

Beginning Again

The Story of the Birth, Death and Resurrection
of a Marriage

by Mary J. Stone

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This book is lovingly dedicated to the Glory of God

to my beloved husband Howard

to our dear family

Jonathan and Sarah and their children

Noah, Chris, Ilsa and Julia

Jim and Heather and their children

Alyse, Miah and Isaac

Joel and Adreza and their children

Thiago and Anjela

and to Diane Heckman,

the Sister in Christ and Prayer Warrior,

who interceded for a family in crisis

on a Maundy Thursday many years ago

Prologue

The conversation took a turn that led us to my longing to be at home more and to work less. Our therapist wanted to know what we were doing as a couple to try and accomplish that goal. I looked at him and said, “I’ve wondered whether we should sell the house and find a cheaper way to live, but Howard won’t even discuss it with me.”

The therapist looked at me as if he couldn’t believe what I had just said. He replied, “Were you tentative about it or did you work at getting his attention and letting him know how important it was to you?”

The tears began to gather and the anger and frustration I had been bottling up, rose like a sudden storm breaking with a force that took us all by surprise, “Yes, Yes, Yes. I talked about it. I tried to get him to talk to me. I cried. I screamed. Nothing, absolutely nothing moved him. He was silent.” The storm blew over quickly and left me with tears streaming down my face.

The counselor looked at Howard and seriously, quietly asked, “Is that right?” My husband wordlessly nodded his head yes.

“How did you feel about that, Mary?” the counselor asked as he turned his head to face me again. With anguish I whispered, “I knew he didn’t love me, and my love for him died.”

Howard then offered, “I don’t want to sell the house. It’s been a source of security for all of us.”

Surprised and affronted, I incredulously asked, “Then why didn’t you tell me that?”

After a long silence, the kind man who had been so sure we could graduate from marriage counseling, sighed softly, “That was a powerful issue to ignore, Howard. I think the two of you are trying to keep a dead horse alive. I think you should come see me next week. Your assignment in the meantime is to think about how you can separate. We will discuss

how you can accomplish that at your next appointment.”

I nodded my agreement. Howard was in a state of disbelief and shock. As we despondently walked out of the office, I wondered, *How did my life ever come to this?*

One

I didn't believe in a Knight in Shining Armor, or did I? I certainly wasn't looking for him that autumn of my second year in Nursing School when he made his entrance into the story of my life. I was minding my own business, learning how to be the best nurse I could be and perfectly content with my life the way it was.

It all started quite by accident, or rather by providence, when I learned that The Fellowship of Christian Nurses was sponsoring a fall retreat. Although I wanted to attend, I couldn't afford the registration fee. I prayed, "God, if there is a purpose for me to be at the retreat, would you please provide the money for me to go?" When the provision didn't materialize, I resolved to use that weekend to catch up on some required reading for my psychiatric rotation.

Then, another opportunity for the same weekend was presented to me. One of my classmates, Pam, and one of the young men from her church were trying to get a college and career group started. They needed to birth a nucleus and planned an outing to a local college that Saturday to hear an author speak. After the convocation at the college, they planned to go to their church for refreshments and fellowship. Pam invited me and five other girls from our dormitory to go, and her male friend invited six guys from their church. I said no to the invitation. It seemed too contrived for my style or taste.

The Friday of that weekend arrived. After getting dinner in the hospital cafeteria, I walked back through the adjoining tunnel, entered the dormitory, climbed the stairs to the second floor and went directly to my room. I grabbed my textbook and plopped down on my bed with my back against the wall. I hadn't been reading long, when I heard a knock at the door.

"Come on in," I yelled.

My friend DJ, wearing hair curlers and a bathrobe and carrying a book,

walked in. She jumped up on my desk and while swinging her legs back and forth, said, “Mare, I just finished this great book. Have you read it yet? I know you’re going to love it.”

I looked at the book title and said no, but I recognized the name of the author. He was the speaker scheduled to address the college convocation I had been invited to. DJ didn’t stay in my room long. On her way out she left the book lying on my desk for me to read when I had time. Despite my resolve to study, the book called me. Before very many moments, I put my textbook down and picked up the book about a life-changing experience with small groups in the church. I read the book straight through, finishing it after midnight. The next morning, I thought, *I’ve got to hear this author speak, but how am I going to get to the college?* My next thought was, *Swallow your pride and go ask Pam if it isn’t too late to join her group.*

I went to her room and sheepishly said, “I’ve changed my mind. If there’s still space, do you care if I come along tonight?”

Pam replied in the same enthusiastic and warm manner that marked her life, “Oh that’s just wonderful. I’m so glad you’re going to be part of the group tonight.”

Although I don’t remember much of being at the college and anything the author said, my memory vividly stored pictures of sitting in a circle on the floor of the fellowship hall of the church. Howard Stone sat at eleven o’clock in the circle. He had brown hair and wore glasses. He was wearing a plaid shirt and a green sweater with the words “University of Minnesota” on the left shoulder. The sound of his voice was rich and pleasant.

Before we left that evening, Howard engaged me in some small talk. He was a few inches taller than me, slim with broad shoulders and a narrow waist. His demeanor was kind and gentle. He had a nice smile. But, when I crawled into bed that night, I didn’t give Howard a second thought.

The group that had assembled that Saturday evening began to meet regularly and grew in numbers. One of the other guys in the group asked me out twice that fall. He took me to see the Chicago Black Hawks play the Minnesota North Stars, and he took me to a Simon and Garfunkel concert at a private college in Minneapolis. In addition to planning special dates, he was fun to be with. I was disappointed he didn't ask me out again.

Then, during November our group went rollerskating. One of my classmates, Lea, accompanied me, and someone from the group swung by our dorm and took us with them to the rink. Once we arrived, Lea and I split up. Later that evening I decided I'd better find a ride back to school. Knowing Lea liked Howard and wanted to get to know him better, I sought him out and asked if there was room in the car he came in for Lea and myself. He said he had come with Ed and that there was room for us with them. I found Lea and said, "We can ride back with Howard and Ed." She looked surprised and told me she had already asked someone else for a ride.

When it was time to leave, Howard came to get me. To my chagrin, there were only going to be four of us in the car. Ed and the girl he liked got in the front seat. *Oh great*, I thought as I climbed in the back seat with Howard. *He's going to think I'm chasing him*. I felt very awkward and angry with Lea and myself for not communicating better with one another. I had a long ride ahead with a guy I hardly knew. Ed and Jane were talking intimately alone, and it was obvious that Howard and I weren't going to be included in their conversation. In spite of those negative thoughts and feelings, the ride back to school went all too quickly. I soon learned that Howard was easy to talk with and that we had much in common. We found out we both enjoyed history, nature, and reading. We discussed C.S. Lewis' Mere Christianity. Howard recommended Lewis's Narnia Chronicles. I learned he was graduating from the University with a history major in December and going to seminary in Illinois in January. When I arrived back at the dorm on that dark, cold night, I felt warmed by the satisfaction of having made a new

friend.

There wasn't much time left that semester to get to know Howard. December came quickly. His mother hosted a graduation open house for him at their home. Some of us from the college and career group dropped in to congratulate him. I hadn't talked with him since the ride home from rollerskating, and there were too many people at his party to have more than a few words with him. It was soon time for Christmas break and a trip home to Michigan. When I returned to St. Paul in January, Howard had already moved to Illinois.

Checking my mailbox in the dormitory was a daily ritual, even though there were rarely any letters waiting for me. Sometimes there was a letter from Mom with news from home. One day in January there was a letter with handwriting I didn't recognize on the envelope. I opened it up and discovered it was from Howard. I ran down the hall to Ruth's room. I opened her door and breathlessly told her, "I got a letter from Howard!"

"Really," she replied. "So did Lea and I." Deflated somewhat, I compared my letter with hers and Lea's. *Okay, I thought. I'm not special to him, but I'm still glad to hear from him and to be one of his girlfriends.*

For a while he continued to write to all three of us. We giggled as conspirators more than once, wondering what he would think if he knew we read each other's letters. As winter progressed his letters to the other girls stopped arriving, but his letters to me began to come more often. I have always said he kept writing me because I returned his letters and Lea and Ruth didn't.

One evening in March I was studying with Lea in her room. We had one phone in the hallway of each floor in the dormitory. Someone from the hallway screamed, "Hey, Mary, you have a phone call."

I looked at Lea quizzically and then left to pick up the phone. My family and I didn't make long distance phone calls. It was a luxury we couldn't

afford. So on the way to answer, I wondered and worried about what might be wrong at home.

“Hello. It’s Mary,” I said.

My heart skipped a beat when the voice at the other end said, “Hi. It’s Howard. How are you?”

We chatted a short while, and then he told me he was coming home for the weekend. “I have a lot to do, but I really want to see you. I thought maybe I could kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. Would you go with me to my Luther League on Saturday night? That way I could see all my friends there and you could meet them. They’ve meant a lot to me and my faith.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’d love to.” After telling me what time he’d pick me up, he said good-bye.

I counted the days until the weekend. I felt nervous getting ready to see him on Saturday. I wanted to look nice and decided to wear my green plaid wool skirt and vest with nylons and my short green pumps. The initial greeting in the dorm lobby was somewhat awkward, but we soon relaxed and adjusted to communicating

face to face rather than in a letter. I marveled at how natural and comfortable I felt with this wonderful young man. I felt honored to be with him and enjoyed my evening with him and his friends.

In spite of intense academic pressures for both of us that semester, we continued to write long letters frequently. Oh how I have wished that I had kept those letters. They contained growing evidence of our common interests and goals and our deepening friendship.

That spring I decided to spend the summer in St. Paul. I could make more money working as a practical nurse in Minnesota than as a nurse’s aide in Michigan (since my home state didn’t allow RN students to work as practical nurses after their first year of schooling, like the state of Minnesota did). The experience of functioning in a nurse’s role was also

good preparation for my third and senior year of the diploma program I was in. Knowing Howard would be in St. Paul for the summer made my decision even more appealing.

Two

Summer arrived with the needed break from study. My friend Diana and I were fortunate to get jobs as practical nurses at the hospital we had done clinicals in that spring. We were further blessed to rent a room in the home of the Director of Nursing. The Director's home was across the street from the Park overlooking the river and city and a short walk from the hospital on the next block to the east. We virtually had the house to ourselves since the Director worked twelve to sixteen hour days and went home to Wisconsin on weekends.

Early that June on a hot and humid Saturday our college and career group met at the lake home of one of the church families for a picnic. Howard was there. It was the first time I'd seen him since our Saturday evening outing to the Luther League in March. I was surprised and pleased when Howard asked me to take a walk around the lake alone with him. We must have talked about many things, but before the walk was over, Howard defined our relationship for the summer. "Mary, I'm not ready for a serious relationship. I want to see you this summer and get to know you better, but let's just be friends." Although the relationship had begun to feel like a romance via our letters and although I was disappointed, I agreed we would see each other as "just friends." His friendship was precious to me.

One of my classmates, Annie, was from the Congo. The previous fall she had asked me to help her teach Sunday School at her small black church in St. Paul. Over that summer I continued to teach the children and worship with that black congregation. Howard had some black friends at seminary and had a growing interest in inner-city ministry. It was one of the concerns and interests we shared in common. I invited him to attend my church with me. My dear black pastor took a

shine to my white friend and mentored him. He even let Howard preach in his pulpit. What a loving, godly and gracious deed it was for this pastor to let a young, white seminary student preach in his church. Howard and I were the only white folks in the entire congregation. In

those years, even now, I doubt two blacks in an all white church would have been as welcomed and as loved as we were there.

I was scheduled to work every other Sunday. Even though I had not asked for evening shifts, I did not work one Sunday day shift that entire summer. That meant I taught Sunday School and worshiped every week. My Director of Nursing knew of my church ministry. I've always believed she intervened to make sure I was off on Sunday mornings. What she probably didn't realize was that she was supporting a blooming romance between a young seminary student and a young student nurse. For over the summer these students who were "just friends" were learning to love each other. Howard later told me he admired the way I cared for the church children and decided I'd make a good mother someday. On the other hand, his love and compassion for our friends at church deepened my respect for him.

Diana had an old pink and white Chevrolet that we affectionately referred to as "Nellie." We walked to work but needed Nellie's help to shop and socialize away from home. One day we got into the car to get some groceries. Diana turned the key but nothing happened. Multiple attempts to get Nellie going were unsuccessful.

"What are we going to do, Mare?" Diana groaned.

Neither of us knew anything about cars. In desperation we decided to call the Stone brothers. Maybe Howard or Den would know what was wrong. Diana didn't have any money for repairs so we prayed the problem would be minor.

It was evening when I called Howard and said, "Diana's car won't start. Would you and Den come over and see what you think is wrong?"

It wasn't long and they arrived in their dad's car. Den was enthusiastic and anxious to help, but Howard seemed in a hurry, distracted and slightly irritated. While they looked at the car, I thought, *What's up with Howie? He's acting like a jerk. Why did he come over, if he doesn't want to help?* Later I found out that we had called Howard away from a

Minnesota Twins baseball game he'd been watching on TV. Neither Den nor Howard had any idea what was wrong with Diana's car. These young men were scholars not mechanics. They left shortly after arriving. Diana and I went back into the house. She sat on the edge of her bed and looked forlornly over at me where I sat on the edge of mine facing her.

As I raised my shoulders and shook my head with an I'm-so-sorry-but-I'm-clueless-about-what-to-do response in her direction, I noticed her suddenly look like a light bulb had been turned on.

"Mare, I think the car is out of gas," she exclaimed.

Bingo, all she needed was to fill the empty tank, and Nellie purred like a kitten. Oh, how we laughed together and wondered how we could possibly ever

face the guys, if they found out that we had asked for help with a car that only needed fuel.

After that incident, I wondered about the meaning of Howard's irritable behavior, which I hadn't liked at all that evening. I concluded that when Howie had set an agenda, like watching the baseball game, getting interrupted was difficult, in spite of his love for others. Knowing all I know about him now, I realize he was irritable because he felt intimidated and inadequate about motors and anything mechanical. His lack of aptitude for engines didn't hurt my opinion of him. I respected the man who was as proud of his library of books as other men were proud of their cars and tools. What did hurt my opinion of him was a tendency to rigidity and selfishness. The knight was human after all. I was no longer infatuated with him, but I remembered that my psychology instructor had said, "We like people because of, but love them in spite of." I had a growing consciousness of liking Howard for many reasons, and as I became aware of his weaknesses, I realized I loved him, too.

My universe shifted mid summer when Howard asked me out on a date. I thought he looked handsome when he picked me up to take me to the

movie *Romeo and Juliet*. More dates followed, but what stands out in my memory was that first kiss. He must have spent at least fifteen minutes on the way back to my home asking for permission to kiss me good night. I thought he was so respectful and tender.

One August night while we held hands walking in the moonlight in the Park, Howard said, “Mary, I love you. I can’t set a date yet, but will you marry me?”

I squeezed his hand and sighed, “I love you too. I want to marry you, and I’ll wait.”

We lingered under the starry sky as long as we could. He kissed me good night at my door and then drove home.

I went into my bedroom. Although Diana was already in bed, she was still awake. Sleepily she asked, “Did you and Howie have a nice evening?”

“He told me he loves me, Diana,” I seriously replied.

Fully awake now, Diana asked, “When are you going to get married?”

“We’re not sure. He has two to three years of seminary left so it won’t be for another two to three years,” I answered her. Then I shared more of the details and plans with the girlfriend who was my trusted confidant.

As she put her head on her pillow, Diana said, “Wow, Mare. That’s so cool. I’m so happy for you.”

I lay awake a long time in the dark that night enjoying the contentment of knowing I loved a special man who loved me too.

September arrived, and I returned to the dormitory to my final year of nursing school. Howard was anxious to make our last month memorable before he

returned to Illinois. One Saturday afternoon he took me to see the U of M play USC. Even having it rain during the entire first half didn’t take

away from the joy of spending an autumn day with my beloved. Another crisp Saturday evening we went to the fieldhouse of a private college in St. Paul for a hootenanny. The final weekend before he left arrived too quickly. We took a bittersweet walk around Lake Phalen under a harvest moon. With our arms wrapped tightly around each other's waist, we discussed our hopes and dreams and prepared to be separated.

Three

Howard returned to Illinois and resumed his seminary studies. We bridged our geographical separation again with letters that were written frequently, in spite of intense studies and schedules.

He came home for a weekend in October. He met me at my dorm where I had reserved one of the rooms in the lounge area. It gave us a private place to talk.

As we discussed goals, I asked, “Howie, what’s your primary goal in life?”

This man who normally thought slowly and spoke deliberately, replied instantly, “To be the man God wants me to be.”

I was impressed by the fact his goal was so clarified and focused on character and being rather than doing or achieving. Some seminary students might have said to have a large church with a big budget. I thanked God that the arms around me belonged to a man after God’s heart.

That November when my birthday came, Den called and said, “When can I stop by the dorm? I have a gift for you from Howard.”

He brought me a red rose in a beautiful cut glass vase that Howard had purchased ahead of time and a birthday card that had been previously signed by my thoughtful fiancé. I felt cherished.

I thanked Den for playing deliveryman for his older brother.

“You’re welcome, Mary. I think I should give you a kiss from Howard, too.”

I blushed, then laughed, and said, “You’d better go home now, Den.”

I didn’t remember my father ever wishing my mother a Happy Birthday or giving her a gift. Birthday surprises and presents were not something I

took for granted that November so long ago.

Over Christmas break Howard traveled to Michigan to meet my family for the first time. We were all gathered at the home of my brother Tom, the oldest of my

siblings. Howard was visiting with Tom's daughter Marcia, and I was sitting across the room facing them. Tom walked behind Howard, pointed to him and mouthed the word Jack across the room to me. I nodded my head yes. Jack, another of my six brothers, had been kind and protective of me as I grew up. He had been my hero. In many ways Howard was similar to Jack. In less than an hour of meeting him, Tom had noted the similarity and had understood my measure of a man had been set by Jack. Until that moment I had not been consciously aware of it myself. I had wanted a life-long mate like Jack, and I wanted to share the kind of friendship with my spouse that Jack shared with his wife, Chris.

The lyrics to a pop song (the title of which I have been unable to identify) back then said, "I saw a quiet man who had a gentle way...And if I had to choose again, I would still choose you." There had been quiet men in my life with gentle ways; among them were my paternal grandfather and my brothers Tom and Jack. God had again blessed me with another quiet man with gentle ways. If I had to choose again, I would still choose Howard.

That winter and following spring some of the dialog in our letters centered on when we should get married. We disagreed. I wanted to be married as soon as I graduated. "Mary," he wrote, "if we wait another year, we could save money for a car, and I'd only have one year of school left afterward." He was set in his decision, and I could not change his mind. We set our wedding date for June 1970. I resolved myself to another year of letters after my graduation. I was thankful we would be able to spend time together during the coming summer.

Four

Summer started with my graduation ceremony, which was held in a church near the hospital and dormitory. Our class had voted on the uniforms we wore that day. We looked lovely in our white, freshly starched caps, matching white uniforms, white nylons, and white shoes, as we each walked down the aisle carrying one long stemmed red rose. I had wanted to be a nurse since I had been twelve. The day was a dream come true for me. Having my mother, father, and little sister in the audience, as well as Howard and his parents, added to the sweetness of my joy.

After the ceremony, my friend Jeri and I were greeted by one of the representatives from our denomination's Women's Organization. She gave each of us a white leather New Testament. The inscription inside mine read, "To Mary Jane on her graduation from Mounds-Midway School of Nursing from the American Baptist Women of Michigan." I treasured that gift. A year later, I made a satin cover for it. A white gardenia was attached to that satin cover, with other white gardenias trailing over the edge, as I carried my white New Testament down our wedding aisle, instead of a bridal bouquet.

Hugs and goodbyes to friends ended the chapter in my life marked "Nursing School," and the chapter marked "Working Adult: Professional Nurse" commenced that afternoon. A favorite quote of mine from Peter Marshall was proven true. The quote went something like this: "Dreams carried in one's heart for many years, if they are dreams which have God's approval, have a way of suddenly materializing."

The usual graduation snapshots were taken before my excitement was replaced with anxiety over introductions that needed to be made.

"Mom and Dad, I want you to meet Howard's parents, Olga and Elmer."

Howard said, "Mom and Dad, these are Mary's parents, Thelma and Maurice."

After these formalities, we left the church and went to Howard's home. My future mother-in-law was a gracious hostess and made my family feel welcome over a meal at her table. After my parents left to return to their motel, Howard took me to the apartment that three friends and I had just rented. As we sat in the car in the parking lot, Howard surprised me with two graduation gifts.

"Oh, Howie, I love it," I exclaimed as I carefully removed a lovely gold locket from a jewelry box.

The second gift was a set of books. "It's the Narnia Chronicles by Lewis, Mary. Remember when we talked about them?" Howard said. "I think you're really going to enjoy reading them."

"Thanks so much" I replied, as I hugged him. We parted with a good night kiss, the first of many given in that parking lot that summer of '69.

I began my career as an RN at a hospital on the east side of St. Paul. Most of the time I was able to get a ride to the hospital with one of my roommates, but sometimes I had to work when they didn't. In that situation I walked several miles to the hospital or called a cab. I loved my job and the people I worked with. Life was good. Howard was working at the same warehouse where he had worked for many summers while going to college and to seminary.

Howard attempted to teach me how to play tennis. He took no pity on my novice status. I was surprised with how competitive he was. Sometimes we played ping pong in his parent's basement. He was wicked at that sport, and the score was ridiculously one sided in his favor. In our spare time we also worked through some marriage preparation studies. We discussed the questions and wrote our answers in a notebook together. On Sundays we worshipped together at our black church in the city, when I wasn't scheduled for a day shift.

In July Howard joined his family for their yearly week at a resort on Whitefish Lake.

I took the bus after work on Friday and met them up north for the weekend. Howard wanted me to see the spot where he had made so many rich childhood memories. The unseasonably cold weather that Saturday and Sunday was documented in the

photographs showing all of us wearing sweatshirts and jackets. What is it they say about Minnesota? If you don't like the weather, stay another day and it will change. In spite of the cold, we enjoyed walking in the woods and playing shuffleboard.

One weekend in August we drove down to Deerfield, Illinois. I stayed with Howard's friends, Den and RuthAnn, at their apartment on the seminary campus. I liked RuthAnn immediately, as she confided with a twinkle in her eyes, "Mary, I invited Howard over and fed him. We told him how Den's grades improved after our wedding. We did our best to get him to marry you this summer!" How fun it was to learn that they had been my allies before meeting me. The four of us were forming a friendship that has lasted a lifetime, multiplying the joys and providing mutual support during difficulties and heartache.

Howard picked me up at Den and RuthAnn's Saturday morning. We drove to the station, parked the car and took the El train downtown to the Chicago Loop. We held hands, in spite of the hot, humid weather, as we walked in the city from the station to a large brick building that housed multiple shops. The lobby was dim and the air felt cool as we made our way to the elevator. On one of the upper stories a Jewish proprietor owned a jewelry shop. He was a wise, old businessman who knew his market. He offered savings to seminary students who were known to buy engagement rings on lay away and to get married before they graduated. There were several seminaries in the Chicago area. I'm not sure if he aggressively advertised or if he benefited by word of mouth testimonials alone. Nonetheless, he had a dependable source of buyers. He had fun as he engaged us in a conversation. "How did you meet," he wanted to know and "how did you fall in love?" He delighted us with his own love story. Howard made the final payment on my diamond. The proprietor looked on with pleasure as Howard put the engagement ring on my

finger.

“Oh, Howie, it’s beautiful” I exclaimed as I held my hand out and up in the sunlight, streaming through the window, and admired the diamond and how it sparkled. I liked its simplicity and thought Howard had chosen the perfect ring.

I alternated staring at my ring and at Howard on our happy ride back to the northern suburb. There was a sense of wonder there always is when one is grateful for the undeserved and surprising blessings of God.

Saying goodbye to Howard in September was less painful, knowing the months of separation would pass quickly with studies, work, and a wedding to plan.

Finding a ride to work was becoming more problematic, and the cold and snows of winter in Minnesota loomed ahead. It had also become apparent that planning a wedding in my home church was going to be a challenge from out of state. With reluctance, I decided it would be better to move back to Mom’s and Dad’s. I was able to get a job at the hospital in my hometown, and my parents were glad to let me use their car to commute to work. Living at home again and starting a new job were big adjustments. I missed St. Paul and all my friends there. My faith and Howard’s letters were a source of help and strength.

Howard and I had our first major conflict during Christmas break. He called from Illinois to tell me when he’d arrive in Michigan. I learned he planned to spend a long weekend with me at the end of his break right before returning to seminary. I didn’t resent his spending Christmas with his parents for the last time, but I had expected him to spend the entire final week with me, since it was going to be the last extended time we would have together before the wedding. My response was to swallow my hurt and anger and to finish the conversation as if nothing was wrong. After the phone conversation was over, I ruminated, and as I ruminated, I wondered why he didn’t want to spend as much time as he could with me. I began to doubt the strength of his love for me and

questioned the validity of his attachment. I didn't know whether marrying him was a good idea after all. I felt confused. I called him the next day and said, "I don't think we should get married. I'm not sure you love me." Since I had not verbalized any objections or insecurities in our previous conversation, he was taken off guard. The phone conversation resolved nothing. He called back later and said he'd still come see me so that we could discuss the issue in more depth and face to face. Christmas was miserable for both of us.

When he arrived in Michigan, we had a long talk. He explained that, since I was going to be working that week, he thought we'd have little time to be together. In his mind it just made sense to come on the weekend on my days off. Although my father was an interesting man, he had not mastered the art of dialogue. Conversations with him were mostly one sided. Howard tactfully talked around the matter of not having wanted to listen to my dad all week.

With pain in his eyes and longing on his face, he said, "Mary, I really love you and want you to be my wife. I didn't mean to hurt you. Please forgive me."

I looked at him intently and saw truth in his face. "You're forgiven Howard. I love you, too, and want to be your wife. I'm sorry I doubted your love."

On an intellectual level I understood how he had made his decision about how much time to spend with me. On an emotional level I never got it. I still don't, but I'm glad I didn't let it keep me from marrying him. It was the first of countless times we'd be up against this universal conflict between the sexes - the way we process decisions intellectually versus emotionally. Like the title of a book published years ago, my man was from mars, and I was from Venus.

I am not particularly proud of how I had behaved, although it was congruent with my level of maturity, or more aptly, my lack of maturity. What a passive, insecure person I was. Swallowing my feelings, denying

my anger, and then over reacting were habitual behaviors. It would take years of being loved in my marriage to learn to be honest, transparent, and to deal with issues assertively in a timely manner. Howard didn't seemingly get angry very often. Looking back I think he had a right to be angry over how poorly I had managed my feelings and our conflict. It was his patience, though, that drew me to him. A forceful, confrontive style at that time in my life would have repelled me. With its resolution, the conflict strengthened our relationship. We had weathered our first storm together.

In March I flew to Minnesota one weekend for two bridal showers and to see Howard who was able to get a ride to St. Paul with a seminary friend. I arrived early on Friday. He and Carl left the Chicago area in the afternoon after classes were over. Diana gave me a shower at her apartment in the evening. It was probably around 10 o'clock when I returned to Mom and Dad Stone's home. It had begun snowing that afternoon and turned into one of those March blizzards we are used to in the Midwest. I began to get worried about Howard around midnight. His parents finally went to bed, while I tried to rest on the living room sofa. I prayed and tried not to fret about his safety. I was beginning to understand how vulnerable love makes us. Around four A.M. I finally heard him at the back door. I breathed a prayer of thanksgiving and met him in the kitchen with a fierce bear hug.

Over the next few months, the letters we wrote to each other chronicled discussions and decisions about the wedding and our first year of marriage. We prayed and trusted God for guidance and for provisions. We were writing the first chapters in our story of God's faithfulness to Howard and Mary. In May Howard wrote, "Mary, we have so much to thank God for: the used car with so few miles at such a good price; being able to house sit for the summer without paying rent; your being able to work again in St. Paul for a few months; and my summer job at the warehouse."

I continued to work at the hospital and completed our wedding plans while Howard attended classes and finished his semester of seminary.

Before we knew it, June arrived.

Five

June 20, 1970, brought blue skies and warm sunshine. Howard and his brothers played frisbee in my parents' backyard during the afternoon. My bridesmaids and I went to the beauty parlor to have our hair styled. Toward the end of that lovely day, we gathered together for a candlelight service in the beautiful, old church where I had been dedicated and baptized. One miracle was God giving Howard and me to one another. My family was more than surprised that my father, who never went to church and didn't own a suit, agreed to come to church, give me away, and wear a tuxedo. That was another miracle. My long, white satin gown swayed softly, as I clung to Daddy's arm and walked down the aisle, as in a dream, to meet my handsome groom. I carried my small New Testament in one of my hands. The white gardenias adorning the top and cascading over the edge of it filled the air around me with sweet fragrance.

After saying our vows and lighting our unity candle, we held hands and gazed into each other's eyes, as my friend Jerrie sweetly sang the old hymn that expressed our hearts' desires:

"May the mind of Christ, our Savior, Live in us from day to day, By His love and pow'r controlling All we do and say.

May the word of God dwell richly In our hearts from hour to hour, So that all may see we triumph Only through His pow'r.

May the peace of God our Father Rule our lives in ev'rything, That we may be calm to comfort Sick and sorrowing.

May the love of Jesus fill us As the waters fill the sea; Him exalting, self-abasing- This is victory.

May we run the race before us, Strong and brave to face the foe, Looking only unto Jesus As we onward go.

May His beauty rest upon us As we seek the lost to win, And may they forget the channels, Seeing only Him."

We had a simple reception with cake and punch in the church fellowship hall following the ceremony. After joyfully accepting the congratulations and best wishes of our family and friends, we walked out into the night to find a gentle rain falling. The air smelled clean and new, and the moisture on our faces was refreshing.

Our souls had already been intertwined in our friendship, and we had just placed our relationship within the protection of our public and legal promises to one another. Oh, the wonder of that first night as husband and wife. I marveled over how natural the privacy and intimacy felt.

The following morning we surprised our families by showing up for breakfast. After we loaded our blue Chevy and said goodbye, we headed off for northern Minnesota for a week at Cross Lake. The private cabin we rented was cute and cozy, but we couldn't get the water heater to work. Except for cold showers, the honeymoon was perfect. Well, maybe, there was one other less than perfect aspect of that week. Howard beat me eight or nine times playing Parcheesi. Being alone with the leisure to enjoy each other, the sounds of loons and waves lapping the shore, and the smell of pines evoked deep contentment. Work beckoned us back to the Cities when the week was up.

I was pleased during my first week of orientation to overhear my former head nurse telling someone, "Mary's a good nurse. I'm glad to have her back on my unit." Howard quickly settled into his old routine at the warehouse. As we chartered new waters as husband and wife, having familiar jobs reduced some of the stress.

Howard's neighbor was glad to have us house sit for the few months we were in St. Paul while she traveled all summer. We had accepted the offer as a provision from God. Mom and Dad Stone were respectful of our independence, even though they were next door.

Neither Howard nor I were handy in the kitchen. Being a traditionalist and believing meals were my responsibility, I attempted to learn how to cook. There were some mishaps that summer. For the most part, Howard

was patient. I don't remember him saying more than once, "My mother didn't do it that way." My verbal and non-verbal responses eliminated that message from him rather quickly.

Of, course, there were the usual adjustments necessitated by trying to merge two different family cultures into one. Perhaps the most humorous example was this:

"Mary, I wanted two sandwiches." To which I replied, "I gave you two sandwiches." "No you didn't. You gave me four," said my exasperated husband.

We were both surprised to learn that more than one definition of a sandwich existed. To his mother it meant one slice of bread cut in two, which was half a sandwich by my mother's definition.

We were soon challenged by the need for me to find a job and for us to find an apartment to rent in the Chicago area. Since we were only going to have one car, meeting these two needs required an apartment within walking distance to the hospital and the hospital and the apartment not too far away from the seminary campus. Howard recommended Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge to me. I applied and was able to set up an interview. We drove to the Chicago area one weekend in July. At the interview I was offered a job, which I accepted. There were many apartment complexes in the neighborhood. We looked at several and signed a lease on a one-bedroom apartment three blocks from the hospital. The drive to the seminary was fifteen miles. We had prayed over these needs and sensed that God had guided and blessed us.

At the end of August, we packed all our wedding gifts and loaded all our "early attic" furniture, as we called our hand-me-downs and cast-off stuff, in the U- Haul trailer. Mom and Dad Stone traveled with us and helped us get settled into the apartment. They liked our apartment, but Mom was aghast when she learned how much rent we were paying. "Howard is going to have to quit seminary," she gasped. After the four of us had unpacked and arranged everything, we had a prayer of

blessing, and then Mom and Dad hugged us and said goodbye. I'm sure they felt anxious as they left us, wondering how we would manage marriage, work, school, studies and finances. Discoveries and challenges awaited us as the honeymoon months ended and we began the earnest work of constructing a marriage.

Six

One of the early challenges was my migraine headaches that had developed during the summer after our wedding. That fall while I was adjusting to my new job and home, my headaches became more frequent and incapacitating. Howard wondered what had happened to the healthy girl he had married. He treated me with tender concern. I consulted with a specialist who immediately took me off my birth control pills. The headaches improved dramatically.

I learned my scholarly husband was the “absent-minded professor type.” He collected papers, magazines and books, which were stacked in an unorganized way in piles on and around his desk in the living room. He paid the bills that fall but missed one that was lost on his desk. Second notices and late statements made me “uptight.” He was starting to see how controlling I became when anxious, but he willingly let me take over the responsibility of writing the checks and mailing out the payments.

He learned I was a fussy housekeeper. I was working full time and needed to rest on my days off. I struggled with letting go of my perfectionism at home. I learned that moving his piles of paper and study materials made him anxious, even

though he liked a clean and neat living space. Cleaning up his piles or throwing any of his papers away was definitely a boundaries violation.

He learned I liked to talk late at night when we were lying next to each other in the dark. I raised philosophical questions, shared my opinions, and asked him what he thought. “Why is there so much hatred and violence in the Middle East? I don’t understand. Why can’t they forgive and make a lasting peace?”

“It’s complicated, Mare. I don’t know,” was his sleepy reply. It was obvious I wasn’t going to be able to engage him in a conversation. I angrily rolled over on my side with my back to him. Howard had the

ability to literally fall asleep in the middle of a sentence. My angry non-verbal behaviors were lost on him. After many months, I became a wiser wife and accepted the fact that talking when he was tired was useless. Such were the lessons learned as the leaves changed color and fell to the ground before winter blew in.

On a cold and starry December night, we parked the car on campus and walked hand in hand to the dining hall where a Christmas party was being given for the seminary students and their wives. I wore a pink wool dress that I had made, and thought my husband looked handsome wearing a turtleneck sweater underneath his wool sports coat. I watched him proudly as he interacted warmly with his friends. Howard introduced me to one of his classmates. During our conversation with this young man, he oddly blurted out to Howard, “She loves you more than you love her.” Why did he say that? On what observation had he made that conclusion? I didn’t know then, and I don’t know now. Was that man’s perception true? Did he seed a thought in my suggestible mind? In any case, the truth remained that one issue that had already emerged for me was feeling loved in my marriage. The bride was an insecure child in many ways. My expectations were unrealistic. Eventually I learned that only God can love like God and that Howard, like myself or anyone else, can only love the best he knows how.

Howard did love me. He was a man who loved the familiar. Even in the most intimate relationship in his life, deep bonding took time. His attachment to me grew within his commitment to me.

The following year the movie, “Love Story” was released. One Friday night we went to the theater to see it. I cried during the ending of the movie when the young wife died from leukemia. When we got home, Howard held me tightly, as he tearfully whispered in my ear, “Mary, I don’t know what I would do if I lost you.”

As we were making these discoveries and adjustments, I continued working as a nurse, and Howard continued his journey toward the completion of his Masters of Divinity Degree.

Seven

While Howard was finishing seminary, we attended a church on Chicago's south side. It was an hour commute each direction from our apartment in Niles. We went for worship on Sundays and to tutor neighborhood children on Monday evenings. The white pastor, Sam, was Howard's friend from seminary. Sam's wife, Jane, and most of the congregation were black. Howard was an intern at the church, as part of his seminary requirements. He preached a few times and helped out in other areas as well. The people in that congregation were an important part of our lives.

Sam and Jane exemplified Christ as they loved us and their church. One Sunday morning while Jane was waiting to deliver a nearly full term baby that had died in her womb, I noticed her at the back of the sanctuary before worship began. She was visually scanning the people assembled. She then abruptly left the church. She returned much later, well into the worship hour, with an elderly, frail white woman holding onto her arm. Rachel had no family, and no one in the congregation had remembered to pick her up for church that morning. Even in her grief, Jane was thinking of others and caring for them. That sacrifice of love, that Jane made when her heart was aching, touched me profoundly. I wanted to be like her.

Our friend Bob attended this church with us. Bob worked on campus where Howard went to school and lived in the northern suburbs also. We often commuted to church together. Bob knew Howard to be a slow and deliberate conversationalist. On our commute home after he had heard Howard preach the first time, Bob confessed that he had doubted Howard's ability to speak publicly. With wonder in his voice, he said, "when you get up there, the Holy Spirit takes over." The feedback was treasured by Howard because it confirmed that this call he felt was a thing of the Spirit and not of the flesh.

Although we had a burden for urban ministry, we believed we needed to be open to wherever God called us. During his last semester of

seminary, Howard notified each of the district superintendents in his denomination of his availability. We were trusting our Good Shepherd to open a door for us in the place of His choosing.

That fall my headaches returned with a vengeance. I consulted with a trusted internist who admitted patients to the unit I worked on. “Mary, I know your type. I get migraines also. People like you and me function beautifully during crises, but we get stressed anticipating the crises or in the aftermath of the crisis.” He went on to challenge me by saying, “What are you anticipating or recovering from?”

As I left the office, I prayed: “Isn’t that just like you, Lord, to send me to a doctor who would also have migraines and understand so perfectly what I’m going through. Thanks so much and please help me know what it is I’m so stressed about. What am I anticipating or recovering from?” Immediately came the thought: *being*

a pastor’s wife. What an “Ah-ha” moment that was. I felt so unworthy, unprepared and anxious about the new role I would be assuming. As I took the medicine the doctor had prescribed and prayed over the insight God had given me, the headaches improved. After a few months, they were rare.

Winter was fast approaching and so was the completion of Howard’s studies. We were beginning to be anxious about his not having been hired by a church. Then, one evening after dinner the phone rang. Howard picked it up, and I heard him say, “Montana?” I realized he was talking to someone from a church search committee. *Not Montana*, I thought. The phone call led to plans to candidate at a church in western Montana. We flew out of O’Hare airport and changed planes in Bozeman where I was miserable, vomiting in the bathroom with a severe headache.

The weekend was a whirlwind. We were introduced to many new people we liked. The church was small and had a storefront appearance. The parsonage was a large two-story brick house with a back porch that

looked out on a mountain with an elevation of 9,000 feet and which was snow-capped most of the year. The parsonage was next door to the church in a town with a population of 900. On Sunday after church there was a potluck dinner for the entire congregation. After everyone had finished eating, people were given the opportunity to ask the pastoral candidate questions. After Howard fielded an especially controversial query in a neutral manner, I heard one of the men say, “a politician.”

We flew home verbalizing ambivalent feelings and seeking God’s will in the matter. As we prayed, we believed God was asking us to go there. Later that week, the church voted and extended a call to Howard who told them, “Yes, Mary and I will come.” This was a very conservative church, and they had just extended a call to a young pastor with a mustache. God must have been in it.

Before we moved to Montana, Jane gave me her copy of a book about being a pastor’s wife. I read it gladly. I don’t remember the title or any of the content. Jane’s observed life was the best preparation and counsel. When we said goodbye, she tenderly touched my hand and said, “Mary Stone, you’re no militant. You’re just a precious person.”

As we packed to leave, we didn’t know as much as we thought we knew. One fact we knew and were right about: People in the country need Jesus just as much as people in the city. We left the congested suburbs and the urban ministry of a metropolis and drove to a small town in a rural ranching and logging community.

Eight

Moving to a small town of 900 was a culture shock. Having grown up in St. Paul, Howard thought my hometown of 20,000 was small. At that point in our

history, he redefined his terms. My birthplace had been a city after all. We had been living so near O'Hare airport that conversation in our little apartment had needed to be suspended when planes were overhead. We now heard cattle bellowing in nearby fields when the windows in our parsonage were open.

A few months after we arrived, one of the families in our church invited us to dinner. They lived many miles out of town on a ranch. As we conversed after a wonderful meal, the gracious hostess said, "Pastor, if the hustle and noise of town ever gets to be too much for you, you are welcome to come out to our place for some peace and quiet."

Howard thanked her for the kind offer. When we were barely out of their driveway on our way home, Howard commented with incredulity in his voice, "They really do think our town is noisy. Mary, the quiet has been deafening."

Culture shock was about much more than the physical environment. The social climate was very different from the Midwestern one we had been accustomed to all our lives. People were fiercely independent in their approach to life and to community in this conservative town. At the time we did not realize how change was viewed as an enemy. Although the church had called Howard, we were aware that he was scrutinized and suspect by virtue of being an outsider, having a moustache, and having a graduate degree. Difficulties emerged as Howard's goals and dreams for the church were opposed by some of the leadership. Their disagreement with Howard was not kept philosophical but became personal; they became hostile and confrontational. In retrospect, Howard later concluded, "If I had been more mature and wise, I wouldn't have pushed programs and ideas that some of the board weren't comfortable with."

As we lived through those painful days, I intellectually knew “in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purposes” (Romans 8:28). As I agonized over what possible “good” could be in our circumstances, I pleaded, “God, this would be so much easier to deal with if I just had a little glimpse of your purpose.”

One day as I repeated that plea, the still, small voice whispered, ‘That you might empathize more fully with Jane and others who are subjected to prejudice.’”

Eventually the most negative people left the church, but not before Howard had been wounded. Since I was a caretaker, I believed it was in my power and was my responsibility to make everything “okay” for him. I tried my best to comfort and to encourage him, but that was not enough to heal his broken spirit, self-esteem and confidence. I felt like a failure in my attempts to help him. I became more controlling as I tried to manage my anxiety and his. He was not ready to face the truth that his self-esteem could only be grounded in his security as a beloved son of the God of Grace and not in his work, his performance, or his success. I was not ready to face the fact that, though I am called to build him up, I am not responsible for his self-esteem.

Another issue was emerging in our relationship. Although I functioned as a caretaker, I also had a longing to be taken care of. During my upbringing I had developed a set of beliefs about masculine and feminine roles in marriage. I was sure the husband had been created by God to repair, fix, and maintain things. Women were supposed to do the housework, make meals, and do the laundry. I loved doing those things. I was willing to compromise and pay bills and balance the checkbook. On the subject of repairs my unwillingness to compromise was being challenged by the fact I had married a scholar who had no interest in repairing any- thing.

One winter night I was awakened by the abnormal noises the furnace was making. “Wake up, Honey! What’s wrong with the furnace?”

“I don’t know,” he mumbled as he rolled over and attempted to go back to sleep.

Getting emphatic, I demanded, “You’ve got to get up NOW. Something is seriously wrong with it.”

“You’re over reacting, Mary. It’ll be okay until morning. I’ll call one of the church trustees then,” Howard replied in an irritated tone as he put his head back on his pillow.

At that point I became more agitated and charged out of bed. The floor felt cold on my bare feet. Howard sat up again, now resigned to losing sleep, and snapped, “What do you want me to do?”

“Call Ben and see what he thinks.”

A few minutes later, our neighbor Ben knocked on the back door. Howard took him through the kitchen and dining room and down the steps to the cellar to look at the furnace. The belt on the fan needed to be replaced. After Ben explained what was wrong and reassured me, he went home. The climate in our bedroom was chilly for more reasons than just the air temperature when we crawled back onto bed.

Our first son, Jonathan, was born while we lived in Montana. He was due the first Monday in March. We were in the midst of a church crisis at the time. The treasurer had been paying current expenses out of special funds and had not alerted her pastor and the board until all funds were nearly depleted. We weren’t sure how or when our next paycheck would be provided. That Friday evening Howard had a wedding rehearsal. Saturday he had the wedding to officiate. Sunday he had morning and evening services to lead. Monday evening a church business meeting had been scheduled to discuss finances. All week I wondered how we might squeeze in the birth of our first child. “Lord,” I prayed, “I think it might work if I went into labor Sunday evening after the service and give birth before Howard has to be at the meeting Monday night. If You would work out the logistics of this, I’d sure appreciate it.”

I awoke Howard Sunday night shortly before midnight. “Honey, I’m in labor.” We got out of bed. I grabbed the bag I had packed, while Howie threw on

some clothes. We rushed out to the garage and didn’t take time to look at the starry night sky.

The trip to the hospital was a thirty-minute drive. As Howard began to back out of the driveway, I reassured him, “You don’t have to speed, Howie. We have time. My contractions are regular but not that close together yet.”

We made it to the hospital with plenty of time to spare. Baby boy Stone greeted the world shortly after 9:00 a.m. His daddy’s eyes were full of wonderment as he briefly held his baby boy. Then the new daddy tenderly bent down, kissed me goodbye, and returned home to call our parents and get some sleep before the scheduled business meeting that evening.

Jonathan was more than enough miracle to fill our hearts with thanksgiving and praise. Before the week passed another miracle unfolded. A beloved elderly couple in the church gave a large gift of money from their life savings to replace the special funds and restore the church to financial solvency.

I had no idea how proud the new papa was until after church the following Sunday. I had stayed home to rest between Jon’s feedings. I heard the back door bell ring around the time the morning worship service was due to be over. Puzzled, I went to the door in my bathrobe.

“Hi, Mary,” the visitor said. “Pastor told me you wouldn’t mind if I took a quick peek at the baby.”

I smiled and replied, “Sure. Just a minute.”

I went to the nursery, picked up Jonathan, and brought him to the kitchen to be admired. The visitor kept her word and left shortly through the front door. As I turned to go put Jon back in his crib, the doorbell

rang again. Howard had sent someone else over to meet his son. Then the bell rang again. It soon became apparent that as people shook hands with pastor on their way out of church, he was sending them to our home. The congregation slowly left that day by a path through the back door of the church, across the lawn, through the back door of the parsonage, through the house, and out the front door. Having not dressed for the occasion, I was exasperated to suddenly and without warning be hosting a reception line. In spite of my frustration, I soon saw the humor in the situation and became delighted with the pleasure our congregation was having in sharing our joy.

Joys also existed in the ministry. One Sunday after Howard's sermon, several people came forward to commit themselves to God's service. They went on to become lay leaders, a missionary, and a pastor. One godly, elderly man testified, "I don't know if it is Howard's preaching or my age, but the Word of God has never been dearer to me."

Howard watched a newspaper editor come to believe in Christ and then mentored him in his faith. Years later that man told Howard, "There is never a day that passes that I am not grateful for the way you disciple me in my faith and grounded me in the Scriptures."

Toward the end of our second year in Montana, we decided to make ourselves available for a call elsewhere. We trusted God to close or open doors as He saw fit. A church in rural Minnesota asked Howard to come pastor their congregation, and he accepted. We had grown to love many people and saying goodbye was painful. We were given a wonderful going away party. Nearly everyone in the church came, along with friends from the community. Many people stood up and publically shared their gratitude for how we had touched their lives. A fellow pastor's wife who was present came up to Howard afterward and said, "Howard, you caught a big fish here."

We packed and left with ambivalent hearts. We were sad to leave loved ones behind but glad to be moving back to Minnesota and nearer to our families.

Nine

The church in Minnesota was excited we accepted their call. The women had asked me what colors I liked. While they waited for us to come, they painted and papered and re-carpeted the parsonage. We arrived on a cold winter day. The two story white bungalow was framed in front with a large, tall evergreen laden with fresh snow on either side of the walk up to the front door. We were welcomed into our warm and inviting home. It looked beautiful, and I felt so grateful and honored they had incorporated my favorite colors.

We were informed that after the truck was unloaded Anna had coffee waiting for us at her house. In this old Scandinavian town we were soon to learn “coffee” meant a whole meal followed by sweets. On our way into town we had seen a sign at the grocery store advertising lutefisk for sale. There was no doubt we had come to the land of the Swedes and Norwegians.

What a contrast the culture was in rural Minnesota. In Montana we never had to guess what people were thinking. Their style had been almost “in your face” when they disagreed. In the new congregation behavior was polite and pleasant, but we never were really sure what they thought. Their style was to avoid conflict at all cost.

Howard had a group of Godly leaders who seemingly respected him but who didn't want to try anything new. Having been burned in the previous church by being too directive and assertive in his leadership style, Howard decided to approach change gently by seeding new ideas in his conversations with the church board.

In a small church the pastor and his wife had many roles. Because our salary was so small, we agreed to clean the church and mow the lawns on both the church lot and the parsonage lot for an additional paycheck each month. We both taught Sunday School. Howard did the church bulletin himself on an old mimeograph

machine that weekly tried his patience. There was no church secretary. We led the youth group. We visited newcomers and entertained them in our home. We led the young married group. Toward the end of our nearly eight years of ministry, Howard worked part-time at a grocery store, and I worked part-time as a nurse at the nursing home.

We invested deeply in the lives of several of the youth who came from homes that were dysfunctional and chaotic. Those teenagers were adopted spiritually into God's family and emotionally into our family. That group of kids met at our home every week. One Wednesday evening one of the girls came to our home for Bible Study in a distressed frame of mind. I ended up spending some one-on-one time with her privately on the landing of our staircase midway between the first and second story of our home. Jonathan, who was about four at the time, was a precocious, tender preschooler. He sat on a step beneath the young woman who sometimes babysat for him. He held a box of kleenex and handed them to her as she cried. Some of those youth are still a part of our lives. Their testimonies and ministries bring us deep joy and satisfaction. We continue to pray for them and to bless them.

Our next two sons were born during those years. James Daniel joined our family in 1976, and Joel Douglas arrived in 1978. For five years I was a stay-at-home mother and found great contentment in caring for my children and my home.

In spite of our hard work, the church did not grow. "For unless the Lord builds the house, those who labor, labor in vain" (Psalms 127:1). He called us to be obedient; the results were in His responsibility. Unfortunately, churches hire pastors to grow the church and either blame or laud them for the outcomes. Even though the board prayed with Howard, they still trusted human effort. I don't believe any of us ever called out to the Lord seeking His help and trusting His Spirit to do what flesh cannot accomplish. I wish we had known then what we know now about prayer.

Even as the congregation expected the pastor to grow the church, the

pastor and his wife had expectations for the congregation that were not being met. We were frustrated and blamed them for the status quo. They were the reason that Howard's dreams weren't being realized. God corrected our attitudes via a book, *Life Together*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He wrote with conviction, saying that when we love the dream of community more than the community itself, God mercifully destroys our dream. That idea took root in us. "Oh, God," we prayed, "please forgive for loving dreams more than people. Please help us love Your people."

Eventually the state of the church began to affect Howard's self-esteem. His self doubt grew. He was becoming more passive and dependent. As my anxiety grew, I was becoming more controlling. My control tended to make him more passive and dependent. His dependency threatened my dependency needs, making me more anxious and controlling. We were in a dangerous downward spiral and oblivious to it. We were too busy coping with life to analyze what was happening.

My mother came to help for a week after Joel's birth. At that time I was feeling very overwhelmed with the responsibilities in my life. One morning that week Howard dashed from the church across the parking lot. He ran into the parsonage and found Mom and me in the kitchen. "Mare, do you think I should put a thank you note in the bulletin regarding the work Swen has done in the church basement? Or do you think that would embarrass him?"

I went ballistic on my unsuspecting husband. "I don't know." I screeched angrily. "Make your own decisions and stop leaning on me so much. I can't take care of the boys and our home and do your work too."

Howard stared at me in shock and confusion. After mumbling "Oh...okay," he fled his home for the safety of his church study. His confusion revolved around the fact that he knew, regardless of his professional decisions, I would intrusively challenge him after the fact, if I did not agree with what he had done. Even as he needed to learn to

stop leaning on me, I needed to learn even more how to respect boundaries.

There was an uncomfortable silence in the kitchen after Howard left. Mom had witnessed our scene. Mother looked me in the eye and said, “Mary Jane, your father never asked my opinion about anything. I think you are so lucky that Howard respects your opinion and asks for it.”

Suddenly I felt embarrassed and ashamed of myself. Later I apologized to Howard in private. Although my mother meant no harm, my response to her feedback was harmful. Some needed work in our marriage was left on the back burner at that important crossroad of opportunity. My retreat from the needed work further enslaved Howard and me into a pattern that was headed for crisis.

As time passed, Howard decided he had done all he could at the church and sought another ministry opportunity. This led to a series of contacts with various churches but no calls. We felt we were on a treadmill. In my immaturity I took the closed doors as personal rejections. As a result of that and the other pressures in our life, I began to experience some depression. Since no doors were opening, Howard began to wonder if he should seek a position as an associate pastor. Because he liked teaching and because he had a passion for helping families, he wondered about being the pastor of family life in a larger church. As he prayed about that direction, he decided to return to seminary for another master’s degree in Christian Education.

His father questioned this decision saying, “Howard, you have a real gift of preaching. I don’t think you should leave the pulpit ministry.”

Although we listened respectfully, we did not carefully and prayerfully consider Dad’s counsel. Dad Stone also believed the district superintendent should not have let us stay at the church so many years because country churches as a rule didn’t grow much. My father-in-law knew that prospective churches would view the longevity of the pastorate without any significant growth in membership or budget as a

blight on Howard's resume. In a perfect world, God's people would have noted Howard's perseverance, faithfulness, and humility. They would

have sought those godly character traits in their leader. Churches weren't looking for godly leaders; they were looking for CEOs, in my opinion.

In the end I supported Howard's decision to return to seminary, even though it meant I would return to being the primary wage earner in our family. Howard applied to seminary, was accepted, and resigned from the church.

On our last Sunday afternoon on a hot August day, we were given a going away party in the cool church basement. The women served a delicious luncheon, and the table was set attractively. We hardly took any notice of the fact the party was poorly attended.

Later, we were given two revelations about those years. The first revelation was given to me in the form of a dream. I awakened one morning with a vivid drama replaying itself on the picture screen of my mind. I saw myself in the enclosed porch of the parsonage we had left. I was angrily hurling my china against the wall to the north facing the church. As the plates were smashing, I was screaming, "It's not fair. It's not fair. We worked so hard here." Second, we heard from a reliable source that the district superintendent had said he would never recommend Howard for another church. We had no idea why that would be. I thought Howard should set up an appointment with the superintendent to verify the truth of this rumor and if it was true, find out why this man felt he could not recommend Howard for another church. Howard disagreed with me and decided not to confront this issue.

Many years later, I had a personal need to explore what had transpired. I asked a couple of people, who had been part of the church, if they knew any details. I was informed that after we left the church, a few people from the congregation had gone to the superintendent and complained about Howard. It is a sad commentary on the state of the church that the

district leader did not call Howard and give him a chance to defend himself or to share his perspective on his years of ministry in that place. Sad that during the seven plus year tenure there, there had been no feedback from either the church board or the superintendent.

Many times I have been comforted by these words: “God is not unjust; He will not forget your work and the love you have shown Him as you have helped His people and continue to help them” (Hebrews 6:10).

At the time we left the church we were oblivious of the fact we were leaving on such bad terms. We faced our new adventure full of anticipation and hope.

Ten

The new adventure took us to the Twin Cities. We felt fortunate to find a roomy three-bedroom apartment less than a block from the hospital that hired me.

Our new home was on the ground floor, and our front door opened out onto the grounds with a park for our children. The grade school was only a few blocks away. Before I started my new job and Howard returned to seminary, we made the trip to Michigan to see my family.

On our way back home to Minnesota, we stopped in the Chicago area to see our good friends Den and RuthAnn. During our visit they shared that two of their old seminary friends had recently been divorced. The wife, who was a nurse, was going to marry the doctor with whom she had an affair. Knowing I was returning to work as a nurse, my dear friend RuthAnn looked at me and said, “Now, don’t you have an affair with a doctor.” At that time I interpreted her comment as meaning she couldn’t stand the pain of having another set of friends divorced. Later I wondered if she had seen me at risk, as vulnerable. Or had God spoken a word of warning to me through this saint with the gift of admonition.

The adjustment to the hospital and full-time work was difficult, but God gave me grace. I learned to love my job and the people I worked with. The adjustment was also painful for Jonathan who was in first grade. He was used to me spending some one-on-one time with him everyday. One day Jon sadly said to me, “Mom, we never have our time alone together anymore.” His lament hurt. I wanted to be a full-time wife and mom. I consoled myself by remembering that this period of our life was temporary until Howard finished seminary again. He hoped to be done in two academic years.

During my first month of work, Howard had no classes. We decided to wait another month to start daycare. This soon-to-be student thought that he would get a lot of reading done while he played “Mr. Mom.” One day after work I kicked off my shoes as soon as I came through the door,

popped down on the nearest chair, leaned back and stretched my legs out in front of me. I had barely taken one or two deep breaths of relaxation, when my exasperated husband sat down in the chair opposite me and began to unload.

“I can’t believe it,” he exclaimed. “I don’t get anything done. I get them up, feed them breakfast, clean up, and then it’s lunchtime. After they eat, I read stories, lay them down for naps, clean up, and now it’s nearly time for dinner.”

After assuring him, with as much empathy as I could muster, that I understood completely, I abruptly got up, saying, “I’m going to shower.” I needed to exit quickly and wipe the smirk off my face. How good it felt to know he had a whole new appreciation for my role as mom and homemaker.

Early one December morning the phone rang before 6:00 a.m. Howard jumped out of bed and flew to the kitchen to get the call. I heard him talking softly as I tried to calm my thoughts. *Who’d be calling so early? I wonder what’s wrong?*

Howard hung up and slowly walked into our room. As he sat down on our bed next to me, he gazed at me with tenderness and compassion. I looked up into his loving eyes, sighed, and whispered with grief, “My father is dead, isn’t he?”

“Yes, Mare,” Howie breathed as he wrapped me in his embrace.

Dad and I had talked on the phone a few weeks earlier. I had told him about the challenges of my new job, which included reading heart rhythms on telemetry strips for my patients that were being monitored in a Step Down Unit next to the Intensive Care Unit.

Daddy had said, “You’re a smart girl, Sissy. You’re going to do just fine.” As we were getting ready to hang up, he said, “I love you.” It was the only time I remember him telling me he loved me. It was the only time I remember him affirming me. The words had gone into my heart

and had begun a work of healing. Little did I know at that time, those words were God's gracious gift of closure for me. Later my older sister told me that Dad had decided to trust Jesus before his death. He had told her, "I'm a different man." She said she had seen the evidences of a changed life in him before he left us.

I flew to Michigan for the funeral. I called Howard the next day after the reviewal. Rather than ask how I was doing, he proceeded to tell me how stressed out he was caring for the boys alone.

I replied with sarcasm, "Your stress can't equal that of seeing a parent in a casket," and then I hung up on him. I felt angry and hurt by what felt like his lack of support.

A few days later while trying to help and support my grieving mother, a troubling thought intruded my consciousness. *Someday Howard will die, and I will be a widow.* The thought was accompanied by a sharp pain in my chest. I called Howard immediately and apologized for hanging up on him. He apologized for having been thoughtless.

Howard enjoyed seminary immensely. He is by nature a perpetual student and life-long reader. God gave him grace to work part-time, attend classes, study, write papers, and help me care for our children and home. He also did an internship his second year at the local church we were attending.

The apartment complex was not an ideal place to raise a family. After a year there we learned of a house that was for sale near the hospital. It was a three bedroom, white rambler with brown trim and a full basement. It needed some tender loving care in the form of elbow grease. Seeing the potential, I thought it would make a cute and cozy home. Howard's brother lent us a down payment, and in a leap of faith we bought it. The boys liked having more space and their own lawn to play in. Because we were in the same neighborhood, they didn't have to change schools, and I still walked to work. Our only car was used by Howard for his commute to his job and to seminary.

The year after Joel had been born, I had begun to experience periods of extreme fatigue and migratory joint and muscle pain. These symptoms now increased and worsened as I tried to manage and juggle responsibilities at work and at home. I did see an internist, but the work up was negative, and the symptoms were attributed to stress.

One of my coping strategies was reading. It was relaxing and provided an escape. Although the romances I was reading were sexually explicit, I rationalized my behavior. At that time, I became more attracted to a physician I worked with. I found myself fantasizing about him and justified and rationalized that behavior as well. All that was happening in the context of loving my husband and Jesus and wanting to please God.

Ironically while living my private life as I described, my public life included helping my husband lead a marriage enrichment group in our church. One of the pastors on our church staff had observed Howard and me together. The friendship we shared and our communication skills as a couple had impressed him. "Howard," he said, "You have a strong marriage. It's going to last."

As graduation approached, Howard sought a call as a Christian Education Director. He was interviewed at the seminary by a senior pastor from South Dakota. After that interview the church of that pastor asked Howard to come candidate as their Director of Christian Education. Howard was excited and expected me to share his enthusiasm. I dragged my heels. Since God had worked out the details for us to buy our home, I wondered if His plan was for us to stay where we were and wait for Him to open a door in the community. Howard thought we should consider the opportunity set before us. Struggling with my responsibility to submit to my husband, I agreed to candidate and agreed to move after the church extended a call to him. I wish Howard had decided to wait until both of us were unified in our belief that God was calling us to the new location.

It was hot the day Howard graduated that spring. I wore a sleeveless

dress. He let us take several pictures after the ceremony, although he could hardly wait to take off his black, long sleeved gown. That night after we tucked our sons in bed, we sat down in the living room and cuddled on the sofa. Howard confided, “Mary, this degree means so much more to me than my Masters of Divinity because I had to earn it while working and caring for the kids.”

As I held and squeezed his hand, I said, “You worked hard. I’m so proud of you.” Together we thanked God for His goodness and His faithfulness to us.

We visited South Dakota one weekend to look for a home. With the help of some of the people in the congregation, we bought a lovely, three-bedroom, four-level home on a hill. We put our house in the Twin Cities on the market and hoped and prayed it would sell quickly. It didn’t sell before we had to pack and move. On one of the final days before we left, I pondered our circumstances with trepidation as I mowed our lawn. Was the pondering a prayer? Nonetheless, God spoke His promise as clearly in my mind, as if it had been an audible voice: “For I know the plans I have for you. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you a hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29:11). In the months and years ahead, believing that promise took faith. I clung to it as we left Minnesota in July of 1982 and journeyed to South Dakota to resume life in pastoral ministry.

Eleven

From the beginning there were frustrations for Howard in his new pastoral role. He had no Sunday School Superintendent, and it was his responsibility to find one. All year he tried to recruit someone. This difficult task was rendered impossible by the fact he was given responsibility without authority. The recruit had to meet the approval of the entire pastoral staff. Each time he suggested someone, one or another of the pastors found a reason why the suggested person was not suitable. There were other matters, as well, in which Howard was set up to fail by having responsibility without authority.

We lived on the edge our entire year in South Dakota. Our jobs at the church and at the hospital were in different parts of the city. Neither job was near our home. We had the logistics of getting everyone to work, school, and daycare with only one car. God provided grace, creativity, and help from the church family to get everyone where they needed to be when they needed to be there. God provided enough income to make two house payments every month. There were multiple near accidents. Joel fell out of the car while his father was backing up in a parking lot and narrowly escaped being run over. Jim nearly drowned in a swimming pool. Howard and I were not injured when our car rocked back and forth in a parking lot during a severe storm that brought down trees and power lines all around town. We also struggled as parents about how to handle the fact that Jon was being verbally abused by his teacher at school.

Howard's style of ministry was relational. That meant being present with people was more important to him than crossing tasks off a "to do" list as soon as possible. It hurt his productivity in concrete, visible measurements. It meant that when people called or dropped by his office, he had time to listen and share. The outcomes of time spent that way are more difficult to measure. Even though Henry, the senior pastor, had talked as if he was relational and as if his leadership style was empowering, in our opinion, he was really task oriented and controlling.

What Howard had seen was not what he got. They were incompatible as ministry partners.

In the midst of those frustrations, challenges, dangers, and differences, Howard had his most fruitful year of ministry, from my vantage point. He mentored a physician who was young in his faith. He mentored and encouraged leadership of the college and career group. He led the seniors and helped them develop a well-structured and well thought through program.

That winter Pastor Henry was asking a different lay person to pray during worship service each Sunday. He asked me to participate one week in January. Here is the prayer I wrote and read on a cold day when my heart was still warm and trusting:

I praise You for being Almighty and everywhere present. I praise You, Father, for being with me as I face the stress of changes - a new job, a new home,

a new community, a new church. I experience courage and a quiet confidence in the midst of uncertainty, of newness, knowing You will empower and enable me. I praise You for being gracious, gentle, and merciful. There have been

times I've made mistakes and errors in my judgments. Yet, You have forgiven me and even, in addition, redeemed my errors and turned them into good for me.

I praise You for disciplining those You love. I praise You for all the times You've allowed me to suffer the consequences of my actions and for the learning and growth this has produced in me. Thank You for loving me all the

while you disciplined me. I praise You for the strength of your love for me. Nothing can separate

me from that strong love - even the present circumstances of a slow real estate market and double house payments.

I praise You for being wise, Father - for knowing when to give and when to

withhold. I praise You for all the times the answers have been no and the gifts withheld. It has caused me to know I love You for Yourself and not for the gifts- not because You are someone I can manipulate, but because You are God. I adore You. May Your Holy Name be Blessed Now and Forever. Amen.

In April the staff had a birthday party for Henry. Howard and I gave him a small gift and card. Shortly afterward, he sent us a thank you note in which he affirmed Howard in his ministry and told us both what a blessing we were to the congregation.

On May 6th Howard said goodbye to me and left for work at the church office. I had the day off and filled the hours until noon with chores that needed to be done around our home. Although the man who left after breakfast had self- confidence and dignity and looked like my husband, the man who arrived for lunch was only the shell of the man I had known. He looked devastated.

“Honey,” I cried, “what’s wrong?”

After collapsing on a chair in the living room, Howard replied with pain and confusion on his face and in his voice, “Henry called me into his office this morning. He thinks I’m in the wrong place.”

As my concern for Howard grew, my questions continued. “What does that mean? What’s the problem?”

Howard numbly responded, “He said he had had several complaints about me in the last few weeks.”

While he was at it, Henry decided to add his own list of complaints to those that had been brought to him. Howard still hadn’t found a Sunday School Superintendent and he had taken too long getting the senior program off the ground. Our children were criticized. We were even blamed because the church pre-school teacher thought our four-year-old son was anxious and lacking in self-esteem; the fact we had uprooted him to a totally new environment less than twelve months before didn’t figure into the equation at all. This attack, that came out of the blue and

blind sided Howard, was not a performance review with strengths being affirmed and weaknesses being addressed as areas to be improved. This was a notice of failure, and I am sure it was delivered in a shaming manner based on how traumatized Howard appeared. Howard's weakness of needing to please others made him vulnerable to the arrow of shame. He didn't have the strength to evaluate the messages with any objectivity and throw out what was unjust or untrue. It was his thirty-eighth birthday. He wandered around our home mumbling, "I don't know if I want to be a pastor anymore. I just don't know." He had no energy to fight. All he wanted to do was run away to the safety of life without the title of pastor.

Over the next several days, we repeatedly discussed our options. We kept arriving at the same conclusion. Howard could stay and over the coming months attempt to improve the problems that had been identified, but we had no guarantee that it would make any difference since Henry had already decided Howard was in the "wrong place." We did not want to end up in a situation where we were forced to move our sons in the middle of the school year; better to move during the summer that was just around the corner. Out of a church of 900 people only one person, another older pastor on staff, advised Howard not to resign without another call. Howard was too ambivalent about pastoral ministry at that point to heed the godly counsel. So he gave his resignation. Neither of us were seeking God's will.

I felt totally abandoned by God. I was angry with Him and the church. I was even angry with Howard for not being angry. The situation was reminiscent of my childhood in an alcoholic family. I felt alone in the chaos. I transferred my feelings about Daddy who couldn't be depended upon or trusted on to God. I told myself I was strong and that I would see my family through this crisis. I was proud as I leaned on myself instead of on the God who loved us. In my proud and wounded state I was unable to give wise counsel to my husband or to help him heal.

Howard coped with the pain with his defense mechanisms of denial and repression. It was several years before I heard him verbalize the sense of

shame he felt because he believed he had failed. Eventually he verbalized he had even believed he would never be able to do things well enough to please God. In time he said, “I ran away from South Dakota. I should have stayed and confronted the problems for the health of the church. I didn’t do them any favor by leaving.”

We knew we did not want to cause division in the church. Only a few people actually knew why Howard resigned. “Why are you going?” asked the people who wanted us to stay and who were hurt and puzzled over our impending departure. Our responses were deliberately vague.

“Howard,” one of the seniors said, “we’ve tried to get a ministry off the ground before, and it has always failed. This time it’s going to succeed because you helped us carefully think through our goals and plan the program intentionally around them.”

Another senior said to him, “We’re losing our pastor. I don’t know what we’re going to do. You always took the time to listen.”

The college and career group had their own going away party and let him know how much he had meant to them. Although these affirmations were appreciated, they were not enough to dress and bind up Howard’s gaping wound.

In spite of our disappointment with God, He was faithful. Miracles of provision marked His continued blessing on our lives as we moved. The same people, who had helped us buy the house in South Dakota, told us to leave it without a thought. They took over the mortgage payments and sold it. An anonymous large gift of money from someone in the congregation enabled us to make some improvements on the house in the Twin Cities when we returned. Although some of God’s people behaved thoughtlessly and with unintended cruelty, others behaved in generous, loving, and kind ways. We are eternally grateful to the people who were instruments of His provision for us at that critical time in our lives.

In the Twin Cities Howard was able to get a full-time job at the same

warehouse he had previously worked in throughout his college and seminary days. I was able to get a job at my previous hospital. We thanked God that He had kept our home from selling. The boys were glad to return to the same house, neighborhood, friends, and school.

We returned home broken and rebellious but loved by our Father who was tightly holding on to us during this tumultuous time in our lives.

Twelve

Howard continued to handle the tumult in our lives in the style that fit him comfortably, like an old shoe. He returned to his old job at the warehouse, as if no loss had been suffered. One obvious behavior signaled he was not himself; he was irritable with his sons. Multiple times I suggested he see a counselor because I thought he was depressed. Each time he acted like he had not even heard what I

said. Finally, I quit making that recommendation. By nature he was passive. He now became even more passive. It was as if he was immobilized.

After a period of time Howard decided he would seek another pastorate, although he remained ambivalent. I am not sure whether he truly wanted to manage the challenges of the ministry again or whether his desire sprung from the lack of fulfillment in his job. He sought opportunities inside the denomination that had ordained him and in two other denominations, as well. Over several years he had contact with many churches and some interviews. Every opportunity ended in a closed door. This further injured his self-esteem and spirit. During those years, he told me, "Thoreau said some men live lives of quiet desperation. That describes my life."

Our children, who had experienced many changes in a few years, were having their own adjustment issues. Our middle son in particular verbalized depression. One day Jimmy said, "Mom, I think someone in our family is going to die." Did he sense his father was dying? In many ways the husband I had known was already dead to me.

The boys were normally active and impulsive. Parenting them now took more effort because they were acting out. Howard expected the children to be good for goodness sake. He believed a reprimand should be an adequate, effective intervention. When that didn't work, he nagged. He did the best he knew how; I don't think he had the energy for more. Setting limits, creating consequences and rewards, and following

through with them fell on my shoulders.

“Honey, would you run the vacuum sweeper in the living room?” or “Sweetheart would you mop the kitchen floor?” were always answered with an affirmative yes by Howard. In spite of that, I longed for him to see things that needed doing and tackle them without being asked. We lived in an older home that needed repairs. He was content to ignore those needs; repairs made him feel inadequate. On the other hand, the needed repairs bothered me. I felt the weight of solving our home maintenance.

I had always hoped the day would come when I could return to being a full time wife and mother. That dream died. I was working eight shifts every two weeks and didn't feel I could manage the full time ten because my symptoms of fatigue and migratory joint pain had become more problematic. Working full time would have helped relieve some of the financial stress and strain we were experiencing. I felt overwhelmed, trying to juggle the demands at home and at work.

My coping became more and more escape oriented. I kept reading the explicit romance novels and fantasizing about the same man. At that time in my life I was at risk for an affair. Certain disciplines and habits remained a constant in our lives. Those practices of daily personal Bible study and prayer, family devotions, and weekly church attendance for myself, and Howard, and our children provided structure and were protective. I am convinced God used them to keep me from sinning in action when I was already sinning in my thoughts and in my heart. At a later time when I was more receptive, God called me to repentance and delivered me

from my addiction to reading explicit novels and from my addiction to those fantasies.

My anxiety was also becoming more of a hindrance. I knew I was depressed; I even experienced some fleeting thoughts of suicide. I finally told myself, *You've got to get some help*. I made an appointment with a

physician and filled a prescription for an antidepressant, and I began seeing a therapist.

I chose a therapist who worked out of an office in the basement of a church affiliated with the denomination I grew up in. At that time the association with the roots that nurtured me as a child felt reassuring. The therapist's office was an inviting, welcoming room. It had a soft sofa on one wall with a bookcase. There was a round rug on the floor in the center. On the wall opposite the sofa was a comfortable armchair with a lamp next to it. The lighting in the room was low and soft. The place lent itself to honesty and confidences. It was a safe place. At work and at home I lived like a strong woman, but as soon as I sat down in that armchair across from the therapist in that refuge, I began weeping. The weeping lasted for many visits. I completed personality tests; the results made my dependence and my anxiety blaringly apparent.

Two things the therapist said to me were worth their weight in gold. "You know, Mary, you married the perfect man." was his challenge to me one session.

"I did?" was my tentative reply.

"Certainly, with your level of dependence, you would have shriveled up and died with anyone who had a dominant, forceful personality."

A long silence followed. After pondering his premise, I begrudgingly admitted, "Living with Howard has made me stronger and more independent." *But I really wanted someone to take care of me and It's not fair* were the immature thoughts I chose to keep to myself, although I'm sure the therapist knew that was the inner emotional climate tearing me apart. It was why he issued me another challenge.

"You live in a dream world and believe some fantasy about a knight in shining armor. It's time you bury that dream, grieve, and get on with your life."

I was too shocked to respond and only gasped at his nerve. The silence

was tense. I finally broke that quiet with a very reluctant intellectual assent. Emotionally and behaviorally, it was a tough assignment.

I prayed over the insights I was gaining in therapy. I resolved to give up caretaking Howard and to hold him accountable. I began to manage my anxiety more effectively and to take responsibility for ensuring that my own needs were met. I knew that it was crucial for my children that I attend to my own needs. I quit expecting Howard to read my mind and quit feeling sorry for myself because I had to be assertive and directive with him. After several months I ended my individual counseling.

As a result of the counseling I had been able to define what I no longer needed from Howard on one end of the spectrum. That felt good and freeing. I felt healthier as I began to live in the light of the truth that only God can meet my deepest needs and longings. I began to cut Howard a break and receive him as a real person with his own set of weaknesses, the way I expected him to receive me. On the other hand, at the other end of the spectrum, I knew what I had to have from Howard. I knew the bare minimum was that he meet me like an adult and problem solve with me the challenges set before us as a couple.

I am convinced that in the mercy and plan of God, my personal growth in the soil of this marriage had brought me to the point where I would force us to tackle what needed to be done for the health and survival of our marriage because the structure was crumbling.

I was practicing assertive behavior. It didn't seem like Howard was coming along side me as a partner. Finally one night, I said, "We've got to talk after the boys go to bed." Later after it was dark outside and the kids were sleeping, we sat down at the dining room table. "I can't go on this way anymore, Howie. I feel like my love for you is dead." I gave examples of how his dependent behaviors had emptied me. "I want to run away."

He defensively told me that I had changed. "You aren't the sweet girl I married, Mary. I don't know if I love you anymore, either."

We agonized over how this could have happened. We cried together over the death of our love and tried to comfort each other as best we could because we were still best friends. He reluctantly agreed to go to marriage counseling with me.

For financial reasons we had to choose a counselor our insurance company would pay for. We prayed that God would lead us to a good one. He gave us a gifted marriage therapist from among our network provider list. This counselor saw the strengths in our marriage: our friendship, our compatibilities, and our communication skills. I think he was mystified about why we were at his office. We talked openly and honestly about the issues in our marriage that left me feeling empty and depleted, all the while avoiding the issue that was tearing us apart. He must have known there was an issue we weren't ready to deal with yet. We had effectively discussed all the issues we had brought to the table, and the therapist said we didn't need to see him anymore.

Howard had always spoken slowly and deliberately. He likes to think through his ideas and organize them carefully before articulating them. On the other hand, I think quickly on my feet, so to speak. Over the years Howard had come to feel that his inability to think quickly on his feet put him at a disadvantage with me during conflicts. This became an obstacle because he saw our conflicts as debate. He operated on the assumption that one person was right and would win and that one person was wrong and would lose. I saw our arguments as a way to get our feelings out in the open, to understand each other, and to find solutions. That was my intellectual understanding of our fights. Emotionally I was acting like a spoiled child who wanted her way. What I didn't understand was that he believed he would

lose and that he had shut down on me. He had shut down on the issues that mattered the most to us. I also believe his underlying level of depression kept him devoid of the energy needed to resolve our conflicts. During our entire time of counseling this pattern had not been put out there. We had been guarded.

During that appointment that was to have been our last, the conversation took a turn that led us to my longing to be at home more and to work less. Our therapist wanted to know what we were doing as a couple to try and accomplish that goal. I looked at him and said, “I’ve wondered whether we should sell the house and find a cheaper way to live, but Howard won’t even discuss it with me.”

The therapist looked at me as if he couldn’t believe what I had just said. He replied, “Were you tentative about it or did you work at getting his attention and letting him know how important it was to you?”

The tears began to gather and the anger and the frustration I had been bottling up, rose like a sudden storm breaking with a force taking us all by surprise, “Yes, Yes, Yes. I talked about it. I tried to get him to talk to me. I cried. I screamed. Nothing, absolutely nothing moved him. He was silent.” The storm blew over quickly and left me with tears streaming down my face.

The counselor looked at Howard and seriously, quietly asked, “Is that right?” My husband wordlessly nodded his head yes.

“How did you feel about that, Mary?” the counselor asked as he turned his head to face me again. With anguish I whispered, “I knew he didn’t love me, and my love for him died.”

Howard then offered, “I don’t want to sell the house. It’s been a source of security for all of us.”

Surprised and affronted, I incredulously asked, “Then why didn’t you tell me that?”

After a long silence, the kind man, who had been so sure we could graduate from marriage counseling, sighed softly, “That was a powerful issue to ignore, Howard. I think the two of you are trying to keep a dead horse alive. I think you should come see me next week. Your assignment in the meantime is to think about how you can separate. We will discuss how you can accomplish that at your next appointment.”

I nodded my agreement. Howard was in a state of shock. As we despondently walked out of his office, I wondered, *How did my life ever come to this?*

Although Easter was less than a week away, winter weather was hanging on. The silence between us was as cold as the air as we walked across the parking lot to our car. The most difficult assignment of our lives loomed ahead.

Thirteen

Howard had previously planned a three-day, personal retreat during Holy Week. We decided he should still go. I breathed a sigh of relief as he closed the door and left on Wednesday morning. One of my friends at work was a fellow Christian and was aware of my marital struggles. I picked up the phone and called her. “Diane, it’s Mary. Howard and I saw our marriage counselor on Monday. It didn’t go well. We’re going to separate.”

“Oh, Mary! You aren’t going to divorce are you?” she asked with sadness and concern.

“I don’t know,” I said numbly. “Right now we’re just talking about the pragmatics of how to separate.”

We talked for a short time. As we hung up, she reassured me, “I’ll be praying for the two of you.”

“Thanks,” I said as I set the receiver down and thought, *I’ve prayed a long time, but go ahead, I doubt it’s going to make any difference.*

I was scheduled to work a 3:00 to 11:30 p.m. shift that Maundy Thursday. Diane was also working. Mid shift she took a break from her unit and came to the desk on my unit where I was working charge.

“Mary, I think we should pray together after work.”

“I don’t think I should, Diane. I’m tired. I need to get home as early as possible,” I replied, trying to put her off.

“No, it’s important, Mary,” she insisted. “We’ve got to!”

“Okay,” I said, unable to refuse her loving pressure.

After our shift was over, we met in the employee lounge, empty and quiet at that time of night. We sat down on the maroon sofa in front of the window with the dark night to our backs. She put one of her arms around me and began her battle while I listened.

“God, in the Mighty Name of Jesus, we ask you to save Howard and Mary’s marriage. We ask that you bind up the forces of evil that are trying to separate them. We ask You, in the Name of Jesus, to loose your light and grace in their lives to heal their marriage. Satan, in the Name of Jesus, we render you powerless. In the Name of Jesus, we tell you to go straight way to Jesus and do whatever He tells you to do about Howard and Mary’s marriage. Nothing is too hard for You, Father God. You are all powerful. We believe that greater is the One who lives in us than the one in the world. We ask all these things in Jesus’ Name. Amen.”

Although I was weary in body and soul, I managed a polite, “Thanks, Diane. I appreciate your concern and love. Have a nice Easter weekend.”

She wrapped me into an affectionate hug and whispered, “I care about you.”

I drove home, oblivious of any war being fought in the heavenlies on my behalf. I tiredly walked through our kitchen and made a beeline for the bathroom. I filled the bathtub with hot water and bubbles. As I sunk into the warmth, leaned back against the tub, rested my head on the wall, and relaxed, I had a peculiar sensation. Something felt distinctly different. It was as if a heavy load had been lifted from my shoulders. After my bath, I climbed into bed and snuggled under our blankets. The lighter sensation remained. It felt comforting as I drifted off to sleep.

Friday morning Howard took a hike in the fresh air on the grounds of the retreat center. He walked onto a small, arched wooden bridge. He stopped and gazed out over the stream that had been thawing during the warmer temperatures on Wednesday and Thursday. He looked down and noted some ice breaking away and floating down stream. He thought, *My heart has been cold and hard like that ice. Oh, God, he prayed, melt my heart of ice and give me a heart of flesh again. Please forgive me.* Years later, he wrote of those days at the retreat center: “God broke through to me and showed me that I needed to ask Mary for forgiveness for my actions and attitudes.” Years later, he described himself at that period of his life as “frozen.” He arrived home late that evening. He said

little, but knowing him as I did, I sensed a shift in his attitude and his demeanor.

That Saturday we had planned to pull up the carpet in our bedroom and living room. We had decided that we needed to go ahead as planned with the project. If the impending separation necessitated the sale of the house, new carpet was important. After pulling up the carpet in both rooms and the hallway, we had to remove all the old staples. We washed walls and windows before cleaning the floor. Howard hauled the old carpet out to the garage, while I dusted furniture and laundered curtains and linens. We worked well together; we always had. We did the strenuous tasks without any conversation, except what was needed to get the job done. Although Howard and I weren't talking, the Holy Spirit would not stop badgering me with His words and thoughts. "He's sorry. You need to forgive him."

"I don't know if I can, God. And even if I do, I don't have any confidence he'll be able to change," I argued.

"Forgiveness isn't an option," the Lord persisted.

"You expect so much," I grumbled in my heart.

"Mary, haven't I told you that if you do not forgive men their sins, your Heavenly Father will not forgive your sins." (Matthew 6:15).

"Oh, my dear Father in Heaven, you know I can't live without your forgiveness. You win. I'll forgive him, but there's no way I can pull it off without your help," I reluctantly surrendered.

The physical labor of the day had been exhausting, but the spiritual battle I had fought had taken its toll as well. I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

Easter morning dawned brilliantly. I awakened suddenly, and as I sat up in our squeaky clean, sun-filled bedroom, the Lord greeted me, "I am making all things new." (Revelations 21:5). In my spirit I knew the Resurrected Savior I loved was promising me He'd make my marriage

new, if I would be obedient and forgive my husband. Our family went to church together. Howard and I were quiet and awkward with one another on the way to and from worship. Our sons, set free to play, scattered as soon as we were home. We found ourselves alone together on uncertain footing in the familiarity of our kitchen. Howard's body language was tentative, but there was longing in his eyes as he looked at me. The silence between us felt less formidable than it had.

I broke it by saying, "I never asked how your retreat was. Tell me about it."

Relieved to have an opening, Howard got right to the point, "Oh, Mary, God convicted me. I let you down. I withdrew and behaved irresponsibly. Would you please forgive me? Would you please give me another chance?"

His sincerity was heartfelt. I sighed. Without any emotion, I replied, "I sensed you were sorry when you got back. God spent all day yesterday convicting me of my need to forgive you."

We stood warily, wondering what the next move was. Finally I ended the stand off with the three most important words in any marriage, "I forgive you."

We agreed by the Grace of God to stay together and to rebuild our marriage.

The next day we returned to see our marriage counselor. He was quite surprised by the shift in our relationship that we later referred to as our Easter Miracle. We told him we were going to stay together and begin all over. We continued seeing him until the three of us were confident that Howard and I had crafted some new ways of resolving conflicts - ways that would strengthen our marriage. Once the wall between us was torn down, God filled us again with His love and renewed love for one another. Jesus Christ proved that He does indeed make all things NEW. Our broken-down, dead marriage was resurrected by His power.

A Letter to My Husband on Our Fifteenth Wedding Anniversary

June 20, 1985 Dear Howard,

The earth is warm and verdant once again. The summer breeze that blows over our flower garden and into our sunny kitchen is fragrant. And we celebrate fifteen years of marriage.

The earth was cold and covered with snow last winter when we cried together, grieving over the loss of our love. Our feelings had died. I was no longer the sweet girl you had married. I was empty and desperate to run away, certain it was your dependency that had depleted me. We decided to wait and see if something new and just right for now would germinate in the midst of the debris and decay.

Those unseasonably warm days in late winter were deceptive. They were followed by heavy storms before spring arrived to stay. Things aren't always what they seem. We kept the ongoing, painfully honest dialogue open. I learned that my anxiety wasn't really fear you couldn't change and that I'd have to leave. It was fear that I'd have to change. In reality it was my constant, unfitting control that left me feeling drained. Letting go of that entrenched control over myself and you left me feeling vulnerable and unprotected. I frequently imagined a trampoline. In my imagination I repeatedly trusted it to catch me as I'd jump higher, higher, higher, and then let go. It recalled the exhilaration I had felt as a child on the trampoline and colored my fledgling attempts at letting go in attractive hues. And you did assume more responsibility and behaved in ways that felt less dependent to me. You decided to learn to stay engaged in dialogue with me during conflict and committed to not shutting down and withdrawing in silence. You even learned to love the new me who was more assertive and at the same time less controlling.

Spring with its budding new life found us busily reconstructing our marriage, recreating our roles and the pattern by which we related. What we built feels right, viable for now. Perhaps sometime in the future what we built won't fit, and we'll have to once again tear down and

rebuild.

As we celebrate our anniversary I salute our dialogue. It brought us forward. It was the soil that nurtured the germination of a workable relationship at this stage of our growth and development as individuals and as a couple. This dialogue is distinctly ours - something we created and keep alive - unique and wonderful. Thank you, Howard for your commitment to me, to our dialogue, and to our growing together. Hooray for you! Hooray for me! Hooray for us!

And Happy Anniversary with Love,

Mary, your Rib

Addendum

In retrospect, I think some of the crisis in my marriage paralleled the crisis of my faith. When I was disappointed with God, Satan tempted me to believe the lies that God no longer loved me and that He had forgotten me. My faith was tested and proven, like gold in fire. I know before those difficult times I had a belief system. After them I had a faith. Faith can't exist apart from doubt; otherwise by definition it is not faith.

Howard's withdrawal, which felt like the emotional distance I had experienced as a child in my relationship with my dad, happened during a time when I was feeling abandoned by God, my Heavenly Father. The painful church experiences had left Howard and me debilitated emotionally and unable to attend to one another's needs. I had expected a lot from my husband when he was depressed and dealing with his own crisis of faith. I wish I had been more understanding and patient, and yet, it seems the pressure I exerted helped propel us both toward the healing and personal growth God had in store for us. The threat of a separation was the shock that broke through Howard's withdrawal and brought him back to me and to life. Our marriage was saved by a miracle of God's grace.

Howard never did receive another call to pastoral ministry. I was never able to return to being a full-time stay-at-home wife and mother. We grieved and went on with our lives, which have been rich and full of meaningful relationships and activities.

It is nearly twenty-seven years since that Miracle Easter. We will soon celebrate our forty-second anniversary. Our personalities are the same as they always were. We still deal with the same issues in our marriage. I always need to keep working on being assertive but not controlling. I still have to initiate problem solving. Howard still works at being more pro-active and staying engaged in conversation with me when we are having a dispute or disagreement. We always need to be forgiving one another. We are grateful to be together and cherish our romance and our friendship.

Howard and I pray that our story encourages you to forgive and to begin again. May you be empowered by the One Who Makes All Things New! “And now to Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy - to the only God or Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.” (Jude 24 and 25)

Discussion Questions

Chapter One

“In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.”
(Proverbs 16:9)

- 1.) Do you think God uses circumstances to direct and guide you? If you believe He does, how do you support that opinion?
- 2.) What were the circumstances that God used to introduce Howard to Mary? Were there circumstances that supported the growth of their friendship?
- 3.) How important is friendship and common goals and interests in a marriage?

Thank God for the circumstances that brought you together with your spouse. Thank Him for the interests and goals you share. If you lack common interests and goals, ask Him to help you develop some and to use them to strengthen your unity as a couple.

Chapter Two

“I have loved you with an everlasting love.” (Jeremiah 31:3)

- 1.) Howard’s, “I love you,” was followed by, “Will you marry me?” In a Christian world view why does love equal commitment? How does this viewpoint run counter to our culture?
- 2.) When and how did you know you loved your spouse? What is the difference between like and love?

Remind your spouse what you like about her/him. Together thank God for the joy you bring to one another and praise God for His everlasting love for you. Thank Him for your commitment to one another. Ask Him to help you love each other the way He loves each of you.

Chapter Three

“One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek; that I might dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.” (Psalm 27:4)

“One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:13-14)

- 1.) Mary asked Howard what his primary life goal was. What did he tell her?
- 2.) Why are primary desires and goals important for individuals and couples?
- 3.) Why is it important for you to know your spouse’s primary desires and goals?

Tell your spouse about your primary desire and primary goal. Tell her/him how you would like to be encouraged and held accountable. Commit these desires and goals to God in prayer.

Chapter Four

“Speaking the truth in love, we will grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.” (Ephesians 4:15)

- 1.) What did Mary feel when Howard informed her that he wouldn’t be coming to see her until the end of his Christmas vacation? How did Mary manage her feelings and what was the result?
- 2.) How did Howard and Mary resolve their crisis?
- 3.) Is truth crucial to intimacy? Is truth crucial to keeping a marriage viable?

Discuss your level of transparency with one another. Tell your spouse what makes you feel loved and what makes you feel unloved. Commit in

prayer, with God's help, to intentionally engage in behaviors that make each other feel loved.

Chapter Five

“My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:19)

- 1.) How did God meet some of Howard’s and Mary’s needs? Identify some of the emotional and spiritual needs they had as they built their marriage?
- 2.) What are some of the challenges newly married couples have?
- 3.) How important are faith and humor in keeping a relationship strong in the midst of adjustments and challenges?

Discuss some of the challenges you’ve faced in blending two family cultures into a new one. Identify some of the ways in which God has provided for you. Praise God for the help he has given you and ask for his guidance as you continue to design your own unique culture.

Chapter Six

“A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” (Ecclesiastes 4:12)

- 1.) What were some of the strengths that Mary and Howard brought to the construction site of their marriage? What were some of the weaknesses that emerged?
- 2.) How can a marriage be constructed to withstand the stressors that assault it? How can weaving Jesus in, as the third strand, strengthen a marriage?

Discuss with one another how you are weaving Jesus into your lives. Identify the strengths and the weaknesses in your marriage. Together ask God for wisdom and help in making your marriage a strong one.

Chapter Seven

“ “Whenever you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a

voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.” ” (Isaiah 30:21)

1.) How did Howard and Mary decide to go to Montana? How did they try to discern God’s will for them?

2.) Do you think it is important for a couple to have an agreed upon strategy for how decisions will be made? How important is it for Christian couples to seek God’s plan for them when they make major decisions?

Discuss with your spouse how you make decisions and whether or not each of you is satisfied with how decisions are being made. Do you want to negotiate a change in your style of decision making? Are you satisfied with the role you give the Lord Jesus in your choices? Pray together for God to grow you in the art of making unified decisions and in the art of seeking His wisdom and counsel. Thank him for his guidance.

Chapter Eight

“the Lord disciplines those he loves... endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons.” (Hebrews 12: 6 and 7)

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1: 2-4)

1.) How did difficulties impact Howard? How did difficulties impact Mary? How could they have coped with the stress of their difficulties in a more productive manner?

2.) Does having some negative outcomes mean that you made a mistake or that you failed to discern God’s wisdom or direction?

Discuss your current difficulties with your spouse and how those problems are impacting you. Do you need or want to change your attitude about those difficulties. Do you need or want to change the way you are coping? Pray for the Lord to help you endure and to develop his

perseverance in your lives.

Chapter Nine

“Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” (Philippians 2:13)

- 1.) What were the major problems emerging in Howard’s and Mary’s marriage? Why do you think they put off working on those issues?
- 2.) How did the stress of Howard’s ministry put pressure on the faults in the structure of their marriage?

Discuss with your spouse some of the major problems you see that have emerged or are emerging in your family. How would you like to work on these issues before you are at risk for the stresses of life to threaten your marriage? Go to prayer together and ask God to help you with fear and trembling to work out the salvation of your marriage. Ask him to accomplish his good purposes in your relationship.

Chapter Ten

“Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” (Proverbs 4:23)

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Ephesians 5:21)

- 1.) How was the stress impacting Mary’s life? How was she coping? Was her coping strategy effective? How could she have managed her stress more effectively?
- 2.) Was Mary’s behavior sin? Was Mary guarding her heart? What do you think it means to guard your heart?
- 3.) Ephesians 5 gives the principle of mutual submission and the principal of a wife submitting to her husband? How can those two principles be reconciled when a Christian couple disagree and wish to be

obedient to the Lord's directions? Do you think Mary should have submitted to Howard's decision to move their family? Was there another way they might have managed their disagreement and still have followed the Lord's directive?

Spend some quiet time alone with the Lord and consider the secret places in your heart. Think about how you are coping with the stress in your life. Confess any sin you discover and seek God's forgiveness and grace. Even if sin is not a part of the picture, ask him for wisdom regarding how you might manage your stress more effectively. Then have a discussion with your spouse about how you want to make decisions when you aren't in agreement.

Chapter Eleven

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:12)

1.) Who was the enemy for Howard and Mary? Was it the church? Was it some of the people in the church? Was there a battle going on, and if so, what was it about?

2.) How did Howard respond to his hurt and his sense of betrayal? How did Mary respond?

3.) How were Howard and Mary and their children in danger or at risk?

Discuss with your spouse how you protect each other and your children from the attacks of the enemy of your souls, marriage and family. Go to prayer and ask God to make you vigilant and strong warriors.

Chapter Twelve

“God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” (I Corinthians 13:10)

1.) What dangers and risks became realities in the Stone family? Were those realities just an eventuality or could they have been prevented? Once they became realities how were they managed?

2.) Are dangers and risks a kind of temptation? How are they temptations? What kinds of provisions does God make so that we can stand up to them?

3.) How did Howard's and Mary's love die? Could this death have been prevented, if they had done some reconstructive work in their marriage earlier? Or could it have been prevented if they had managed their hurts, disappointments, and problems differently?

Share with your spouse a time when you were disappointed with God. Talk about how it impacted you. Consider whether it impacted your relationship and love? Pray for each other and these disappointments. Ask the Lord to protect and bless your love for each other and to give you the resolve to nurture that love.

Chapter Thirteen

“For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (Matthew 6: 14-15)

1.) What was the turning point in the Stone's marital crisis? Why did Howard repent? Why did Mary forgive?

2.) Who resurrected the love between Howard and Mary? Did the resurrection require anything from Mary and Howard?

3.) Discuss whether you think there is a correlation between forgiveness and new beginnings. If you think there is a correlation, how might forgiveness be a crucial component of a fresh start for a person or for a marriage?

Have a heart to heart talk with your spouse and explore whether there

are any issues that might be sapping the life out of your marriage. Is there anything that needs repentance and forgiveness? Ask God to give both of you tender hearts that are quick to repent and quick to forgive. Before God commit to keeping your love strong and healthy. Do it to honor God and to honor each other and your vows.

About the Author

I live in the woods of Northwest Wisconsin with my husband Howard. I am retired from my long career as a nurse. I enjoy spending time with my husband, our sons and their wives, and our nine grandchildren. I also like to garden, bird watch, walk, read, knit and cross-stitch.

This story is our history as I best remember it. I changed some names to honor and to protect the privacy of others.

I thought that having read my story, you might like to hear two of my intimate and personal titles for God. These affectionate names grew out of my relationship with Him and out of the ways He acted in my life and revealed Himself to me.

First of all I call Him, "My Great Iconoclast." He certainly cast down my graven images and those of my husband. Even good and noble callings can take God's place and become idols, I believe. One of my idols was my ideal of "the

stay-at-home woman." One of Howard's idols was his role as pastor. God didn't ask us to give those things up. He systematically tore them down. He is the One who said, "You shall have no other Gods before Me." With St. Paul, I say, "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord." (Philippians 3:7-8) Oh, how I love "My Great Iconoclast."

Secondly, I call Him, "The Great Closer of Doors." Howard had many doors close over the years while seeking another pastoral position. I would try to console him by saying, "Honey, I think God has given you an honorable discharge and a purple heart. Perhaps He doesn't want you back in the battle field." So many doors closed in fact, that sheer numbers would have favored an open door at some point, I would have thought. The fact that no door opened became a miracle of a sort in my mind. In Revelations 3:7, Jesus is described as the One who opens doors that no one can shut and shuts doors that no one can open. Oh, how

fiercely and tenaciously loved we are by “The One Who Closes Doors
No One Can Open.”

Blessings to you.

Mary J. Stone