our way knowing that He always brings out a greater good in bad situations. While Stephen Hawking studied the universe with all of its infinite possibilities, he once suggested that "no matter how bad things get, don't look down on your feet, but look up at the stars."¹⁰ The stars have always provided reliable and unchanging direction for those

Alive and Kicking

who needed it. As Pope Francis suggested, in times of uncertainty, “We need the Lord like ancient sailors needed the stars.”¹¹

Brothers and Sisters,

I've met many interesting people and gone to many places around the world. And it's true. There are times in our lives when we want to run away and hide. Fear, uncertainty, and even anger cause us to believe that there must be a better place to be. We begin to abandon the very people and places that need us the most, that we need the most—our families, our homes, our jobs, and our churches. We even begin to abandon our beliefs, our values, and our authentic self, totally unaware of how much we are loved and would be missed. But you taught me that there is another way to respond to our doubts, fears, and grief. You taught me to trust you and weather the storms that come knowing that you are with me. You helped me understand that sometimes we can get so wrapped up in ourselves, that we can't see the love that is being offered to us every day. It remains hidden, as if only the people who can levitate, can recite every line of scripture from the Bible, or were granted some other “crazy holy grace” can see it. This is mostly because we want what we want without considering that maybe, just maybe, we are being offered something far greater and better. Some of us have been hurt, rejected, or led to believe that there is something wrong with us. So, we refuse to entertain the notion that we are loveable or that someone might love us for who we are as we are. There are others who buy into the belief that we must do something to earn or fight for love, when love is all around us, freely given. Others fear the loss of love and choose not to accept it in the first place. These broken hearts can only be mended

Alive and Kicking

with love. Choose to love and know that you are dearly loved. Embrace it and let it transform you, your family, your church, and your community. It is my hope and prayer, that by sharing my story, you'll be able to see that although you may not share the particulars of my profile, we are more alike than different. All of us are far more related than meets the eye. I made the choice all of my life to look upon you as reflected images of Christ regardless of your past deeds. In you, I was taught by the Great Teacher, and I mimicked and learned. I encountered the Healer and came back home spiritually renewed and wanting to tell everyone about it. You were kind and patient with me, which in turn, made me a better servant for others. I witnessed your acts of tremendous sacrifice and courage, and I became brave and prepared to give even my life. But most of all, I've seen the image of the suffering Christ in you. I heard your cries. I took your offensive looks and remarks and reminded myself that you were hurting. I shared in your passion and in your sorrow. As reflected images of Christ, you are like the moon. You are like the morning star. You are like Mary. You are the physical manifestation of the mystical body of Christ that responds to the summons of the Holy Spirit in real time and in the real world. Mary is the lady that appeared on a simple man's tilma in Mexico, years ago, as the Castilian roses he carried in it dropped to the ground. All who witnessed this spectacle dropped to their knees. To this day, there is great speculation about the origins of the image of the expectant mother on the poor man's cloak. Who was the artist? Some say Jesus. Some say the Blessed Mother. I say they were both artists. I hear Jesus' voice in the beautiful "Man of Colours", a song about an aging artist.

Alive and Kicking

I could have sworn I heard Mary's voice in Belinda Carlisle's "Shades of Michelangelo", a song about an expectant mother who aspired to delivering great hope. Let that hope grow in you. Let your love shape a better tomorrow for you, me, and our children.

I love you.

Alive and Kicking

Notes

1. Music video featuring the band Simple Minds can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljIQo1OHkTI> which poses questions with regards to where one goes when in the midst of different types of crises.
2. An Icehouse song that can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpv3Yrs_dLS, with a bridge that depicts best the process of seeking, finding and generating new questions that I've gone through all my life. Perhaps my sense of what "contemplation" is all about. It's a love for the process, the journey and all the interesting characters God allows you to meet along the way.
3. Macomber, D. (2018). *Cottage by the sea*. New York: Ballantine Books. Story of a woman who moves to a seaside town needing to find light after experiencing the darkness of a devastating tragedy.
4. From the 1971 suspense drama "Play Misty For Me" starring Clint Eastwood about a crazed and dangerous fan who stalks a radio DJ.
5. A beautiful recording of the meditation can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRVu1exlui0&t=41s>
6. The Interior Castle is archived and can be downloaded at no cost at <https://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/tic/index.htm>. The quote comes from The Seventh Mansions, Chapter II: Spiritual Marriage, paragraph 5, p. 273 in *The Interior Castle* by St. Theresa of Ávila.
7. 1 Kings 18: 42-44
8. Pope Francis called for prayer and delivered an Urbi et Orbi blessing and message, on Friday, March 27, 2020. After praying before the Blessed Sacrament, he took the monstrance with brilliant colors of the rainbow emitting from the Eucharist out and held it up for the world to see outside in response to the coronavirus pandemic.
9. Listen to "One Love: Song of the Lion" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rp38vuXheSM>
10. Hawking, S. (2016). "Genius: Episode 3, Why are we here?". Public Broadcasting System.

Alive and Kicking

11. Extraordinary Moment of Prayer presided over by Pope Francis, Sagrato of St. Peter's Basilica, Friday, 27 March 2020

Interested in ordering additional copies of this book? Go to
www.lulu.com or www.kolakgroup.com

