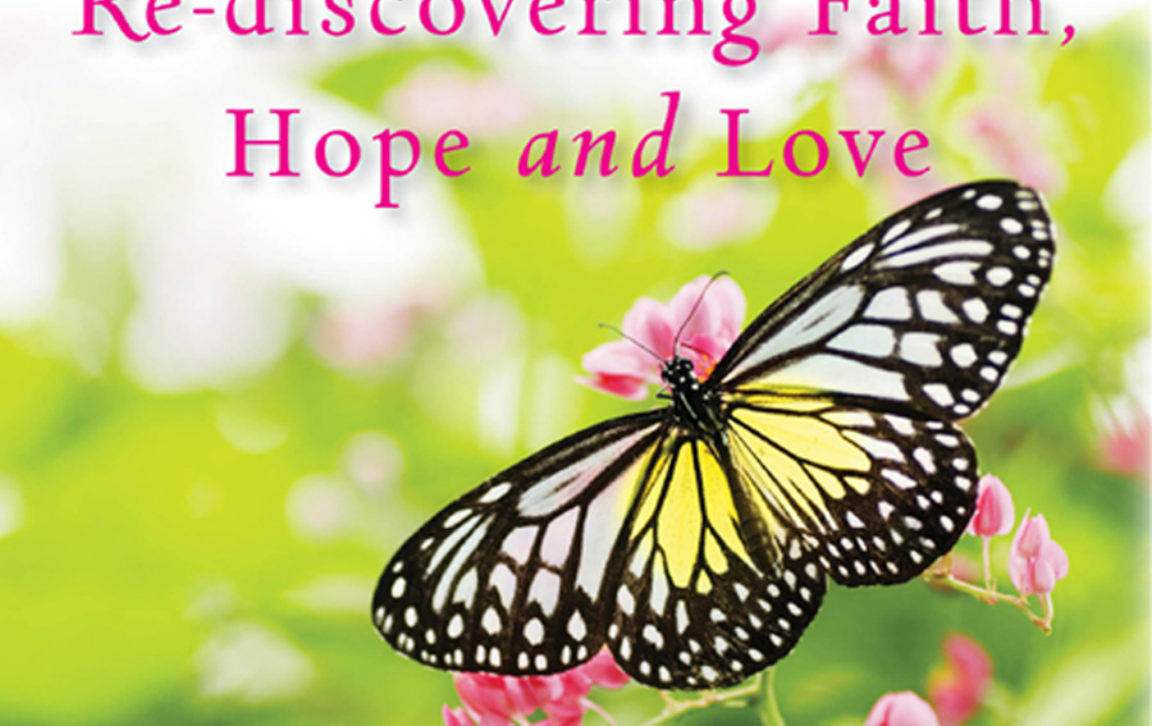
The Power of Hope:

7 Inspirational Stories *of* People Re-discovering Faith, Hope *and* Love



The Power of Hope

"Life is difficult" wrote a best-selling author. And he was right. Life often tests our hope and faith with its challenges and difficulties. But the stories you're about to read are the perfect antidote. They dramatically show how people just like you not only overcame illness and hardships but deepened their faith in the process.

You'll meet a woman who was close to despair because of her depression but found healing in both mind and spirit, mothers who found the strength to carry on in the face of staggering losses and a soldier wounded in Iraq who rose above his suffering and found his true calling. Their stories are sure to move and inspire you.

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Loving Life Enough

FEW PARENTS SUFFER THROUGH THE LOSS OF THREE CHILDREN. MARY MANACHI REFLECTS ON THE SOURCE OF HER STRENGTH.

By Mary Manachi, West Paterson, New Jersey

We had just cut the watermelons at a Sunday-school picnic and I was laughing at the kids' antics—pretending to play harmonicas as they munched on the sweet pink slices, using the rinds to make big green grins, seeing who could spit seeds the farthest. When I felt the woman's hand on my arm and saw her sympathetic, questioning eyes, I knew what she would say before she even spoke.

"You seem so happy. Really happy. How do you do it after … after all that's happened to you?"

Again and again people ask me that same question—people who know that Louis and I had three children born with the blood disorder called Cooley's anemia. First Mary Lou, then Rosemary, then George. One after the other, they were born with it, lived with it and died of it.

How can I be happy after all that's happened? Well…

Mary Lou was born in 1955. She was our second child, coming two years after our strong and healthy daughter Ann. At first I had thought Mary Lou's pale skin meant she took after my side of the family. Louis and I are both of Mediterranean descent, but he's the one with the olive complexion. When I took her to the pediatrician for her

three-month's checkup, he asked me to set up an appointment for testing. "She seems to be anemic," he told me.

It didn't sound too bad; lots of people have anemia. But after Mary Lou was tested at Cornell Medical Center in New York City, the doctor called Louis and me in for a consultation.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this," the doctor said. "Your baby has *thalassemia major*." he explained that this is commonly known as Cooley's anemia, named after the doctor who identified it. A rare genetic blood disorder, it prevents the body from manufacturing hemoglobin, which carries oxygen from the lungs to body tissues and muscles.

"It mainly affects people of Mediterranean heritage," he told us. He also said that Cornell Medical Center was headquarters for the Harold Weill Clinic, which specializes in treating children with blood diseases. Mary Lou would have to go there every two weeks for a blood transfusion.

From then on I drove my daughter into New York City from New Jersey regularly. After a few months she seemed to get used to it. And she had company; 19 other children were being treated there for the same illness.

Louis and I wanted more children, but now we wondered.

"Don't worry," our doctor assured us, "it is rare that this happens in a family twice."

Rosemary was born in 1959. She looked fine—bright-blue eyes and fine brown hair like Mary Lou's. But just to be certain, I took her to the clinic to be examined. The doctors were noncommittal. Weeks went by. One day she would seem perfectly normal, the next her head would

be sweating. The pattern had been the same with Mary Lou. Then, when she was six months old, the doctor gently told me that Rosemary would also need regular blood transfusions.

So now I was driving two little girls into the city. It was easy to see how much Mary Lou and Rosemary depended on the transfusions. As the time for the treatment neared, they tired easily and became irritable. But after their hospital visit—grueling as it was—they seemed fine. In the meantime, Louis and I tried to give our three daughters a normal life, with music lessons, Monopoly games and plenty of family outings.

In 1961 our son, George, was born. We had yearned for a boy and we had been assured that the chances of our having another child with the same affliction were nil.

But from the first moment I held my little boy in my arms, I knew. Deep down, I knew. Soon I was taking George into New York along with two-year-old Rosemary and six-year-old Mary Lou.

Even so, Louis and I were grateful for our four lovely children. The blood transfusions simply became a regular part of our lives, and we went on hoping that a medical breakthrough would make them unnecessary. Meanwhile we were busy with the usual family things—school activities and vacations. The years passed. Then came our shocking discovery.

One morning while I was waiting at the hospital, a mother of one of the other children quietly handed me a clipping from *The New York Times* headlined "Fatal Blood Disorder." It was about children coming to that very clinic. One sentence blazed out at me: "They usually die before

they are 20 years old."

I couldn't believe it. Our doctor had never been that specific. I took the clipping to him. "Is it true?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, sighing. "I'm afraid it is."

There were no drugs, no treatments, no known medical help to prevent my children's death at a young age.

For weeks Louis and I lived in a daze. His reaction was to say little and concentrate on his work as a garment designer. Mine was to cry whenever I was alone.

The children? We couldn't bring ourselves to discuss it with them, though I knew they were aware of the seriousness of their condition from talking with the other patients during their hospital visits. And then came one of those small moments that can change the way you see things.

I had walked into 11-year-old Rosemary's room one evening and found her making a jeweled butterfly pin. She was already selling her work at craft shows.

"How beautiful," I said, as I watched her set a rhinestone.

"Thanks, Mom," she said. "I'm going to earn all I can for college."

She was planning on college?

I cleared my throat. "Um…what are you planning to study?"

She looked up, eyes shining. "Nursing, Mom. I want to be like those nice women at the hospital who help me."

She turned back to her work and I walked slowly out of the room, trying to take it all in. Rosemary was not thinking about death; she was focusing on life.

At Thanksgiving one of her teachers phoned me. The class had been asked to write about what they were most thankful for. The answers were the usual ones about home, parents and food. The teacher's voice trembled. "I thought you would like to hear Rosemary's answer: 'I thank God for my good health.'"

Good health? How could she write that? And then I remembered the other children Rosemary saw on her hospital visits, the ones with amputations or suffering from cancer. But Rosemary could walk…go to school…skip rope.

Rosemary had filled our house with Scripture plaques that she made. In her own room she had hung the one that read "This is the day which the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."

That Thanksgiving I looked around me. I saw that our house was not a house of shadows and sorrow; our children filled it with cheerfulness and bustling activity. Mary Lou's piano music rang through the rooms as she practiced for a recital. Rosemary busily made jewelry and plaques. Little George had an extensive rock collection; he was already talking about becoming a geologist. Slowly I began to see that my children, all of them, were rejoicing in life.

On July 4, 1969, Rosemary, then 12, was in the hospital with a minor cardiac problem, a side effect of Cooley's. "You seem better, honey," I said as I leaned down to kiss her good-bye. "I'll be back in the morning."

The telephone rang just after I got home. Rosemary was gone. "Peacefully," the nurse said.

Mary Lou and George had known their lives would be short, but with Rosemary gone they were forced to

face that fact head-on. Mary Lou, four years older than Rosemary, carefully tended her sister's grave. I knew she must have been contemplating her own death. And yet, I watched as she took up the business of her life with a new vitality. She began making the honor roll in high school and was very popular. And she made a suggestion that gave new direction to our lives.

"Mom," she said, "when I told the kids at the clinic about our vacation to the Poconos, most of them said they had never been to a place like that. Could we find a way to take them with us next time?"

"Of course we can," I said, hugging her. Suddenly we had a project. I started organizing a volunteer group to take the other children on trips. We held bake sales and candy sales and raised enough money for an excursion to Mount Airy Lodge in the Poconos. Most of the children had never been together outside the hospital. How wonderful it was to see them laughing and having a good time, away from the sting of needles, transfusions and spinal taps. We found ways to raise funds to see a Broadway play and even to visit Disney World.

In 1973 Mary Lou graduated from high school, a member of the National Honor Society. She had undergone surgery to remove her spleen, so she had worked extra hard for those honors. In the fall, she entered William Paterson College as a fine-arts major. Soon she made the dean's list. She worked part-time in a TV repair shop and her civic activities—everything from collecting for charity to volunteer work—put her in touch with almost everyone in town.

The following year she volunteered to participate in an experimental drug program for the treatment of Cooley's

anemia. It took a lot out of her and she had to be hospitalized for three weeks. “But if it helps other kids, it’s worth it,” she said.

Mary Lou was 19 that Christmas of 1974. In January, our Christmas tree was still standing in the living room. For some reason I just couldn’t take it down.

On January 20 it snowed heavily, keeping all of us home. Mary Lou practiced her piano in the morning, but got very tired. “I think I’ll rest for a while,” she said as she went up to bed. Later I brought her some lunch.

“Oh, this soup is so good!” she exclaimed. Then the light suddenly went out of her eyes and she fell back on her pillow.

Mary Lou’s funeral was one of the largest ever in West Paterson. Louis and I had no idea she had had so many friends. The mayor and the entire city council were there. In the words of the Cooley’s volunteer group member who honored her, she had been “a very special girl who lived and understood life better in her 19 years than most of us could possibly hope to if we lived to be a hundred.”

Later, as a cold rain battered our living room window, I sat alone, thinking about my radiant daughter. Sighing, I leaned back, staring at the wall. In my line of sight were three of the scripture plaques Rosemary had made: “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” “Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.” “Do not be anxious about tomorrow.”

The words blurred in my vision, then cleared. I got up immediately and began preparing dinner for my family.

Our oldest daughter, Ann, was involved in her career, and George, a typical teenager, kept our house lively. His

friends came and went and the telephone rang constantly. He dated and had an after-school job at a local restaurant. We continued to take the Cooley's children on trips and have get-togethers.

George graduated from high school and went on to William Paterson, where he threw himself into a full schedule of activities. He continued working part-time at the restaurant, and the summer he was 19 he bought a sports car—shiny black with fire-engine-red trim. It was a young man's dream—and always full of his friends. He kept it in showroom shape.

That's why, on the night of September 20, I knew something was wrong. George came home from a date and after he went to bed I noticed his car had been pulled into the garage at a careless angle. Always before he had aligned it so straight.

The next morning he stayed home from school. "Mom," he said. "I just can't make it. I'm so tired."

Louis and I took him for a long ride that night, knowing the hum and rhythm of the moving car would help him doze off. When we got back to the house, he sank down on the couch. "I know I'm going, Mom," he said wearily. He looked up at me with concern. "Promise me you won't cry? You know where I'll be."

"No, Georgie, I won't cry."

My son smiled, shook his head and lay back, eyes closed. Then he took a deep breath and was gone.

Mary Lou.

Rosemary.

George.

And so, again and again, people ask that question: "How

can you be happy after all that's happened?" I'll tell you how.

My children understood that life is a holy gift from our creator. They loved each day they were given, and their enjoyment and gratitude were like sunlight, warming and brightening our time together. In the face of early death, they embraced life. If they loved life as much as they did, honoring it, reaching out to soothe their stricken friends, using their days creatively, am I to love life any less?

No! I will not dishonor God—or my children—with gloom and self-pity. I embrace life as they embraced it and I shall rejoice and be glad in it!

BROUGHT TOGETHER

A HEARTBREAKING TRAGEDY, A CHANCE ENCOUNTER, AND A LIFESAVING GIFT

By Allen Van Meter, Macclenny, Florida

God, Please, NO!" I wanted to cry out that night when my sister called and told me what happened to my nephew Michael. He had suffered a gunshot wound to the head. A careless accident, but the damage was massive and irreversible. Only machines were keeping him alive.

"Come home," my sister whispered as she hung up. "Help us." I would have done anything for her and Michael, but even as my wife, Marilyn, grabbed the phone and started calling airlines, trying to get us seats on the next flight to Kentucky, I couldn't quite bring myself to believe he was gone.

Michael was my sister's son. His father wasn't in the picture, so I was the one who looked out for him and took him fishing when he was little. I tried so hard to protect him from the rough-and-tumble life of the Kentucky backwoods, the life that would have destroyed me if the Lord hadn't come to my rescue.

I'd even had Michael live with Marilyn and me in Florida when his teenage rebelliousness got to be too much for my sister to handle. He was a lot like me, the good and the bad. Hard-headed yet big-hearted, a taste for living on the edge mixed with a bedrock belief in the value of hard work. Both Michael and I grew a lot in those years together—he because our boys looked up to him like a big brother,

I because I knew he was looking to me for an example.

Memories played through my mind like an old, grainy home movie. Little Michael jumping up and down with his first catch from the creek. Michael gleefully (and skillfully) driving a front-loader before he was old enough to get his learner's permit. Michael working three jobs at once, then zooming around on his motorcycle after hours. Michael calling us just a few days ago so excited, like a kid on Christmas morning, about finding God. He was only 25. How could it all be taken away from him in a single senseless moment?

Lord, this doesn't make sense, I prayed. *You gave me a second chance. Why not Michael?*

Really, my turnaround was nothing short of a miracle. Back then, I was totally broken by my addiction to alcohol and drugs. The crime I'd turned to in order to support my habit landed me in a Florida prison and forced me to dry out, but it didn't do anything for the self-destructive spiral I was continuing down.

One day in early 1989 I was slumped on my bunk in my cell, thinking, I've messed up everything worth caring about. I might as well be dead. Then a fellow inmate came by. "I'm going to chapel," he said. "You're coming with me." I couldn't muster the energy to argue, so I followed him out of the cell block. I sat way in the back of the chapel like a zombie, not even caring where I was.

All of sudden a presence spoke to me, the voice cutting clear through my despair.

"Allen, if you give me your life, I'll restore it back to you." I knew it could only be God. Who else could bring a spiritually dead man back to life?

The rest of my sentence I read the Bible and got to know

the Lord. I talked to him like I'd talk to a friend.

"God, let me know what you want me to do," I'd ask. "I'm kind of thick-headed, so you'll probably have to speak real loud and clear to get through to me."

One morning that spring, I was lying on my bunk with my Bible open on my chest, thinking about my release in September. Again, I felt the presence I'd felt in chapel and heard a direct message: "Wait until after February 14 to get married. I will bring her to you." That sure came out of the blue! I hadn't given marriage much thought because I figured it would be next to impossible to find a woman willing to share her life with someone who'd messed up his own so badly. I tucked that promise from God away in the back of my mind. First things first, I figured. I was released and went into an aftercare center in Jacksonville, Florida.

I was at an evening service at the church down the road the Sunday after Valentine's day 1990, sitting in the same pew as two little boys, unable to take my eyes off the blonde leading the songs. I'd noticed her that morning at coffee hour too. Marilyn, the preacher said her name was. She's the one, something kept telling me.

The singing ended. She came down the aisle and sat down—right in my pew, between me and the boys. She was their mom. The service went on, and the younger boy nodded off. Pretty soon he was stretched out on the pew fast asleep, scooting his mom right up next to me. That was the confirmation I needed. I worked up my nerve and asked Marilyn out for coffee the next night. Not long after that, I asked her to be my wife. Turned out Marilyn too had felt the Lord leading us together.

In the 10 years since our marriage, we hadn't been apart,

and it was at moments like tonight, facing this tragedy in my family, that I was most grateful God had given me Marilyn to lean on.

She hung up the telephone. “Finally, some good news,” she said. “I got you on a flight leaving first thing in the morning. You’ll change planes in Memphis—”

“Wait,” I interrupted her, confused, “Aren’t you coming with me?”

“There’s only one seat left on that plane,” she said. “You need to be in it. I’ll take a later flight.” she must have seen my look of dismay. “Don’t worry, Allen, I’ll be right behind you.”

Right behind me, Lord? I need Marilyn right there next to me!

The phone rang before I could say anything. “The doctors said Michael’s brain-dead. They’re asking me to donate his organs,” my sister sobbed. “Please make the decision. I just can’t.”

“Donating would be the right thing to do,” I said slowly. “At least some good can come out of this. Hang on. I’ll be there tomorrow.”

Early the following morning Marilyn dropped me off at the airport. I picked up my ticket and went to the gate. “Sir, you’re seated in 8B, on the aisle,” the flight attendant said.

Lord, I’m leaning on you like always. Tell me what to do. I’ll do it. I promise.

At row 8, a dark-haired woman in a red blazer was trying to get her suitcase into the overhead bin. I gave her a hand. She nodded her thanks then wordlessly settled into the window seat.

Shortly after takeoff, she pulled some papers out of her purse and studied them intently. I glanced over. They were diagrams of the human body. Maybe she could answer some of my questions about Michael. "Excuse me," I said, "are you a doctor?"

"No," she sighed. "I'm going over these because my sister's in bad shape, and she needs one of my kidneys."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

"Debbie's been sick for a long time," she said. "With liver disease, actually. She got a transplant, only now her body's rejecting it. She's on the waiting list for another liver, but all the medication she's taking has damaged her kidneys. I'm on my way to her hospital in New Orleans to get tested as a donor."

"I'm headed to Kentucky because my family's going through something similar," I said. "My nephew is being taken off life support. We're going to donate his organs."

"It was good of your family to make the decision to donate."

She went back to her medical diagrams, and I closed my eyes to get some rest. But my mind kept going back to another conversation, the last one I had with Michael. He'd been so awestruck at finding God at work in his life.

God at work…My eyes flew open. I tapped my seatmate on the shoulder. "I think there's a reason we ended up next to each other. I have a feeling my nephew's liver should go to your sister." As soon as I said that, I sensed the Lord's presence, as real and unmistakable as I had those other times, telling me, *Yes, this is what I want you to do*.

"It's not that simple," my seatmate said. "There are all kinds of rules. And the blood and tissue types must match."

I stared at the air phone in the seatback before us, the

voice of the Lord resounding in my head. This is what I want you to do. "Look, it's more than coincidence," I insisted. "This is definitely God at work here. I feel it. We have to get on that phone right now and find out how to get the liver to your sister."

This time my seatmate didn't argue. She dug out a credit card and a list of numbers, and punched one into the air phone. "This is Jan Larson," she said. "My sister, Deborah White, is on your waiting list for a liver transplant."

Jan explained what we were looking to do and listened for a while to the response. Then she turned to me. "The nurse says we can do this. It's called a directed donation. They'll still have to confirm the organ match and be able to get it to New Orleans within ten hours. Can you call the hospital where your nephew is and get things started there?"

I picked up the air phone, dialed and got through to the transplant coordinator. "My name is Allen Van Meter. My nephew is Michael Gibson. He was declared brain-dead not long ago, and his mother signed the papers to donate his organs. Well, we have a woman in New Orleans we want to give his liver to."

"I'm sorry," the nurse said. "They're about to unhook Michael and wheel him into the O.R. to harvest his organs."

"This is of God!" I practically shouted. "It's not too late!"

Silence. Then I heard the phone being set down and footsteps scurrying away. It seemed like forever before the nurse got back on the line. "It wasn't too late," she said quietly. "I stopped them."

"Jan, we're just in time!" I exclaimed.

At the Memphis airport, Jan and I exchanged numbers. "I

can't tell you how much your nephew's gift means. Please thank your sister," she said. "We'll pray for you." She gave me a big hug goodbye, and rushed to catch her connecting flight to New Orleans.

Three days later I was struggling over Michael's eulogy, Marilyn at my side again, when Jan called from New Orleans.

"Debbie's doing great," she said. "Your nephew's liver really and truly came just in time."

She explained that during the operation, the surgeons discovered Debbie's hepatic artery—the main blood line to the liver—was so clogged that she had only hours to live. If they'd gone ahead with just the kidney transplant as planned, it would have killed her.

"Even the doctors say it's a miracle. Debbie was in intensive care for weeks after her first liver transplant. This time she's doing so well that pretty soon she'll be coming to thank you in person. She's been telling everyone Michael and the Lord turned the sunset of her life into a glorious sunrise."

I knew what I would say at Michael's funeral. I would talk about one of his kidneys going to a young father; the other to a little boy. A three-month-old baby got his corneas; a badly burned child, skin grafts. Fifty cancer patients received some of his bone marrow. And of course, I would tell everyone about how I ended up with the last seat left on that plane, right next to a woman whose sister was in dire need of a transplant. It was all because of the one who helped my family make sense of our tragedy by transforming it into a second chance for so many others.

A Room for Jeremy

MARION BOND WEST REDISCOVERS THE POWER OF HOPE IN HER SON'S BATTLE WITH ADDICTION.

By Marion Bond West, Watkinsville, Georgia

My son Jeremy stood aside, not meeting my eyes—or maybe it was me who didn't want to meet his—and let my husband Gene and me walk into his mental health counselor's office ahead of him.

We'd gotten him out of jail two nights before. Blenda, an addictions specialist, had given him an emergency appointment that May morning and urged us to sit in on the session.

Every time Jeremy got into trouble and couldn't find a way out—and there had been so many times that I'd finally lost count—he hurried back to Blenda, as if he knew she was the one person in the world tough enough to keep trying with him.

She had counseled Jeremy for six years and she'd seen him in every kind of emotional state imaginable. Uncontrollable rages fueled by drugs. Manic know-it-all phases when he stopped taking his medication for bipolar disorder. Withdrawn and scared moods. Or those increasingly rare instances when he was charming and funny, polite and cooperative. When he was the son I still had hope for, however fading.

I sat down on the brown leather sofa in Blenda's office, wondering which Jeremy we would see this time. Gene

took a chair. Jeremy plopped down on the sofa next to me. Evidently he remembered that Blenda figured out a lot about family dynamics based on where everyone chose to sit.

Jeremy had showered, shaved and put on clean clothes. He must have left them behind the last time he stayed at our house—when I'd caught him huffing (inhaling aerosol sprays to get high), and had to kick him out. Now he leaned forward, clasping his hands loosely between his long legs, and listened intently to Blenda. His eager, cooperative posture. I inched away from him on the sofa.

Just give it up, Marion, a weary voice inside told me. *You can't let yourself hope anymore. It's too late for Jeremy*.

Jeremy had lost his father, my first husband, when he was 15 years old—a vulnerable age, not that he showed it. He had seemed so strong then, forging through his grief, taking over his father's jobs around the house, like keeping our yard perfectly weeded and mown.

In his twenties, he ran his own thriving landscaping business. But in his mid-thirties, Jeremy fell apart, as if all the feelings he'd been holding back since he was a teenager erupted, a kind of emotional volcano that destroyed everything in its path—cars, apartments, relationships, his business, the successful life he had built for himself.

Now he was 41, and I was terrified that addiction and bipolar disorder had finally swallowed up the real Jeremy. I'd read the arrest report. The police had been questioning people in the neighborhood where Jeremy was hanging out. He hadn't committed the crime they were investigating, and if he had just cooperated, he wouldn't have ended up in jail.

But he had been skipping his bipolar meds. He reacted

belligerently. He said that he'd done meth, cursed the officers, charged at them. They had to tase him twice.

I hardly heard a word Jeremy said to his counselor. My mind kept going back to two nights before, when we'd picked him up from jail. Guards led him into the waiting area, limping—an old hip injury from one of his car wrecks.

"It's not my fault," he bellowed. "I was just standing there minding my own business!" The bedraggled clothing, the dirt-encrusted hands, the wild eyes…nothing about this disturbed man resembled the Jeremy I knew, the son I loved.

"Marion, Gene," the counselor's no-nonsense voice brought me back to the session. "I'm very concerned for Jeremy's life right now. He doesn't have many more chances. I'm asking you to take him into your home for at least thirty days. He needs structure. But if he breaks even one rule, he's out. He must get back on his bipolar medication, see counselors regularly, go to 12-step meetings…"

I wanted to scream, *Blenda , we've lost the battle. Can't you see that?* Didn't she understand the terrible anguish of watching someone you love self-destruct and feeling powerless to help him? She really expected me to open myself up again to that kind of pain? I glared at her as she rocked gently in her chair, waiting for our answer.

Jeremy sat up straight, rubbing his hands back and forth on his jeans, not daring to look at me or Gene.

"He can stay with us," Gene said.

I didn't know how he could be so calm. I didn't trust myself to speak. I just nodded mutely. It was more resignation than consent.

When we got home, I put Jeremy in the guest room. He

joined us for meals. But I kept my heart closed off. Constantly I watched him for any slip-up, any deception, even the smallest white lie. One mistake and I was ready to pounce. I was not going to get hurt again. I was not going to risk having hope again for my son. Hope had been such an empty promise.

To my amazement, the county health department promptly provided excellent counseling and the prescription medication Jeremy needed to control his bipolar disorder—all free of charge. Begrudgingly, I gave a silent prayer of thanks.

Jeremy found an AA group that met at seven in the morning. "I need this to start my day off right," he told us. Since his driver's license had been revoked, he got someone else in the group to pick him up and then bring him back to our house afterward. He went to those meetings six days a week.

The seventh day he went to meetings of the biblically based program Celebrate Recovery. "Man, you can confess anything there," he told us one night at supper. "No one judges or rejects you. I fit in." He paused. "I'm going to make it this time." There was a quietness in his tone, not his old bravado.

"Sounds good," Gene said. The smile he gave Jeremy said even more. It said, I believe you will make it.

Lord, how I wish I could believe it too, I thought.

Jeremy was trying hard. He kept his room immaculate. He helped around the house without being prompted and kept asking us if there was more that he could do, even as his limp grew worse. He took his meds regularly. He went to his counseling appointments. He was committed to his

recovery groups.

Still, I kept thinking—almost expecting—that he would revert to his old behavior. I had seen it happen so many times already—Jeremy would get clean only to relapse and sink even lower than he had been before. And each time it felt as if he were taking a part of me with him.

Six months after Jeremy moved in with us, Blenda agreed that he was ready to try living on his own again. In November, he rented a starter apartment in the nearby town of Athens. He told us about an organization there that provided medical care for people who couldn't afford it. He had talked to someone in their office who thought that they might be able to give him hip-replacement surgery, free of charge.

I was certain that he had misunderstood. It just sounded too good to be true. But sure enough, just before Christmastime, Jeremy received a new hip, compliments of Mercy Health Center.

Soon, Jeremy was getting around so well that he was back doing some lawn care. His clients were so pleased with his work that they were willing to come over and pick him up. He even lined up a job at a bakery-café and bought an old bike for five dollars at a yard sale so that he could get to and from work.

Part of me was happy for Jeremy. But another part of me couldn't help remembering his last apartment—a nice place that had ended up trashed after repeated drug binges. It seemed as if the more progress my son made, the more I imagined the worst.

One spring day I was driving home from shopping and passed Jeremy's new apartment. His ancient yard-sale

bike was chained to a post. That meant he was home. I decided to stop in and say hi. Or was I checking on him, always concerned that I might catch him at something? Did I just want to get the disappointment over with?

The door was unlocked. I walked in. "Hey, it's me," I called. The small three-room apartment was sparkling clean and fresh smelling, neater than I'd ever kept my house.

Jeremy hollered from the bedroom, "Take off your shoes, Mom. I just vacuumed and mopped." He came out to the kitchen, carrying his Bible.

"Guess what? They made me a sponsor at Celebrate Recovery last night. And later this month, I get my one-year chip from AA." He was beaming. "Check out Romans 5:5," he said. He handed me his Bible. He had highlighted the scripture in yellow: Hope does not disappoint.

I looked up at Jeremy. There was a sweetness in his expression, a trust that I had all but forgotten since I had let go of hope.

Right then the sun streamed in through the little kitchen window, and we stood there together, bathed in light. I took a deep breath and caught the faint aroma of bleach and something else, something fresh and citrusy: lemon. Hope will always smell like lemons to me.

At that moment, standing there looking into my son's clear eyes, I let myself trust in the miracle of his recovery, and whatever plan God had for Jeremy. I let hope into my life again, a hope as warm and bright as sunlight.

A Symbol of Hope

SHE SURVIVED THE OKLAHOMA CITY BOMBING. BUT HEALING SEEMED IMPOSSIBLE.

By Priscilla Salyers, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

I looked at the basket of yarn on the floor by my chair in the living room. It was 7:00 p.m., the end of a long day. Can I really do this? I wondered.

Once, I'd loved knitting. I carried yarn and needles everywhere. I knit while watching TV, standing in line at the store, even on lunch breaks from my job with the customs service in the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

Then on April 19, 1995, a massive bomb blast destroyed the Murrah building. A coworker found the basket in the shell of our office, two weeks after the explosion. He brought it to my house, remembering how I was never without my knitting. It had been a tearful reunion.

But later, when I took up my needles, I felt nothing. No joy. No comfort. After a few minutes I dropped the yarn into the basket. What was the point of trying to pick up where I'd left off? Nothing would ever be the same.

The basket had been sitting by my chair ever since, the skeins still covered with bits of dry-wall, insulation, ash. I picked up the yarn every few months, but I could never manage more than a few stitches before my mind replayed that April day.

I remembered looking out my office window at the tall

elm tree in the plaza, admiring its green canopy. Chatting with two of the customs agents I worked with. Then, a deafening boom, a rain of debris, followed by an even more terrifying silence. Slowly becoming aware I was alive. Being trapped in rubble for hours. Discovering afterward that 168 people had died, including the two coworkers I'd been talking to.

I'd prayed that God would help me find comfort, some sense of meaning in my survival. But was that even possible?

Two years after the bombing, I still felt a bleakness I couldn't escape. I was numb, shut off from everyone, everything, as if I were still trapped in the rubble, back on that terrible morning.

Until I watched a broadcast of other Murrah victims testifying at bomber Timothy McVeigh's trial. They talked about their struggles to go on. A woman who'd lost her son told of not being able to sew anymore. A man said he no longer enjoyed woodworking. Anger surged through me. McVeigh is stealing our joy. I can't let him do this.

I jumped in my car and drove to the site of the Murrah building. Through the chain-link fence that still encircled the burned-out ruins, I stared angrily at the scar in the earth, the scar that was a part of me.

Then I saw it. My tree. Half its branches were gone, but the elm was standing tall, almost defiantly. "If you can do it, I can do it," I whispered. I went straight to the yarn store. I knew what I wanted—no, needed—to do. For the first time in months, I felt alive again.

Now I picked up the new skein of royal blue yarn I'd bought and snatched my needles from the basket. I pulled

out a strand, hesitantly threading it between my finger and thumb. Once, just feeling the softness of the yarn would've been enough to set my hands in motion.

I'd done some beautiful work. I'd made sweaters that sold for hundreds of dollars. But the real payoff was the joy I felt inside, the kind of deep, satisfying joy that makes you feel connected to God. Could I rekindle that passion?

I made a loop from the blue yarn and slipped it over a needle, pulling the yarn tight. I made another loop, casting on again. Over and over I cast on, sliding the knots down my needle, counting as I went. Ten knots. Twenty. Thirty. It dawned on me I'd long passed the point where I usually had to stop. My fingers were nimbly working, as if someone were directing them.

Knots ran the length of a needle, nearly 80; I began stitching the ribbing for a border across the bottom of a sweater. I thought about all the people who'd died. So many lives cut short. I looked at my basket and saw a skein of red yarn, blackened in parts, covered with ash. Red… red hearts. What if I knitted 168 hearts into the border of the sweater? It would be a memorial only I could create.

The debris-littered skeins were tangible reminders of the darkest day of my life. And yet I could see purpose in intertwining new yarn with the old, a bridge between my grief and a future only God could see.

I picked up the red yarn and looped a strand around a needle. A row of hearts spread across the bottom of the sweater, then another above that. With each stitch it felt as if I were reclaiming part of my life. I was doing something that mattered. I was knitting a victory sweater.

I looked over at the clock. I'd knit for more than three

hours! The back of a sweater, six inches deep, lay on my lap. I counted the hearts: 44. It was a start. There'd be more knitting, and more healing, ahead.

I pictured what I'd add to the sweater to honor my coworkers and the others lost that day: the chain-link fence, mementoes left by mourners. And, of course, my tree, with its new leaves of spring. A symbol of survival and, like my sweater, of hope.

The Healer

I'd battled depression all my life. I didn't know how much longer I could fight.

By Therese Borchard, Annapolis, Maryland

I was trying to pray when it happened. Desperately. Dark feelings I'd been holding back for days like some terrible tide, feelings of worthlessness and exhaustion, overcame me.

I forced myself to keep reading the psalm I had in front of me, but all I really wanted to do was give up. Just close my eyes and never open them again. Anything to make this unnameable despair, this sadness beyond sadness I couldn't seem to shake, go away.

I was kneeling in our walk-in closet, my prayer space, the one spot in the house where my kids, Katherine and David, wouldn't see me acting weird and wonder what was wrong.

The kids were downstairs watching TV. My husband, Eric, was at work. If only he'd come home! And yet I didn't want him to see me like this. Not again. He'd know I wasn't coping. He'd spend yet another evening worried sick about me. He'd tell me we should go see a doctor. That was the last thing I wanted.

I knew what my problem was: clinical depression. I was a stay-at-home suburban mom with two wonderful kids and a devoted husband, trying to maintain a freelance writing

career. A perfectly normal person to anyone passing by.

Inside, though, I was a complete disaster. I'd battled symptoms of depression all my life. I had been a fussy baby, an anxious child, a teenager with an eating disorder.

I saw a counselor in college and learned to get by. Then in my thirties, after the kids were born two years apart, I went into a tailspin. Episodes of postpartum blues deepened into full-blown depression, a looming darkness that threatened to swallow me whole.

I'd seen a psychiatrist, but all the medications he had prescribed only seemed to make me worse. That convinced me. My problem wasn't finding the right doctor. My problem was finding the right amount of faith.

I had been raised in church and I believed with all my heart that God answered prayer.

It's me, I thought. *I must not be praying hard enough*. Kneeling there in that closet I tried to dig deeper into my soul, tried to find a deserving faith.

The front door opened and closed. Eric was home. "Where's Mom?" he asked.

"Upstairs," the kids said.

I heard him mount the steps. "Therese?" he called. I tried to pull myself together. I wiped my eyes. Why was I always crying? My hands tightened around my Bible. Eric's tall, reassuring form appeared at the closet door. "Therese, what are you doing?"

I looked at him helplessly. "I—I didn't want the kids to see me like this."

His face softened. "Therese, why didn't you call me?"

"Because I knew you'd come home," I said. "You have to work. I didn't want you to worry."

"But I am worried." he knelt and put his arms around me. I leaned into him and our bodies shook together with my sobs. He stroked my hair. "You can't go on like this," he said. "We can't. Let me call a doctor, Therese. Please."

For a long time I didn't say anything. I thought about the psychiatrist I'd seen. He'd spoken so confidently, but nothing he'd tried had worked. I slept even less. The roller coaster of my moods got even wilder. My freelance writing career ground to a halt. I stopped scheduling play dates for the kids.

Every day was like a mountain. I hated my feelings and I hated myself for feeling them. What was wrong with me? I had so many blessings. Why couldn't I just be grateful and get over my depression? What right did I have to be so sad? It was thoughts like those that had convinced me to go off medication. Didn't God heal? Wouldn't he heal me if I asked hard enough? If I had enough faith?

Eric took my silence as a tentative yes. "Let me call someone at Johns Hopkins," he said. A friend of ours had recently seen a doctor at the renowned medical school in Baltimore and told me that the care was excellent.

"The doctor you saw wasn't right for you," Eric went on. "Maybe someone else could help you. Therese, I'm really scared. Please. For me."

For an instant I had a vision of what life could be without depression. Life, like the first years of our marriage, full of simple joy. I saw us taking the kids to a pumpkin patch in the fall, sledding in winter, on rainy spring walks. How could a doctor or a pill give that back to me? How could anything? But I heard the desperation in Eric's voice. "Okay," I said. "I'll go."

The first appointment I could get was six weeks away. Somehow I got through those weeks, though each and every day I thought about how the world would be better off without me—and I without it.

The appointment arrived. Eric's mom came over to watch the kids, and Eric and I got into the car for the 45-minute drive to Hopkins. I tried to relax, but I couldn't stop my obsessive, suicidal thoughts. What was wrong with me?

The feelings didn't fix on any one thing. I couldn't understand where they came from. Mostly I felt like a tremendous burden to Eric and the kids. I woke up every morning crushed by sadness. *You're worthless*, a voice inside me said over and over. Why hadn't prayer shut that voice up? If only my faith were stronger than that voice!

We neared the Hopkins campus and I felt panic stir. I pictured white-coated doctors wheeling me away. "I'm sorry, Mr. Borchard," they would tell Eric, "but your wife is beyond hope."

The doctors wouldn't understand. What did they know about me? About my prayers? My faith? I was a diagnosis to them, not a person. The whole thing felt wrong. Eric circled the campus of historic brick buildings, looking for the parking garage. Should I tell him to go back home?

Finally we found a place to park. I took deep breaths. In one last instant of spiritual desperation, I screamed out a prayer in my mind: *Dear Lord, be here. Help me. Please*. We got out of the car and walked through the campus. I stared up at the buildings, all red brick and slate gray roofs against a cloudy Baltimore sky.

"Hmm," said Eric. "I don't think this is the building we want." He looked at a map of the campus. "It looks like we

just have to cut through that building there." He pointed to an imposing Victorian structure topped by a dome and spire. "Billings Administration Building," a sign read. We opened the doors and entered the lobby.

I stood stock-still. For a moment I thought I was seeing things. I thought I really had lost my mind. But, no. There, right in the center of the lobby, towering over everything, bathed in light from a skylight far above, was a ten-and-a-half-foot-tall statue of Jesus. He stood with arms outstretched, seeming to look straight into my eyes with an expression of infinite compassion and understanding.

What was a statue of Jesus doing here? I wondered. I knew that Johns Hopkins had been founded by a Quaker in the nineteenth century, but—this was the last thing I had expected to see today at the cutting-edge medical center. Jesus?

On the pedestal beneath Jesus' feet was an inscription: "Come unto me all ye that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." Around the statue strode doctors in white coats talking in low voices. Patients walked past, nurses, orderlies, visitors.

I read the words again. I will give you rest. I looked around. Here? I wondered. Here, Lord?

Even as I asked, I knew the answer. Yes, it was exactly here that God would give me rest. Not through some sudden miraculous change in my emotional state. Not because my prayers were finally good enough. God would heal me as he had healed countless others, through the hands and talents of good doctors and nurses.

He could even work through medication if he chose. There were no barriers to Christ's love. He was in charge

of my healing. I could let go. I could let him work. Finally I could stop fighting. I could trust. Who more than Jesus understood the nature of suffering?

"Therese, are you okay?" Eric was right beside me. I turned to look at him. "Yes," I said. "I'm ready. Let's go."

We found our way to the psychiatric building, and there I was seen by a doctor named Milena who asked smart, gentle, caring questions. She then told me that the depression was not my fault, not a personal or spiritual shortcoming. Severe depression is a medical condition like many others, she said, biological in origin. It can and should be treated as an illness.

"You can get better, Ms. Borchard," she said.

Eventually I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, which explained why my moods varied so dramatically. It has been almost four years now since I returned home from Johns Hopkins. Taking the right medications and seeing a counselor, I've gotten my life back on track.

Eric and I took the kids to that pumpkin patch. We went sledding and took walks in the rain. I returned to my writing career. Most important, I learned how wrong I had been to believe that God had forsaken me because of some weakness in my faith. I know better now.

I came to the hospital that day weary and heavy laden, but not knowing what to do. And there, so unexpectedly, the Lord gave me rest, the rest my spirit yearned for, the healing he knew I needed.

Firestorm at Our Back Door

WHEN A NEIGHBORHOOD IS THREATENED BY A SURGING CALIFORNIA WILDFIRE, ONE RESIDENT TAKES MATTERS INTO HER OWN HANDS.

By Sharon Dryden, Sierra Brooks, California

Driving home from the farmer's market in Truckee, that hot, windy August afternoon on winding Highway 89 through the Tahoe National Forest, a friend and I were startled to see a tree in flames at a campground along the road. We were in the midst of a dry summer, and any fire in the forest had the potential of becoming dangerous. A U.S. Forest Service worker was standing there with a shovel, looking up at the burning tree. It was not a good sign.

By the time I arrived home a half hour later, my husband, Forest, was running down the driveway, pulling on his volunteer fireman's yellow turnout coat. "There's a fire!" he shouted as he jumped into his pickup.

"I know," I called. "I just saw it."

I watched him disappear down the long residential block on his way to the firehouse, and my stomach fluttered. Although the fire was about 15 miles away, anything could happen on a day like this.

Suddenly I smelled it. Smoke! I craned my neck to see

past our white two-story home and the skyscraper pines that framed it. A plume of gray smoke ominously wafted over the mountainside just beyond the golden meadow behind our home. Many ridges sat between the flames and our house, but southwesterly winds were whipping the fire right toward us.

As the Loyalton-Sierra Brooks fire engine screamed down the road, an alarm of fear sounded in me as well. I tried to pray away my panic, but it still crept into me, like the smoke sneaking over our mountains.

Within hours a smoky, acrid haze pervaded our mile-high valley, so that even home was no longer a haven. Fire trucks streamed in from surrounding counties. News flashes reported that 25-mile-per-hour winds and dry timber were feeding the fire. A numbness washed over me. A firestorm could be raging at our back door in hours.

I hurriedly threw photos and clothing into suitcases, then commandeered our kids—Crystal, 15, Matthew, 13, and Alayna, 7. They grabbed our two cats, calico Calle and all-black Domino, and our border collie, Panda. We all jumped into my in-laws' old motor home, stored in our driveway, and in minutes we were headed to my sister Denise's home in Reno, 40 miles away. I had to escape; I could not fight another battle.

We had already been through so much in the past few years. First Forest had required surgery for a collapsed lung. Our medical insurance company went defunct, nearly bankrupting us. Next, Matthew almost died from leukemia. Exhausted from the financial and emotional toll, I had struggled through anxiety and depression—until we moved into our new home in Sierra Brooks, a rural subdivision four miles north of Loyalton. It was, I felt, a symbol from

God: A better life was ahead for us.

In the Sierra we explored streams and mountain paths, discovering flora and wildlife. I loved our dream house, which we had built ourselves—a split-level with vaulted interior ceilings and muted gray-and-pastel furnishings.

But now I feared yet another trial. It's too much, God, I prayed. Please make the fire go away.

It didn't. The next morning Forest called to tell me the Cottonwood Fire, as it had been named, was roaring toward our home. "Get our stuff," he said, "the fire's coming." Suddenly I began to quiver. Too shaky to drive, I asked Denise to take me back to our subdivision. When we got there, she had to inch her car around road blockades. Fire trucks guarded every other house, and heat hung in the air.

Three firemen met us at my home and readied it for a fiery battle. They covered windows with blankets, guided our 4-H pig to a trailer and removed the gas barbecue and woodpile from the fire-facing backyard.

Trying to review my mental lists, I gathered the most important things of our lives. There's money in an envelope, Forest had said. Get Crystal's saddle. Matthew's new air rifle. Alayna's—what did Alayna want? Toys?

The firemen helped me with it all—the computer, photo albums, my wedding dress, Grandma's cookie jar, the children's guardian-angel pictures. My brown jeep Wagoneer looked like a dust Bowl migrant family's jalopy stuffed with our most important earthly possessions.

Seeing the panic in my eyes, a friend, Brad, walked up and put his arm around me. A veteran U.S. Forest Service fire manager, he was the commander for the western edge of the fire. "We'll do the best we can, Sharon," he said.

I knew he would: The orange-red firestorm—more than 27,000 acres in size—was already cresting the western mountainside, threatening his nearby home as well. The heat pushed me in waves, and as I tried to swallow, I tasted soot. I watched the fire hungrily lick its way over the mountain. My heart was pounding. I knew then I was probably seeing my home for the last time.

Back at my sister's home in Reno, exhaustion hit me. Frightened as I was, I hadn't cried yet. I felt I had to hold myself together for the sake of the kids. Grungy and reeking of smoke, I headed for the shower, where my tears fell with the soothing streams.

God, I can't take it anymore. I haven't seen Forest these two days—just two quick calls. Is he okay? And my home may already be gone. Why would you give me a home, a sanctuary, then take it away? I'm so afraid.

I let the water run over me, remembering the last time I had to trust God in a big way. Matthew had been almost four when he was dying from leukemia. At a nurse's prompting, I sought out the hospital's chapel. There I had prayed, *I love Matthew, Lord, and I want him to live. But he's yours, and I give him back to you*.

It hadn't been an attempt to bargain with God. I had given up my son because I knew God wanted my surrender and trust most of all. And soon Matthew was on the road to healing and complete remission.

Now I prayed in the shower, *Lord, you have faithfully brought us through each hardship. Why should you not be trustworthy again?*

I sighed. I would still trust God for everything in my life. There would be no trying to bargain. As the water soothed

my aching body, he calmed my soul. I knew then that no matter what the outcome of the Cottonwood Fire, God would take care of all of us.

Just minutes after my shower my husband's sister telephoned. "The fire's on the six o'clock news, Sharon. Go watch it."

Grimly I sat on the couch. The kids were still outside playing. Denise was at the grocery store. Trying to hold back tears, I rested my face in my hands and watched the TV.

A white-haired reporter in a yellow firefighter's shirt was reporting live. My neighborhood stood in the background; smoke billowed through the pines on the hills behind the houses.

Then suddenly the scene changed and I saw it. Our home! The front of the house filled the television screen. I held my breath as the shots changed every few seconds…the firestorm rushing toward our house…flames swallowing hundred-foot trees in a moment…Brad lighting a backfire at the edge of our yard…one of our trees bursting into flames, just feet from the house…a fireman spraying foam over the kids swing set…a helicopter dropping water from a bucket.

What happened then so shocked me that I wasn't sure I was seeing what I thought I saw. A sudden force of wind blew back the massive wall of flames—and in an instant the firestorm switched its course! Instead of heading toward our home, it turned almost completely around and rushed south. I gasped as the reporter confirmed that the fire had not damaged a single house. *Oh, thank you, God… thank you!* I almost shouted.

It was several days until things returned to normal.

Another arm of the fire continued to threaten nearby Loyalton for two days. The population tripled in size during that week, as more than 2500 firefighters from the Forest Service and California Department of Forestry and volunteers from all over the West converged on our town of 1200. Schools, the city park, and surrounding alfalfa fields looked like war encampments.

Finally, the fire burned itself out near the Nevada border north of Reno. More than 48,600 acres of Tahoe National Forest and grazing land were consumed by the Cottonwood Fire of 1994. But not a home was lost—not a life. Some say the backfire helped switch the fire's direction, saving the houses. But even the fire manager in charge, Brad, said it was a miracle.

The next afternoon I returned home alone. As I pulled into the driveway, I noticed a television-news team interviewing a group of firefighters. I timidly approached, and gasped when I saw Forest standing with them. I had almost not recognized him. He was covered with soot, his thick brown hair was rumpled and exhaustion was etched into his face. And his boots! The soles had been melted away! The intensity of the danger hit me, and I fell into his arms.

News reporters moved toward us. One newswoman—twentyish, dressed in jeans, perky in the midst of us battle-weary locals—brushed aside her layered brown hair. "Ma'am," she said, "I bet you feel really lucky." She smiled sympathetically as she poised her pencil over her notepad.

I looked at her in disbelief. As the news camera zoomed in, I shook my head and measured my words. "Lucky," I said, "is finding a penny. This has nothing to do with luck."

And as I walked back to our home with my arm around

my husband and his around me, I thanked God. For he had shown me once again that when I put my faith completely in him, he takes care of my needs more wonderfully than I can even ask. He is worthy of my trust—every time.

SOLDIER OF THE YEAR

HE FACED HIS BIGGEST CHALLENGE AFTER HE RETURNED HOME.

By Scotty Smiley, Durham, North Carolina

It had been dark for days when I finally heard the doctor's voice. "Lieutenant Smiley?"

I knew from his tone that the news wasn't good. How could it be? I was lying in a bed in Walter Reed Army Medical Center. I had memories of an explosion in Mosul, in northern Iraq—a car driving toward my armored combat vehicle, me waving it back, shouting. Then hot, white light and loud noise. Then nothing.

"We performed the final surgery last night," the doctor told me. Since my injury two weeks before, military doctors in Iraq, Germany and the U.S. had operated on me several times, removing shrapnel from my head and eyes and cutting my skull open to relieve the swelling in my brain. For most of that time I had been in a medically induced coma.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant Smiley," the doctor continued. "There's nothing more we can do for you. Your blindness is permanent."

I opened my eyes as wide as they would go, staring hard toward his voice, as if somehow I could capture light by a sheer force of will. I knew my wife, Tiffany, was in the room. I sensed my mom out in the hall—she must have left to cry. I wasn't going to cry, though.

"Scotty," said Tiffany softly, laying a hand on my arm.

I jerked my arm away. "I'm fine," I said gruffly. I tried rearranging the doctor's words: Blindness. Nothing more we can do. Permanent. No, it wasn't true.

Why would God have taken me so far—only for this to happen?

It had been just five years since I had entered West Point, and its beautiful campus high above the Hudson River. I felt on top of the world. I was certain, maybe even cocky, about my future. I majored in engineering management, planning to hone leadership skills during my five years of mandatory Army service, get an MBA at a top-ranked school and, to be frank, get rich.

Yes, there had been some changes to that plan. For one thing, I hadn't met many teachers at West Point who thought getting rich was a laudable goal. They believed in service, to their country and their students, and it showed.

Then September 11 happened, and Afghanistan and Iraq, and I realized I'd probably be going into combat. I was nervous about that, but excited too. Joining the Army is like joining a big family. The 45 men I commanded in a Stryker armored combat platoon were loyal, brave and as close to each other as brothers. I had wanted that leadership experience, and here it was.

Lying in that hospital bed, though, all I could think was, *What for? What was the point of leadership experience, my degree, my plans, if all of it was simply going to be washed away in darkness? Do you hear me, God? What was the point?*

Tiffany again laid a hand on my arm, and again I brushed it away. I struggled to get out of bed and fell back in pain. My leg was injured too, and I was still hooked up to

machines, a big bandage around my head. A feeling of vertigo came over me. Blindness!

There was Tiffany, beside me. Quick, remember, what does she look like? Big smile, cute nose, that delicate face I had loved since high school. We had dated all through college while she went to nursing school in Spokane, Washington, seeing each other on vacations. I had shipped out for Iraq less than a year after we married. I would never see her again! Would I forget what she looked like? What must she think of me, lying here so weak?

"Scotty," she said with a tremble in her voice I had never heard before, "Remember that verse you like so much, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.' We're going to get through this. It's going to be okay." I wanted to believe her. I had even had those words inscribed inside my class ring.

But at that moment, all I could do was slump farther into my pillows and close my eyes. Like it made any difference! I said nothing and thought nothing and eventually went to sleep.

I was at Walter Reed for one month. I had to learn to walk again. I had to learn everything else too. How to shower. How to eat. I wasn't a very pleasant patient. Every day brought new frustrations, new awareness of my limitations. I tried to do things myself, refusing help. But the fact was, I wasn't independent. And I hated that.

Men from my platoon called from Iraq, and Tiffany sat at my bedside every day, reading from the Bible, the newspaper, making small talk. I might have given up without the support. But I resented it too. It made me ashamed, magnified the question I least wanted to answer.

What was I going to do with the rest of my life? Who was I, if I wasn't the man who had entered West Point with such confidence?

The Army sent Tiffany and me to a blindness rehabilitation center in Palo Alto, California. I learned to walk with a stick and cross streets by listening to which way the traffic flowed, to distinguish coins by touch and to keep my money organized in my wallet so I could pay the right amount in stores. I learned new reflexes, putting my hand to my face anytime I entered a room, just in case something hazardous was suspended there.

Tiffany saw one positive side to my blindness: "You'll never see my wrinkles!" I laughed at that, and I had to agree when she pointed out that every day I was mastering things I had once told myself I would never do again. Still, the terrible question of my future loomed before me.

Even before I had come out of the coma, Army officials had handed Tiffany a stack of forms—application papers for military disability. If I signed them, I would be discharged from the Army and guaranteed a lifetime disability payment. If I didn't—well, I didn't know what would end up happening.

I tried sending resumes out, mostly to defense contractors who might be able to use my military experience. But my heart wasn't in it. That hadn't been the dream. The dream, I was sure, was gone.

One day in our room, I heard Tiffany shuffle papers around on the desk and gather some up. I knew what papers they were. "We need to make a decision about this, Scotty," she said.

"I know," I said quietly. She made no reply, and I realized she was waiting for more. Finally I spoke. "I don't

want to sign something that says I'm disabled. But I am disabled!"

"Are you? From doing what?" she asked.

The question was so strange, the answer so obvious, I didn't know what to say to her.

Tiffany waited, then finally said, "Scotty, listen. You know the hospital people told me I could sign those papers for you before you woke up. And you know why I decided not to? I believed then, and I believe now, that God is watching over us. I know you can make this decision. You keep talking about this future you can't have. But how do you know it's the only future worth having?"

I sat back, and again I was speechless. The only future worth having. I did indeed know that Tiffany had refused to sign those papers. We had talked about them so many times, around and around, and just as often I'd thought of her there in that hospital, so scared, me practically unrecognizable in intensive care. And yet she'd had the presence of mind to be smart for me. She had believed in me. I'd been completely dependent on her.

Dependent. I almost laughed. Who hadn't I been dependent on? Doctors. My family. God, of course. Why was I so stuck on independence anyway? On my dreams for my future? I felt something shift inside me, something unclench.

"Um," I said, and I could almost feel Tiffany strain toward my voice. "Actually, I do know of a few officers I could talk to about Army jobs I might be able to do." I paused. "Non-combat things. What do you think?"

Tiffany didn't even have to give me an answer. Her arms practically flew around my neck and, for the first time, I

knew without a doubt that everything really was going to be okay.

Soon after leaving the blindness rehabilitation center I was transferred to Fort Monroe, Virginia, which happened to be home to a unit providing classroom training to new recruits about to ship overseas. When an officer offered me a teaching position, I didn't hesitate. And I didn't regret it, either.

Almost immediately, I discovered that I loved teaching. Blindness heightened all of my other senses, and I found myself often knowing exactly what my young recruits were feeling, sometimes even before they spoke.

All of my old judgments about people—whether they looked sharp and ambitious like me—went out the window. My real blindness, I realized, had been before I had gone to Iraq, when sometimes all I could see was myself.

I did end up going for my MBA at Duke University. I won't be going into business and striking it rich, though. I'll be heading back to West Point to teach. I want to be one of those instructors like I'd had, an example of service to my students. Tiffany and Grady will be coming with me, of course—I mean our little boy, Grady. They'll like living there.

Etched in my memory is an image of that beautiful campus on a bluff overlooking the Hudson River. I can still picture it glowing in the late afternoon sun. It's a wonderful vision. Full of light. Full of life. Full of strength.

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