

Metaphorical Faith

Book 1

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Teresa Irene Smith

God cannot be missed. He fits in the smallest and fills the largest. Faith is believing what you cannot see. Therefore, this description of faith is metaphorical, for in all these things you can see God.

C.S. Lewis

Metaphorical Faith – Book 1

First Edition

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Foreword

A metaphor is defined as “one thing conceived as representing another.” On a molecular level, the raw material of every element in the universe does not vary much. One thing can stand in for many other things and correlations can be drawn between them. This world was conceived as a representative of the universe and of a human and of a cell and of a molecule. If this cross-translation happens in the physical realms, I believe it also happens in the spiritual realms.

I have looked for God in many places and am pleased to report that I find Him 100% of the time. If I think I cannot see Him in a circumstance, event, object, or condition, it is only because my perception is limited. When I increase my perception in proportion to the revelation of God’s existence, He appears.

If you and I saw God in the same place at the same time, we may see Him differently. In this writing, I reveal what I saw with my natural eyes and what I saw with my spiritual eyes. The eyes of the spirit are as unique as the eyes of the body. As you read these metaphorical writings, I hope you can see beyond even what I saw. It is in simplicity that the depths of truth are revealed. You may find, as I have, that everything in this world – be it a table, bird, volcano, pebble, or wind – represents the simple complexity of Deity. Open your eyes wide and see that God is real.

Teresa Irene Smith

Love and Gratitude

Dr. Masaru Emoto of Japan studied water for 10 years before he discovered that water is affected by energy. He froze water and then used a high-powered microscope and camera to photograph the crystals that formed as the water froze. Classical music formed beautiful crystals, but expressions of negativity made deformed crystals. One of the most stunning crystals is formed when water is exposed to two words, not separately, but together. The two words are "Love and Gratitude." Since the human body is mostly water, these two words have power to transform how a person feels, emotionally and physically.

I would like to express these two words to the many people who helped us make this book a reality. The first person to thank in regards to this book is **Wendelyn McGrew Barrett**, who collected my email messages, printed them, bound them, and gave them to me as a book. That was several years ago. Thanks for believing. My dear husband, **Kelly Smith**, gives me reasons every day to be thankful. I love you. **Diane Mendez** is the meticulous editor of my prolific words and ideas. Thanks for being so careful. Lastly, my greatest love and gratitude is reserved for the **Creator** of all things whose heart is bigger than the universe. It is His love that empowers every good endeavor.

The Sculpture

God created a man to be hard and rigid, like a sculpture made of granite. The sculpture, by its nature and design, has voids within that reduce its stability. In addition, the pressures of life cause cracks to form, some along the outside and others that run deep. God created a woman to be soft and pliable, like putty. Putty is, by nature and design, flexible under pressure, with the ability to fill empty spaces while maintaining its integrity. Putty can be applied to fill in the voids and repair the cracks of the sculpture. This filling gives the sculpture more stability and strength than what it has on its own, which in turn, provides more stability and strength to the putty than what it has on its own. If the sculpture must move or shift due to life's circumstances, the putty is pliable enough to adjust and remold itself to the new shape.

When a woman decides to conform or compete in a man's world, her misperception of her natural strength causes her to form a hardened shell around her softness. Feminine hardness is not flexible like putty. When a situation calls for flexibility, the woman is restricted by her hard shell. All she can do is bang into the hardness of the sculptures around her, hoping to dislodge their stability by finding a point of weakness.

So, women and men often clash – hardness to hardness. The clashes weaken the male structure

and cause the woman great pain as his hardness stabs her own hardness like a knife into her softness. After a clash, the cracks in the sculpture widen and form stress fractures. The hard shell of the woman remains intact, but she suffers from internal bleeding.

Can a woman exist in a man's world and stay pliable? She can if she discovers the strength of flexibility. Men can only dream of the ways a powerfully flexible woman can move. Instead of competing with men or trying to conform into a shell of manhood, women should express the fullness of womanhood. In a corporation, for example, where men clash against each other as a way to prove their superiority, women can enter and strengthen the entire structure of the company. That is not to mean they are subservient or play secondary roles. Women are observant, smart, and proactive. They have creative reasoning and intuitive instincts for addressing problems. Men would do well to appreciate and enable women to fill in the cracks and fissures of their organization so that the entire structure can be stronger.

Without the aid of a strong, pliable woman, a man will try to fill his own cracks. He may use all manner of substandard materials, such as sports, work, money, pornography, gambling, drugs, and so on. Not all those things are bad, but they are a poor substitute for an empowered woman who knows her capabilities and purpose.

Some men think they can function quite well without an empowered woman. This is prideful and foolish thinking. God said, "It is not good for man to be alone." So, He made the woman. She was not created to be his servant, but to stand beside him. A man may think that any woman will do, but he is wise to seek the one that will strengthen him rather than weaken him. Ask Sampson what happens when a man trades his integrity for beauty alone.

An empowered woman can enter a relationship and mold herself to a wise man, seeking out the cracks that years of pain and stress have caused to his soul. In the seeking, she can find herself. She can also find safety and security in the strength of his structure, not feeling the need to supply all of her own defenses.

What happens when a wise man is involved with a woman who is not empowered? The wise man can help her find her purpose by identifying her strengths and affirming her as a woman. Her power needs only to be revealed, treasured, and encouraged in order to blossom. He must allow her into his broken places and let her fill him wherever he feels empty. He must search his inner self and make sure that he is not contributing to the formation of a hard shell around her softness by being too strong or forceful with her. Rather than resenting the time away from him, he should

encourage her to spend time with other empowered women. They will help her regenerate herself in order to completely fulfill her purpose.

What happens when an empowered woman is involved with an unwise man? The empowered woman can (ever so gently) find ways to slip into the cracks of his life and strengthen him. While doing this, she must effectively communicate to him, in his language, her true self. If he strikes too forcefully into her softness, she has the power to absorb that shock with flexibility and dissipate the force into the depths of God's love and forgiveness. She may need to enlist the help of other wise men to help the foolish man become wise to the ways of empowered women. Sometimes men only understand the words of other men.

If either a wise man or an empowered woman is not in a relationship, they each can find their sustenance in the divine relationship. Somehow, God can fulfill the role of the missing counterpart. He may do it through friendships, through ministry and life purpose, or through quiet revelation in times alone with Him. Some people function quite well with God as their sole partner.

Even if we have a relationship, we should all know that we are representatives of God to our human partners. In the Bible, God calls Jesus the "Groom" and we are His "Bride." God seeks to have a relationship with us that transcends the ordinary.

Our human relationships teach us how to participate in the divine relationship. We each hold a portion of the divine spark. If we treat our partner with less respect than we would God, then we are missing a component of divine relationship. We feel unhappy, but don't take responsibility for our role in the discomfort. Represent God well by being a divine partner.

Do not wonder why you have relational issues if you are not fulfilling your role or helping your partner to fulfill his or her role. If you are a sculpture that does not allow the putty into your broken places and voids, your structure is weakened and you will not provide sufficient stability to yourself or the people in your life. You will feel uneasy all the time because you know that the entire structure could collapse. If you are putty that refuses to mold yourself into the cracks of the sculpture and transform the dysfunction or trauma into strength, then you will find yourself acting more out of fear than of love. You will become a statue of hardened putty. Without protection from the elements, you will eventually be worn down to an indistinguishable shape.

What does a man do who has previously refused to allow the putty to strengthen him? He must submit himself to God, who will chip away with his chisel at the blockages the man set up against the woman. That chisel has a sharp edge and it causes pain, but the release of any block is sweet salve to the wounds

of repair. Then, the man must allow the woman to enter and trust her to know what he needs. He reveals his weaknesses to her so that she can give him strength in those areas. When a man has all of his voids and cracks solidly filled, he will experience amazing stability from which he can accomplish his life purpose. He will be fulfilled.

What does a woman do who wants to be pliable, but who has formed a hard shell? She must submit herself to God so that He can knead her like dough. His large and gentle hands can break down the hardness and mold her into total softness. After an intense session, He lets her rest and rise, and then He begins kneading again. His gentle strength and loving patience, hopefully also demonstrated by the man in her life, will triumph over the hard shell. She will then be free to fulfill her life purpose within the protective covering of her partner.

Let there not ever be a twisting of the roles where the sculpture compresses the putty through force or the putty uses pressure to generate cracks in the sculpture. When we hurt the other person, we hurt ourselves and we hurt God. Instead, let there be complete union where at some point the sculpture knows not where the putty begins and the putty knows not where the sculpture ends. They are one.

Waves of Grief

When grief first hits us, it's like we are in the ocean. We cannot find our footing and when a wave comes, it crashes over us. We are disoriented, tumbled by our grief, and feel as though we may drown. Each day that passes brings us one step closer to the shore. The waves of grief still come, and while we feel their effect, they do not tumble us over anymore. The day comes when we are completely on the shore. Sometimes a big wave comes in and we feel the grief touch us again. In these times our tears mingle with the waters and grief once again retreats to the ocean from whence it came.

Gin Rummy

At the beginning of the game, each player is dealt the same number of cards. They do not have the same cards, just the same number of cards. Some people's first hands are great, with many pairs or runs and good possibilities for winning quickly. Other people's first hands are a jumble of cards that don't seem to have much rhyme or reason. No matter what we are dealt, one of our first tasks is to group our cards together in some logical order. Some players choose not to do this and can miss opportunities as a result.

The draw pile represents the options that life offers us as we play. You never know if the next card is

one you can use in your hand or not. Still, when it is your turn, you draw and see what comes your way. The dealer lets the other player go first. The first choice we have is whether to take the first card that is offered or pass on it. If we pass on it, the dealer may take it and that card is not an option for us anymore.

Each time we take a card, we must get rid of a card. This is sometimes a difficult choice. We'd like to keep all of our cards, just in case we need them later. What we lay down is available for the dealer to take or leave, but we can never have it back. What's done is done.

Who is the dealer? The dealer created the game, determined the rules, designed the cards, and invited the players. He's God.

Some people recognize the Dealer's role right away. They accept that someone else is in this game with them. They know that the cards in the stack don't just appear out of nowhere. Usually these players decide at some point to start conversing with the Dealer and find that He is quite interesting. Then, they discover that He is even cooperative in helping them win the game. He actually wants them to win!

Some people think there is no dealer. The game just naturally occurred, rules developed over millenniums, and the cards are dealt by something

called "fate." Whether they believe He exists or not, the Dealer still plays the game, but He does not interact with them much. He just tries to drop them hints that He exists and that He'd like to help them win.

Some people think there might be a dealer, but they just don't trust Him. When He lays down a card that is not what they want, they decide that the Dealer really wants them to lose rather than win. They pout and ignore Him, or even act out in angry ways. This behavior usually distracts them from good card playing. Winning is not as easy that way.

Let's consider the deck of cards. After every hand that is played, the deck is reshuffled. How much control does the Dealer exert on the order of the cards? That is a mystery. He is certainly skilled enough to arrange all the cards, if necessary. Somehow, though, I think that life has a flow to it that is influenced by many factors not necessarily under the direct maneuvering of God. It is certain that the Dealer chooses cards from His own hand to discard on the stack as choices for the player. He also has the capacity to know what is in the player's hand, but chooses not to play both hands. He lets the player make decisions, too. The decisions the player makes affect how the Dealer will play next. Thus, the game has a unique flow to it that is only possible because of the combination of the Dealer, the player, the order of the cards, and the choices

that are made. The other thing about the cards is that a normal deck has 52 cards of four different suits with each suit having fourteen cards in ascending order. If each card in Gin Rummy requires the player to make a choice, the game of life must also have a certain set of choices for each person to work through. Before a game is won, many hands will be played. Each hand will present a different arrangement of cards and thus a different set of circumstances to work through. Occasionally, we will see an old scenario pop up again and we can apply the lessons learned from our past. A friend of mine told me that when an animal trips on a rock, he won't ever trip on it again. Humans aren't often that smart.

Strategy is a skill we all develop over time. The best strategy in Gin Rummy is to put together three cards that offer the most possibilities. For example, keeping a 7 and 8 of diamonds with a 7 of a different suit will allow for any of three cards to make a set: another 7 would make three of a kind, or a 6 or 9 of diamonds would make a run of three. Keeping your options open in life is a good idea, as well. Sometimes we are too narrow in our approach, keeping cards that can only be completed by the appearance of one particular card. The card in question may be at the bottom of the stack and the hand will most likely not last that long. Even with our possibilities open, there is a time to abandon a particular strategy, especially if the cards we are keeping are face cards. Face cards are the most

costly if we do not win the hand. (Is there something here to be said about "losing face?!") Holding low value cards reduces the cost if the hand is lost, but one can often do well by cultivating high value options because other players often discard their high cards quickly. Weigh the risks and make a wise decision.

Developing a plan is important when a hand is first dealt. The flow of cards may alter the plan a little, but usually it is best to stay with the initial plan. A change mid-hand often leads to a loss because there is not enough time to rebuild. Also, some of the cards you need are probably already buried by the previous plays. Of course, sometimes a major change is necessary and is successful when just the right cards come up.

Each time the Dealer places His discard on the table, the player can either choose that card or draw from the stack. It's interesting that often the card presented by the Dealer is not helpful to us at all. Why would He do that? Why wouldn't He use His powers to give us exactly the card we need all the time? Think about it - that would not be a very fun game. Not getting our way all the time presents us with dilemmas that are gratifying to solve. Another reason may be that He has His own hand to play. Even though we wish He would, He does not show us His cards or the scenarios He is working on. Why would He be playing to win the hand while at the

same time helping us to win? We always want the good guy to win. When we have a complete understanding of the nature of the game of life, we understand that when the Dealer wins, we win, too. We want Him to win and He wants us to win. It's a "win-win" situation! I must admit that there is an exhilarating element of mystery about who is going to win each hand. Something deep inside of us strives to knock first and catch the other guy off-guard. Perhaps God likes surprises, too.

Speaking of knocking, how do you decide when to wait for Gin or to knock and lay down your hand when your deadwood is less than 10? If you knock with deadwood and the Dealer has fewer deadwood points than you, He gets a 25 point undercut bonus. So, you lose the hand and are assessed extra points. If you wait for Gin, you earn an extra 25 points in addition to the Dealer's deadwood points. Most of us are not patient enough to wait for Gin. We also are not as observant as we should be regarding the cards that have been discarded. Plus, we may not have watched carefully enough to know which cards the Dealer has chosen from our discards. Usually, I knock with deadwood if it is early in the hand. If we've been playing for a while it's best to wait for Gin. Although, if the Dealer is picking up a lot of face cards knocking may pay off. What a dilemma! Maybe this is where experience becomes our best ally. The longer you play, the better your timing is. As we go through life, we are dealt hand after hand. We make play after play. We win some hands and

we lose some. We laugh; we cry; we cheer; we grumble. The goal is, of course, to win the entire game.

In Gin Rummy, the first one to score 500 points wins. What constitutes a win in the real game of Life? The true thrill of victory can only be found in accepting the rules of the game as defined by the Dealer. People who play by the rules will win, guaranteed. People who rebel against the rules will suffer the agony of defeat, guaranteed. I don't know why it is like this – I am not the Dealer. It's His game, not mine. He invited us to play His game with Him. It's true that His game is not the only one in town. If we decide that we would rather play another game with someone else, then He will let us go. He's not going with us, that's all. Playing any other game than His means you lose His game. If you aren't playing, you can't win. The amazing thing is that people will blame the Dealer, saying it is His fault that they lost the game. It's not His fault. He doesn't play our hands for us. He leaves the decisions up to us. We can win it all and He is willing to help us win, but He won't force us to win. That's no fun.

The Armoire

We could liken our lives to an armoire. When we are first created, everything about the cabinet is new – the drawers are empty, there are no clothes on the

rod, the wood is aromatic, the joints are tight, and there is promise of a fulfilling and purposeful life ahead.

When we are young, the doors of our cabinet are often open because we are seeking our purpose and experiencing life to the full. This can be both good and bad. As time goes by, various articles of clothing are added to our cabinet. Some of them are cheap, often purchased as part of a fad, and quickly turn to rags. Others are very expensive, but also turn to rags because they lack substance. A few garments are costly, but of good quality and hang neatly, ready to be used again and again.

Occasionally, other people put clothes into our cabinet. This can only happen when we have chosen to open our doors or when they step beyond their rights and force the doors open. The people might be either trying to help us become more useful or they may be unloading their dirty laundry into us. It's hard to tell which, especially when we are young. Time makes us wiser in this regard. Other people's clothes often end up in a pile on the bottom shelf.

Every piece of fine furniture needs to be regularly cleaned and, as it ages, properly maintained. Some people keep the outside of their cabinet sparkling clean, but the inside is full of filth and rags. They don't ever open their doors, choosing instead to pretend that what is on the outside compensates for the condition on the inside. Perhaps they have

tried to clean themselves out, but weren't up to the task. It's hard to know what to throw away and what to keep. The corners where dirt and grime accumulate are dark and unpleasant, even frightening. Rats come to nest in the rags and feed on the filth. They cause further deterioration within the cabinet – chewing on the wood, staining the shelves, ripping even the good garments – and their rapid reproduction amplifies their affect.

How vulnerable we feel when our doors are open and others can see what is inside of us. That is why we hide behind our exterior, but hiding doesn't work forever. What is happening on the inside will begin to show on the outside and no amount of polish or paint can cover it up. Cracks appear, joints loosen, jagged splinters protrude and no matter how much shame, guilt, or remorse is applied, the cabinet exists in a sad state of disrepair.

Many people have made it their business to clean and repair furniture. The problem is that you don't know which ones you can trust with your recovery. How do they truly know what is best for you? Do they know the difference between a rag and a good garment? Can they kill all the rats? Will the cleaner they try on the filth be too strong or too weak? What if they are making changes in you that are based on their own perspective of what furniture should be, rather than on what is right and best for you? Certainly, we take a risk when we trust, but

that is no reason not to trust. Good people exist who apply experience, knowledge and a heart full of love to everything they do. These people can be trusted to bring some level of functionality back. However, no matter how good they are at what they do, they cannot completely restore the cabinet. Why? Because they did not build it.

Consider the possibility that only the Carpenter who made the cabinet can completely clean and restore it. He made the cabinet and he knows it best. He knows how every joint was formed and he remembers what the cabinet was like when it was new. He even built the cabinet with an idea of what its purpose would be. He decided the dimensions, the number of drawers, and the depth of the shelves. He even knows what kind of wood he made the cabinet from, choosing whether it would be soft or strong, beautiful or rugged. The Carpenter has tools that no other human has – tools for repairing scratches, sanding surfaces, mending cracks, and killing rats. He knows every corner and does not fear the filth. Years of experience and wisdom have taught him the difference between a rag and a good garment. He can lovingly remove what does not belong and put what does into order. These repairs the Carpenter performs can be painful at times, like when he has to tighten a loose joint or pound in a nail for stability. However, the pain of a good repair is bearable because the end result is the ability to be strong – a capacity to endure and fulfill a purpose.

When he is finished with the restoration, the cabinet still has the marks of having been used improperly, but the joints are tight, the wood is smooth, and the good clothes are neatly folded. The interior is as clean as the exterior. The cabinet is more selective about what it takes in and is readily available to be maintained by the Carpenter. Maintenance is easy compared to the repair. As a finishing touch, the Carpenter rubs aromatic oils into the wood, so that the dry air in the atmosphere cannot crack the wood and make it vulnerable to outside forces. The fragrant glow of the wood and the usefulness of the cabinet make it a joy for all who behold it. However, it is the Carpenter who appreciates the cabinet's beauty, its very nature, more than any other ever could.

The Barn

Perhaps it still happens these days. The farmer hears of an upcoming blizzard, so he ties a rope from his house out to the barn. The distance is not so very far and the rope looks ridiculous hanging there in the sunshine. When the storm hits, however, that rope becomes a lifeline to both the animals in the barn and the farmer. The winds are howling so loud you cannot hear a call for help. The snow is swirling so thick you cannot see more than three feet in any direction. Inside the house, the fire warms the rooms that are filled with the necessities of life. The walls stand against the wind and snow without even

a shudder. He can smell the soup on the stove. His every need is met here. The house is not just a dwelling; it is home to the farmer. His family is there as is everything he has worked for. It is where he longs to be at the end of a long day. And, it is the place he is loath to leave when the time comes to check on the animals in the barn. He does go, even so. Wrapping up against the cold, he opens the door and places his gloved hand on the rope. The moment he steps down to the ground, he feels the chill in both his body and his mind. For he knows that every step from the house puts him in greater danger. With his hand on the rope, he pulls himself along its length. Drawing breath is painful because of the cold and his feet already feel like wooden stumps. He methodically places one hand over the other and slowly draws nearer to the barn. It seems like hours have passed when suddenly the large wooden door appears before him. He wrestles with the latch and then struggles to get himself inside. He pulls the door shut and relishes the comparative quiet of the barn's interior. It is not as warm in here as in the house, but it is warmer than outside. After shaking the snow from his head and shoulders, he sees that the animals are where he placed them earlier in the day. Each one greets him in their unique ways as he cares for their needs. The smell of hay is comforting and he takes a moment to rest on one of the bales. His feet are still cold, but his hands are slowly warming. The wind outside seems to pick up momentum and the farmer marvels at its intensity. His first thought is to stay in the

barn until the storm passes, but he knows his wife and children will be anxiously awaiting his return. He also realizes that he has no food or water for himself out here. He rises and with a last look at the barn and its occupants, he opens the latch of the door and pushes with all his might. He opens the door enough to get his arm out and searches blindly for the rope he had attached to the wall outside the door. Finally, he finds it and holds tightly to it as he gets the rest of his body outside and then pushes to close the door. The storm has indeed intensified and he almost turns back. His resolve to make it back to the warmth of the house and to his family overcomes his fear and he takes the first step back. He can only see a few inches now and the wind takes his breath away. Once or twice he falls, but he does not let go of the rope. To do so would be certain death. He knows of people who have died a few feet from the safety of their front door. Again it seems like hours go by before the light over the door is seen. He still does not let go of the rope until he has his hand on the door and is pushing it open. What relief pours over him as his wife rushes to hug him and the children cheer for his return. As he takes off his winter coat, hat and gloves, he feels the warmth of the room melt away the chill. Then, he walks to the fire and sits in his favorite chair to enjoy the rest of the evening safely at home.

What the analogy means to me...

The barn is earth. When I was a child and would leave the door open, my mother would ask me, "Were you born in a barn?" As I went to close the door, I would be saying "No" to myself, but in this analogy, I'd have to say "Yes." We are all born in the barn. The farmer is you (or me!). The home is heaven. The storm is those things in life that come against us, that wish to defeat us, even destroy us. The rope is that which keeps us going -- whatever is our lifeline. From the Christian perspective, the rope can only be Jesus. Without Jesus, there is no hope of reaching home safely. Some will brave the storm without the rope and are like the ones who die a few feet from the door. Other religions say you can reach it on your own, but I fear that few, if any, actually do -- no matter how hard they try. It's warmer in the barn than in the storm, but the barn is a pale resemblance to the comforts of the house. The hay is pokey, whereas the favorite chair is soft and comfy. The walls of the barn keep out some of the cold, but there is nothing to warm it like the fire in the house. The animals are content to be companions, but make poor conversationalists. The food in the barn is not really suitable for a human. Munching on hay and grain is not as pleasant as a warm bowl of soup. We think the creature comforts of earth are good, but they are nothing compared to what waits for us in heaven. The animals represent the ones who love us on earth. Not that our families are animals or that our pets are the only ones who love us, but their love cannot compare in scale with the love that God and the heavenly hosts, including

the people who have made it home before us, have for us. They anxiously await our return home.

Again from the Christian perspective, the storm is Satan and his minions. He wants nothing more than for you to let go of that rope and he will send all of his fury to get you to do so. He uses his powers, which are stronger than the strongest wind. He also uses us against ourselves -- our fear, our weakness, our lack of resolve. He can chill us to the bone and convince us that we cannot make it. He must do all that he can to stop those who have been brave enough to grab the rope and head for home. It is the first step that is the most important for without that first step, home will never be reached. (That first step is asking Jesus into your heart and life.)

Now, some people become so comfortable in the barn that they do not want to brave the storm. Satan does not mind them at all. He has them right where he wants them. He convinces them that there is nothing better than this and there are many things worse. He smugly grins as they chew on hay and break their teeth on corn. They drink the slobbery water of animals and do not know or believe they are worthy of better. Deep in their hearts, something tells them that this is not all there is and that there should be something better than this. In fact, they try hard to make the barn into home, but despite their efforts, something just isn't right and they feel surrounded by discontent. The truth is, as

long as they stay in the barn, they will not ever know true contentment.

Now, here are some points where the analogy breaks down.

- In the analogy, the farmer is alone in the midst of the storm. He is struggling with his own muscles; he is determined within his own mind; he is making it on his own strength. If he falls and lets go of the rope, no one is there to help him find it again. In reality, if the rope were Jesus, the farmer could not let go of the rope for the rope would be holding on to him! The farmer would have to cut the rope in order to be separated from it.
- The other thing is that this rope would not have been put in place by the farmer, but it would have been in the house and then attached *itself* to the barn. That's what Jesus did, He stretched Himself from heaven to earth, even though He could have stayed contentedly within the house. He chose to be a lifeline from earth to heaven, to show the way should any brave souls wish to make the journey. We must make the first step, but He is there to bring us through the storm and into our true home in heaven. As many will come, He will lead. There are no rules about who can grab the rope, anyone can. A rope of twine or hemp may break, but Jesus is

unbreakable. He will never fail, or break, or disconnect.

- Now, some would say that we come from heaven to earth and then return to heaven. I'm still pondering that scenario. The scripture does not say much except that David says God not only knew him in his mother's womb, but He knew him before then. Whether we came from the house to be born in the barn, or if we began life in the barn, the goal is to make it to the house. Just as the farmer instinctively knows it is right and good to take care of his animals and then return home, there is something deep within us that says there is somewhere better than earth and we have a longing to be there. The farmer was longing for home, even though the barn was not so bad. We have a longing for heaven, where there are no more tears, no more pain, no more death -- where things are "as they should be." That is heaven and that is our home.

In God We Trust

Trust is at the root of my agitation. If someone told you to climb a ladder that was leaning against a tree, then they said to lean back, release your grip on the ladder, and free-fall into their arms, would you do it? Your ability to trust would be greatly influenced by whom the "someone" was waiting on the ground, right? You would want to know how

strong that person is, how experienced he or she is at this catching thing – you would want to know if he or she is trustworthy.

Let's say that the catcher is God. He's the strongest entity known to man. Being the Alpha and the Omega would indicate a fair level of experience in many things, including catching. He has proven His trustworthiness a million times to many different fallers. So, what is stopping you from letting go of the ladder?

Let's take it to a dizzying height. The level of trust that God wants from us would put us not on a ladder, but on 100th floor of a skyscraper. That is the smallest level of trust that God is worthy of. We could fall the equivalent of the circumference of the galaxy and He would still catch us. He doesn't want us quizzing Him about His reliability or taking a peek over our shoulder to see if He is really there. He's there, capable of holding not only little you, but also the entire universe in His hands. And you have trust issues? Give God a break!

I often project humanity onto God because humanity is my normal context. Certainly, we are made in His image, but as Isaiah 55 clearly states, His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. Is not our lack of trust in God rooted in our perceived need to control everything by ourselves?

If I am the master of my own destiny, then I have no need to trust anyone with anything and, therefore, no one will fail me. Things will be done according to *my* specifications and I *will* have my way. Yep. The problem is that we fail ourselves. How can we both fail and catch ourselves? How many of us think that is possible? Realistically, it is not possible. So if I cannot trust myself, then I will have to trust someone else, most likely, a person. Unfortunately, people fail us, too – quite often, in fact. They will try their best, but if you weigh 200 pounds and your catcher weighs 120 pounds, you have a problem (especially when you factor in gravity). God never fails. Never, ever, ever.

You may think He has failed you because He did not conform to your specifications or expectations. He's not a dog you own, Santa Clause, or your fairy godmother. Think of the audacity the creation has to even suggest that the Creator do its bidding? If you ever really met God, face-to-face, you would probably stop breathing. God's glory alone would kill you, not to mention His power, His presence, or His essence. Moses asked to see God's glory on Mount Sinai. God told him that no one could see His glory and live. So, God hid Moses in the cleft of a rock and let him look at His back. Moses' face was shining so brightly from that brief glance that the people at the base of the mountain made him wear a cloth over his face. We are so fortunate that such a powerful being of pure energy is motivated by love.

God *is* love. True love embodied in deity can be trusted. I want to let go of the ladder on the tree, of the railing on the building, of the wing on the plane, of the port nacelle on the spaceship, of the illusion on my ego. I will free-fall from whatever height God calls me to reach for I know Whose arms are outstretched to catch me.

The River

If a day in your life is like a drop of water, consider that the accumulation of days makes your life like a river. When does a river start? The rain comes down from heaven to the earth. At the point the first drop of water hits the earth, there is not much movement. As time goes by, however, the first drop is joined with other droplets and together they begin to yield themselves to the pull of gravity.

Ever forward, ever onward, the water flows. In time, the flow is a small rivulet winding its way through tiny canyons of dirt and pebbles. The sunshine causes only momentary glints of light to reflect on the passing droplets. Those minute canyons become wider and soon the rivulet is a stream. This stream follows in the paths of streams that long ago became great rivers. Though the streambed is rough and steep, it is the easiest route down the mountain. Tumbling, churning, faster and faster, the stream runs. Sometimes the flow is swift and smooth, but most of the time, the water is smashing into rocks,

splashing on the bank. The turmoil is constant and rarely relents. The stream continues down the steepness until it reaches an established bed of a creek. Here the water is still swift, but the flow is deep enough now to skim over some of the rocks. Even though twists and turns approach rapidly, the creek waters are now accustomed to the flow and do not have to splash so much. It is still a wild ride. When the sun shines on the waters, its reflection is fleeting, yet brilliant.

Soon, the waters become a river. The descent is not very steep, but the pull is still strong. Only the largest rocks cause turmoil. Occasionally, around some bend will be a narrow valley that forces the waters to become "a rapid." The waters seem to pick up speed as they move as quickly as possible through the rocky areas. Some rivers experience the terror of the land falling abruptly into what seems like nothingness -- a waterfall. The free-fall is disorienting and forces the water to take forms never before experienced. Even though the water crashes on the rocks below, it does survive and continue on the journey. Over many miles of terrain, multitudes of rocks, and uncountable twists and turns, the river draws nearer to its destination.

The many waters join together to form a river that is so wide, you can hardly see from one side to the other. Its depth is such that no rock can cause even a ripple. Its path does not twist or turn anymore,

but is instead a series of long graceful curves. The reflection of the sun is seen in its entirety upon the wide waters. When the journey to the sea is complete, the river empties itself into the expanse of the ocean and yields to the wonders of a world as yet unimagined. Deeper canyons, higher mountains, greater expanses await the waters that began so long ago as a simple drop of rain. What an incredible journey! Finally, the essence of what the river is drifts to the ocean. From the ocean, water evaporates and forms clouds that flow over the land and release another million drops of rain.

What the analogy means to me...

First, we are sent with purpose from heaven by God. He is the one who set the flow in motion. Isaiah says in chapter 55:10-11, "For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it." The pull of gravity is the pull of our spirit toward the Spirit of God. We are drawn to Him by a force we cannot explain. If the force is resisted, which it can be through trying other routes, the water can get stuck in a pond, or just sink into the muck. If the water will continue the journey, though, the path is fraught with challenges. The rocks represent stumbling blocks or circumstances we can only flow

around or over or under. Only many rivers over many years can move or alter those rocks.

Rocks are different for each river and can include such things as abuse, neglect, pain, bitterness, tragedy, loss, and so on. Rocks can be placed in our way by other people, by evil forces, or just by the natural flow of the universe. For example, an earthquake is a sudden event of a magnitude that it can change the entire flow of a river. Though altered, the river still feels the pull and still is able to find its way despite the fact that the way is totally different than originally anticipated.

Speaking of anticipation, a waterfall is an upcoming, stable event that expands our physical, mental, and emotional boundaries. The freefall can be either terrifying or exhilarating, depending on the perspective of the water. Yielding to the extreme pull brings joy unimagined. To see waterfalls as a natural part of a river's existence leads to acceptance and the ability to move on. Splashing is when a part of the river is displaced, separated from the flow. We all "splash" once in awhile. When we let a rock get the better of us, we use words we shouldn't, say things inappropriately, perform actions that are harmful rather than helpful, and so on. Rapids are when our life gets out of control. We are moving swiftly and there are many rocks in the way. We have a harder time controlling ourselves and we tend to be noisier and splash much

more than we did when the riverbed was smooth. Notice that the largest river does not splash at all. Through its sheer volume, it encompasses all turmoil, accepts all circumstances, and gently flows through life.

The ocean is heaven, which becomes another journey in itself. The nature of the water is not changed, but its environment is expanded. This life feels constricting to me sometimes. I don't really like how the rocks affect me. I want to flow with the other mighty rivers that came before me. Could I experience that joining before I actually make it to the ocean? I know there is a length of time when you cannot determine where the river ends and the ocean begins. That is like heaven on earth and I believe we can experience the first joys of the ocean of love long before the "river" part of our life is over.

When does the fresh water take on the salt of the sea? Part of the process in the flowing is that the salt penetrates the water until the water is the same as the sea. This does not happen when we are rivulets. It happens when we come to the widest and deepest point of our life. Sadly, some will resist this melding of spirits to the point that the flow is entirely stopped, like waters behind a dam. The dam of pride is the largest rock and few waters will make it past the blockade. Rejecting God means turning away from the route (the purpose) He has for your life. Every river wants to be the master

of its own destiny -- you want to choose where you will flow, even if it means never experiencing the fullness of the ocean of love. Whether the river submits or not, the pull exists. If the dam ever breaks, the water will flow like a torrent to the sea!

We all know that water evaporates from the ocean and becomes clouds that rain on the earth. I speak not of reincarnation, but of procreation. When a child is born, they have within their bodies, minds, and spirits, the essence of their parents. They, too, must find their way down the mountain, over rocks, through valleys, over waterfalls, and perhaps even through cataclysmic events. We can be more certain of them reaching the sea if we have given them an essence that is deep and wide. Our lives make streambeds and riverbeds that are pointers for these young ones along the path of life. Where do we want to lead them? What kind of world do we want them to live in? Even though our efforts may be vast to create a wholesome world, we are not the masters of the universe. We can warn the smaller waters of the rapids, but they must traverse them on their own. Something about the journey requires hardship for without turmoil we cannot appreciate the peace. One day, they too can choose to join with all the rivers of all time in heaven and experience the depth of true peace and love.

Think once more of the verses from Isaiah 55. What does the water do as it flows along the earth? It

brings forth buds, that become seeds, that become bread, and that bread is food for the eater. We can produce good as we flow through life, it is in fact, the very purpose for which we were created. When God speaks, His word is an action. He spoke us into being, and we are held together by that Word.

Consider how your life is flowing right now. Where are you headed? What would be so bad about flowing to the sea, to the place for which you were created? God is not only waiting for you there, He is with you on the journey. Remember the sun? You could barely reflect God's divine spark within you when you were young. By seeking depth and width, you have the potential to reflect Him in all His glory! Release yourself to the pull of God's love, surrender your pride that tells you it knows what lies ahead, and you will be given the deepest desires of your heart. I know this is true, for I have experienced it and am seeking to know it in its fullness. I came from the sea and I want to return to it. I want to be love. That is the purpose for which God sent me into the world.

John 7:37-52

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"

Want a little more?

Perhaps you are a single drop of rain and the other people who are living in your time are also raindrops. Together, the raindrops form streams, rivers, and lakes. We are connected to each other in mysterious ways as we flow together. We are stronger together than we are alone. We each have potential to bring life. As a collective, we can heal or we can harm. When we reach the ocean, we are joined with every person who has lived before us.

The River of Relationships

Many times in the course of a river, it joins with other rivers. Both come from completely different trajectories to a single point of contact. The waters of one intermingle with the waters of the other. The volume of the river is immediately expanded. Because of this greater capacity, rocks that just moments before had caused splashing are no longer a concern. The increased volume does require that the banks be either wider or deeper, or both. A time of adjustment is often required for neither individual river is what it was before. Its own volume has not changed, but the addition of the other waters changes the nature of the environment. If the channel is narrower than necessary, the expanded volume causes acceleration and sometimes turbulence. Drastic changes in the rivers' course

can cause even greater turbulence as the waters try to make the adjustment. Every sense is heightened at these higher speeds and the river may feel totally out of control. It may long for the more peaceful time of separateness, when the banks were just the right size for a single river. When does a joined river split? Two cases: an island appears in the middle or a great divide separates it. When an island is formed, the one river splits into two parts. Those two parts are not always equal. One side may be deeper and wider, leaving the other side to be narrow and shallow. Sometimes, one side is wide and shallow and the other is deep and narrow. It depends on the lay of the land. In shallow waters, you can see the bottom because the water is clear. However, the flow is reduced for a lack of water. In deep waters, you cannot see the bottom, but the flow is still sufficient to carry the water forward. The nature of an island is that, in time, the two waters will join once again and continue on their combined journey. They are usually stronger for having been apart. If not stronger, they at least find themselves to be more stable together than when they were apart. Much like the island, when the river comes to a great divide, the joined river is split. Again, the two parts may be unequal in size. A great divide, though, sends the rivers in completely different, often opposite, directions. Will they ever join again? It depends on the lay of the land. On a smaller scale, a stream can flow down the ridge of a mountain and then split for a time and then return to one stream again at the bottom of the mountain.

Rivers can do the same, however the distance is usually much longer for a river than a stream. It may be that an entire mountain range of canyons and valleys must be traversed before the one river is joined to its counterpart again. Even if they do not join again until the end of the journey, it is certain that the ocean will bring them together.

What this part of the analogy means to me...

You have probably figured much of this one out after reading the previous analogy. First, let me say that I have lived through the divorce of my parents and feel that divorce is rarely the answer for life's circumstances. Who can separate what God has joined together? Who can tell where one river begins and the other ends. They are flowing side by side, intermingled. The rending of a human heart is painful. Still, there are circumstances that arise in life that may require a kind of separateness. The island represents those circumstances. In my family, the loss of a child formed an island between the two hearts. My father was swift to deal with the issue, while my mother was not able to quickly move beyond it. Other problems made the situation worse, and because they could not draw strength from each other because of the separation, the island became a great divide. Islands often form slowly and are temporary in nature, thus they can be overcome. It usually just takes patience to wait it out. Great divides, conversely, rise suddenly, almost

cataclysmically, out of the land forming a gigantic mountain with steep ravines and wild descents. As the water careens down the mountain, it also is getting farther and farther from the other water that is doing the same actions down the other side of the mountain. The pain is excruciating and the river is half (or less than half) of what it was before. Farther and farther they flow, away from the source of strength they had when they were one. When faced with a great divide, rivers and people have different choices. A river is subject to the forces of nature and how the mountain is physically structured. It cannot choose how much of its water goes one way or the other. In relationships faced with a great divide, there is a brief moment of decision in which one person can choose to go along with the other person or go their own way. Some would say they were the victim of the forces of nature, but the truth is that they wavered in their commitment. That sounds harsh, but I know in my own marriage, that I had a choice to either go my own way or to go with my husband. Sometimes the only thing that kept me in this house was the promise I made on our wedding day. That commitment was stronger than my own will. I chose to give up my own way, my own path, in order to stay with him. I did not lose any of the strength that our union gave me, in fact, I had that strength to help me stay the course down his side of the great divide. Our togetherness made that rocky descent much less painful for both of us. We have come to the base of the mountain and are once again flowing peacefully to the sea, together!

One thing I know, you can no more control the lay of the land than you can control how a cloud moves through the sky. Life happens. Each of us can control how we handle the terrain. We cannot see very far ahead, but we know where we are at this moment. In every circumstance, you have the choice to do either the loving thing or the selfish thing. It is the loving thing that keeps a relationship moving forward cohesively. Submission is hard for humans. We are naturally prideful and desiring of our own gain. A most beautiful relationship occurs when both people are submissive to each other -- thinking of the other person as higher than themselves. The goal of each is the betterment of the other. Each one is totally committed to the strengthening of the union, even if it means an alteration in the anticipated course or route to the sea. Drop your expectations of the other person and be willing to adjust. Flow together and enjoy the journey.

Winter

Winter to some people is a cold, cruel, and interminable time of torture. To me, winter is wonderful. We would not appreciate warmth if we had never been cold.

In winter, every bare branch holds a hidden surprise. Frost on those same branches transforms the landscape into a scene from another world. Birds appreciate their seeds so much more when chill

is in the air. People appreciate evenings by the fire and cuddling under fuzzy blankets. It's a time for being indoors together rather than scattered outside. Angels and men of snow come to life in the mind of a child. Bundled up like Eskimos, the young-at-heart frolic in the white powder until both noses and cheeks are a rosy red. Smiles and giggles accompany every snowball in flight. Sweat pants are acceptable in public as are fake fur muffs and multi-colored striped hand-knitted hats. Hot chocolate, hot coffee, hot tea -- everything hot is welcomed inside to soothe both body and soul. As night falls, who hasn't experienced that blissful moment when your body has heated both the mattress below and the mounds of blankets above allowing you to sink with a sigh into a hibernating sleep?

The most wonderful thing about winter to me is that it hides the promise of spring. Just when we think winter will never end, the sun pours forth warmth, the snow and ice melt, trees bud, birds sing, and flowers bloom. It is because of the bleakness of winter that we truly appreciate the regeneration of spring.

Shoes

We all walk around in our own shoes all the time. We don't stop someone on the street and ask, "Do you mind if I wear your shoes for a bit?" We wear our shoes because they are the most comfortable to us, fit our personality, or match our outfit. We go

into our closet (or reach under the bed) each morning to find our shoes for the day. Even though the shoes may be different than what we wore yesterday, the shoes we select are still our own.

Once, I asked a group of teenagers to sit in a circle and remove their shoes. I gave them a number and as a group, they shifted around the circle that number of steps. Then, they had to put on the shoes before them and make one revolution of the circle. It was funny to see guys walking in high heels and girls clumping about in huge sneakers. They were learning how to expand their perspective by walking in someone else's shoes.

Our reaction to another person's behavior is altered when we take the time to evaluate *why* the person is saying or doing such a thing. Considering the motivation for other people's behavior requires that we release our own perspective and step into theirs.

If you put on the shoes of a homeless person, you might find that the fit is not quite right because he or she got the shoes after someone else discarded them. The laces are frayed and too short to tie in a bow. Cold water leaks in through the hole in the sole.

If you put on the shoes of teacher, you might find that they fit a little too tight, restricting the toes from the freedom they need. The sole would be

worn, but thick and strong. Even though the teacher often polishes the shoes, scuffmarks are often seen on the tops from so many people stepping there.

If you put on the shoes of a drug addict, you might find that the shoes would stick to your feet like glue, making them almost irremovable. That would be okay if the shoes were comfortable, but they aren't. The toes curl sideways and the laces run along the bottom of the shoe instead of the top. Imagine trying to tie them! Everything about these shoes is upside-down and backwards. Just one time the person tried on the shoes and somehow got stuck in them. They can't even take a shower without those rotten shoes on. Eventually, the shoes are worn for so long that the person can't remember what it felt like to go barefoot on the grass.

A less dramatic option might be to try on the shoes of someone in your family. Maybe by doing this, we could reverse the old saying "We always hurt the ones we love."

If you put on the shoes of a father, you might see that those shoes are often worn in places that the man does not want to be, such as under a desk, on a construction site, or beside an assembly line. Dad's shoes are in those dismal places because he has to provide shoes for his family. Mom's shoes are usually in the same situation, often residing in places they would rather not be. The shoes mothers wear are not on their feet for very long because she

changes them often. Her many roles require multiple shoe changes each day.

If parents put on their kids' shoes once in awhile, they would probably learn some valuable things about the life a child leads. Kids still wear out their shoes, but not as much from playing as from negotiating this world. This can be a tough place filled with stress and the pressure to achieve. Kids are often as worn out as their shoes. Kids also outgrow their shoes, moving forward from one perspective to another. Maybe grownups should try that, at least metaphorically.

As you go through your day, look at the shoes that the people around you are wearing. Imagine what it would be like to wear those shoes for a day. Try to understand people better. If temporarily exchanging positions is a challenge for you, consider asking for help from the best "shoe walker" in the universe.

Since we move and have our being in God, He occupies our personal space. He knows what it's like to wear our shoes. No one thought He really knew what it was like, so He became one of us for a while. Sandals are apparently His personal footwear preference. His feet were dirty, hot, and sore from walking many miles on this earth. Because of those footprints, we can be sure God understands how we feel. God knows our motivations because He stepped into our perspective.

Your shoes may be the most comfortable for you, but if you really want to understand another person, step into their perspective. You might find that some people are crabby because their shoes are full of rocks.

Bondage versus Freedom

Sometimes it seems like we have to go through the hardest times in order to become the person He made us to be. We pick up a lot of things along life's way that hinder our progression. God is love, and perfect love brings freedom. As we allow Him access through yielding, He will make a way to set us free. So many people live in bondage and think that is what life is. Like a bird tied to a perch by bands of sin and pride, they watch other birds fly over and around them. They long to fly, but cannot find a way to loose those terrible bands. They complain about how hard life is, curse at the Creator because they cannot fly, and finally decide to accept their lack of freedom. How sad that is! God is not to blame for the hardships of life; He is the One who works to bring good of the bad. He wants to set them free, but they must participate in the releasing of their bands. We who fly can land on their perch, not only to help them not feel so alone, but also to show them the way to freedom. We were all made to fly and I think nothing makes God happier than birds in flight -- people loving and living in freedom!

Suffering

I certainly understand how emotional issues can be rooted in physical issues. Often it is difficult to tell which is which -- kind of like the chicken and the egg riddle. Your words about people making assumptions regarding your health made me do some soul searching. It is impossible to know what is happening within another person's body without sensitive intuition and the revelation of the Holy Spirit. Gosh, it's hard to know what is going on inside our own bodies without those two! I really do not want to go out on limbs under my own power. I pray for the healing qualities of Jesus to be in me. I must admit, Linda, that I do not believe God is going to keep me in the physical healing realm. Already, and for quite some time, He has been equipping me to enter spiritual healing realms. As we discussed, though, the body, soul, and mind are so intertwined that you cannot approach one without considering the other two. So, I need this knowledge of the physical things. He has been taking me on journeys through emotions, which I used to block out or stuff inside because of their intensity. I find that emotions reveal secrets that should not be kept. The spirit in control keeps emotions and physical drives from dominating our person, but even the spirit needs to expand in order to keep control. We are ever-changing and even though we think we like things to stay the same, we really don't. I am seeing suffering as a way to draw nearer to God. Without suffering, we are self-reliant (or think we

are). God knows how much and how little power we actually have. He knows our potential for both good and bad. Without humility, we think more highly of ourselves than we ought to. It is our nature. When I was 22, I remember thinking "I've got this Christianity thing down." I thought I knew what being a Christian was all about and figured I was a pretty good one. Boy, did God send lightning from heaven to zap that prideful attitude out of me! I cried every night throughout that time, but I learned a good lesson. We NEVER get it down; we just get closer to its reality. Do you know what the "reality" of Christianity is? Love. That's it. That's everything. Such a simple word, but it is the key to all our mysteries. Oh, to understand the depth of love. To live it. To be it. To show it. To give it. To receive it. To be utterly transformed by it. That is a dream that can become a reality if we seek, knock, and ask for it.

Hitting the Bull's Eye

I'm learning lessons about the goodness of God. It seems to be something that cannot be fully comprehended and is often taken for granted or misunderstood. There seems to be a correlation between perfection and goodness. All my life I have tried to be perfect -- but it was twisted into perfectionism -- and I have always seemed to miss the mark because my efforts were focused on pleasing other people. People are hard to please

because they don't know what they really want and what they want changes. When I focus instead on the goodness of God and ask for His goodness to overflow into my life, the mark is hit more than it is missed. Of course, the mark I aim for now is not determined by people, but by God. He is much more forgiving of my shortcomings and understands what I am capable of. The mark He sets for me each day is not easy to hit, but it is possible. Just like in archery, missing the target is caused by a lack of focus. Who can hit a bull's-eye when their attention is not on the center? When I focus on the center of God's goodness and His will for me, wait for the right timing, and release the result to God, my "arrow" hits the target in the center every time. Those are some of the things I'm learning.

The Mountain

In response, God displayed before me a large mountain. In the distance and above me I could see the peak of the mountain that was covered in snow. Jodi and I were about half way up the slope. I could see that the way to the top had several paths. Some were shorter and steeper. Others were winding back and forth up the mountain. Those paths were the easier ones, but they also took the longest. The goal, of course, is to climb the mountain.

The mountain peak represents God's ultimate goal, in essence, His will. It is that which He will see to fruition. For His own reasons, He wants us to decide

which way we will take to reach the goal. We can choose the harder way and that will get us to the goal quicker. Or, we can choose the easier way, but it will take us longer to reach the destination. In some situations other paths exist that are somewhere in between the two extremes. Because we cannot always see the best way, we sometimes choose a path that has a huge boulder in the way and we have to backtrack in order to find another route. We can always ask God to show us the best way. It is our choice whether or not we will follow His guidance.

So, in thinking about this vision, I could see that Jodi and I were climbing a cliff when we were doing two products. It was the harder way, but the fastest to reach the goal of wider distribution of the DAILY 7 message. I was above her, energetically pounding in pitons, reaching higher and pulling myself up. A red rope went from me down to Jodi. I looked down at her and she was hanging from the rope tied around her middle, arms and legs hanging out and down. She was moaning, "I can't do this." What could I do? I could keep climbing, but I didn't. I moved back down the face of the cliff and helped lower her down to a stable place. Then, we re-evaluated the situation and chose another path, which was the longer, easier route. We will only get the workbook out at first and then evaluate other products later. Either way, the will of God is that the DAILY 7 be proclaimed. He will have His way.

The Ocean

This time, I was hovering above a beach. The u-shaped beach stretched far into the distance. The sand was brown and, because it was wet, the sun shimmered over it. The ocean waves formed garland-like shapes of whitecaps into the distance. The Lord told me to walk upon the sand, so I did. I could feel the wet sand as it sunk beneath each footstep. I could feel the ocean breeze and the waves would occasionally reach far enough to touch my feet. The water was cool and refreshing. I felt such peace, that deep kind of peace, as I walked along the shore. Then, the Lord repeated a message He had given me several months ago. "Show them the height, width, and breadth of My love."

Then, I was back in my bed. When God had told me those words before, I did not know how to fulfill the directive. I also thought it was strange that the last word was "breadth" instead of "depth" like the scripture says. I decided to wait for more information. With the ocean vision, I began to understand the directive. The height of the ocean is the same as its depth. The depths of the ocean are unsearchable. Plus, the height is the top of the measurement and it is at the top where all the life exists. That's where the coral reefs are and the blueness of the water can be appreciated. In the depths it is total darkness. God's love is very high and full of life. The width of the ocean is a measurement from shore to shore. God's love is

always with us, no matter how far to the east or to the west we go. The breadth of the ocean covers the entire earth. As with many other things I have written, the physical world represents the spiritual world, albeit on a smaller scale. So, the breadth of God's love encompasses the entire universe and perhaps beyond.

Love like that cannot be blamed for what is wrong with the world. God truly does want people to be well in their bodies, their minds, and their spirits. He wants us to be fully alive and aware. He wants us to know Him and have a vibrant relationship with Him.

Mirrors

People are always holding up mirrors for us to look in. Sometimes accurate and sometimes not, the reflection is influenced by the person holding the mirror. The best mirror to look in is the one that God holds up for us. His mirror is, without fail, absolutely accurate. The more we know who we are according to God's perception, the less it matters what anyone else thinks. We then have the freedom to completely love the people with whom we have relationships no matter what they do (or neglect to do) because we are not restricted by our own insecurities. Over time, as we begin to believe in God's perception of us and as we draw nearer to His heart, God's mirror becomes transparent. We see

Him in ourselves and He sees Himself in us. The images are the same.

The War Within

Kelly tells the story of his karate teacher who worked as a bouncer at a popular club for young adults. He had to evict many a rowdy guy. One night, he told a guy to leave and the guy decided to fight back. The guy got all worked up and was taking swings that missed. The karate teacher calmly waited for the right moment, struck one blow and the guy was out. Later, the guy came back, completely calm and asked how he was beaten so quickly. The teacher explained that he does not get all worked up during a fight. He remains calm because agitation causes a loss of focus.

We must not allow the war to rage within us for the environment within us expands to influence the environment outside us. If we are engaged in unhappy circumstances, we must first look inside ourselves. We must give right sacrifices and trust to God in order to have peace inside and out. With inner peace, we can clearly see the movements of our enemy. It's time to step out of your personal fire and to step into the fires of others. Jesus stepped into our fire for us. He demonstrated how to be a warrior of love that brings peace. He forgot about Himself so that He could rescue the

lost and soothe the suffering. Jesus has done this for you, my friend. Accept His gift. Live His gift.

Moths – Flame Dancers.....

Sometimes we are like the moth who hovers in the darkness surrounded by a circle of multiple lanterns. He flits from light to light, drawn by some unknown force. He stays with one until another draws his attention. He flies to the next light, fluttering about it, trying to get closer. It seems as though he wants to become one with each light, but he can never reach his goal.

The lanterns represent relationships. If we focus too much attention on one relationship, trying to become what the other person wants us to be, we cannot fulfill our unique purpose. The better way is to be equidistant from all the lanterns so that each one illuminates a part of who we are. Bring all the lanterns closer to the center (our inner self) and even more of our uniqueness can be seen. We can bask in the warmth of the relationships without sacrificing who we are or leaving other relationships neglected.

100 Years – The Future

This morning when I woke up, I was thinking about how the land where I live must have looked one hundred years ago. It was most likely wild prairie with a winding Indian trail heading toward a fort up

north. Then, I wondered how the land where I live would look one hundred years from now. With the population growth in our area, my house would probably be gone and the land covered with a gigantic shopping mall. All of my trees would have lived their full life and fallen down. Probably new ones would have sprouted in their place. Like the trees, everyone in my parent's generation and mine would be buried and at least two more generations would have been born. Then, came this thought: "What can I do that will change the next one hundred years?"

Certainly, having a positive impact on a child would change the future. I think of the people who influenced the life of Billy Graham, the greatest evangelist of our time. By investing in a boy named Billy, someone changed the next one hundred years. I also think of Charles Manson, who sits in his dementia within a prison cell at this very moment. Who influenced him to become a cold-blooded killer? Who didn't have a positive impact in his life? How we treat the children of our generation creates waves of either goodness or wickedness that flow from today into tomorrow. What we give them or invest into them becomes what we are as a society.

Inventions change the future. Think of how people lived one hundred years ago. The common elements of their lives included horses, cast iron, hand-made furniture, homegrown and home-cooked food,

handwritten letters, and families living in the same area for generations. What has changed our lives so drastically in such a short period of time? The answer is inventions. Even the smallest invention has the potential to drastically alter the way we live. Think of the impact of the following inventions: telephones, automobiles, paper clips, toilets, furnaces, airplanes, printing presses, computers, assembly lines, asphalt, x-rays, microwave ovens, television, and thousands of other ideas that became reality. People with vision can see a need and invent a way to meet that need. The smarter ones see a coming need, something people will want soon, and when that need is met, the future is changed.

Writing can change the course of history. Whether the writing is a collection of facts or the expression of an ideal, words have the power to change things. How many words were written that did not live forever? How many words are still living though spoken or written hundreds or even thousands of years ago? What we write is important. Think of the impact of William Shakespeare, Plato, the biblical authors. The inspiration for the words came through their souls. What if they had never taken the time to put those visions into writing? Where would we be? When I have thought of writing something of lasting importance, I wonder what in the world I could say that has not already been said. That is not the way to think. For I am unique in all of time and the words that come from my existence will be special because no one will ever be me again.

How sad it is when a life passes away and the uniqueness of it is lost. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a record not only of birth and death, but also of the moments of significance that occurred in between? For years, I have read obituaries, which may seem to some to be morbid, but to me it was a way of honoring the person who lived that life. Those writings rarely say more than what the person did as a job, whom they married, and who in their family lived longer than they did. That is a sad record of someone who laughed and cried, hoped and dreamed. Biographies of famous people abound and those records have their value. But, who will write about the normal people, the ones who make the lives of famous people famous? Every life is significant, no matter how many people know about it. One of the common themes I hear, especially among young mothers, is that they don't feel like their lives really matter. Does folding little socks, wiping bottoms, and cleaning up mess after mess really make a difference in the future? They feel like their lives are small, but suspect that they were made for something greater. If someone would take the time to invest in their small life, maybe they would be able to see the greater good, the lasting impact, of their everyday actions. They would know why they live and just knowing the reason for life will influence the way they interact with the people in their lives. It would change the way they treat their children and that would change the future. Perhaps I will write the stories of the ordinary people; the

high points of their lives and the low. I will write their dreams and validate their inspirations. It is something I can do with them that many of them cannot do alone.

God will change the next one hundred years. By participating in each of those "small" lives, God will influence the future. When we look from this place where evil seems to proliferate, we wonder if the future is bright or dark. No doubt, harder times are coming our way. Every time humanity tries to find significance within itself alone, darkness and despair result. The "dark ages" are usually followed by ages of light because there is a turning from darkness to light. Like a giant pendulum, humanity continually swings from darkness to light. When we are in the light, our discontent causes us to explore the darkness. When we are in the darkness, our discontent causes us to explore the light. In between these two extremes is a time of complacency, of neither full darkness nor full light. The incredible thing to me is that God is constant; He does not change even though the tide of humanity changes. No matter what position in the full swing the pendulum of morality is flowing through, God is there. For even in the deepest darkness, there is always a point of light. Though every human reject God, reject the Light, someone somewhere will have a small spark within them that can light the signal fires of a new age. That someone could be you. That someone could be me. We must each be true to the divine spark within us.

We must honor it and use it in whatever positive way we can. Otherwise, the spark will go out. Without the spark, the darkness within is the deepest kind of dark. We also must recognize our ability to ignite or extinguish the spark within another person. Could it be that when we put out the spark of the people around us the cumulative result brings the entire human race into an age of darkness? God put the spark within us. He wants every spark to become a flame of blazing light that overcomes the darkness. No matter what our perception of our personal capabilities, the spark within each of us has the potential to change the next one hundred years. All we must do is believe.

A Dream of Faith – Desert Rider

The other night, I had a dream. I saw a small woman riding on a horse. She was on a mission to save two small children from certain death. To get to the children, she had to go through a canyon. The only way to get to the bottom of the canyon was from a cliff. I saw the horse go to a particular part of the canyon rim that had a low overhanging arch of rock. Connecting the two sides of the arch was a metal rod. The woman and the horse leaned forward and she grabbed on to the rod with both hands. Her eyes became my eyes at that point and I looked down into the deep canyon. The height was staggering, but I did not have any fear in my heart. I was absolutely convinced that I would experience a

controlled free fall and then land gently on the canyon floor. The back of the horse swung around and I let go of the bar. I was falling while riding on a horse! Down, down, I fell, staying upright and balanced. As we approached the bottom, I looked to the left and saw a large ledge. The horse and I floated to the left and landed quickly, but gently. The woman continued on her mission from there and rescued the children.

Hebrews 11:1 says, *"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."* By purely human understanding, the woman should have found another way down into the canyon. A longer route would have resulted in the children being lost. It was the only way. The confidence of safety was her only ally in actually accomplishing the jump. One tiny seed of doubt could have altered her focus or brought a disastrous result. Our thoughts are powerful and affect the outcome of our situations more often than we know. Hebrews 11:4 shows that God set the standard in this type of thinking. *"By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible."* Everything we can touch and see was made from God's invisible words. Our thoughts are invisible, but they make things happen. Every word and every action was first a thought. God could have made a world of darkness, but He chose to make light that overcomes the darkness. Negative thoughts bring about negative realities. Positive thoughts bring about positive realities.

When we have faith, we can move mountains. The unseen is more powerful than the visible, but it takes faith to put that power into action.

We must be certain of the unseen realities in order to make them visible. For example, the wind is real and it is invisible. To see the wind, we can toss a feather into the air current and see it fly on the wind. We would then have evidence of the reality of the invisible. If we did not believe in the reality of the wind, we would not even toss the feather. Our thoughts of faith motivate our actions to provide the proof of the unseen.

The foundation of faith is the Living God who can make the intangible touchable through the power of His Word. The Word of God is living and sharper than a two-edged sword, so we cannot presume to request His Word become real without understanding what will result in the seen world. God alone can direct the power of His Word, but He honors our faith and does what He deems best when we believe in His capability to create something out of nothing. Verse 6 of Hebrews 11 says it this way, *"And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him."* God is invisible, thus we must believe He exists and is willing to reveal the invisible to seekers.

The rest of Hebrews 11 demonstrates how people believed in the existence of God and by faith affected change.

- *"By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death."* Enoch did not die because he pleased God.
- *"By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family."* He labored for years and years based on a single prediction from God. Noah's steadfast faith was rewarded with life for himself and his family. The rest of the people, who did not have faith, perished.
- *"By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going."* He also became a father even though he was so old and almost dead. His son was the first of whole nations of people. God made something out of nothing because Abraham had faith.
- *"By faith, Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict."* His parents saw that the unseen God is more powerful than the visible king. The opposite of faith is fear.
- *"By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days."* How ridiculous! How amazing! Do

what God says and watch the power of the invisible crumble a mighty fortress. Obedience to God empowers the effects of faith.

These people had a choice between faith and fear. Think of the outcome if they had chosen the opposite of what they did. Without faith, none of these things would have come to pass. We are blessed when others believe. Others are blessed when we believe.

I want to stencil on the ceiling of my bedroom, right above my bed, these words: "God exists." The root of faith is belief in the existence of God.

In my dream, if the woman had not had complete confidence in her survival, she would not have grabbed the bar or let go of it. The fulfillment of faith, the revealing of the unseen, requires an act of belief on our part. Faith has no fear, for it knows in Whom it believes.

"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

Our Space

God occupies our space. That is how He knows everything. When you are in a room with someone, you know what they are saying and doing. If you could be inside the person, you would also know what they are thinking and feeling. When

we say, "God is everywhere," we still see Him sitting on a throne in heaven looking down upon us. Does the universe define the dimensions of God? Can He be on the throne and in my space at the same time? God is not the tree, but the tree grows within God. The earth and all the planets and stars are suspended in God. He truly is everywhere at the same time. This also explains to me how He can know so much about every individual and how He knows when a sparrow falls. When I accept God's Holy Spirit into my life, into the core of my physical, emotional, and spiritual being, I become aware of God in my space. Like driving through wind, I feel Him in my car. When I walk, I feel my body move through Him. When I breathe, I breathe Him. When I laugh, I know He feels my joy. When I cry, I know He feels my sorrow. I know I am not alone. Belief is required to experience this level of awareness. This is how I can be in communion with Him every moment, to literally "pray without ceasing."

Lynn Hammond wrote a book about prayer called "The Master is Calling" that expounds on the expanse of God and the moving of His Holy Spirit.

"The realms of the Holy Spirit are incredibly vast. They include not only this physical universe and all that is in it – from the leaders of nations to the baby bird in its nest; they also include dimensions of the Spirit no man has ever seen. They extend beyond the here and now, backward through the ages of time, and forward through the eons of eternity.

"Although it's difficult to imagine what the Holy Spirit does with all those realms, the first chapter of Genesis gives us

some insight. It says that in the beginning when the earth was without form and darkness was on the face of the deep, 'the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters' (verse 2 KJV). The word *moved* actually means to hover like a mother hen hovers over her eggs.

"The Holy Spirit's desire as He hovered over this earth was to release His power and bring forth life according to the will of God. But He did not do so until God spoke. He did not split the darkness until He heard the Words, 'Let there be light.' (verse 3).

"Today the Holy Spirit is still hovering over the realms of God. And today, just as in the beginning, He is waiting for someone to speak God's words and will over those realms. He is waiting for us to ask in the name of Jesus. He is waiting for us to yield ourselves to Him in prayer and say, 'Let there be light in the life of that lost soul! Let there be life for the dying one! Let God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven!'

"But, for the most part, we have not done it. It's not necessarily because we've been unwilling, it's because we haven't known about those realms – much less expected the Holy Spirit to reveal them to us. We've puttered around praying from our limited earthly perspective, totally unaware that if we would but release our faith, the Spirit of grace and supplication within us would open to us the eternal universe of God Himself."

Because God is in our space and hears every thought and word, and because we have a connection with the Holy

Spirit, we can begin to understand the power contained within a believing Christian's words. If the Holy Spirit is "hovering" over us, waiting for us to speak the will of God, what are we waiting for? The power of healing released through Jesus was usually based on three elements: 1) He asked the person what they wanted; 2) When they answered, He released the Holy Spirit to do the work through His thoughts or words according to the level of their faith; 3) He made the person do something to complete the healing process, such as wash in the water or go tell the priests or take up your mat and walk. Jesus gave us the formula and told us we could employ it, even more powerfully than He did, by the power of His name.

Our thoughts and words do have power to affect change in multiple realms. I have seen where negative emotions and thought patterns manifest themselves in the physical body. For example, when I am feeling inadequate or threatened, my shoulders will rise up toward my ears. When I am feeling controlled, my lower back will spasm. It has come to my mind that if negative elements can manifest in the physical body, then it stands to reason that positive elements can also be manifested. What does peace do for a body? It relaxes it. Joy will energize. Kindness warms the body. Love heals the body. No wonder the Bible tells us to think on things that are wholesome and edifying. Our internal environment affects our external environment. Extend all these concepts beyond the person's own body and realize how our words also affect other people. One word can cause pain while another word can cause healing. The ways that word is spoken will also affect its outcome. If someone says to you, "I had a rotten day." The intonation

of how you say "oh" will either ease their suffering or add to it. If you say, "oh" in monotone and do not look at the person, you express a multitude of negative connotations, such as, "I don't really care about your day. You are not important. Get over it." If you say that same word with sympathy and look at the person, you express a multitude of positive connotations, such as "I care about your day. You are important. Tell me more." What a difference! Our words have power. If we can understand this to the depth of our being, we will then be able to comprehend how our words not only affect the physical realms, but also the spiritual realms. The Bible says what we bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Prayers are composed of words and prayer moves the Spirit of God. What words would you choose if you knew that your prayer would either help or hinder the angels of God in a raging battle against the minions of Satan? That is not a hypothetical question! We too often pray flippantly. For example, we know the Bible says to give thanks for our food. So, we pray a quick prayer over the food so that we can get to the eating of it. Science has proven that when food is prayed over, it has more energy than food that is not prayed over. How much energy do you want your food to have? What if you could direct exactly how that food would affect your body? Let's be more selective with our words in prayer.

Do you ever pray and think that what you ask for will not happen? Do you pray *hoping* it will happen? Expand your perspective and increase your faith. Believe in the power of your words. Remember, though, that the Holy Spirit moves in accordance to the will of God. He is not a Santa Clause or go-for guy. You must be in tune with God, in personal,

intimate relationship with God to know what is appropriate to pray and what is not. You cannot, for example, ask for a million dollars if your motivation is for selfish gain. You could, however, ask for a million dollars if you are led by the Holy Spirit to do so on behalf of a cause that is within the will of God. Many times, I have an idea that I present to God, asking Him to direct me as to what His take is on the situation. Sometimes He likes my idea and sometimes He doesn't. When He does, I really go for the gusto! I pray up, down, through, and all around that situation. Be comprehensive and you will find that your faith assures that what you have said will be done.

That reminds me of the verse that says we have not because we do not ask and we receive not because we ask amiss. So, God wants us to inquire of Him, especially when our request involves something that is already within His will. His will is perfect and righteous. His will is what He wants. If you can determine what God wants (and He gives us many hints in the Bible), you will be less likely to ask for something He will not provide.

Your knowledge of God's attributes and promises will also bolster your confidence and belief. Many times, people in the Bible conversed with God about His previously spoken promises in order to influence or assure a particular outcome. God's word is living, powerful, and eternal. Speaking those promises is like hedging your bets, shoring up your dyke, fortifying your fortress. When God speaks a promise, you can apply that promise to your prayers. When you do this, you are adding God's words to your request.

God's word created the world! If you really want results use God's words.

Another way to say all of this is that God occupies our entire space and we occupy a tiny portion of His space. None-the-less, it is an intersection that has great power to affect change in both the physical and spiritual realms. The vehicle that carries us into that intersection is our words. Solomon was the king of the well-chosen word. He said, "A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver." We would do well to learn from him and choose our words wisely because they have amazing power.

Matrix Revolutions

Last night we watched Matrix Revolutions. Interesting how the word Revolutions is so like Revelations. Those Matrix movies never fail to inspire me to deeper (or should I say "higher") thoughts. Here is a sampling...

When Smith took over a person, they looked like him and thought like him, but the new Smith entity still had the memories and capabilities of the original person. Each person who sides with the Dark side takes on the image of darkness and the darkness takes on part of that person's personality. Each one gives the dark side more power.

Even though Neo was battling for Zion, the people of Zion still had to do their part to fight off the advance

of the machines. We, too, must do our part as soldiers for Christ in a battle that makes the Matrix scenes look like a walk in the park.

When Neo allowed Smith to invade his body, he was initiating the doom of Smith. Jesus became sin so that He could conquer it.

Even though Smith had invaded many other people, only "the One" could break his spell. Jesus' power comes from "the source" which is God. His sacrifice was made complete by the interaction of the Source. God worked with Jesus to bring about our salvation.

If Trinity had not died, Neo would not have been able to sacrifice himself. We must each die to self in order to activate the sacrifice of Jesus in our lives.

Extraordinary times call for extraordinary people. The people we see portrayed in the movie are not so different from us. When Smith asked Neo why he keeps getting up and fighting back, Neo replies, "Because I choose to." That is what it takes to be extraordinary - the will to choose.

Some might say that the writers chickened out by not showing Neo alive again. I think they did the right thing. It's all about faith, believing, seeing what cannot be seen. We want it all played out for us, but that is not the way we grow.

These movies showed three levels of existence: the Matrix, Zion, and the Machine World. We have earth, heaven, and the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6). So many times, I do feel like earth is the Matrix, where all is not as it seems. Something within tells us there is more than this. Zion (heaven) is a place of freedom, but even now is engaged in a war. We participate in the fight against the "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" when we become aware and believe in what we do not see. Neo's eyes were burned, but it was only then that he could "see" true reality. We must be like that in our awareness level. Part of being able to do that is to stop looking with our eyes and start seeing with our spirit.

I liked that young kid who helped the captain, opened the gate, and then shouted, "He did it! He saved us! It's over! The war is over!" Youth are quick with enthusiasm, while the old still wonder "What just happened?" Everyone in Zion shouted with joy once they believed what the young man said. They did not know why the war was over, but they still shouted. Some may not ever believe that Neo saved them, but it does not change the fact that he did.

Well, that's just some of my thoughts.

In regards to your verses (see below), I think they very much fit in with the entire preceding text. Since the context is Jeremiah, you could certainly take all

the words as prophecy. I like to think that we are living in the time when God writes His words on our hearts. We are now a part of the house of Israel and can count on those promises as our own. I like that each person is accountable for his own personal sin and that God does not punish the children for the sin of their parent. I have battled the sin of my parents, but it was not counted against me. This is something new I have learned. Most of my life, I have counted their sin against me. I have taken it on as if I did it. It's not right! I did not do those things and I was not at fault. I was innocent! I AM innocent! I no longer need to wear their sin like filthy rags for I am clothed in a white robe, compliments of my Savior.

Jeremiah 31:27-34

"Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast. And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. In those days they shall no longer say: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' But every one shall die for his own sin; each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge.

"Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which

I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, `Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

The Cross and the Throne

To say you are a "Christian" means more than just believing the two-thousand-year-old stories are true. Being a Christian involves becoming like Jesus Christ. To be like Jesus requires the deepest level of commitment. We say the words He said, but do we live the life He led? He was serious when He said we must take up our cross and follow after Him. [Matthew 10:38] Not only must we be willing to take up our cross, we must also be willing to lay ourselves down upon it and be crucified. Jesus was crucified for our sin, but we must crucify our selfishness. Each person's cross is different, but the laying down of self is the same for us all.

When we lay down upon our cross, who is it that hammers the nails through our hands? Who is it that pierces our side? For Jesus, it was the very people He loved and for whom He was paying the ultimate price. For us, it is usually our friends and family that do the hammering and piercing. They are the ones who see us the most and know how to drive those wounds deep. They are also the ones who expose our hidden faults, laying us naked before the world. Did Jesus hate the ones who nailed Him to the cross? No. He asked God to forgive them. He had compassion on them because they did not know what they were doing. We tend to resent the ones who nail us to our cross. We often get angry with them rather than asking for mercy on their behalf. We blame them, resent them, and judge them even though their actions will be used by God to bring us a greater good. [Romans 8:28] It is their unknowing words and actions that God uses to purify us from our selfishness. When we suffer, we become better people. When we experience pain, we empathize with others who hurt. After we choose to lay on the cross, we must expand our perception to love the people and the tools God uses to complete our crucifixion of self. Focus on the process rather than the person.

The lyrics to a modern Christian song say, "Put yourself on the cross and your Savior on the throne." The writer is saying that we must die to self and allow Jesus to be the Lord of our life. Too often we leave Jesus on the cross and put ourselves on the

throne. Putting self on the cross of crucifixion is contrary to our survival instinct. We think that if we die, life ends. The truth is that if we die, life begins. [Galatians 2:20] The self will do anything it can to be in control. It wants to be the master of its own destiny and resists the lordship of any other. The self cannot be dominated or controlled or retrained for it is genetically flawed by the fall from grace. The self has a sin nature. Jesus knows the only way to conquer the self is to kill it. If self is not crucified, it will vehemently fight until it alone sits on the throne of the human heart. Like Jesus, if the self dies, it will rise to new life. [Romans 6:5-6] Self becomes transformed and is capable of wielding powers unattainable before death. Those powers flow from the One who sits on the throne of the universe. Our surrender to the Lordship of Jesus releases those powers that include wisdom, grace, the fruits of the spirit, and (above all) love. We are empowered to not only conquer the enemy, but rescue the perishing. We are also set free from "trying to be Christian." It's impossible to try and be a Christian. You can never try hard enough to be perfect like God is perfect. [Matthew 5:48] The death of self sets us free to become Christ-like. With the death of self, trying ends and being begins.

Because we do not live in a society with a king, it is difficult for us to understand lordship. We have a president that we can vote out of office every four years. Loyalty for leadership is short-lived. In a

monarchy, the king is in command for his entire life. His position alone demands the continued obedience and reverence of his subjects. In return for loyalty, the king uses the resources of the kingdom to provide a good quality of life and peace for the people under his care. The loyalty and responsibility goes both ways, from me to my king and from my king to me. If I owned land in the kingdom, the king would protect my land with his armies. I would, in turn, give a portion of my proceeds to the king for funding his supervision and protection. If I choose to have some lands outside the kingdom, it is my personal responsibility to manage and protect those lands. It is the same in our personal and spiritual lives. Anything that is not submitted to the Lordship of Jesus must be managed and defended by us. How many areas of your life require that you take the throne? In a real monarchy, you would be put to death for suggesting the king step down so you could sit in his seat. The King of kings is more merciful and only sits on the throne of the human heart when invited to do so, even though He was the creator of that heart and has every right to take the seat. Who is better at being king, you or Jesus? Consider offering all the areas of your life to your King so that you can enjoy the benefits of His wisdom and power. He has resources far beyond yours for maximizing the yields from all areas of your life. He has legions of angels that you cannot see, waiting to do battle on your behalf. If an area of your life is causing you stress and stealing your peace, evaluate if it has been fully surrendered to

the King of kings. Choose every day who will sit on the throne of your heart and who will hang on the cross. Between Jesus and yourself, whom will you obey and whom will you sacrifice?

When we put Jesus on the throne, we take Him off the cross for our personal sins. We end His suffering on our behalf. When we take Him off the throne, He goes back on the cross. Jesus chose to lay down His life for us. He sacrificed His self, His sinless and wonderful self, so that we could live the abundant life and experience peace. As ambassadors for our King, we represent Him when we venture out into the world. We are like Him. His words are our words. His power is our power. How can this be? It is because our King sits on the throne of our heart. Our heart is within and, thus, the King is within. Solomon said that the words of the mouth come from the heart. If self should rise up and take the throne, the words will reflect the change. Crucify the self so that it cannot rise up. To be like Jesus, we must sacrifice our self and be obedient to Jesus so that we can ministers of peace to a war-torn world.

Please read Romans, chapter 8, right now.

Miracles of Cellular Intelligence

John Maxwell said, "If you have a problem, you are a candidate for a miracle." It appears we have many candidates, but few actually get elected. Why do

problems far outnumber miracles? First, let's define the word "miracle." The dictionary says a miracle is "an event that appears inexplicable by the laws of nature and so is held to be supernatural in origin or an act of God." Some people do everything in their power to change a situation, but only a miracle would bring a positive result. Other people want the laws of nature to be broken without having to do anything to help the situation. Of those two, who is more likely to receive a miracle? I observe that those who do all they can to produce positive results experience more miracles. The candidacy for a miracle appears to have some requirements, but what actually happens when we are elected to receive a miracle?

Think about what must happen on a cellular level for a hand that is twisted to instantly become straight. That goes against the laws of nature – it's a miracle. How is it that my friend who suffered with a bladder the size of her little finger can utter a prayer for healing and now has a normal-size bladder? Her doctors could not explain what happened. It was not the first prayer for healing she prayed. She learned that she had to change her lifestyle and increase her understanding of spiritual realities. Once she made those choices and acted on them, her prayer was answered. When Jesus healed someone, He often instructed the person to take personal action such as washing in a pool or going to the priests in order to see the realization of their healing. [Matthew 8:4, Matthew 9:6] That person had the choice of whether

to follow the instruction or not. All of the people recorded in scripture who chose to do what Jesus said were healed.

The choices we make and the actions we take affect us physically, both externally and internally. Before an action is an action, it is a thought. Thoughts are often generated by emotions. Therefore, emotions and thoughts have an impact on the cells of the body. How can that be? Emotions and thoughts are not physical. As a volunteer at a nursing home, I was amazed at how the lines on each person's face told of the life they had lived. Crabby people had wrinkles that formed permanent frowning faces and happy people had continual smiling faces. Their skin displayed the accumulation of their life's thoughts and emotions.

Like emotions and thoughts, prayer is not physical, and yet, it also can alter the function of cells. The Apostle Paul wrote in his letters that the unseen is more real, more lasting, than the seen. [2 Corinthians 4:18] For those who are aware and in alignment with God's way of thinking, the unseen is much more powerful than the seen. When powerful prayers are spoken, things happen that cannot be explained by the laws of nature.

The One who hears the prayers also created the laws of nature. God put those laws into each cell, in the form of DNA. Cells follow those laws and do not

randomly change their pre-defined function. When they do change, something within the cells must be reacting to an alternate instruction from an outer source, such as our emotions, a physical demand, or God's command. If I get scared, my cells will pump adrenaline into my bloodstream to give me more energy for flight. If I consistently work out with weights, the cells of certain muscles change and become stronger. If God decides to change something about my physical structure, He has the power to do it. The cells have a pre-determined function, but also have the capacity to react.

The intelligence in a single cell is simple, but when combined with other cells, their cooperative capacity is incredible. For example, one of my favorite body parts is the duodenum. The duodenum is a collection of cells that form a tube. The tube functions as a conduit between the stomach and the intestinal system. The intelligence of the duodenum coordinates the flow of digested foods to the intestines for absorption of nutrients. If the intestines are full from a recent influx of food, the duodenum will tell the stomach to stop the flow of food until the intestines can take more. The stomach responds by closing a sphincter and waits for the signal to send more food. That amazes me. This collection of cells is functioning and communicating without my knowledge and yet my survival depends on what they do. The duodenum is not the only tissue with intelligence. In fact, every blood cell has its own intelligence. How is it that

white blood cells know to attack foreign elements? They are not self-aware and yet they are protecting me. It is my growing belief that the intelligence in our cells will respond to our own intellect. They respond to our emotions and thoughts. They are influenced by spiritual truths. They hear God. The individual cells may not think like our entire brain thinks, but their intelligence should be considered when illness occurs.

Where does illness come from? What we do is simply a byproduct of what we think. What we do either helps or hinders our health. If a father tells his young daughter that she is a "dummy," she interprets that as being worthless. She could struggle her whole life and experience a multitude of illnesses as a result of considering herself without value. From my own experience, people with low self-esteem have cells with less vigor than they could have with appropriate self-esteem. Even their immune system is compromised. The pain from their past affects their present, down to a cellular level.

Addictions are another example of destructive behaviors rooted in past pain. Are not the cells intricately involved in maintaining the addiction? The detoxification of cells is critical to recovery. When we detoxify our minds of lies and misconceptions, our cells also begin to detoxify. As the toxins come out of the cells, we often feel worse

than we did when we were toxic. As the cells recover, though, health returns. Sick thoughts make sick cells. Healthy thoughts make healthy cells. So, again, the seen responds to the unseen. Our bodies respond to our mind, will, emotions, and spirit. Prayer is an amplification of this process for we are tapping into the greatest mind of the universe – God. Even though prayer is powerful, the fulfillment of the healing requires “faith” on the part of the recipient. Faith is being certain of what you cannot see. [Hebrews 11:1] It makes sense that cells respond primarily to the organism within which they function. God rarely forces any entity to do something against their will. If the power to detoxify is available, but resisted by the person, the cells will not release their toxins or change their behavior. If the power is available and accepted, the cells will cooperate fully.

Many times, when I ponder the mysteries of the universe – the seen versus the unseen and being more aware versus sleep walking through life, I think of the movie, “The Matrix.” Neo, the main character, progressively discovers the nature of the matrix and his role within it. His understanding of his existence is key to how he functions in his world. As people awaken to reality, they may not be pleased with what they see, but they usually are thankful to be set free from the sleep of slavery. Neo struggles with the unfolding of reality and has to step beyond his old perceptions in order to grasp the new

concepts. If he resists the truth, it delays his ability to be more powerful.

If I truly believe what I say about the response of my cells to my mind, will, emotions, and spirit, then I need not degenerate, but can actually regenerate on a cellular level. Certainly, we cannot deny the existence of sin and its affect on the longevity of the human body, but many of us are killing ourselves before the fullness of our days. God said that the span of a man's years will be 120. [Genesis 6:3] Who among us is fulfilling that limit? It should be common, but it is not. The average American's life expectancy is in the high 70's. That's a full 30 years short of God's intention. What are we doing that is cutting us short on time? Two six-letter words say it all – the first one is "choice" and the second one is "stress." When I make negative choices, I get negative results. When I make positive choices, I get positive results. When my mind, will, emotions, or spirit is stressed, the cells in my body are stressed. Over time, poor choices combined with a continual state of stress will lead to malfunction and eventually cessation of activity, or death. When our cells are sick, we are sick. When our cells die, we die.

Stress is a perception of our circumstances. Take two steps back emotionally and two steps upward spiritually from your circumstances, so that you can have a better perspective for evaluation. If you are

examining a three-dimensional object from only one perspective, do you truly grasp the nature of the object? It's like those two men who were blindfolded and led to stand beside an elephant. They were asked to describe what they were touching. One touched the elephant's leg and said it was a tree trunk. Another one touched the elephant's tail and said it was a rope. Each person's limited perspective concealed the full truth. Try walking around the object, going under it, and hovering above it, touching it and lifting it – then tell me what that object is about. You will know better how to handle that object after increasing your perceptions. Many times, our circumstances are so troublesome because we do not have enough information. Your perspective on the circumstance changes your reaction. Positive reactions are beneficial to the body, mind, and spirit. Negative reactions are not. If you spend most of your life reacting negatively to your circumstances, it stands to reason that your body could manifest that negativity in its cell function.

If your cellular malfunction comes from things beyond your control, such as a nuclear plant meltdown or genetics, I still believe that the damage can be diminished and even reversed through the positive reinforcement from the mind and spirit to the affected cells. For example, I saw a video produced by a doctor who was diagnosed with breast cancer. She had a lump the size of a grapefruit on her chest. She chose not to do chemotherapy

because she knows that chemotherapy drugs cause cancer. Instead, she changed three things in her life: 1) She drank more water; 2) She started eating a nutritionally balanced diet; and 3) She changed her lifestyle by eliminating stress. She is now cancer free. Her cells were manifesting her negative choices. When she changed her choices, her cells changed, too. No matter what the cause of cellular malfunction, cells can be “re-programmed” to repair and rebuild.

Our spirits have amazing power, especially within our own bodies. However, that power can be multiplied in the presence of other positive thinkers. Surround yourself with positive people who have a wider perspective on life and their power will amplify your own.

God is also a positive thinker. He put together a world where He hoped people would love Him, but loved them enough not to make them do it. He is eternally optimistic that we will someday care about Him. He wants us to ask for His help in directing our cells to wellness. His power is exponentially beyond ours. He occupies our space, knowing every hidden thing, including the inner function of every cell of our bodies. King David wrote that God knew him in the secret place within his mother’s womb. My friend’s new bladder is evidence of how a conversation with God can change cellular function. James wrote, “You do not have, because you do not

ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." I heard someone tell of a man who had diabetes. He was praying for God to heal him, but was unwilling to give up his daily breakfast of donuts. Would that man bring glory to God for the healing? Will not his diabetes return? This man's motives for being healed involved a "quick fix" rather than a personal commitment to change.

Are you a candidate for a miracle? Would you like to be elected to receive one? Decide you want to live and tell your cells of your decision. Make choices that bring you life instead of death.

If we repent of our negativity, expand our perceptions, and purify our motives, our cells will begin to respond to the positive atmosphere. If we seek help, in faith, from the Creator of cellular intelligence, He will lend His influence to the transformation. Do not lose heart. Open yourself to the possibilities. Miracles do happen, especially when we realize our role in allowing them.

Light

Tonight I was thinking about how each of us is reprobate without the goodness of God. If God were not so active in our world, this would be a terrible and terrifying place. So many verses speak to this

fact. "Everyone has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Each has gone his own way. There is none righteous, no not one." Yet, somehow we think we are on the right track, that we are righteous and that we don't need God. What a pack of sorry sinners we are. How can we not be sinners when we don't know the mark that must be hit to be righteous? So many people are walking about totally blind thinking they see clearly. Our own minds are not trustworthy. Our hearts are fickle. How lost we would all be without Jesus! We have so many desires, plans, and schemes that count for nothing in the scope of eternity. How would our world change if we wanted Jesus and His righteousness above all else? What if love ruled over selfishness?

The further we get from God's eternal light (His glory), the further we slip into the abyss of darkness. The sad thing is that as we slip, we become accustomed to the darkness and even prefer it. The light of God is so very bright that it causes our spiritual eyes to squint. Oh, that I could become so accustomed to the light that I could keep my eyes wide open before it! Is it possible to be so transparent, so transformed by its brilliance, that I shine with the same brightness and intensity of that light? When we shine with God's light, we have the potential to fulfill Matthew 5's instruction to let our light so shine before men that they may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. If, however, we shy away from the light, even the light

that is within us (the spark of God that is the essence of life) becomes darkness. If the light that is within us is darkness, how great is that darkness. I have no hope to escape the illusionary comfort of the darkness within without the guiding light of Jesus showing me the way to true safety. The father of lies tries to convince us that darkness is light and light is darkness. We are so easily confused. However, as we step into the true light, nothing compares. One taste of the divine will expose the counterfeit. The love of God is that which never concedes to allowing a person to be totally lost in the darkness. He always hopes they will return to the light. He loves them wherever they are. He calls them to Himself and waits patiently for their response. How merciful He is not to give us over to our reprobate minds. How full of grace He is that He does not abandon us in the darkness of our sin and pain. He who is the light and the light giver combs the darkness for any one that might turn to Him. Imagine something so bright being willing to go into the deepest darkness.

As we become light bearers, we help Him in His search for the precious lost. We go where He sends us. We offer our bodies as living sacrifices so that He can use them as He deems necessary to facilitate the rescue mission. An unyielded vessel may choose its own prideful course of action, but a yielded vessel will follow the master's plan exactly. Many have tried to enter the darkness with only their personal light. Most discover over time that their own light

fades and becomes part of the darkness. This need not happen because God is willing to add His brilliant and eternal light to our own. The light of God never fades. As I live in that light, I live a life of righteousness. It is in this way that I love the One who loved me first. It is that love which gives me the courage to step into darkness to reach the others that He loves. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Guppies and Neons

My fish tank has an abundance of guppies. Guppies are a mostly mild-mannered fish except that they eat their babies, swarm selfishly for food, and the males relentlessly chase the females. If a guppy dies, the other guppies will munch on the tissue. It's a fish-eat-fish world in that tank. In my desire to watch other fish besides guppies, I bought some tetras neon fish. Their smaller size is not all that distinguishes neons from guppies. Neons have red tails and a bright blue, "neon-like" stripes that run down the sides of their bodies. While the guppies are pushing and bumping and knocking each other around for food, the neons wait for the food to come to them. If one neon gets a bite, the other neons do not try to get the food out of its mouth. The neons are not aggressive with any fish. Neons do not eat their young. They do not chase each other, but just like to "hang" together in small schools. When I

first put the neons in the tank, they were small enough that the guppies tried to eat them! The neons were quicker than the guppies and eventually, the guppies left them alone.

As the owner of this aquarium, I do my best to maintain a balance in the ecosystem. I clean the water, change the filters, vacuum the gravel, and feed the fish. I also test for pH balance while monitoring the nitrite and ammonia levels. As needed, I make adjustments. I watch my fish for signs of stress and take action when the ecosystem begins to be imbalanced. The fish know when I'm going to feed them and when I'm cleaning the tank. They fear me, but are curious when I am near. Some of them test to see if my arm is edible. The fish have a desire to survive, but do not know how I hold the power of life and death over them. Fortunately for them, I sincerely care for their welfare and hope to give each one a long and pleasant life. I understand the nature and confines of their world much more intimately than they do. My thoughts are higher than their thoughts. They take my existence for granted, sometimes appreciating me (like at mealtime), but mostly ignoring me. They have no idea that other tanks exist or that they were designed to live in the vast waters of an immense planet.

The "tank" in which I live is called "Earth." I am, for now, confined to the surface of this planet. I did not make this place, nor do I have much control over

the environment. The Creator of my world sets the parameters of my existence. He tends the ecosystem and makes adjustments when necessary to ensure the continuance of my species. His thoughts are higher than my thoughts. He could destroy this world, but He sincerely loves the people who live here. We fear our Creator, God, but are curious when He draws near. We see signs of His existence and often appreciate what He has provided, but most of us ignore Him.

Many people in this world are like guppies. It is human nature to selfishly fight for our own rights even if our winning is at the expense of someone else. We don't actually eat our babies, but we do kill them by the thousands through abortion. We have one-upped the guppies in the "relentlessly chasing" category in that not only do our males go after the females, but the females also go after the males. Mating for life is now a rarity. It's a dog-eat-dog, climbing the corporate ladder, looking out for #1 world.

Christians (and I mean the Christians who actually do what Christ instructed and have the Holy Spirit within) are the neons in our world. Neons still are fish, but they are different from guppies in both behavior and appearance. Christians are still people, but they are (or should be) different from unbelievers in both behavior and appearance. Christians have a certain glow about them and they

do things that are contrary to the world norm. They do things like turning the other cheek, giving people their only jacket, and walking the extra mile. Their eyes shine with the love of God and they have a wisdom that exceeds their years. Christians are content to wait for the provision of God. Christians love each other, even beyond the point of self-sacrifice.

Here is where the spiritual truth detours from physical reality. Guppies in our world are really meant to be neons. Any guppy can choose to be a neon, but in choosing to change, they lose their ability to behave like a guppy. Guppies who consider this transformation are often fearful that they will be losing either who they are or their status in the guppy world. Somehow, they know that the other guppies will not appreciate the change and they will try to eat them. Having never been a neon, the guppy fears it may not like what will happen and will not be able to go back to what it was. The guppy is accustomed to fending for itself and eating babies. How could it be happy not doing those things? Surely, it would die, or so it thinks. However, guppies who bravely become neons never regret the decision and know that what they have gained far outweighs what they lost. The life of a neon still has challenges, but there is a peace that passes understanding. The frantic searching for self-identity is ended because when a neon sees the Caretaker, it knows both His power and His love. The fear is gone.

Some guppies envy such peace and “try” to be neons. They paint the blue stripe on their sides and give their tails a coat of red. They hang out with the neons and do the things that neons do. However, because they are not truly neons, they feel restless and quickly lose interest. Trying to wait for food when you really want to push others out of the way is almost impossible. Watching the neons float together becomes irritating because the guppy doesn’t float well. The guppy starts to pick at the other neons because he resents their ability to keep being neonic (a new word!). Eventually, the paint wears off and they return to their guppy ways.

More guppies would become neons if it weren’t for one sad development in the lives of some neons. Sometimes, a neon starts to watch the way the guppies act. At first, they are appalled, but after awhile what the guppies do does not seem so bad to the neon. The neon sees that guppies get more food and they get what they want instead of what all the other guppies want. When you are a neon, you often give up what you want. Sometimes, the food that comes to the neons is scant and has already been chewed by guppies. The guppy way of living slowly becomes attractive to the neon. The neon will start to push other neons out of the way to get food. The neon tends to wander from the school of neons. It starts being on its own more than it is in

fellowship with the other neons. Eventually, the wandering neon lives like a guppy.

Some argue that neons in such a state will revert back into a guppy while others argue that once you are a neon, you are always a neon; albeit a bad one. Only the Creator knows the answer to that one. All I know is that when guppies see neons acting like guppies, they see no reason to change.

Here's one vital reason they should change. A day will come when the Caretaker of the tank will separate the guppies from the neons. He will take all of the guppies (and the fake neons) to a commercial store where no one really cares about their welfare. The tanks at the stores are smaller and emptier, without decoration and without love. The guppies will be separated from the Caretaker and the world they have known. The neons, on the other hand, will be given a new existence that returns them to what they were created to be — ocean dwellers. The new ocean will be safe and the neons will know the Caretaker even as they know themselves. Their way of thinking will be expanded and they will understand more fully the nature of their existence. They will launch on a great adventure of exploration and discovery.

Neons have a bad wrap in the guppy world. They are misunderstood, blamed, and ridiculed. Even so, the way neons are treated does not alter what they

are. The struggle of temporarily living in a tank prepares them for the eternal joy of ocean time.

The Race

Paul uses the analogy of a race to describe the Christian way. Even if you have lived 40 or 80 years, you are barely out of the starting blocks. Then, the image of a runner came to my mind and then a wider view followed it. I told him that we are not alone on the track. There are other runners in lanes beside us. There are runners in our lane that went before us and others that will follow after us. Before saying that to him, I did not consider the expansiveness of the race. It reminds me of the verse that says we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

EXPOUND ON THIS!!!

Loneliness

I saw her across the room. Everyone was laughing and having a good time, except for her. Everyone was talking about old times, except for her. She was over by the window, at the end of one of the tables, one of the empty tables. I watched as she gazed out the window, pretending not to hear the swirling laughter and pretending not to see the smiles that were not intended for her. Someone came to the

table. She sensed their presence and looked up with expectancy. Finally! Someone had come into her world and she could talk with them. I was happy for her in that moment because she had been so utterly alone and now she could laugh with someone, exchange smiles with someone, build memories with someone. Then the someone asked if they could have one of the chairs. In shock, all she could say was a simple "Yes," when what she wanted to say was "Hi, my name is..." but, it was no use, the someone was gone. Her eyes turned down. They turned down so no one would see her watching the someone move away, away into another world, a world that she was not a part of. She gazed out the window again with a sigh. My heart ached for her. I wanted to go talk to her, but I couldn't... I couldn't because I am her.

There could be people around you right now who are like the one in my story. Maybe they are new to the school. Maybe they have been here for a long time. If you can take your eyes off of yourself for awhile and pay attention, you will see them. They are the ones standing on the outside of a circle of chattering people, listening silently over someone's shoulder. No one sits with them at lunch or calls them in the evening. "Well," you say, "that's their fault. They should be more outgoing and make friends."

Think about a time when YOU were the one who didn't know anyone. Walk into a room of strangers and tell me that is not intimidating. What if your

personality was characterized by quietness and shyness? Whose fault is that?

I challenge you, especially those of you who call yourselves disciples of Christ, to open your eyes to the ones around you. See the ones who are gazing out the windows of their world, hoping for someone to talk to, wishing that the phone would ring, needing someone to smile and say "Hello." The friends you have now, if they are truly friends, will still be your friends if you reach out to a new person or a lonely person. Look for opportunities to expand your circle of influence. You can strive to get good grades, dress really sharp, or write the best journalism story, but all of that is meaningless if the people around you aren't loved by you. Not just the lovable people, but the unlovable ones as well. God loves them just as much as He loves you.

What does the third C of CCCS stand for? Shouldn't it be like the first century church when the people said, "See how they love each other!" If we don't love every person in our school, we might as well take out that C and be called Choice City School.

I finish with words penned by the wisest man who ever lived...

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work:

If one falls down, his friend can help him up.

But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!

Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves.

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

ECCL 9

In the last chapel, I shared with you a story I wrote about a girl who was alone and needed someone to reach out to her. That girl was not real, but a representation of many people in our daily lives who live on the fringes of acceptance.

The Boy

Today, I will share with you a story of a boy that I knew. He was real and his story is real. He was alone and needed someone to reach out to him. As you listen, ponder two things: what could have made the ending of the story different and could what happened to the boy happen to you.

When I think of the boy, I remember his thick brown hair and his big eyes. I remember how smart he was and how all the other kids liked him. He was a good kid – everybody said so. He was about as normal as they come. I'm sure as a little boy, he made noises when he played with trucks and found creative things to do with tinker toys -- like stick them up his nose or throw them at crawling ants. I

bet he liked to get real dirty with his same-size friends, having wrestling matches, stomping mud puddles, and playing all kinds of rowdy games. I didn't know him when he was little, though I would have liked to.

I met him when he was finishing Junior High, working through all the struggles that a ninth grader has to work through. He was kind of quiet, so quiet that I don't think I had one conversation with him that didn't have something to do with his schoolwork. Other kids would talk with me about their struggles, but he didn't. I don't think it was anything personal, he had just become kind of a quiet person. He was quite normal, though, because all the other kids liked him.

He had a good year at our school, but left because he wanted more of a challenge academically. I told you he was really smart, just quiet. I did not hear much about this boy, except that he was attending one of the public high schools and once I remember someone telling me his little brother was having some troubles.

I honestly did not think of the boy for a couple of years, not once. He had just drifted out of my life and I did not think of him, until one day when someone asked me, "Did you hear about...?" and they said his name, the name that belonged to a boy I once knew. "No," I replied, expecting to hear

some great news like he'd won a big scholarship to a major university. But the words I heard next shook me inside out. "He committed suicide this week. On the railroad tracks..." I didn't want to know the details. I didn't want to imagine how his life ended that night, when he was alone and tormented. I couldn't help but wonder what circumstances had led him to that moment when he decided death was preferable to life.

He just didn't fit the mold of someone who would lay on the tracks in the dark and wait for a train. He had gone to a Christian school and he had played with Christian friends. He listened to Bible class every weekday morning and attended every Friday chapel. His voice mingled with other voices as he sang the hymns of faith. What happened to this boy? What happened to him, who could be sitting in this room with us now, but who is not?

I can only guess, but somehow, I know exactly what happened to him. When he listened to the truth, he accepted it. He knew it was true and he felt the benefits of believing the truth. He was in a good environment and it was easy to be good, but somewhere in his being was the desire to test the other side -- the darker side of life. When he left the good environment, the outside world was different and strange, but he adjusted to it pretty fast. He felt good about life in general. Eventually, the lies of the outside world started to weave a net of deception in his life. He would try this one thing

this once. He knew it was "bad," but one try couldn't hurt anything. Maybe it was a cigarette or a drink of beer. Nothing, really. It didn't hurt anything and he was fine, really. No big deal. Well, one didn't hurt, why not go for two? Then, it seemed like those things that used to be bad were a part of his every day life. Once or twice, he thought to call one of his old friends from the Christian school, but he didn't because somehow he wasn't very proud of some of the decisions he was making. He didn't really think that consciously, he just knew they wouldn't understand where he was coming from now. So, he started hanging out with other people with the same habits, the same lostness. Together, they drank and smoked and laughed. Apart, they drank and smoked and cried. The boy remembered a happier time, a time when his spirit felt peace. But, he couldn't go back to God... he couldn't even talk to his old Christian friends, much less God. The emptiness of his spirit moaned to be filled again, so he explored the spirit world again, only this time it was the dark side of the occult. It really seemed quite the same as Christianity at first. Regular meetings and special sayings, people who wanted you there, belonging to a group again -- it really seemed this would be the answer for him. He got deeper and deeper into it all. The music he listened to now was loud and every beat pounded the words into his soul. Then began the pull to drift, from one high to another, from one ritual to the next, from one level to the next level, just keep going, up and

up... down and down. Somewhere inside, he felt the spiral downward into the blackness of the unknown, but he felt totally numb. It wasn't long before nothing really mattered anymore. He was tired outside and sick inside. He started to hear voices in the night. Life is, after all, one big empty lie -- human existence is God's joke, if there is a God. Why go on kidding yourself? Remember the lyrics. There's no point. Might as well end it now...

When I think of the boy, I remember his thick brown hair and his big eyes. I remember how smart he was and how all the other kids liked him. He was a good kid, everybody said so.

Remember the two things I asked you to ponder?

1. What could have made the ending of the story different? Every person who comes into your life is there for a reason. Reach out in love and discover the purpose for the intersection of your life with the life of another. Your action today can make a difference tomorrow.

2. Could what happened to the boy happen to you?

Yes! Many little steps lead a soul away from the truth found in Christ Jesus! Some of you are not finished with sin. Think of sin as an acronym.

Sensual -- your senses lead to toward the dark side. Be careful of what you see, hear, touch and smell!

Invasive -- like a silent army, evil creeps into your territory and soon you are conquered. Guard your life and wear the full armor of God.

Natural -- because of the fall, the tendency to sin is in your flesh, the third part of you (body, mind and soul.) It is possible to live without sinning, but not apart from the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit!

In closing, please read I Peter 4:1-11:

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do-- living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit. The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves,

he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

A Sporting Analogy

Christianity is NOT a spectator sport! We are each players in the game of life and every person must decide which team they want to play for. They can either help us win the game or they can sit the bench until the the enemy's owner drafts them. To play on our team means supporting and encouraging each teammate while respecting and obeying the Coach (your youth leader or mentor).

The Coach calls the plays, but he can't win the game! The plays have to be executed by the players. Players must have commitment, give effort and apply the will to succeed. Teams can't give up when they get behind or have cold streaks -- they have to try harder, stick together and make the RIGHT decisions.

Every team needs a captain. Who will be a captain for our team? It is an honorable position with responsibility. Who among you has felt the call to leadership? Will you rally the team and lead them to victory? Will you set an example by your actions and prove you are worthy of the position? Our team

needs MORE captains. Where are they? Many are called, few are chosen -- will you ignore the call?

This game is a deadly one, not just balls through a hoop. Our goals involve human souls and attaining the victory of eternal life through Jesus Christ. If you stand on the sidelines, you hurt the cause. If you trip or criticize or do anything to harm your own teammates, you have committed the worst foul. If you are going to foul someone, foul the enemy (Satan)!

If you purposely do not perform the Coach's plays, you might as well be off the team. If you are not listed on the roster of our team, you are automatically on the other team. Everyone is on a team and there are only two: God's and Satan's. Which uniform do you wear? Are you helping us win or helping us lose? This is a serious game in which your very soul, and the souls of others like you, hang in the balance.

What will the outcome be? Our team WILL win the tournament, just as the newspaper (Revelations) has predicted. How many points will YOU have scored? Will you win MVP honors? Which team will you have given the most assistance to?

Think about it and then do something about it! Sign the contract of intent to prove your commitment and have a news conference to publicly announce your

decision. NOW is the time for action. We are approaching the two minute warning of the fourth quarter. Your Coach wants to hear you say, "Give us the play, Coach. We will perform as a single unit and we will do it RIGHT! To God be the glory and the victory!"

What kind of a Player (Christian) are you?
--

Let's take a deeper look at ourselves and the spiritual game... The ball is a human soul, the hoop is salvation and the lane is where the hardest battles are fought. Which of the following are you?

1. **The tall center** who jumps to get the ball to teammates. Plays in the lane a lot and is good at rebounding (helping those who are not quite in the basket). Excellent at offensive and defensive boards and knows how to block out defenders. May not be very speedy, but has solid skills and good coordination.

2. **The quick guard** who excels in defense -- stealing the ball from tall opponents. Good at handling the ball with care and precision. Well practiced at bringing the ball to our end of the court. Knows when to pass at the right time so that his

teammates have an open shot. Coordinates plays and , when necessary, can shoot from the outside to open up the inside game.

3. **The bold forward** who is an all around player -- handles the ball well and has excellent shooting skills. Knows how to rebound and does not hesitate to drive to the basket. Quick and powerful, but always a team player.

You must be one of the above. If you are not, then it is time for you to examine your role on the team and take steps to define what you should be doing. If you know your role and just want to be better at it, here are some tips for you...

<h3>Hints for players who want to turn PRO</h3>

1. Professional Players will obey the Coach, watch the clock, know the plays, work hard in practice, give 110% effort during games, wear the team uniform, follow the rules of the game, and work well with teammates. Every game you will see them score points give assists, and get rebounds. They go for the triple double!

2. Players must be physically active and move around when in the game -- no standing still! No one is allowed to stay in the lane too long when on

offense. Short bursts through the lane at strategic times keeps us strong and active in offense.

3. Foul your opponent rather than let him score a basket on a fast break. Don't be the last one down the court on a fast break whether it is for us or for our opponents. If being slow is not due to a lack of training, it indicates a lack of self-discipline.

4. This is an "away" game, not played on your home court (heaven). Mentally ignore distractions from the hostile, screaming crowd (the world). Focus on the goal. If you get a free throw opportunity (someone is sent directly to you), make it count. Practice your free throw technique, because a lost opportunity may not come again.

5. Use your peripheral vision (see beyond your selfishness) and know where your teammates are. Do not let them get discouraged. You need them to help your team win. Communicate with them as much as possible.

6. Respect and obey the referees (persons in authority over you). They help you play a clean, safe game. They keep track of fouls and hold you accountable for your actions. The Commissioner (God) hired them and gave them the whistle (power over the players). Disobedience and disrespect can result in hefty fines and/or temporary expulsion!

7. In this spiritual game, there is no limit to the number of fouls a player can commit. The refs will

keep your opponent from inflicting too many fouls against you (another reason to respect them). Be prepared with the right equipment (Ephesians 6) to protect yourself in the rough times when the refs. may not be able to see you being fouled.

8. It is better for you to attempt to steal the ball or intercept passes than to foul the enemy every time you are in their area of the court. When fouling, you risk injury. A strong, athletic player can foul more often and more successfully than a weak, out-of-shape player can. Build up your strengths and adjust for your weaknesses.

9. Stay in "game shape". Eat the right foods (the Bread of Life) and get plenty of rest (away from hectic schedules and over commitment outside of the game).

10. Study the playbook (the Bible) and ask for guidance from your Coach. Always be sure you understand the fundamentals of the game, and each day become more knowledgeable about the details that make a difference. Seek to rise above the crowd by letting your Coach instruct you.

11. Watch your opponent carefully. Study his moves and seek out his vulnerable areas. Anticipate his decisions and think over his strategies. Consult with the talent scouts (older Christians) for more

information. Never underestimate your opponents ability.

12. Always stay between your opponent and his basket -- especially if he is handling the ball. Prevent him from scoring points by blocking shots, stealing the ball, intercepting passes and working in tandem with your own teammates. Establish a position that is balanced and well placed when he is driving to the basket. Taking the brunt of his offensive foul may hurt, but he at least he won't score the basket.

13. Buy tickets to the game for all your friends and family. Play hard and do your best because they are watching you and they want to be proud of what you accomplish.

14. If you happen to be injured during the game, take some time to heal. Do whatever the doctor (your Pastor) says so that you can get back to playing the game and scoring goals. Some injuries are worse than others. Objectively assess your injury and do not give it more attention than it deserves. There is often pain in sacrifice. "No pain, no gain." Be as tough (resistant to pain) as you can be and determine to be back on the court as soon as possible. Your teammates need you!

15. Whenever you can, be sure to thank your Coach, his assistants, your teammates, the refs., the doctor and especially the Commissioner for all they do to make you a better player. They all put in long hours

of hard work and spend much of their time thinking about you. An expression of gratitude gives them strength and an even stronger desire to help you succeed.

16. Always use all of your abilities to help the team win. Do you have leadership skills? Consider becoming a captain. This gives you even more opportunity to contribute. You can call time outs, decide certain plays and lead the team toward victory.

17. The best thing you can do is decide to be a TEAM player. Ball hogs, superstars and hot heads try to play alone and are soon defeated. BE unselfish, patient, obedient, knowledgeable and committed- this is the winning combination.

At The End Of Your Playing Career

Eventually, you may consider becoming a Coach. You will have played the game for a long time and may be able to train others in how to excel. Consult the Commissioner. When a position opens up, you can be sure He will have prepared you to do it.

After playing and perhaps coaching, the time will come when you will be able to retire. The Commissioner will induct you into the Hall of Fame.

and all the Coaches and Players of games gone by will applaud your efforts. You by one, your teammates on will also tire of and, tether you, I will remember the successes and the failures, the great shots and the painful injuries. In the post-game analysis, you will each discover that the blood, sweat and tears you gave really did help in obtaining victory for the kingdom of God.

When you stand before Jesus and say, "Thank you, Lord, for putting me in the game and for letting me play on Your team," He will answer, "Well done, my good and faithful servant (in other words

The Wind, The Spirit, and The Church

Consider the wind. It cannot be seen or touched and yet can be heard and felt. The same wind that can drive the sting of icy snow can gently twirl autumn's colored leaves. Over time, the wind has transformed entire landscapes; carving its own sculptures from solid rock or creating shifting mountains of sand. The wind makes waves on both amber grain and blue oceans. The wind changes, but it is always the same.

Consider the Holy Spirit. He cannot be seen or touched and yet can be heard and felt. He can burn into the very heart of a man or bring comfort to the most sorrowful soul. Sometimes in a moment, sometimes over years, the Holy Spirit transforms the

lives of people into the likeness of Jesus Christ. He moves in a mighty way among those who welcome Him as He is. The Holy Spirit can be different to each person and the same to all.

Consider the Church. A church can be seen because it has a building. It can be touched and heard through the hands and voices of it's people. It can be felt through the powerful love and life of Jesus Christ. The Church can have the health of vibrant ministries, abundant fellowship and continual vision or it can have the sickness of diminishing ministries, closed circles and immutable traditions. Over time, the Church will be transformed into one of two things: various groups of separatists who are continually defeated by Satan or a unified body of believers who are experiencing victory in Jesus Christ. The Church makes close-minded hypocrites or it makes God-seeking disciples. The Church must be different for each person and the same to all.

Ephesians, Chapter 4, describes the components of a healthy church.

Unity among believers is of utmost importance. Being of one heart and one mind under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and God. This one Spirit leads us to be one body. A body cannot cut off it's own arm or separate the shin from the knee. Every part must be considered vital to the life of the church, while recognizing the head of all is Christ.

No one person or group of people should be allowed to cause disunity, for it means the maiming or even death of the church.

God is the one who gave each person unique gifts, spiritual gifts, intended to be used in service to build up the body of Christ. A body that is not worked soon becomes weak, susceptible to injury and tires easily. Each person must be given the opportunity to learn their spiritual gifts and then apply them in order to edify others. Some people are given gifts of leadership which prepare the way for people to serve. Those among us that have these gifts must be raised up and given the opportunity to apply their gift in the appropriate area of leadership. The scriptures instruct us to continue in this "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." The church must also be careful not to place people where their gifts do not lie, lest the opposite occur.

A church must seek truth in all things, the truth that comes from a full knowledge of Jesus Christ. We must be sensitive to each other to the point that we know when a ministry or tradition is no longer fulfilling the needs of the people. A church can be like a pond; without fresh water, fresh ideas, it becomes stagnant. We must have new attitudes of true righteousness and holiness. Honesty about ministry is essential. This includes honesty about the leadership, the application of gifts, the direction

of education and the focus of ministries within the body. If we are not meeting the honest needs of people, they will not be able to stay. We must truthfully evaluate every aspect of the ministry and this evaluation must be continual.

We also must develop a vision; not a vision of our own good intentions, but a vision of what God wants this body to be like. We must earnestly endeavor to do things God's way. He gives answers to those who ask, therefore, let us seek Him for a path and then walk it together with boldness.

The devil is hunting for a foothold in every church. He picks at each member to determine their area of weakness. With some he uses gossip, backstabbing, or murmuring and with others he may use anger, lies, or laziness. His goal is to destroy the opportunity for furthering the kingdom of God. To allow him to succeed is unthinkable! We must bond together with kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. There is no weakness in a bond of perfect love and, therefore, Satan cannot taste victory in our midst.

The wind, the Holy Spirit and the Church all work in the same way. Jesus said **"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."** If we are truly children of God, born of the

Spirit, then we must be like the wind. Changeable, but the same. Changeable to adjust to new situations, but the same in the bond of love. Like a mighty wind, directed by the will of God and empowered by the Holy Spirit, our church can carry the good message of the gospel across our city, our country and our world. It is then that we will be fulfilling the great commission to make disciples of all men.

Focus

Focus: Webster's = to concentrate on

This is the word the Lord gave me as I drove home tonight. The answer was in response to a prayer about what to do with you two. When I told Kelly the word, he said, "They focus on each other's faults."

As I thought about the word and how it applies to your marriage, I realized how important focus is for Christians. Our focus, what we concentrate on the most, should be on God. He told me that prayer is the answer to every dilemma. We would talk to that person the most whom we focus on the most because that is where we would be looking. When our focus is on any other thing or person, our vision is narrow.

A person who needs glasses cannot focus properly on the things around them. Some people with eye problems can see far away (farsighted) and some can only see close up (nearsighted). However, the opposite extreme for them is fuzzy or out of focus. When our focus is entirely on the person closest to us (probably our spouse), then God is out of focus. When our focus is on God, a miracle happens – we can see both God and the person perfectly.

It would be shortsighted if you were focusing on each other, but you two are not even really focusing on the other person so much as you are his or her faults, which is an even narrower focus. What is a fault?

Faults: Webster's = Something that prevents perfection, such as: A flaw, blemish or defect, a mistake or error, an offense, transgression or minor vice. Fault usually refers to a specific quality or trait that detracts in large or small measure from excellence.

Fault-finder: Webster's = Petty criticism; a carping, disposed to find trivial faults

Do you suppose that the definition of "spouse" includes having the right to point out and correct each other's faults? Let's see...

Spouse: Webster's = One's marriage partner; a husband or wife. Okay, nothing about fault-finding there. Let's check the word "partner."

Partner: Webster's = A person associated with another or others in some activity of common interest. Partner implies a relationship, frequently between two people, in which each has equal status and a certain independence but also implicit or formal obligations to the other or others.

Let's try relationship. Maybe that gives you the right to "fix" people.

Relationship: Webster's = The condition or fact of being related. Connection by blood or marriage; kinsfolk.

How about kinsfolk then?

Kinsfolk: Webster's = Members of a family; kindred.

Not there. Let's try family. Surely being "family" gives you certain rights.

Family: Webster's = The most instinctive, fundamental social group in man and animal, especially the union of a man and woman through marriage and their offspring.

I guess Webster's falls short in giving us permission to find fault as a part of the marriage relationship. Maybe the Bible has some clues...

Mark 10:7-8 (Jesus said) *"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh, so then they are no longer two but one flesh."*

Mark 3:24 (Jesus said) *"If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, it cannot stand."*

Romans 12:10 *"Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer, distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."*

Many other verses come to mind. Like the one where Jesus tells us to take the plank out of our own eye before trying to get the splinter out of someone else's eye. How about the love chapter (2 Corinthians 13)? Consider the part that says, "*keeps no record of wrongs.*" So, it appears that the Bible has a lot to say about who gets to judge other people and how it is not our directive to point out faults in anyone.

Let's return to our first word, "focus," and see what the Bible has to say in that regard. One day, a scribe was listening to Jesus and was impressed with the answers Jesus gave the Pharisees. So, he asked Jesus what was the "first" or most important commandment of all. Jesus replied, "*The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.'* This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: '*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31)

If your focus is on loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, how much time do you really have to pick out the faults of someone else? You two are a family and your children are learning from your example. Get your own house in order before you clean up someone else's. Being a husband or a wife does not give you the right to

point out in your partner every little sin, mistake, shortcoming, flaw, or whatever else negative attribute you can name. By doing so, you are dividing your house against itself. You are harming yourself when you harm the other person because you are one flesh.

If each person would FOCUS on their own personal relationship with God, letting Him work on the other person, peace would live in your lives. God is so much better than you are at changing people. You've tried it with each other and have not had much success – admit it. Give that up, focus on Jesus, and just love each other.

Pain

If my feelings get hurt in a message sent by email, I do not know exactly what the person meant by their words until I talk with them. If I talk on the phone with them, I do not have physical feedback from their eyes or body language to determine their intentions. Even if I am in the presence of that person, but I don't know them well enough, I may need more information about how they think and react to life. It is a one-sided perspective to judge the situation by only what that person has done to me. A wider perspective will attempt to discover the cause that led to the offensive action. Often our own pain filters our reality regarding the ramifications of our actions. A hurting heart cannot easily feel the

pain of another because its own pain is being felt. It cannot easily feel the pain it is causing either because its personal pain is greater than the pain it is causing. You can see this in the physical world, too. Let's say I get a paper cut in the morning that bugs me all day, and then in the evening while slicing onions, I cut off the tip of my finger. At that point, which of those two pains will I feel the most? The finger will have absorbed the entire pain awareness reservoir. If, in my haste to get a bandage for my spouting appendage, I stub my toe on the couch, I will still feel the pain from the toe, but to a much lesser degree than the pain from my finger.

I have two nieces who are near the age of 8. If I turn each of them upside down and tickle them, one will scream in delight and the other will scream in pain. Even though they are the same age, same size, and same gender, their tolerance for pain is different. We each have a specific threshold for physical pain and for emotional pain. Someone may want to feel your pain, but may not be able to because his or her threshold for pain is not sufficient to handle it. Too often we feel hurt because someone else could not handle our pain. That's not fair, is it?

Some people can take more emotional pain than others (or at least they think they can). Counselors amaze me with their capacity for pain. How do they stay tender and compassionate? They must have to

guard against becoming callous to other people's pain. Several years ago, I asked the Lord to "show me pain." My friends thought I was crazy, but I thought that the only way to ease the pain of others was to understand what pain is all about. What I learned is to handle the pain of others in the same way Jesus did. He touched people at the point of their pain so that they could choose to release it. Like the woman at the well, He knew that she needed her secret sins to be exposed so that she could believe what He said. She was thirsty for the living water of which He spoke. Jesus eased her burden of emotional pain, but He did not take her burden as His own. Her pain went through Him, as if He had holes from the front to the back of His body, and straight up to God. God is the only one who can handle everyone's pain. He doesn't like it, but He *is* God and, therefore, capable of bearing it. Even though we do not have God's capacity for pain, our compassion wants to ease their burden so we take it from them. Too many caring hearts are crushed by the weight of other people's pain.

We should not feel compelled to carry all the pain of the world. Do you know why? Because one person already did that and so it is done, once and for all. The cause of pain is sin. Sin is choosing to do that which God would not choose to do. God would not choose to hurt an innocent person. God would not choose to say something that caused emotional wounds. God would not murder, steal, covet, falsely

accuse, slander, gossip, or be cruel in any way. People do all those things and those are just some of the things that cause pain. In one amazing moment, all the pain that ever was or ever will be was put on Jesus while God turned His back. Jesus bore the pain of sin for us in His human body. Every other time in His life and ministry, He was able to send the pain to His Father, but this time, He kept it and bore it even though it crushed His heart and He died. Jesus gave Himself that way so that you would never have to bear that pain on your own. God will never turn His back on you. You can always send your pain and the pain of others straight to Him without fear of rejection. You honor Jesus' sacrifice when you let Him be the Savior for yourself and others.

Another advantage of letting Jesus be the Savior is that you will have an unending capacity to help other people with their pain. You really can feel their pain as it passes through you, but it does not put a burden on you. You will not need to become callous in order to not feel the pain so intensely. You can feel it as intensely as the person with whom you are with feels it without being damaged by it. This is incredible and powerful. The power comes because the person can choose to let go of that pain as you funnel it up to God. It's easier for them to let go if they do not have to lift it up alone. For example, imagine that someone had to lift a couch through a window that was five feet off the ground. Through great effort, they might be able to get it above their heads and move toward the window, but if they then

discovered that the couch was bigger than the window, they would need to drop the couch. Dropping it is almost impossible without crushing themselves under the weight. If, however, you come along and hold up one part of the couch, dropping the weight would be simple. Both people would feel the weight of the couch, but their combined effort would keep it from crushing them. That's just one reason why "it's not good for man to be alone." People carry around an incredible weight of pain and suffering. If we could be strong ambassadors for Christ, we could go around helping people manage and then release their burdens of pain. We can feel their pain without being crushed by it.

If someone has hurt you, the source of their actions could be their own pain. Knowing this, you can more clearly understand why they did what they did and not take it so personally. A wider perspective will prevent more heartaches than a narrow one. You really can feel someone's pain without getting hurt yourself. Gather more information about them and what is really bothering them before you pass judgment on what they did to you. Better yet, don't pass judgment; just pass it on to God. He's just as good with judgment as He is with pain.

Blinders

Too often, we live like horses with blinders on. Blinders are black squares attached to the halter and

positioned to the outside of a horse's eyes. With blinders on, the horse can only see straight ahead. This reduction of the horse's field of vision makes it is less likely that events occurring to the side of the road will spook the horse. The driver puts the blinders on the horse because a spooked horse usually upsets the cart.

Blinders for people can be attitudes, doctrines, prejudices, expectations, or fears – anything that narrows their perspective of reality. Other people, like our parents, sometimes put blinders on us but often we choose them for ourselves because we are afraid of anything that is not contained within our personal path of experience.

The difference between people and horses is that people can choose whether or not to wear blinders. Just because we can't see something doesn't mean it isn't real. Ignoring our fears, for example, does not make them go away. Facing our fears helps us to conquer them. The world is an expansive place full of diversity and wonder. When we widen our perspective by removing our blinders, we have the greatest potential to experience the full range of what life wants to present to us.

Some special things happen when we widen our perspective. What was once unknown becomes known. What was once uncomfortable becomes comfortable. And, as wide as a perspective may seem, it can always get wider. The horses that

must wear blinders are the fearful ones. Not all horses have to wear them. The horses with peaceful and strong spirits can handle more turmoil in their environment. They tend to have more curiosity and an ability to accept the unexpected.

Identifying your personal blinders is the first step to removing them. However, you might feel like your hands are hooves when you try to get them off. It's not as easy as it sounds. Clearing your life of negative attitudes or overwhelming fears is often a process rather than an event. You may even need some assistance from someone you trust. If they are especially big, you might need help from above. Consider a prayer that says, "Lord, show me my blinders and help me to take them all off. Expand my vision. Then, help me to be brave and not get spooked!" ;-)

Bring It On

Did you ever see the movie, "The Emperor's New Groove"? It was about a selfish young emperor whose mortal enemy tried to kill him with a potion. The potion didn't kill him; it made him into a llama. (Who thinks this stuff up??!) Anyway, a big guy played by John Goodman reluctantly befriends the whacked-out llama and they begin a journey to try and restore him to his rightful position. At one point in their hazardous trek, they are strapped to a dead tree trunk and floating down a river. The river is picking up speed. The big guy, who is facing

forward, says, "Uh-oh." The llama says, "It's a waterfall, isn't it?" "Yep" is the reply. "Big sharp rocks at the bottom?" "Probably so." After a short pause, the llama says, "Bring it on." They plunge over the edge, screaming the whole way, get set free from the tree trunk, and survive to continue their journey.

The part that hit home for me is the "Bring it on" concept. I decided that is the kind of relationship I want to have with God. If He wants to bring me pain and sorrow, struggle and hardship, I say, "Bring it on." Why? Because He knows exactly how much I can take and He uses every situation to either teach me something or draw me closer to Him. He's taken me through every other hard thing in my life. That's quite a track record. If He wants to bring me blessings and joy, laughter and celebration, I say, "Bring it on." The Christian life is not supposed to be so serious all the time. We are supposed to have fun, laugh, and enjoy the goodness of God. Are you open to a "Bring it on" kind of relationship with the Almighty??? For me, it has been glorious and I see no end in sight. I'd recommend it to you, highly.

Minutes into the Game

Minutes into the game, it was 13 to 3. The opponents were ahead and moving down the field like a steamroller. They just did an end-around and scored again. Now it is 20 to 3. The home team has

lost momentum and is wondering what is going on. Unity is imperative, but there seems to be some finger-pointing between team members. It's not even the end of the first quarter and already there is sideline talk of losing the game. The Coach has crafted an incredible game plan, but the players are distracted by their own mistakes, their teammate's shortcomings, and what the opponents are doing rather than paying attention to their Leader. One of the team captains convinces the Coach of the need for a timeout. He calls it. He beckons the team to stand near Him and begins to speak...

"Now prepare yourselves like men. I'm going to ask you questions and you will answer. Do you think you can change my game plan? You think I'm crazy and you can do better? How long have you been coaching football? What is your win/loss record? Go ahead and pump yourselves up, get dressed in your fancy uniforms, then go out there and play without My plan and see what happens. You get pummeled, that's what happens. Put together a plan of your own and watch as it disintegrates around you. If you say you can make a better plan than mine, I'll say you are nuts because it can't be done.

"Look at my record. It is flawless. All wins, no losses. Every time I plan out a game, the strategy is perfect. As the Coach, I don't execute the game plan on My own, but rather depend on my team to take my plays from paper to reality. Just because

you misinterpret the play, or forget some part of it, or miss the mark does not mean that something is wrong with my logic. I make powerful plays that take into account the weaknesses and strengths of our many opponents. My teams have played against them before, so I know how they operate. Your capabilities are also well known to me. I have studied your actions and noticed your choices. I know better than you do how much you can take and how much you can give. Sure, it's a tough game. You might get banged up on each play, but hard hits and bruises are part of football. The rules and boundaries are in place for safety reasons, but there's a lot of free will happening between the hash marks. What I want to see from you guys is some guts. When the big uglies are flying at you in a rage, don't get all flustered. Be confident and remember the play I just called. You don't have to think about all the plays I'll call, just the one I want you to do at that moment. Stay focused and don't give up.

"I've coached a million of these kind of games. You think this score is impossible? Ha! I once coached a game where the opponent was ahead 45 to zero. The fans were leaving the stadium and it wasn't even halftime. Guess what happened? One guy, the quarterback, lead by example and gave everything he had to give. He executed each of my plays with perfection. It was incredible to watch and I marveled at that kid's heart. We won the game that Friday night, 47 to 45. The opponent didn't score

again, but we did. Our victory was as bright as the sunrise on Sunday morning. We won because one guy on the team decided he believed in Me. What a difference he made! You guys have that same kind of heart within you -- I know you do. You just have to believe.

"Now before I send you out to play again, I want you to stop picking at each other and expecting everyone else to step up instead of stepping up yourself. Play your position and stop telling the other guys how to play theirs. That's My job. If you don't know the game plan, then study it some more. Memorize it and practice it. Play with your whole heart and don't hold anything back. We can win this game. Remember that greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world. The victory is already ours.

"By the way, if anyone needs a timeout and wants to talk with Me further, that's fine. Don't be putting them down because they need clarification. I'd rather have a timeout than a disastrous play. Our opponents are crafty and they put some creative defenses out there sometimes. Timeouts are few, but necessary. Just because someone called a timeout doesn't mean the game is over. It means that someone wants to win.

"Okay? Are you with Me? Let's play some football!"

Just as the players were about to take the field again, the Coach hollered out, "And watch your language out there. Nobody on My team uses foul language and we don't do anything dirty or mean. I want a clean, sportsmanlike game!"

So, Steve. Are you on the bench, in the game, or are you walking out?

So, Wendy. You wanted the timeout. When time's up, what part of the field will you run to?

If you ask me, I think Steve should be the quarterback and Wendy the running back. (When he hands her the ball, she knows where to take it.) Your offensive lineman are all your friends and family providing a front against the enemy so that plays can be run successfully. The little tailback is yet to be born. I hope he gets the chance to play.

Love and hugs,
Your Offensive Coach

P.S. I took liberty with Job 40 to craft the Coach's speech. Hey, God said it once, He can say it again.

Priscilla the Scardy-cat

While I was thinking about the concept of fear, Priscilla meowed at me. Priscilla is a "wild-eyed" cat that is afraid most of the time. Even though she has a safe place to live with loving caretakers, she is

easily spooked. She has lived within these walls with us for three years and yet, when we come home, her eyes and actions are suspicious of our intent. She sniffs us like we are dangerous foreigners and then darts away. She rarely trusts us enough to let us give her affection. When *she* wants affection, she is overly exuberant in her attempts to get it from us. It's like she gets love-starved and then can't get enough in the short amount of time she allows herself to get the love she needs. The smallest bit of love overwhelms her and she has to run away from it.

Something deep inside that cat is fearful. Fear must be in her blood because she has experienced nothing but kindness from us. Some cat in her ancestry was scared so terribly by someone that the fear became part of what was passed on in the DNA. Her littermate, Pursy, has some of it, too, but not as much. When we went to choose kittens, the lady held Priscilla up first, hoping we would take her. I know that she knew Priscilla was "weird." I'm glad that we got her because no one else may have loved her as patiently as we do. We let her be who she is, but work to counteract her fears with our love.

Another strange thing about this cat is that her meow never grew up – she sounds like a kitten. We even treat her like a kitten all the time and talk to her like she's a baby because that helps her overcome her fears. When visitors come to our

house, they don't know how to talk to her, so she runs away and hides. Her understanding is so limited that she fears death continuously whether the threat is real or not.

So many people live like Priscilla. We are provided with an amazing environment of love and protection, but we spend most of our time running away and hiding. We suspect the intentions of the One who made our world. We run away from the One who feeds us and cares for us. We doubt His sincerity and love because we have been hurt (or someone in our ancestry has been hurt). Occasionally, we allow Him to love us, but quickly return to our fearful ways. We get stuck in a pattern from long ago and cannot grow up into true reality. The false reality we make is a scary place where everyone is out to get us. We do not trust anyone. Our fear of death smothers our love of life.

You might say that if an actual threat did occur, she would be the least likely to be harmed. In truth, the one who is "cool under fire" is the most likely to survive. Fear can paralyze us or cause us to make unwise decisions. We often call Priscilla "Silly" because she does crazy things when she is startled.

I wish I could become a cat so that I could speak Priscilla's language and help her understand that she does not need to fear me. Since that is not in my power to do, my continual effort is to express love to her by my soothing tone and loving actions. Eventually, I know I will win her trust. It may take years and years. I will know I

have won when I come home and she sniffs me without darting away. I'll get a "slider" instead.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. John 3:16.

The Burning Bush

Not so long ago, a pine tree stood on a mountainside amongst a thousand other trees. It had grown there for many years, absorbing the energy of the sun's rays. One day, much to its surprise, it was cut down. Life as it had been was no more. The tree was harvested and realized it would never fulfill its ultimate goal of reaching the sun. Instead, its parts would be sent to a multitude of places and used in a multitude of ways.

The room was cold one winter morning. Confined within a cold metal stove, a piece of that pine tree in the form of plywood was stacked on top of crumpled newspaper. The match was lit and the newspapers burst into flame. The fire licked at the small square of plywood that sat calmly awaiting the fire's touch. The flames came from the back of the plywood and crept over the top and down its face. Behind the line of flame the surface was black, but at the point of ignition the fire danced in flourishes of yellow and orange. The wood calmly relinquished its energy, resigned to the unavoidable release of stored

sunshine. Not long after the fire first kissed the wood, all of its energy was released, leaving a small pile of blackish-gray ash. Comparing that pile of ash to the magnificent beauty of the original tree brought a sadness that was lessened only by the gratitude for the temporary warmth the tree's sacrifice provided.

Long ago, a bush stood at the base of a mountain at the edge of a desert. It had grown there for many years, absorbing the energy of the sun's rays. One day, much to its surprise, it caught fire. The fire came out of nowhere. The bush knew about fire and resigned itself to yielding its precious energy to the flames. Strangely, the bush felt the touch of the flame, but did not feel compelled to release the energy hidden within its branches. The bush burned but was not consumed. What a strange feeling! Then, from within the space between its branches, came a voice that sounded like the rush of many waters. The bush knew this Voice, knew this Presence. It was the Creator. The power of the Voice shook the branches several times and then, as quickly as it had started, the fire was gone. The bush stood quietly in awe until a gentle breeze rustled its leaves and whispered "Thank you."

Interpretation:

I have lived most of my life in sacrifice, giving parts of me away in a multitude of places and a multitude of ways. I have felt removed from my proper place,

disconnected from my parts, and unable to fulfill my ultimate goal of reaching God. The heat of my fire, though welcome at the time, was temporary and did not provide lasting warmth. The energy within my dispersed parts was used up, leaving a few ashes to be blown away on the winds of time. People do not like being cold, so they moved on to other energy sources. Once all of the parts of the tree are used, it is no more. I felt like I wanted to be no more. But, I am not a tree. I am a human being. I survived the turmoil of being harvested for the benefit of others at the expense of myself. I found a way to live.

I want to be a burning bush, alive with holy fire that does not consume my energy. I want my branches to shake with the power of God's voice coming from the spaces within me. When my time of service is done, I will not be a pile of ashes, but a vibrant, living entity that basks in the joys of the Creator's gratitude.

"To obey is better than sacrifice," said the Voice that sounds like many waters. "Do that which I call you to do and I will supply the energy. You will provide lasting warmth to thousands of people without being consumed. Come live forever in peace with Me."

The Swamp of Pain

It's not bad for you to think about your pain. In fact, you need to not only think about it, but fully experience it. Why? So, that you can move through it. If you don't move through it, it never goes away.

Pain is like a swamp with big bogs of thick, slimy mud. It's the kind of mud that tries to claim your boot with every footstep. Moving through that stuff is hard work. You have to maneuver yourself carefully, purposely, as you plot your course through unfamiliar territory. In addition, you must watch for alligators (people without scruples who hunt for vulnerability and take advantage), leeches (anything or anyone that sucks your blood to feed their need despite your desperate situation), mosquitoes (all those negative thoughts that continually itch), and snakes (people who seem to care but end up giving you poison).

Pain can be a confusing place where everything looks the same. It's hard to find your way through forests of towering reeds (spoken words). If you touch one on the edge, it can slice your skin and leave a stinging cut. Swamps also cause familiar sounds (like TV commercials, a dog's bark, or even your own voice) to become strange noises that randomly disturb your peace and make you want to bolt. It takes every fiber of your being not to panic and start sloshing and slashing your way to anywhere else but

where you are. You have learned in the past, though, that panic often results in going backwards instead of forward. Stay calm. Think slowly.

"Which way is forward?" you ask. The answer is, in whichever direction you carefully, purposefully, continue to progress. Just as a suggestion, since it's usually dark in the swamp, look up for the North Star. Point yourself in His direction and take it one step at a time. Some of the steps through pain are things like forgiveness, gratitude, acceptance, knowledge, change, and release. The types of steps are determined by whatever caused the pain swamp to form in your life. By the way, this swamp you find yourself in is NOT endless. Every swamp has an edge, a place where the mud ends and solid land begins. I know you are tired. Rest as often as you need to, not in futility, but to gather strength for the next step.

I know you want to be out of the pain swamp, right now. I wish I could snap my fingers and make it so for you. I can't. However, I do know one way to speed your progress. (At least it worked for me.) Rather than resist the pain, ignore it, or hate it, choose to make the pain your friend. When perceived as an enemy, pain is cruel and relentless. Like two boxers moving in circles around each other, those who fight with pain cannot move forward. When perceived as a friend, pain is a companion that will teach you the deepest secrets of the universe. It

will tenderize a tough, world-weary heart quicker than any other life experience. Your friend will also show you the shortest route to dry land. Whether you view it as friend or foe, pain will not leave you until you have taken every single step through it.

One last thought for this analogy... Most swamps are located near free-flowing bodies of water. You may be closer than you think to floating on rivers of peace toward oceans of joy. Keep on keeping on, my friend. Many people have successfully traversed this swamp – some more than once. Look for their trails and follow in their footsteps. The time will come when you will stand strong, looking back at your pain, and be thankful for its transforming affect on your life. For now, take one more step, then repeat.

Frequencies in Marriage

On the kitchen table in a perfect little house sits a large radio. The radio is mostly silver with a glass front over the frequency register. The radio has a speaker and two dials. One dial tunes the radio to a particular frequency and the other one controls the volume. When the volume button is turned all the way to the left, it shuts the radio off. For power, the radio can run on four "D" batteries or be plugged into a wall socket via an electrical cord. It's a good radio and has easily been able to receive the signals from variety of radio stations. The one station it is

tuned to the most is a local station with the call letters of WGMB. A variety of programs air every day on the local station, including the news, special events, and music. Most weeks the broadcast includes a drama or two that run in serial style for several months. This radio is a special receiving device compared to other radios - this radio has feelings. For example, the radio thoroughly enjoys the program selection that is transmitted from the local radio station. It particularly appreciates the music.

Receiving a signal from the local radio station is easy for the radio because the station has a tower that is state-of-the-art. It is high-tech and very powerful, easily capable of sending a message around the world. The Owner of the station is generous, loving, and very wise. He carefully makes programming selections that will bring the most benefit to His station and the ones who listen to it. Ironically, the Owner of the station also owns the perfect little house and the large radio. It is important to the Owner that both His radio and His station are operational at all times. He uses these two as an example for other radios and radio station companies. He also uses them to test the effectiveness of His programming.

To make sure everyone stays safe, the radio station occasionally does a test in order to ensure that if an emergency arises, everyone affected will know what

to do. The radio finds these tests to be a bit annoying, but is patient enough to wait through them so it can listen to music again. Every so often, usually in the middle of a great song, a real emergency does occur. In response, the station sends out a jarring signal accompanied by this statement: "This is a message of the Emergency Broadcast System. Please tune in." The radio is irritated that its song was interrupted, but it listens anyway. The emergency announcements are accompanied by huge power spikes. Sometimes the radio feels like the excess energy will cause its circuits to overload and POP! it will be destroyed. Consequently, the radio has coped by temporarily turning down its volume control until the announcement is over. Some weeks there are so many of these emergency situations, that the radio progressively turns the volume down until the radio shuts off completely.

The radio tower is programmed to test the feedback of energy from the radio, so when the radio turns down its volume, the tower transmits with more energy to assure the important message is received. This seems strange, but the tower is controlled by a complicated computer program inside the station with a prime directive to keep the energy flow balanced. If the radio is receiving less, the tower puts out more. The radio feels intruded upon when forced to receive (no matter how important the message), so sometimes in utter protest and a desire to survive, the radio shuts itself off. With a

total lack of energy flow from the radio, the tower's sensitive equipment and complex computer program is thrown into an endlessly looping routine where it feeds back on its own power. The radio could fix the feedback situation, but it is turned off, so the station Owner has to come to the station and debug the program. Then, He has to go to the perfect little house, turn the radio back on and adjust its volume.

If the Owner were not so loving and so patient, He would get frustrated with how often this situation of dysfunction occurs. In His wisdom, He sees that the radio and the station were made to perfectly interact with each other. The radio was made to receive and the station was made to transmit. The radio has an antenna and the radio station has a tower. The delicate balance of energy flow between these two sensing devices is not so difficult to maintain, as long as each is diligent in monitoring the energy levels and strives to maintain a balanced give and take interaction.

The Owner sees that the radio likes to be light-hearted and the emergency announcements are a drain on its energy. The radio prefers to run on batteries so that it is more mobile. However, when the emergency announcements occur, the radio needs to stay put and plug into the AC outlet so that it can get the unlimited energy supply from the local energy company (Heavenly Power Plant, Inc.). The radio thinks that it might get a power surge so

strong from the tower that its circuits will be blown. It doesn't know that the Owner made it to receive the most powerful energy surges of the universe and that whatever the tower puts out is nothing compared to that. In time, the radio will understand this.

The Owner sees that the station is so powerful that it unwittingly overwhelms the receivers, especially those in close proximity. The station sincerely desires to benefit all the listeners, particularly those who would hear the sounds that emanate from the radio in the perfect little house. The Owner is encouraging the station to learn how to transmit in frequencies that are not overwhelming to radios. He is teaching the station to adjust the transmission according to the receiving device and to be sensitive to each device's current state of receptivity. That seems impossible to the station, to fulfill the individual needs of so many, but it does not yet know that the complexity of its programming enables it to more than handle an infinite number of receivers. In time, the station will understand this.

Until the two elements grow individually and realize their potential as a team, the Owner suggests the following interaction parameters.

1. The station should do its best to fill the airwaves with the music the radio loves. Until the radio lives up to its full potential, the station should be selective

in its decisions about what constitutes an emergency that needs to be broadcast and those that can be taken to the Owner and solved there. The radio can handle drama, but too many emergencies cause the radio to feel overwhelmed with despair and inadequacy. The station needs to continue to send its extra energy to secondary receivers, especially the radios adorned with pink plastic cases.

2. The radio can turn down the volume when the energy flow from the tower is overwhelming, but turning itself completely off is never a solution. The radio can request a "time-out" so that it can switch from batteries (its own power) and plug into the wall socket (the Owner's power). The radio can then request the Owner's help in dealing appropriately with emergency situations. The radio needs to understand the damage it does to the station when it shuts down and causes a feedback loop. The station is burned internally by the excess energy and questions its value as a station because it no longer has its primary receiver. Besides, a radio without power is not of much use to the Owner or anyone else. Well, it makes a good paperweight, I guess.

3. The station must realize its role and the influence of others in the radio feeling the need to turn down the volume. The station has the supernatural ability to see through the glass front of the radio and see the frequency levels. If the frequency is getting too high, the station needs to lower its energy

output to safer levels. If the radio has had to turn down the volume, it must be willing to test the airwaves immediately and turn the volume back up as quickly as it can. The station can help the radio with this decision by playing some music.

4. Because He designed and built them both, the Owner has all the answers for the radio and the station. He should be consulted daily, especially if the energy flow is not balanced. Any other attempts at resolution will fall short compared to His solutions. He is the power source for both the radio and the station. He knows what He wants from each one and will relentlessly push them forward into growth so that His purpose and plan can be fulfilled through them.

P.S. God wants a message of love to be broadcast to radios and radio stations around the world. Wendy's tower can send that message to radio stations (women) everywhere. Women can then transmit that message to their husbands. Steve is an example to all men that they can amplify the message of love by the power of God and proclaim His message to anyone who has ears to hear. Yeah!

Leggo My Ego

George Patton attained the rank of a four-star general in World War II. Even though Patton never

lost a battle and was decorated with many medals, his ego wreaked havoc above and below him in the chain of command. He thought he *was* the army *and* the United States. His commitment to his lofty ideals and personal needs sometimes blinded him to the bigger picture. In one part of the movie about his life, some injured soldiers are walking beside a road as Patton's jeep rolls by. One soldier says, "There goes 'Blood and Glory.'" Another soldier replies, "Yeah, his glory and our blood." His soldiers obviously thought General Patton was driven by his ego rather than their welfare. Patton made decisions that made him look glorious, but at the price of increased human suffering.

Why did Patton strive for a glorious reputation? At some point in his life, he determined that he must be unique and, not only unique, but unequaled. He was fulfilling the definition of ego, which is, "*The self, especially as distinct from the world and other selves.*" Some people would rather not be distinct from the world or other people, but they are, nonetheless. Every person possesses an ego or is possessed by one. The ego determines what is "me."

I call you "you" because you are not me. What combined parts make me distinctly "me?" Some of what I am came to me through my genetics. Environmental situations influenced my perceptions of my identity as I grew from a child to an adult. Some parts of my ego were simply declared by my

parents, family, friends, teachers, classmates, enemies, the media, and anyone or anything else that spoke something about me within my hearing. My grandmother told me I look good in purple, so I often wore purple. My father told me I was gullible, but I thought he meant I ate a lot, so I often ate a lot. Teachers told me I was smart, so I was smart. The media told me I wasn't a supermodel, so I decided I was ugly. Of course, some of the things that make up my ego are ingrained in the moral fabric of humanity, such as being kind, generous, fair, able to tell right from wrong, and so on. My ego decided to align itself with morality, but some people choose to go against it so that they know they are unique. Ultimately, my ego was formed by choices, my own and those of others.

Your ego is a multi-layered filter through which you analyze your surroundings, your relationships, your capability, and your place in the world. Your ego even filters what you think about God, how you perceive His reality and in what ways, if any, you interact with Him.

Who you think you are is not necessarily who you are. Who you think you are may just be a product of influence and circumstance. To discover who you really are requires a peeling away of layers of misconceptions, lies, patterns, and conditioning. The top layers are the easiest to remove because they are the newest. The inner layers are stubborn and often painful to remove. Where the top layers

come off like the layers of an onion, the inner layers come off in bits like those irritating shells of hard-boiled eggs. For most of us our inner layers of ego are compacted and melded together like sedimentary rock. We don't even remember the words that formed those layers, but the pain they caused is experienced again as the layers are whittled away. Who undertakes and actually finishes such a process – the revealing of the inner self? Not many, and that is why discontent is rampant. Something is missing from our lives – a treasure we sense but cannot grasp.

The treasure hidden underneath all those layers of ego is the inner self. Like the contents of an egg, your inner self contains the seeds for all that you can become. This inner self is a steady spark of energy that is part of all the energy of the universe. Even though your energy is composed of the same energy of the universe, it is a unique part of that energy. Another way to think of it is that your inner self is like one piece of a giant multi-dimensional puzzle. Everything in our universe is a part of the puzzle. Your puzzle piece may be similar to the parts around you in shape or color, but what makes your inner self absolutely unique is that no other piece connects with the other puzzle pieces in the place or way that you do. Your inner self is unique and vital to the continuance of the universe. How useful is a puzzle with even one missing piece?

When someone insults or criticizes you, they are really insulting or criticizing your ego. They are evaluating you based on your choices and how others have influenced you. If I am a rebel, for example, people who are not rebellious will express their disapproval of my choices by trying to influence me to change. Any ego can be changed through dismantling and reconstruction. You have probably seen people dramatically change from one lifestyle to another, from being rebellious to compliant or vice versa. People can change their physical appearance, their emotional outlook, and their spiritual beliefs. These are all parts of their ego. The ego can even be like a chameleon, changing with the circumstances. Changing your ego is like changing into a new suit of clothes, like trying a new kind of life. It's really not a big deal to make changes to your ego. In fact, people who hold on stubbornly to one kind of ego rank low on the experiential scale of life compared to those who are willing to adjust, change, and experience new things. A flexible ego helps the inner self experience the many facets of life.

Ego becomes our enemy rather than our partner when it becomes conceited. People who think their shell is who they are and that who they are is superior compared to others possess a deluded ego. Superiority is a perception of the ego and not reality. Every person is vital to the universe, even if his or her role is comparatively a small one. The source of a conceited ego is rooted in inferiority and

insecurity. The inner self with such an ego would say, "I cannot let people see that who I am is inferior, so I will create a 'me' that is superior." The ego is delusional, living a lie that rigidly inhibits the inner self's ability to move and expand. Consider that the message of inferiority was expressed to these people at a time when they were vulnerable. Rather than addressing the lie of inferiority, they create a shell of superiority.

Not all egos consist of multiple layers of misconceptions. Some egos are composed of positive and affirming layers. Some would describe a collection of good layers as a "healthy self-esteem." Good ego layers are transparent, allowing the light of the inner self to show through. These layers have rainbow colors that freely interchange to bring specific colored light to any situation; yellow to brighten, blue to calm, red to excite, green to grow. The light of the inner self shines through these colors and positively influences situations.

No matter how good your ego layers are, however, you must never think that the layers are who you are. Who you are is your inner self. The ego layers cannot be counted on for stability for they are prone to change. Ego layers that have not expanded can become brittle and prone to damage. Old ego layers tend to decay and stick like rusty bolts on rusty screws. As an easily influenced part of our existence, ego is undependable. For example, is a

20-year-old ego the same as a 70-year-old ego? No. Choices and circumstances influence the ego to change. Therefore, to rely on your ego for validation or definition of who you are is not wise. The part of you to rely on as the true indicator of who you are is your inner self. The inner self is not like the ego.

The inner self is sacred and beyond reproach. The inner self is eternal and whatever is incomplete or immature within it will be fulfilled and established in the course of time. The inner self can wear many different ego outfits and remain unchanged in its essence. If the ego layers are flexible, the inner self is unrestricted. The unrestricted inner self grows in stature and expands in capability through experience. The inner self connects directly with the truth of the universe. The inner self recognizes and relishes its role in the puzzle of life, whether that role is great or small. Because the inner self can function independent of the ego filter, it easily recognizes the egos of others. The inner self is more understanding of the influence of ego on the behaviors of others. The inner self communicates with Creator and knows who He is. The inner self does not require the filter of the ego when interacting with God.

If the ego layers are hardened and thick, the person may not be able to connect to his or her inner self. Disconnection hinders the growth of the inner self. However, this lack of growth is temporary. If some people cannot peel away their ego in the course of a

lifetime on earth, their eternal existence will allow them the opportunity to do the work in another context. Whether the context is like heaven or hell, each restricted or hidden inner self will be encouraged to make progress to freedom and revelation. Why? Because we must all be as one. A puzzle with disconnected pieces does not make sense – it has low energy. All of our inner selves know on a deep level that we need each other. And we need all of us, not just some of us, to connect and generate energy on behalf of the whole. Egos think as separatists. Inner selves think as cooperatives.

So, how do you begin to crack the old ego shell and discover your inner self? Recognize that your ego is not who you are. Be willing to let your current ego go. Identify the words that have been spoken over you that should no longer define your existence and replace them with words of truth. If you must keep some semblance of an ego so that you can operate in your world, consider what layers you want to try on. Experiment with various physical, emotional, and spiritual states. People around you may think you are strange or going through some mid-life crisis, but they are not the ones to whom you must ultimately answer for how you spent your allotted time. They are on their own journey, not yours. The one who possesses a flexible ego can take hits from other egos without being adversely affected. The inner self clothed in a soft ego can love without

fear. Love is the source of all energy. The Light of love overcomes the darkness of fear.

Could it be that the universal truth of enlightenment consists of living in a state of connectivity without the shell of ego? Without a shell, we can really connect with others who also have no shells. That is unity. Energy from multiple streams flowing together without restriction or blockage is powerful beyond imagination. Until we accomplish that state of ultimate freedom, we can choose to wear flexible, positive, and translucent egos that enable the growth of our inner self.

Perhaps if George Patton had learned to alter his ego, applying the more positive aspects and discarding the negative, the war would have been won with less blood and more glory, for everyone.

Cocoon

It's so dark. I can't see.

No light. No sound.

Just silent darkness surrounding me.

I cannot move. I hardly breathe.

My thoughts are all I have in this place. They comfort me.

I never should have come here. I should have stayed the way I was.

I remember how it was. I was free.

I could move. I could eat.

My appetite was my only passion. Whatever I wanted was mine.

No hurry. No worry.

Yeah, those were the days. Those days are gone.

I feel so alone. No one knows I'm here.

No one cares. God, it's dark.

God? I thought I knew who He was.

I didn't know. He didn't show.

He could have kept me from this shell of a place, this God-forsaken place.

Where have You gone, O Mighty One?

All-knowing, All-seeing... do You know me – see me?

Silence. Typical.

I used to talk to Him. I thought I heard His voice.

He spoke not with words, but with wind, light, and swirls.

The wind rocked me to sleep. The light gave me heat.

With my eyes I saw the clouds paint His thoughts on the sky.
One day, He told me what to do. I did it.

Now, I cannot hear. Now, I cannot move.

God was there, but God is not here.

Why did He leave me? Why did He deceive me?

Teenage Wasteland

"You have to make your body know what your spirit knows."

At age 10, the child is compliant, cheerful, and cooperative. Children in a good environment are quick to forgive and have a positive outlook on life. About three years later, on one particular day, a switch is flipped and the child becomes a teenager. Teenagers hear, but rarely listen. Teenagers seek their own path, which means they often choose the opposite of what their parent's desire. They explore without thought of consequences the multiple paths of rebellion, moodiness, and selfishness.

Even if the parent's viewpoint is reasonable, the teenager must, by his or her nature, first examine the alternatives. As the teenage years progress,

patterns of behavior are formed. Only the diligent and persistent parent will have any impact on the formation of those patterns. Sometimes that persistence requires that the parent express "tough love," in direct opposition to the choices of their teenager. Not all of the patterns and choices of the teenager are bad, but good parents recognize when to give freedom and when to influence for change. Teenagers secretly feel like they are an adult and in equal standing with their parents, capable of making any decision despite their lack of experience. No matter what the teenager feels, though, until he or she comes of age and leaves the home, the parent is the ultimate authority. With this authority comes responsibility of assuring the continuance of the teenager's life. Even if the parent does everything possible to fulfill their responsibility, the choices of the teenager carry benefits or consequences, not only for the teenager, but often for the family, as well.

Your body is a teenager. It is the youngest of your three parts, namely, body, mind, and spirit. Until the age of 20, your body was compliant, cheerful, and cooperative. If it was not well cared for or suffered an injury, the young body regenerated quickly. After the age of 20, a switch is flipped and the body begins to degenerate. Neglect is more detrimental and recovery from injury takes longer. Your body thinks it is young, even when it is not. Your mind is like the parent. It can give the body

instructions. The body hears the instructions, but rarely listens. Your body often chooses a way of existing that is contrary to what you desire. For example, the American ideal says a human should be lean with a good complexion, strong muscles, perfect skin, silky hair, white teeth, and overall vitality. Your body is a teenager. It does not want to choose those things. Your body wants to sit on the couch rather than workout. Your body wants to eat junk food rather than healthy food. Your body resists trips to the dentist.

Your body can be rebellious, moody, and selfish. If it's your wedding day, your body will give you a zit on your nose as a present. On January 1st, your body will cooperate with your new health objectives and on January 2nd will mount an all-out rebellion. If you want your body to lose weight, it will quickly convince itself that you are starving it on purpose, and stubbornly hold on to those fat cell contents. Your body will hound you relentlessly to give it what it wants, no matter what the cost. You can argue with it, plead with it, even try to control it against its will, but the body will often win. Your body seems to be watching you for a moment of weakness, then it strikes.

Over time, the body forms its own patterns of behavior. If your body has affection for sweets, you will crave sweets. If your body enjoys the sedentary lifestyle, you will struggle to get your body *dressed* for exercise. Not to mention the extreme effort it

takes to start exercising and then actually finish. Even internally, your cells came with some genetic programming that predisposes characteristic functions of tissues and organs. If your parent had heart problems, for example, you are more likely to have heart problems compared to someone whose parent had a strong heart.

On behalf of the teenager, the parent examines a situation, determines the status and formulates appropriate adjustments. Only a diligent and persistent mind will have any impact on the patterns formed by the body. Sometimes those patterns were allowed because the mind was not tough and gave in too quickly. Perhaps the mind did not have the information it needed to formulate appropriate adjustments. So, the body got its way because the mind did not know any better.

Armed with accurate information, the mind will need to be persistent in convincing the body to change its harmful ways. This must be a loving action, not an antagonist one. It is never wise to incite rebellion. We must convince, counsel, cajole, and encourage our body to comply with our wishes.

Teenagers that make it through those transition years without much harm are usually the ones that are given the information they need before they need it. They are also the ones that are convinced they are loved. The same is true of your body.

Giving the body information involves a process of reprogramming cellular memory. Every cell of your body has instructions as to its function, but it also may have adjusted its function according to its predisposition or in response to stimuli. Repeated stimuli sets a pattern in the function of the cell. If the pattern is detrimental to the body, the pattern needs to be altered to a more positive function. The energy of your positive thoughts is the first step toward reprogramming your cells. If your thoughts say, "I am such a tub of lard." Your body will say, "Okay." Consider this alternative instruction, "You really do not need to store extra energy. I'll give you what you need; don't worry. Please release the extra energy." It's a totally different feeling. Your body could just as easily say, "Okay" to that message as it did the "stay fat" message. If you tell teenagers what you want, rather than what you don't want, their response is likely to be more positive. Do the same with your body.

Teenagers like to have fun and experience freedom, but they also need to learn and be responsible. Parents help their teen prepare for adulthood when the young person is allowed to participate in choices that affect his or her life. They thrive when their opinions are treated as worthy of consideration. Your body also has preferences and not all of those preferences are bad. For example, some bodies digest meat better than others. Some bodies do well on a totally vegetarian diet. Giving our specific body exactly what it needs to live longer and stronger can

be a cooperative exploration between the mind and body. The exploration requires communication between the body and mind. Regular exchanges of feedback from both parts speeds the recovery process and makes maintenance easier.

In too many homes, the parents are disconnected from their teens. Communication is almost non-existent and feedback is negative, at best. That can also happen between our minds and bodies. They are disconnected and cannot feel each other. If all the messaging has been coming from the body, and the body is calling the shots, the mind needs to not only receive the messages from the body, but also start sending messages that the body can understand. The mind must learn to speak the body's language. The body communicates distress through cravings, pain, and symptoms, such as lack of energy, indigestion, dry skin, and so on. If it is ignored, the body will increase the level of output. The pain gets more severe and symptoms spread into other areas. If its messages are continuously ignored or misinterpreted, the body will eventually shut down and stop communicating. The dysfunction is worse than when the body was screaming, but now the mind does not even know what is happening deep inside the body. Unless reversed, this situation leads to disease and death. Because the parent is older and hopefully wiser, it is easier for him or her to make the first steps toward reconnection.

Sometimes, parents and teens need help to reconnect and establish a loving relationship. They might go to counseling or enlist the help of a wise friend or pastor. The same holds true with our minds and bodies. Sometimes we need the help of health care professionals and natural health practitioners to inform our minds and assist our body in returning to a state of health.

Be aware that even if the mind is doing everything right, the body may still not comply with agreements. If the body remains rebellious, the mind may have to express “tough love” and be in direct opposition to the body. Resisting the craving for sweets, is a good example of how your mind must take authority over the body. The mind should determine why the craving exists and take steps to alleviate and remove it. Until that happens, total abstinence from sweets is the difficult, but a better choice for the sake of the body.

Even though your body depends on your mind to keep it alive, it thinks it can quite easily go on without your input. You know this is not true. You cannot let your body rule your existence. Your mind has been granted more power, the power of authority, over your body. With this authority comes the responsibility of preserving the body. If the body senses that you do not have its best interests at heart, such as working too long at a fast pace, it will mistrust your intentions and resist both negative

and positive input. Assure your body that it can rest, be adequately fed, and that you will care for it. Strongly counter any negative resistance from the body to good care with positive affirmations.

Where does your spirit come into all of this? Many a parent knows that circumstances arise when he or she is powerless. The phone rings while your teenager is out and it's the police. "There's been an accident," are the most frightful words. At times like these, the parent instinctively calls on a higher source for help. They reach out to a power that is beyond their own to affect change or give them clarity in the situation. This greater power is possessed by the One who receives prayers of gratitude when life is good and things turn out okay or who comforts them when life hurts and things are not okay. Your spirit holds a portion of that same power. Your mind can easily connect with your spirit when it needs more strength or endurance. Your spirit can counsel your mind, balancing its tendency to over-think with a measure of intuition. Often when the mind is stuck, the spirit sets it free. Even though the spirit is the most powerful of your parts, it is the least audible. The spirit speaks with a small, still voice. A quiet mind can hear it and pass a louder version of the message along to the body. (Bodies seem to be hard of hearing!) Of course, your spirit can also connect to the higher Source for help, just like a parent can. This is especially helpful when both mind and spirit have tried

everything to convince the body and its response is unsatisfactory.

Balance among your parts is the key to health. If any one of your parts has surged ahead and left your other two parts behind, the strong part needs to reach back and bring the other two into balance with it. If you know in your spirit how you want to live, you must make your body know what your spirit knows. The bridge between your spirit and your body is your mind. A healthy family acknowledges and celebrates the importance of every family member. Each person knows that the authority structure exists to guide, protect, and provide for survival and growth. Each person knows his or her role and is diligent in performing any required duties. Healthy families are a team effort. So it is with your body, mind, and spirit.

Your body is a teenager, but it will someday be transformed into an adult. Adulthood for the body is a state of harmony with the mind and spirit, health in every cell, and continual regeneration without degeneration. Your spirit knows all of this is true and that it can happen to you.

"You have to make your body know what your spirit knows."

Vacuum Cleaners

The Rose

I am a rose. One that is more beautiful than any of those we took pictures of in San Diego. I have delicate petals that splay out from the core of who I am. My colors are both subtle and vibrant. Like bees, a few people come to me and sample the sweetness within me. I give it without reservation. My leaves are a deep green, the color of the joy of life, darkened by its sorrows. My stalk is strong - it is my faith, which holds me upright.

You are the ground from which I grow. You are rich and dark and brown. Your depth goes to the core of the earth. You provide sustenance, in the form of nutrients. I drink from your stored waters. You give me a foundation, a place to start. You keep me stable in the storms of life. Without you, I would not be so beautiful. My ability to enjoy the sunshine is rooted in you.

With the eyes of an earthman, you look at me from below and see a long stem, filled with thorns. You see the underside of my leaves, darker than they appear from above. You see the bowl of supporting petals, but almost none of the unfolding. For 25 long years you have been providing, always giving,

doing all the preparation so that I can bloom again. You're tired of it. You think, "She should be like me. If she had to be me, she'd understand what it's like. She has no idea." You want me to be a provider - rich, deep, dark, and brown. After all, roses serve no practical purpose. Sometimes they are sold for profit, but mostly they just suck from the ground, reach for the heavens, and create multitudes of petals. What good is that?

And those thorns. Why did God make roses with thorns? In my case, you see the thorns as defects in my character. You dispassionately watch me slicing them off in an attempt to make myself less pokey for you. I have the scars to prove the reality of my painful attempts. I'm dismayed to see that each time I grow a little taller, another thorn appears along my stem. I wonder, "Can a rose be a rose without thorns?" Maybe the thorns are less defects than they are protection. Maybe they sprout so that no one will take advantage of the rose, thinking twice before trying to pull it out, thereby killing the whole plant. I'm not sure why He put thorns on roses. Must be a reason.

It is possible to hold a rose without getting pricked by a thorn. As a person, you don't often think that way. Rather than using fingertips, you grab on with your whole hand and squeeze. Ouch. Not only that, you take the biggest thorn (which is the particular behavior you are focused on at the moment) and stick it in your side - deep into the

tissue. The thorn breaks off and you walk around like that, always in pain because of the rose. You also keep inside all the old thorns you ever touched. The result is a painful, festering existence.

Now, lest you think I am saying you need to change, I am not. If you don't want to live with my rose, which apparently will always have thorns, that's okay. Just like God released me from church, I release you from the obligation of sustaining me. You're free to find your own pearl of great price. I'm not sure right now how I will live without you, or if I even can. Your blood runs in mine and I know a part of me, maybe all of me, will die without you. Even so, I am willing to try for the sake of not hurting you anymore. I may survive. Even if I don't, some people appreciate a rose even when it is dried.

However, I will tell you that without something beautiful growing in your soil, you will become fallow. Plants give back to the soil in a cleverly designed cycle of give and take. When the petals that you helped to form fall gently to the ground, they return to your depths, nourishing and replenishing you. It may seem like a small gift, but it is a gift, nonetheless.

As of last night, I refuse to ever see myself as only a stem of thorns. As long as I see me through earthman eyes, that's all I can see. I choose instead to look at myself from above. I'll keep working on

the thorns - leaving some and pruning others, as necessary. Perfection requires time and patience.

I'm sorry you don't like being dirt - even if you are life-giving dirt. You told me once I was an artist, well, you are a farmer. Farmers relish dirt and are mostly made of it. They are of the earth. You don't like what you are, it seems, because you resent the giving. It could be that you just don't like growing roses anymore. You could try pansies, or marigolds, or maybe some vegetables. They may only last for a season, but they sure are easier to deal with. Roses are challenging. Without understanding the nature of the rose and having a peaceful appreciation for its beauty, the effort to sustain it is futile and meaningless. You don't have to try anymore because I'm not going to take what you do not want to give.

The Earth

[Pull parts from the rose]

Gardens

Consider that our lives are like a garden. Each person has their own plot, with its unique configuration of plantings and mixtures of soils. Some people acquire, through birth or through circumstance, rocky soil that requires great strength and enduring patience to pull out the rocks so that

plants can flourish. Others have soil that is mostly clay, in which plants struggle to put down roots of depth, while others seem to have the perfect soil and growing healthy plants appears effortless. Whatever the soil, each must tend their plot in order to attain the goal of a plentiful harvest (a happy life). What a task it is to not only grow useful plants, but also to prevent the growth of weeds that choke the life out of the other plants. Those weeds appear without warning, borne on the wind of childhood, or sneaking in from under the ground. Wherever their source, every plot has them and they must be consistently destroyed if the garden is to not only survive, but bring benefit to the world.

Amending our soil, planting the best crops, tending our plants, destroying weeds – these are tasks that should keep us busy enough. Unfortunately, we have a tendency to gaze over into other gardens and analyze what is going on there, rather than taking care of our own plot. Sometimes, this gazing is invited or natural, as is usually the case with friends and family. We often, because of love, are motivated to help each other out. We swap advice, lend tools, and warn of sprouting weeds. Sometimes, however, the gazing is more like invasion than invitation.

Because of our marriage, my plot lies right next to yours and even, in spots, overlaps yours. I believe we have both benefited and (at times) suffered from

this proximity. We have grown many crops together that have had a healthy impact on ourselves and others. However, I have often found myself examining your weeds with a critical eye, almost to the point of using a microscope in order to expose the intricate details of the erroneous plant. While in this process of examination, I was neglecting my own plot and there were weeds of greater insidiousness growing beneath me as my attentions were focused elsewhere. When I would point out to you the weed growing in your plot, I was not usually speaking out of love, but out of judgment. Rather than desiring to protect your healthy plants, I was fearful that your weed would infect my garden. Or worse, I was belittling your ability to garden. So, while I was judging you, the weeds in me were choking my beautiful plants.

Now, having said this, I want you to know that I have given God the full reign over my garden. He can, because I said He could, plant whatever He wants, pull out whatever He wants, even rototill my soil, if that is what He thinks is best. He and I collaborate on my plot. Most of the time, He lets me do the work but He gives me direction and occasionally does the tasks that are beyond my capacity to do. He is quite helpful to me because He is a master gardener (eons of experience, I suppose).

You, on the other hand, have chosen to take care of your own garden. I have admired how well you tend

it. Seriously, you amaze me with the variety of crops you choose to grow and how hard you work to keep it all going. I know that having your plot intermingle with mine these past 20 years has caused you even more work. That isn't fair and I have tried harder recently to not cause you this extra effort and even to lessen your workload where possible. I believe I am only able to do this because God is doing some major work on my plot.

So, what is this all about? I'll tell you now. Just as my gazing inappropriately into your garden caused weeds to grow in mine, you have been using the microscope on Dustin's plot. Hear me out! He was born with a certain kind of soil, with the seeds of weeds already there, in some cases, lying dormant until adulthood. You and I both know that he struggles to rid himself of the weeds he can see. We also know that all people have things in their life of which they have no conscious knowledge. Dustin has chosen to let God work on him, too, and I believe that in time, God will make him into something beautiful. It might take 30 more years, but that is between him and God. You are not the gardener of his plot. By examining the weeds in his life and picking them apart and making judgment calls about how he should or should not be working his land, giant weeds are growing beneath your own plot. The roots are small at first, but with time and a generous watering (of dark thoughts and hurtful words), the roots form a taproot. From there, the

tentacles of sucker roots sprout and the entire plot is eventually engulfed in weeds rather than helpful plants.

I admit that I, too, am guilty of doing this to him. I indulged my odious tendency to gaze into other plots near me and analyze their choices. I felt the resentment building in my heart towards my brother, as I superimposed myself as his gardener. The voracious weed that sprouted formed a barrier between him and me – I could feel its stranglehold on me and I didn't like it. I decided to kill the weed. How? I did nothing about his weeds. I just looked at my own plot, dug down to the root of bitterness, and pulled it out with the tool of forgiveness. I decided to let God be his gardener and to just love him, weeds and all. That horrible weed in my heart did die and I now have a right relationship with my brother. What a relief! Honestly, I have done the same thing in my relationship with you. I'm just going to love you and help you from now on – no more examinations and judgments. No one appointed me as judge and jury over you. I am not your gardener and it's about time I realized it.

Look into your heart and see if you can discover why Dustin bothers you so. There must be a reason, but whatever it is, I encourage you to let it go. You have demonstrated to me a million times your desire to bring good, not harm, to all living things in your life. Because they live, they are precious and worthy of many demonstrations of their value. Think of how

you show the foxes and raccoons their value. You do what is best for them, which includes letting them be wild even as you do what you can to ensure their survival. Part of their existence is up to them (and God) – it is out of your control. Where you do interact with them is where you have control and the greatest possibility of influencing them for the better. Parts of Dustin’s life are out of your control and stewing about them, complaining about them, cursing them, and so on, is a total waste of your time and effort. Truth be known, those actions are more like poison than balm. However, when you are interacting with him, you do have control. Your mom says you can attract more flies with honey than with vinegar. You can do what is best for Dustin in those times you are together, but treating him like an unworthy creature is not going to bring about the positive changes you desire. He looks up to you, admires you, and even fears you. He has tried to please you, but always falls short. So, he has decided to focus on his own plot and stay out of your way. He has also tried not to get flustered by your scrutiny of his life. It’s your choice what you do, and I am not going to examine your choice. At the very least, I would lovingly suggest that you tend your own garden and when your gaze falls on his plot, try to see the flowers rather than the weeds.

Winter of Relationships

What is winter like in a relationship? I don't really know, except to take examples from nature. Let's take a tree - a catalpa tree - as a symbol.

All the leaves have fallen off. To me, the leaves are the expectations that we have about each other. They were what absorbed the sunshine and helped the tree to keep living, but they should now be abandoned. If they don't fall off, the tree will not become dormant. Let the expectations go or we are doomed to keep pumping our life's blood into things that are dead already. We'll run out of blood.

The sap isn't flowing anymore. The sap could represent the fulfillment of needs. Without the sap, nutrients don't flow to the leaves, but that's okay because the leaves are gone. If the sap were to keep flowing, the winter cold would freeze it and cause the trunk to split. For this winter-time, we should stop striving to fulfill each other's needs in totality. For awhile, let's become more independent and see what it is like to meet our own needs. Later, it will be a joy when the other meets a need, an unexpected fulfillment.

The tree is dormant and is not trying to grow. There is no effort to become something different than what it is. The roots are not expanding, the branches are not reaching further than they have - the entire system is quiet and still. For us, I think this means we stop talking about our relationship (how we were before or how we hope to be in the spring), other than to remind each other of the winter conditions. The sun might start to shine and

the weather warm, but if it is still January, we know there is no reason to think that winter is over. We just need to be quiet with each other, foster peace and tranquility, avoid agitation and alteration. Winter is not the time for reconstructive surgery.

The tree may choose to kill some branches in order to ensure the survival of the main tree.

Branches represent habits, established routines, attitudes and behaviors. Branches form over time and become stronger every year they live. Some should be kept, others must die. This could be a time to evaluate what we do and only keep those branches that are contributing to our mutual survival. This evaluation, however, must be done individually. I am not going to tell you what branches to eliminate from your part of the tree and you do not tell me about mine. We'll have to trust each other's ability and willingness to honestly evaluate ourselves and respond accordingly.

The tree stands tall and strong against the fiercest winter winds.

We must both be committed to seeing the spring. Accepting the cold of winter, but being strong in our commitment. Neither of us will sabotage the other's attempts or potential to live a full and abundant life.

The seed pods hold the future. This is the most mysterious part of this analogy. What is our future? What do those seeds hold for us? Normally, the seeds would represent children, that part of us that continues after we have died. What will we leave as a legacy, given the fact that the dream of children is

now but a shadow in the clouds? We still have time to make a huge difference in this world. I have always believed in our combined potential to do good unto others. Sure, we can do it separately, but our results would multiply exponentially if we could collaborate. What do those seedpods hold?

The tree may need help from outside sources.

We should have wrapped the trunk of that little honey locust tree, but we didn't and it mostly died. It may be uncomfortable to have another person get close enough to wrap the trunk, but in the long run, it benefits the tree. The tree itself may not know it needs help, but someone from the outside can see that it does. If their efforts, their loving efforts, give the tree more chances to live, why not do it? More wisdom exists than that within our own minds.

Cooking Your Life

A life purpose is like a recipe. First, we have to decide what it is we are cooking and gather all the ingredients. We need a kitchen equipped with the appliances, dishes, and tools necessary to complete the task. Once all that is ready, we've got to give it our best shot, learn what works and what doesn't, then practice until we get it the way we like it best. Then comes the best part – sharing the delicious fruits of our labors with others while enjoying it ourselves.

It is possible for two people to have separate dreams while maintaining a relationship. Both can both be cooks with their own recipes in the same kitchen.

One person makes the main dish while the other whips up the salad! They can work on the dessert together. They each do their best not to be messy. They will be dedicated to cleaning up their own part of the kitchen, but if one is making a particularly complicated recipe, the other chef may need to help them tidy up their side.

We are all cooks, hoping to find that perfect recipe that we alone are best at making. Cooking a life brings some challenges. We'll probably make mistakes and not everyone will like what we cook, but overall it is the activity of cooking that brings us the most joy. We were made to create. So, what recipe are *you* going to make? Or shall I ask, "What's cookin', good lookin'?!!!!!"

The Maze

I saw a vision during my SRI session today with Barb. Here is how the session went:

I lay down on the table, closed my eyes and listened to her voice. She said, "Imagine infinite space in front of you, infinite space behind you... infinite space below you and infinite space above you." Immediately, I saw myself floating in the cosmos,

just like I did in the vision with the mountain, lightning bolt, and the healing of the earth. I was free floating in space. Then, she asked me to pinpoint the pain in my lower back (it had been bothering me for days, and for most of my adult life). She asked me to determine a word for that pain. The word that came to me was "lost." As soon as I said the word, I saw myself in a dark corridor feeling the walls for a corner so I would know where to go next. I could see myself, but I could not see anything else. The walls were black. The ceiling and floor were black. I did not know the way out. I was lost in what I perceived to be a maze. When I told Barb it was a maze with walls, she asked me what was on the other side of the wall. A window appeared to my right and I saw through the glass a beautiful scene of blue sky, white fluffy clouds, and green grass. I tried to open the window in an attempt to get through to the other side, but it would not open. Barb asked if I could get to the other side, which was interesting since I had just been trying the window to do just that. Next, I cupped my hand and pressed the tips of my fingers into the wall. It was soft like clay. At that moment, Barb told me the wall was soft. It was uncanny how I would see something and then she would say it. I began to dig handfuls of the wall out. The surface of the wall was black, but the interior of the wall was a brownish-gray. Eventually, I made an opening large enough to get my body through. I stood on the grass, then turned to face the maze. As I watched, the ceiling of the maze disappeared revealing that

beautiful blue sky. Then, the wall I had dug through fell down. Barb said, "The walls can come down." The rest of the walls fell down like dominos falling upon each other and then the entire structure disappeared into the original cosmic space I had been floating in. The maze was no more. I laughed! Then, I opened my teary eyes.

As Barb and I talked about what happened, I realized that I had built that maze myself as a way of coping with my life. She told me that the maze was not wrong, but exactly what I needed at that time to survive. When something happened that I could not predict or that did not go as I planned, I would run into a wall and then make another opening. That opening would lead to another corridor that I felt my way along until something else happened and I ran into another dead end. The process would repeat. After a while, though, the maze I built became so complicated that I could no longer find my way around in it. I felt lost and alone. The window represents my intuitive knowledge that a world – another way of perceiving – was out there. I would gaze out that window in my mind's eye, longing to be in that beautiful, peaceful world, but not knowing how to get out of my maze.

The vision reminds me of the other vision I had. The brown of the clay was the same as the brown of the swirling cloud. The blue sky with clouds is the same

as the cleansing flow that emanated from the spot where I touched the atmosphere with my finger. Of course, the cosmos and my sense of peace while free-floating in space were the same.

We build mazes, prisons, and traps for ourselves when we do not feel safe. We feel the necessity to build them because we perceive danger in free-floating. We fear falling, or flying, without a safety net. In truth, our self-made fortresses offer no safety at all. The walls are soft, after all. Even a bug could dig through them, so our worst enemies (fears) easily invade our space. Eventually, they fill the space, creating the black coating on the walls, ceilings, and floors.

I believe God installs the windows in prison walls. He whispers to us of the wonders in the great beyond. He calls us to be brave, feeling compassion for us as we shiver in the dark corners of our minds. When we are ready for the walls to fall down, He sends us people, ideas, and new ways of thinking. He illuminates our illusions. He hands us the key to the lock, but we are the ones who must provide the power of decision to insert and turn the key. Then, we must push open the heavy door in order to experience our freedom. That freedom was a gift given at our birth. We need only reclaim it.

So, I am alive again and tentatively trying out my spirit wings for flight. Without restriction and wrapped securely in the pure essence of love that

permeates every molecule of the cosmos, nothing can stop me – except for me! I’m choosing not to restrict myself. The possibilities are endless! What shall I do now?!!!

Breathing Liquid Oxygen

Every day, people around the world drive cars, paint buildings, spray chemicals, smoke cigarettes, burn trash, apply glues, produce products, and do thousands of other things that spew pollution into the atmosphere. The air most people breathe contains toxic substances. We think what we cannot see is not hurting us, but every breath draws the invisible toxins deep into our bodies. Spiritually, we can also generate and breathe in toxins. Toxins to the spirit are things like envy, jealousy, selfishness, cruelty, and disbelief. These also are deadly things we cannot see. The Bible would call a spiritual toxin “sin.” Sin occurs when we do something outside the context of love.

Did you ever see the movie, "The Abyss?" In one part of the movie, the scientists must fill up a diving suit with pure liquid oxygen in order to accomplish a particular underwater task that would save their lives. The man in the suit has to breathe the liquid into his lungs. It was so uncomfortable for him at first and he struggled against the fear of dying - every experience up to that point told him he would die if he inhaled liquid. But, once he did it, he felt

completely comfortable and capable of carrying out the task.

The water of the Spirit of God is living water. Living water is the essence of pure love. We can drink it into our spirits and be cleansed from all the toxic emotions inside. The same thing happens in our bodies when we drink purified water – the water cleanses us internally. The choice about what enters our being is up to us. We have physical and spiritual air and water from which to choose.

So many people think breathing toxic air is better than breathing living water. They don't know any better because that's all they have known... until they interact with a real living-water-breather. Watching someone breathe liquid is strange to them at first, but then they start to wonder what it would be like to breathe that way. What would it be like to live without needing to breathe in or cough out toxins (sin)?

To live in the Spirit, we must breathe it in, even though we fear the loss of our old life. If we choose not to breathe it, we will be less effective in fulfilling God's purpose for our lives. And, we will be more susceptible to the ravages of both physical and spiritual toxins.

Complete Healing

A Part of My Personal Story....

At what point can the source of emotional pain be identified? When was the first time the spirit of a child was embarrassed, intimidated, or even crushed? What were the long-term consequences of those events? We all walk around with emotional scars and some people even have wounds that are still bleeding. I believe our emotional pain manifests itself in our physical bodies, especially over time. My wounds were many and, after 42 years, are finally being resolved one by one. I would like to share with you how pain from my past has affected my health.

The little girl that I was experienced abuse physically, mentally, and sexually. Like many parents, my parents loved their children the only way they knew how, but they were not aware of how their actions would shape our psychological stability.

Punishment and discipline are two different things. Punishment is a penalty for wrongdoing whereas discipline is training expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior, especially training that produces moral or mental improvement. Punishment can change behavior, but it damages the mind and spirit. As a result of the being punished more than disciplined, I constantly pursued perfection in order to avoid punishment. If I did something wrong (whether it be a childish mistake or willful disobedience), I would be sent to my room to

wait for my father to come and spank me with his belt. My mom often had to stand between him and me or my siblings to stop it from going too far. After he finished, he would leave the room, often with a warning for worse if I did such a thing again. I feared my father and remember only two things positive about him in my childhood. One was that he bought me a guitar and the other is that he taught me how to tie my shoes. Other than that, I remember things like him hitting my hand with a fork at the table, the frequent spankings, being criticized and dominated, and lastly the sexual encounters. Perhaps there were other positive experiences, but trauma often overshadows the good.

My sister, Lisa, was 11 months younger than myself. When I was almost ten years old and she had just turned eight, she was hit by a car and died. My parents divorced shortly after that. The next year, my mother remarried a Christian man and I was rescued from the unhealthy, even dangerous, interactions with my father.

From there, I grew up to be a "nice" girl, driven to succeed and yet often sabotaging my success because I felt unworthy of it. Criticism was like a knife in my heart and I often felt inadequate. This inadequacy has resulted in my shoulders rotating forward and also upward toward my head in a defensive posture. Imagine a boxer with his fists before him, his shoulders forward and raised. That

is what I looked like all the time. I was not a fighter, though. I learned early that resistance to force is futile. The sooner I gave in, the sooner it would be over.

I invited Jesus into my heart when I was in sixth grade, but as a teenager I fell away from the goodness of my faith and explored the dark side for three years. During a Bible study presented by the assistant volleyball coach, I rededicated my life to the Lord and began to see life from a better perspective. When one part of us, whether it be the body, mind, or spirit, can experience the beginnings of healing, the other parts have a much better chance to be well again. So, my spirit was the first part of me to start on the path to wellness.

Even though my spirit was better, my mind (emotions and will) was still broken. Every day, my mind replayed the scenes from the sexual abuse. The words of criticism, whether remembered or just felt, rang in my mind and I battled against them continually. My body began to manifest the internal turmoil I was experiencing. I began to put on weight at puberty, struggled with acne, and had recurring lower back injuries. Certainly, some of those symptoms were a result of diet and genetics, but I believe they either began or were accelerated by the emotional unrest. For example, I would attempt to lose weight and would succeed until I looked in the mirror and saw I was starting to look pretty.

Subconsciously, something would click in my brain and I would start doing the opposite of what I had been doing to lose weight until I was "fat" again. I did not feel like I deserved to be beautiful and I was afraid of being attractive to men. This pattern of weight fluctuation wreaked havoc with my metabolism.

I had been so controlled as a child that I was very resistant to control as an adult. It affected my choices in many areas, including my career. I would work several jobs as part of my own business so that I would not have to stay in any one place for an extended period of time. This resistance to control also affected my marriage. Thank God I am married to a loyal man. These control issues, I believe, were directly related to my lower back pain. Whenever I felt controlled, my back would become weak. If it got really bad, the muscles would spasm and I would "check out" of the controlling situations by laying flat on my back for days.

Never being able to conceive children is due in part to my emotional state. Why would I bring children into the world if they had to be exposed to such pain? I always said I wanted to be a mom, but in the depths of my heart, I feared it. That fear affected my hormones and reproductive organs. I developed hypothyroidism and polycystic ovarian syndrome. I went to a fertility specialist who put me on fertility drugs. In three months I gained 30 pounds. I stopped that.

As a teenager, I was promiscuous, but as a wife, I was uninterested in sexual intimacy. Even though that paradox is explained in many psychology texts, it does not help the person who struggles with the condition. My emotional instability and hormone imbalance interfered with libido.

Tension and stress are so detrimental to health. My desire to be liked and considered "good" drove me to over commit in every area of my life, especially church endeavors. I worked sacrificially for more than fifteen years pastoring in youth ministry, leading the music team, preparing the weekly bulletin, coordinating missions trips, volunteering as the church secretary three days a week, and holding a position of leadership on the church board. That was in addition to working my jobs, running my computer business, and being a wife. It was crazy, but I had to prove I was worthy to live and make sure I was not invisible. After so many years of continual sacrifice, my body started to develop and exhibit a vast array of negative symptoms that indicated internal breakdown. I did not stop. I kept pushing myself to the limit.

At about this same time, my mom had an emotional breakdown and was suicidal. She went into the psychiatric hospital. Emotionally, she was dealing with many of the same issues I was. It was understandable given that she was my father's wife

for twelve years and had lost a child. She also had the same physical manifestations as I did (plus 20 years), but the psychiatrists just gave her drugs. Because of our common struggles and desiring that I not end up in total breakdown, she encouraged me to seek counseling. I did as she suggested and thus began my path to emotional healing.

The therapist was a Christian woman who had learned techniques for working through emotional trauma. I will always remember one exercise she did with me because it released me from constantly replaying the sexual abuse scenes. One week, she had me write down my memories of the events and skip several lines between phrases. These were the memories that I formed as a child and were from the child's perspective. The next week, she had me write down how each phrase made me feel, such as afraid, confused, submissive, guilty, etc. The third week, she had me write my perspective on each phrase as an adult. I wrote things like, "He had no right to do that to me," and "I did nothing wrong." That simple exercise stopped the playbacks. What a relief.

Even though I was experiencing relief in some areas, the counseling was opening doors in my heart that had been long closed. I was drowning in the depths of depression. Contributing to the gloom was my chronic struggle with constipation. My gastrointestinal tract was not functioning properly. My digestive organs were not breaking down my

foods, so I was not absorbing nutrients. Then, my colon was spastic and clogged, so the toxins built up in my body. My liver also was struggling due to the amount of painkillers I needed to take to alleviate my body pains and daily headaches. Food would make me nauseous, so I was eating less than 600 calories per day. You would think I would lose weight, but I did not. My body was clogged and filling up. I tried to get help from my doctor, but she told me to "come back when it gets worse."

Something had to change in order for me to live. The first thing that happened is that God "released" me from church. I know it was God because that is the last solution I would have chosen. He thanked me for my sacrifice, but asked for my obedience. He gave me one directive, which was "Love your husband." So, I went home. I was so lost without my church work. I did not know who I was and I began to wonder who God was. I call this my time of "spiritual vertigo." I was truly spinning. The result of that time, even though it was scary and lonely, is that the slate of my spirit was wiped clean of false doctrines and notions about truth that I had formed when I was young and immature. My faith had become religion and church had become my god. What was initially simple, i.e., God is love, became complicated through theology, doctrine and the ideas of man. I had turned my back on God, but He never turned His back on me. He waited patiently and then one day I realized that God is the

one who had answered all of my prayers and done so many miracles in my life. I decided to give Him another chance. Now, my faith is simple and God is my God.

My emotions were healing. My spirit was healing. All that remained for me to be well was that my body needed healing. I was in constant pain, had no energy, and was unable to work or even do laundry. In response to a fervent prayer about my body, God told me to "eat less meat and no sugar." I did that and went into an immediate detox. Still, I knew I felt better. Then, I met a natural health nutritionist who taught me about my body and how to give it what it needs to rebuild and be well. I applied her concepts and not only lost weight (43 pounds so far!), but also saw the majority of my symptoms go away. After over 40 years of struggle, pain, and heartache, I had my life back!

My heart is full of gratitude first to God for His faithfulness and unending love for me. Next, I so appreciate my husband who has stayed with me these 25 years, caring for me, encouraging me, and enduring my pain as though it were his own. Then, I am surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who lift me up with their compassion and acts of kindness. They include my mom and dad (yes, I have forgiven and made peace with my father), my step-dad (whom I call "Dad"), my siblings and their families, my husband's family, my counselor, my pastors, my church family, and all of my dear

friends. We certainly were not made to be islands, but to live in community with each other. We cannot hope to survive without God and other people.

Am I completely well? Not quite, but I am so close! I feel balanced in my body, mind, and spirit. Even though it has been a hard road, I know that my struggles have deepened my empathy for others who suffer. I believe it is possible to be completely healed in all our parts, even before we get to heaven. This message of love and wholeness resounds within my heart on behalf of people who are struggling with situations as bad or even worse than mine. If I can be well, so can whoever is reading these words. God wants to help you and save you, but you have to make the choices and do the actions.

In high school, I bought a polished rock with this saying painted on its surface: "Live well, laugh often, love much." Live well in your body. Laugh often with your mind and emotions. Love much with your spirit. Because of my experiences, I can now do all of three.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Teresa Smith had been a teacher and writer for over twenty years when her chronic health issues became unbearable. She had no energy to work and every day was filled with pain. Teresa's doctors did not offer viable solutions, so she found answers for herself. Through the application of sound health concepts, Teresa has recovered her vitality. She lives without pain and now desires to share the hope of healing with others who are suffering. Teresa manages multiple projects as President of 3 Thirds, Inc. To learn more about 3 Thirds, visit www.3Thirds.com. You can contact Teresa via email at Teresa@3Thirds.com.

RESOURCES

We hope this book has been helpful and informative. Don't stop now! Continue to learn about health and you will be rewarded with it. Here are some good books and websites to help you on your quest for knowledge.

Books

Websites