



THE WITNESS

by Patricia Hawke

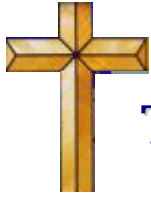


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FORWARD

When the Lord asked me to write this book and share it with people, I was very hesitant. You see I once shared only a very small portion of my story with a Carmelite priest, who looked at me as if I was crazy. I immediately apologized for taking his time and quietly left. I have never told this story to anyone since that time, not even my children — until recently by God's request. I must admit that it would have been much easier to give a witness to all the bad in my life than my spiritual journey.

You will see many photos of myself, as well as a few photos of my children when they were young. I'm truly not that vain, but I did wish to break up the text and to help you relate a bit more to me as this person. I know I find it much easier to relate to someone in a book, if I have a mental picture of the individual. So, I have given you that, as well as a few photos and graphics related to my tale. Additionally, I use only people's first names for their privacy.

I hope my story gives you inspiration for your own faith walk, though I would NOT suggest going through many of the things I have. We each have our own needs in order to get our hearts set on Jesus, and God (knowing those needs) will provide each of us with the experiences we need to get us there.

I pray that God blesses you, your family and friends with love, prosperity and especially spirituality.

Sincerely,

Patricia Hawke



IT WASN'T A BED OF ROSES

I would like to tell you about my spiritual journey. To many people, especially my family, it has probably seemed to be a matter of me not being able to make up my mind. It has, however, truly been a long, continuous journey. This is the first time I have ever told this story outside of a small group of family and friends.

Before I begin my story, however, I want to tell you a few other things about my life. So many times, when someone hears or reads a witness, it can appear that the individual's life ran very smoothly because of their faith. Unfortunately, the opposite is generally true. Their life either straightened up upon finding their faith, some horrific event brought them into their faith, or they simply lived like everyone else with all the problems this life can bring.

My journey story alone may make it seem that everything has gone smoothly for me — not so. Without going into details, I did wish to share a few of the troubles from my life; so you know that it has been anything but easy.

As a child, I was sexually abused. I was too young to know what it even was and suffered the guilt that such victims do, when I finally learned about sex. It's typical for victims to feel this way. It's also typical for them never to tell anyone. I was fortunate enough to get some good counseling, learning that I was too young to be accountable, and thus, had no reason to feel guilty. I have forgiven my abuser through God.

I was married for seven years — lived with him for six. Though I truly loved this man and had two wonderful children with him, he was controlling and verbally abusive. He turned out to be an alcoholic, a womanizer (including bedding my

best friend on our living room floor while I slept in the next room), and midway through our marriage, a drug abuser. I eventually divorced him, staying four years longer than I should have. I don't regret that, since I wouldn't have had my beautiful children otherwise. Also, by the time I divorced him, I was very certain that it was the right thing for my children and me.

Not wanting to become emotionally intimate with men yet yearning to be held, I'm ashamed to say that I went to bed with far too many men after my divorce and subsequent years. Though there were a few long-term relationships, I always left when they become serious. I've been divorced for 34 years at this writing. Unfortunately, by the time I was ready for a relationship, I have never met anyone with whom to settle down and marry.

At the age of 26 while active duty in the U.S. Navy in Norfolk, Virginia, the responsibility of the load (not burden) I carried became too much. I had been raised to believe I would marry and my husband would be the breadwinner who worried about the bills and major problems, while sharing the rearing of our children together. Since the age of 24, I did it all. At one very low point, things got so difficult that I seriously contemplated suicide. It was God who convinced me that it wasn't my time yet; and besides, my two young children needed me.



NOTE: I only use photos of my children, now grown, as children for their privacy.

Since I received very little child support after the divorce, I had to take jobs that paid the most money yet allowed me to be home with my children. They were generally very stressful jobs. Thus, I have gone through two burnouts. These are real mental burnouts, not that I just got tired of my job. They burn brain cells for which I've lost my ability to remember names well or facts about people's lives. If I hear these things over several times, I'll remember them; however, I used to be able to tell you the names and something about over 2,000 employees in a firm for which I worked as a personnel assistant. I have since adjusted, but it was devastating to me after the burnouts.

It hasn't been an easy life as a single parent and sole supporter (my ex-husband paid perhaps four years worth of children support in total, since he only paid sporadically when the courts could find him). My mother, who had retired, eventually moved in with me, helping me raise the children. Though I then had one more person to support, she gave us a much needed stability and sense that it was doable. It was actually much easier afterward.

No, it hasn't been easy; yet, I know my life's journey hasn't been as bad as for others. I was once in the Naval hospital in Portsmouth, Virginia. After feeling better, I visited a friend also in the hospital on another floor. He was talking with a guy in a wheelchair who had both legs amputated just below the knees due to a motorcycle accident. The guy was laughing and thoroughly enjoying himself. When he told me the accident had only happen a few months before, I asked how he was able to deal with it so well. He told me something I have never forgotten and bring to mind whenever I'm having a personal *pity party*, "There are two guys in the next wing. Whenever I begin feeling low, I just go visit them. Their parachutes didn't open, when they jumped from a low flying plane. They're both alive, but they'll be vegetables for the rest of their lives. Compared to them, I'm pretty lucky. There's always someone worse off."



THE BEGINNING



I was born on an Iowan farm between Liberty Center and Lacona. Though I later found that both of my parents believed in God and had attended church when young (my mother Methodist and my father Dutch Reform), my family was not a religious one. I never saw my parents in church nor did they discuss religion. God was not part of our vocabulary.

When I was a year old, my parents moved to the southwest side of Des Moines. This was a “God thing”, as my daughter would say. Jesus tells us in John 6:44 that “No one can come to me unless he is drawn by the Father who sent me.” And in John 15:16, He says, “You did not choose me, no, I chose you”. I was chosen to be a disciple of God.

Grace and Gerald lived across the street. Both were very devout Christians, who attended a nearby Presbyterian Church, where Gerald substituted as pastor for one year. Grace and my mom became best friends. When I was probably six years old or so and with my mother’s permission, Grace began asking me if I wanted to attend Sunday school with them. She asked my brothers, too; but I was the only one who went on a more or less regular basis.



It was there that I received my first Bible, which I still had until a year ago. It was there that I memorized my first Bible verse — John 3:16, “For God so loved the



world, He gave His only begotten Son, so that whomsoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” (Obviously, I still remember the Kings James Version of this verse.)

Unfortunately, I didn't like Sunday school. They would read a Bible passage and ask us what it meant. I didn't know, and this embarrassed me. Until Sunday school, I had never seen or heard of a Bible. Many of the other kids learned about this “stuff” at home.

One Sunday, I asked Grace where they went, while I was in Sunday school. She pointed to a staircase and said they attended church services. After she and Gerald had gone up the stairs, I snuck up the stairs to see what this “church” was. I quietly walked up a middle aisle. It was the widest and longest aisle I'd ever seen. About halfway, I slide into the first open spot in a pew.



I didn't believe anyone noticed me, since everyone was standing and singing loudly. The really big, tall man standing next to me looked down as if to say, “What are you doing here?” I can look back now to realize that the Holy Spirit was with the man that day. I was obviously alone and didn't belong there (all the young children were in Sunday school class); but he didn't say a word. He just smiled widely at me and continued singing.

Everyone sat down, and a man got up at the front (I had to look around the people from the aisle to see him). He spoke about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit with such a passion and love. He was so alive with his faith and wasn't afraid to tell everyone about it.

I fell in love with “church” and God that day. It just seemed to fill my heart to hear him, even though I had no idea who these men were — but I wanted to know more. So, I began attending church more often with Grace and Gerald, always sneaking up to the adult church services, hiding under the stairs until all the adults had gone up. Then, I’d sneak into adult church.



I realize now that everyone had to know I was there, including Grace and Gerald; yet, no one said a word. I felt comfortable there and wonder if that’s why I always got on so well with people older than me — even to this day.



GOD HAD A PLAN



At about 10 or so, my very best girlfriend and next-door neighbor, Cathy, had to begin attending Catechism class on Saturdays. Being from a good Catholic Italian family, her parents put this as a priority and to our dismay wouldn't allow her to come outside and play until she finished her Saturday homework. I thought this was really bad, since it was summertime. We were missing half a day of play. Another God thing!

Cathy and I came up with a plan and presented it to her mother. I would help Cathy with her homework each Saturday after she returned home from Catechism class, but I would only ask her the questions. She had to find the answers. Louise, her mother, looked at us like we were full of the devil, which we usually were at that age. Then, she just smiled at us; but she did agree. The Holy Spirit had to be sitting on her shoulder that day.



Now, I must admit that I did help Cathy find the answers many times, but she had to be learning about the Catholic Church and her faith — because I was learning about it. I fell in love with Jesus and the Catholic faith. Though I had not been baptized, it was during this time that I asked Jesus to come into my heart.



When I was 12, my parents moved to the southeast side of town. As an adult, this is a very short drive to the southwest side; but at 12, it was like moving to another state. And my parents couldn't see driving me to the southwest side just to attend church. I lost all my spiritual support. I no longer had Cathy with whom to talk about the Catholic faith. I had continued to visit Grace before moving, which was like being at church services — she truly lived her faith. Now, I didn't even have her or her church.

I tried attending church services at nearby churches — there were a couple of churches that were close. They left an empty feeling inside. I didn't get that satisfying feeling I used to get at Grace and Gerald's Presbyterian church. At one of the nearby churches, the minister slapped my hands very hard, because I attended church with the adults but not Sunday School with the children. Obviously, God had other things in mind for me.

At 16, I mentioned to my father that I wanted to become a Catholic. This man that I truly loved surprised me by flying into a rage. He told me that if I did, I would have to find another place to live. That firmly put an end to any idea of becoming Catholic.



As a side note: I found, during genealogy research many years after my father's death, that his parents had belonged to the Ku Klux Klan, which are vehemently opposed to the Catholic Church. According to my aunt, they pulled my father into it, as well. It explained a lot about my father's attitude on many things — all the

things that we ever disagreed on or on which we had heated fights. My father died at age 67. It was gratifying to know that he was scheduled to become a Catholic one week later. He had a Catholic funeral, since he had completed conversion classes and had the “intention” to be Catholic. The priest explained that he was Catholic in the eyes of the Lord by intent. The Holy Spirit had a tough job getting him there, I’m sure; but I’m thankful He did. God truly is wondrous.





A MAJOR TURNING POINT

When I was 18, I married and became Pat Miller. My husband turned out to be an inactive Catholic with a grandmother of whom the family said was “more Catholic” than the Pope — behind her back, of course. (And, I swear, she probably was!) I didn’t know any of this until after the wedding by the justice of the peace with only my family present. He was estranged from his family.



At age 20, pregnant with our first child, my husband asked me to become a Catholic. I didn’t even think twice about it; I was thrilled. I came home to Iowa to have our baby and lived with his grandmother. She was a wealth of information and encouragement, while I was studying to become a Catholic.

I was surprised at my baptism, when my father accepted my invitation and attended. My parents were divorced, but both were there. It was the only time I remember us being together as a family at a religious function, other than other people’s weddings.



A short time after our son, Thomas, was baptized, my husband refused to attend Mass again and made it next to impossible for me to do so by causing a fight or taking off with our only car. It turned out that he only wanted me to become Catholic to please his doting grandmother. I continued to attend Mass, but it became increasingly more difficult. I finally gave up, which



seemed to please my husband. When our daughter, Elizabeth, was born, I wanted her to be baptized. My husband wouldn't allow it.

After six years of marriage, I left my husband with our two children and obtained a divorce a year later. I immediately had my daughter baptized in the Catholic Church. That was almost 34 years ago at this writing. I left the Catholic Church soon afterward, which wasn't too conducive to divorced people at the time. I felt like an outsider, who wasn't wanted.



I didn't attend church that first year after the divorce. I worked two jobs just to make ends meet. My husband didn't pay any child support.

Missing my faith and God, I began attending services at various churches. I bounced around to different protestant churches for about three years. I learned a lot during these years about seeking God and finding Him through different forms of prayer — things I never would have learned in the Catholic Church at the time. I must admit that I did love the Pentecostal church we attended. The people were terrific, and the pastor was fantastic. I believe I learned several things here that God knew would be important to my future. It was here that I learned to “kill them with kindness” (for those who didn't like me for whatever reason or who wronged me in some way). I learned that I had been speaking in tongues since I was a child without knowing it. It was here my faith again began to grow.



It was during these three years that I began researching Christianity, the Bible and its history. The history became important to my better understanding of the Bible. For example, in Mark 10:25, Jesus says, “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.” At the time of Jesus, the City of Jerusalem had large, heavy doors in the walled city. They were closed and locked at nights, leaving the only entrance a small door that was a little over two feet square. This door (located in the center of the big door) looked like the eye of a needle, and was called the “needle door”. Some theologians dispute this theory, but it truly makes much more sense of the Bible passage. A camel couldn’t get through the small door, but someone actually might give it a try; whereas, you wouldn’t even attempt pushing a camel through an actual sewing needle eye.



I have now been researching my faith, the Bible and Christianity for over 30 years. In Luke 11:9-10, Jesus says, “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For the one who asks always receives; the one who searches always finds; the one who knocks will always have the door opened to him.” God certainly keeps His promises. I always say, “When all else fails, read the instructions — the Bible!”

Four years after my divorce, God took me back to the Catholic Church. He told me it was time. I reluctantly found St. Pius X Catholic Church, located in Norfolk, Virginia, where we then lived.

It was there that I met Father Duane, a Franciscan priest and pastor of the parish, who helped me with a lot of issues, including applying for and receiving a dispensation (annulment) from the Catholic Church for my marriage. (For non-Catholics, this means that if I should ever wish to remarry, I may do so in the Catholic Church and with the Church's blessing — as long as the groom, too, is eligible to be married in the Church.)



Father Duane also suggested that I purchase a Jerusalem research Bible, which I did and still use today. The bookmark ribbons have since disappeared and the leather cover is in pretty bad shape. After a recent retreat, I was finally shamed into making new ribbon bookmarkers and a tapestry cover for it.

During my many years at St. Pius X, my children and I were very active in the Church. James 2:20 tells us "... faith without good deeds is useless." (This is further expanded upon in James 2:14-26.)

My son was an altar boy (they didn't have altar servers, then). My daughter was in choir and babysat in the church nursery. I was finally confirmed in my faith here. I was a Eucharistic minister for Mass, the sick at home, and the ill and dying in the hospital. I



also was in the choir, and a member of the Social Concerns Committee. I participated in the parish Singles' Group, where Father Tom was my favorite dance partner; and I played volleyball in the parish school gym almost every Sunday with the Young Adults' Group, of which Father Duane considered himself a member, though we all knew he was much too old. <smile>



I became a member of the Third Order of Carmelites, which is a “lay” order. (For non-Catholics, these are normal people who commit themselves to God within their state. Otherwise, if you are married, you are committed to God and your family. If you are single, you may marry but remain celibate until you do. You also have certain obligations of prayer and community.) The Order was a very prayerful group, where I deepened my intimate relationship with God, as well as my faith walk. Being a contemplative Order, I began reading about the Carmelite saints, as well as their own writings on spirituality. I especially loved St. John of the Cross. I read the history of the Popes throughout time and other Carmelite writings. I made my commitment as a postulant to the Third Order of Carmelites.

I met Pat and her husband, Don, in the Lay Order. She deepened my faith walk even further just by her own life’s example. She was my first truly good example of what a marriage commitment really is and how to honor it.





IN OUR MIDST



It was about this time that I began talking to God out loud. I was in the military and had message sorting duty for a week at a time. Since I was the only person in the area, I talked constantly with God. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18, St. Paul tells us, “Be happy at all times; pray constantly; and for all things give thanks to God, because this is what God expects you to do in Christ Jesus.”

I continue this habit today. Of course, it used to be a bit embarrassing to have someone catch me talking to “myself” while shopping. I got over it years ago. Though I find it quite funny that people can more easily accept that I talk out loud to myself, rather than that I’m talking out loud to God. My mother used to catch me all the time. At first, she gave me a funny look. I think she finally just accepted that I talk out loud with only myself in the room, other than my cat — especially after hearing me yell at my computer screen several times (computers can be frustrating for everyone). I guess it’s time to own up to my partner in conversation and quit telling people I talk to myself.

Part of Pope Benedict XVI’s monthly prayer intention for May 2007 stated, “That all Christians ... always remain attentive to the signs of the Lord in their lives.” Monsignor Frank, my current pastor, has reiterated this sentiment during his Sunday homilies, as well. In Deuteronomy 4:29, Moses said, “... you will seek God from there, and if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul, you shall find Him.”

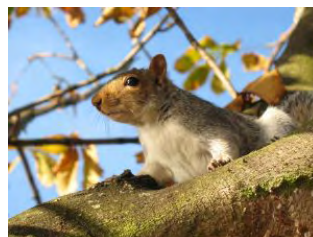
Many years ago, God showed me that He was intimately involved in every aspect of our lives — no matter how insignificant. My children were young and my mother lived with us at the time, taking care of Thomas and Elizabeth while I worked. One Saturday, we were all going to the big mall. I was driving toward the front door to look for a parking space, when my mother told me I should drive to the back lots — there wouldn't be anything up front. I told her, "You never know", but she just laughed at the absurdity of my comment.

When I reached the front doors, there right across from them was an empty parking spot, and I pulled in. I looked at my mother and said, "Oh, ye of little faith." Of course, my children giggled up a storm at that, but I was as shocked as my mother. From that time on, I ask God for a close parking space each time I have to park in a mall parking lot. You know what? I've always been given one within a few spaces from the doors. Of course, I remember to thank God for it.



Since then, I look for God everywhere within my daily life, because no matter how insignificant the situation, God is there for us — in our midst. I don't look for the parting of the Red Sea-type of miracle, though I know He's capable of it. I call them His little "AHA moments"; God's little blessings to us, letting us know He's here. I quickly learned that coincidence is just a way that God anonymously says hello.

Recently, a squirrel, that has become almost a pet for me, built a nest in my tree, closer to the food. I was curious how he got in and out of the nest, assuming it was from the bottom to keep rain from getting inside. One day, I just happened to look out the window and up to the nest area. There was my squirrel playing tag with a black bird,



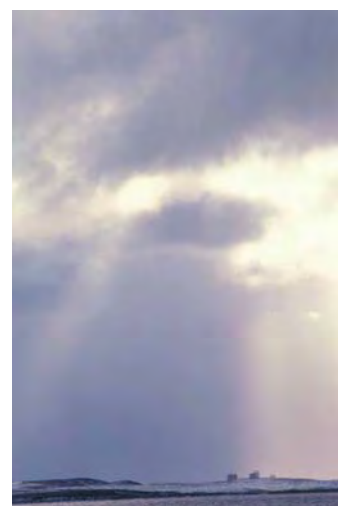
though I don't believe the dive-bombing bird was playing. The bird would dive at him, and he'd quickly jump into his nest and back out again. I was entertained like this for about 10 minutes, until the bird finally gave up and flew off. Then, the squirrel popped his head up out of the nest and back in again several times. He then popped his head out and just seemed to be staring at me for several minutes, as if to say, "This is how I get in and out of my nest." What an AHA moment that was.

These little blessings are given to each of us everyday. We only have to look for them. For me, I have gained a better appreciation for God's presence than I ever had before and appreciate such moments greatly. I constantly look for them, and I've found that the more I look, the more I see God in my daily life.



Also during these years, I learned that God does truly answer prayer. We only need ask. In Philippians 4:6, St. Paul said, "... if there is anything you need, pray for it, asking God for it with prayer and thanksgiving."

One example was when my father had become very ill, and my sister-in-law called me to come home. As the plane started to descend for landing, I got a sick feeling in my stomach. I prayed that God would tell me before I got off the plane if my father had already passed. I had a window seat; and after the plane landed and turned to taxi to the terminal, the sky suddenly opened up with gigantic rays of the sun (known



as crepuscular rays or God's rays) reaching clear to the ground. When I was a child, Cathy and I used to say that this was St. Peter opening heaven's gate to allow all those who had died to enter. At their sudden appearance, I knew my father had passed.

I told God that I wasn't sure I could make it to the inside security gate. I remained in my seat until everyone else had disembarked the plane, leaving just in front of the flight crew. While walking through the terminal, I felt very weak and wasn't sure I could continue upright. At that moment, I felt a very strong hand cup my elbow and physically hold me upright. Thinking it was the pilot, who had not been too far behind me, I turned to see no one there — yet, I could feel His hand holding me up. In my distress, I didn't question it, only thankful I wasn't alone. I thanked God many times over the next few days for His strength.

A few years later, I had another enlightening experience:



From childhood to my 20s, I had a tremendous fear of death. If I saw a hearse drive by (even an obviously empty one), I would cry, my fear was so great. I finally prayed, asking God to show me heaven. I prayed this prayer

every night before sleeping for several months. Then finally, I was given a dream, where I was led to heaven. It was strange in that I could “see” all these people sitting around a long table, yet they had no substance as you and I do. I sat down with them. We all talked, laughed and had such a satisfying and happy time. It was truly the first time I had felt unconditional love. I have never had a fear of death since. To me it's just a passing over from one dimension to another.



SETBACK — SO, I THOUGHT

In 1985, I moved all of us back to Des Moines, Iowa. My life was at a standstill in Virginia, the schools were horrible and my children were learning nothing, and my mom truly wanted her own place, which wasn't affordable in Virginia.



The first church we visited after settling in was Christ the King Catholic Church near to where we rented a home. It was a terrible experience. The atmosphere was cold and unfeeling. My daughter quietly said something to me during Mass (I had always encouraged my children to ask questions about the Mass, so they didn't forget them afterward), and a woman behind us shushed us so loudly that I believe the priest many pews in front heard her.

Each time we went to Mass, I cried all the way home. So, I tried the other Catholic Churches in the city. It was always the same experience — cold and aloof. I truly missed the warm and welcoming atmosphere of St. Pius X in Virginia. After about a year or so, I finally gave up going. I thought about moving back to Virginia, but knew I couldn't afford to do so. Also, both of my children were happier and excelling in their schools here; so, moving was not an option.



My life went downhill. I made many bad choices where men were concerned. A good life in Des Moines was non-existent, where the only place you could meet other single people were the bars. I felt isolated and alone most of the time, except for God, which is why Foreigner's song, "I Want to Know What Love Is", was my anthem for so many years.



In 1995, God led me away from, not only the Catholic Church and my faith, but completely away from Christianity. Under normal circumstances, I would have argued with Him about it. (It always takes a little convincing on His part to get me to do things — not always, but often, especially something of this magnitude. I'm the type of person who hates change.) This time I didn't argue. I only followed.

Why? Several months earlier, there had been an incident.

My son was having surgery in Arkansas, an eight-hour drive from Des Moines. The corporation I worked for wouldn't allow me vacation until the day before his surgery because of my deadlines, and even then I had to work on my "vacation" while there.

The night before I was to leave, we had a terrible ice storm, unusual for mid-March. I didn't sleep the whole night and finally decided to get up and prepare to leave. I ignored the voice of God in my head telling me to wait until my planned 6 a.m. departure time, and left at 4 a.m. instead, hoping to miss most of the traffic for an easier drive on the ice.



The drive through the ice was uneventful. About 30 minutes before crossing the Iowa-Missouri line, we ran out of ice. A semi and myself were side-by-side in front of several cars. I took my cue from the semi driver, who took it up to 55 miles an hour, but didn't venture past that. The drive was good with no problems.



About five miles into Missouri, we hit black ice. The semi was weighted heavily and kept his footing. My car, on the other hand, though heavy with a turbo engine and loaded with luggage, didn't fare too well and began to skid. I was experienced at driving on ice, though never before did I do it at



these speeds. I immediately took both feet off the pedals (I drive a standard transmission) and planted them firmly on the floor, so I wouldn't be tempted to use the brake. (I'm extremely practical in emergencies and only react to the situation.)

I immediately turned into the skid. The car whipped in the opposite direction, going in circles now with more forward momentum. I turned into the skid a second time, sending the car careening in the opposite direction, again with even more forward momentum. I immediately turned into the skid a third time with the same result. I was now going about 80 miles an hour — out of control with a semi quickly coming at me. It was like a roller coaster ride. Anyone who knows me well, knows how much ***I HATE ROLLER COASTERS!***

Only seconds had passed, though it seemed like hours. Thankfully, I was thrown a ways out in front of the semi and oncoming cars; but not for long. I knew there was a hill coming up fast.

After turning into the skid the third time, I knew in my heart that I couldn't get myself out of this mess. It was useless. In Psalms 56:3-4, David sang, "I put my trust in You; in God, whose world I praise, in God I put my trust, fearing nothing."



And that's just what I did. Out loud, I screamed, "I can't do this. God, You drive," and immediately released the steering wheel, putting my hands straight up at the sides of my head and closed my eyes.



I felt the car do two more complete circles. Then, it hit tremendously hard on the driver's side and came to an immediate, abrupt stop — so hard, that I just knew that I would have whiplash from it. The car went dead still. I quickly opened my eyes, and now I definitely felt FEAR! I saw the semi coming straight at me.



It took me several seconds to comprehend that it safely passed me on the right. I looked at the Interstate and saw that I was only two-car widths off the road. I began shaking uncontrollably as the fear and enormity of what just happened finally sunk in. I openly and aloud thanked God over and over again *for being a much better driver than me* and saving my life, praising Him until the fear ebbed and the shaking became minimal.

I felt completely unharmed, and the car showed no damage from the inside. I rolled down the window to see the damage on the outside and realized that God had saved me not once — but twice!

If my car had gone one more car width, it would have rolled down an embankment. Again, I thanked God for His foresight.

From my vantage point, I couldn't see any damage or even what had stopped me; so, I slowly opened my door, waiting for it to hit something. Nothing! I got out of the car and closed the door. Then, I just stood there in shock. You won't believe what had stopped my car — a heavy car, by this time going about 80 miles an hour sideways!



Frozen grass! Only 12 inches tall — and not even that much of it! So fragile, that I bent and broke a blade in half with absolutely no effort. There wasn't even that much of it. Again, I was thanking God. I got back in the car, until again the shaking completely stopped.



About 10 minutes later, a state trooper knocked on my window and inquired if I was okay. I assured him I was fine. He said he had called a sander and a tow truck; but warned that the tow truck driver only took cash, didn't know how much, and asked if I would be okay. I was still so rattled that I couldn't remember how much money I had taken from the ATM the night before, so I said I'd check my purse.

He suggested I join him in his patrol car, where he thought it would be safer. I thought about God being with me in my car and declined, thanking him for his thoughtfulness. I thought, "I'm good, right here."

I checked my purse and found only \$60 dollars. I prayed to God that it wouldn't cost more than that to pull my car back onto the highway. In the meantime, the sander came and double sanded the area on the Interstate in order to get me out.



Another 10 or 15 minutes passed before the trooper was again knocking on my window. He said the tow truck was further up the road pulling another car out of the ditch, since he'd have to stop traffic to get me out. The trooper told me the guy was charging \$60 to pull people out. Was I okay with that? I smiled and said, "I'm good!" I again thanked God for answering my prayer.



I had absolutely no injuries, and my car never had any effects from the accident. I had put all of my trust and my life in God's hands that day, and He didn't let me down — not on anything! After that, I would have followed God into hell, itself, if He had asked me — without question! So, following Him to another religion seemed rather minor.

I'm crying right now, just reliving this episode — not because of what might have or have not happened to me, but because God loved me so much to go to such lengths to keep not only me alive and safe but my car and belongings, too.

During my years of studying the Bible and Christianity, I had also on occasion studied parts of other "old world" religions. I was interested in the beliefs of others and how they affected their lifestyle and shaped their culture. I had read parts of the Jewish Kabbalah, the four Hindu Vedas, and many Buddhist writings. These studies had taught me tolerance and respect for the belief of others.

Though I generally chose these studies, in late 1995, God gave me the religion of Islam to study. Personally, I thought it was a pagan belief system, from which I had always stayed away. After all, the second chapter of the Quran was titled “The Cow”. I thought, “At least the Hindus, who hold the Cow as sacred, didn’t name their religious writings after it. Still, for God, I began reading the Quran as a learning project. Instead, it turned out that they were also called “People of the Book”, just like the Jews and Christians. It was halfway through the Quran, when God purposefully led me deeper into the religion.



God wisely chose the perfect religion for me — one I could accept. You see, much of the Quran reads like Genesis in the Bible, only easier to understand — same stories, same people. (The chapter was named “The Cow” because a major story was about a cow.) Islam worships the God of Abraham, the same God as the Christians and the Jews. They revere Jesus and the Virgin Mary, though they view Jesus only as a man. They don’t believe that Jesus is God Incarnate, which worked out perfect for me. I didn’t believe it either.

One area of my faith that had always been lacking was belief in the divinity of Jesus, though I always believed that He was the promised messiah. I just couldn’t wrap my mind around His being part of God — son of man, even son of God, yes; but God Incarnate, no.



I spent three years in the Muslim community. I learned everything I could about Islam — it's history, the Prophet Muhammad (who was quite a man of integrity, as well as a great leader), and the people, themselves.

Islam is a fascinating faith. The true faith of Islam is nothing like what you hear about in the news; and not being an evangelizing faith like Christianity, Muslims don't understand why others believe they should speak up in defense of their faith that's being wrongly represented by terrorists.



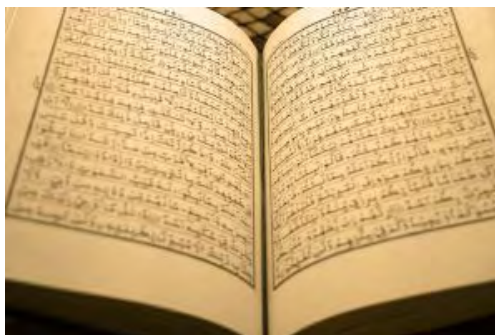
I met some truly terrific people — those who followed the true faith of Islam. I also met some truly scary people, who had no clue what Islam was about or what the Quran really said.

You can always tell when some Muslim cleric on the news, who abdicates terrorism, has never read the Quran. For anyone who has read it, it's quite obvious. Islam is a religion of peace, stating unequivocally in the Quran that you go straight to Hell if you kill an innocent (which is who most suicide bombers are killing — you cannot just label someone an enemy and make it okay to kill them).

After the three years in Islam, God said it was time to leave. By then, I already knew I wasn't to remain there. I departed and was left in a sort of limbo for several years with no spiritual community. God continued to teach me things, using my experience in Islam and, sometimes, current events:

1. God had fulfilled His promise to Hagar in Genesis 21:18, where He speaks to her of her son Ishmael, "... for I will make him into a great nation." Before Muhammad and the Quran, no king or leader of any sort could pull together the nomadic tribes, who were the descendents of Ishmael. Their prophet and the faith of Islam did, and their faith is the only thing that has held them together to this day.

2. The Quran is a very profound book and is easy to read. It has a straight-forward meaning throughout. There is no misunderstanding any of it, which is how you can tell when someone speaking about the



Quran has not read it. The Bible, on the other hand, is fraught throughout with double meanings; but I learned there is an important reason for that. In Matthew 13:13-15, Jesus tells us, "The reason I talk to them in parables is that they look without seeing and listen without hearing or understanding." The truly faithful will understand the Bible through their faith and the Holy Spirit. God wants more than for us to say we believe. He truly wants us to believe and have a strong faith. He wants us to seek Him!

3. He showed me the importance of reading scripture, regardless of your faith. During my short time in Islam, I learned that it could mean the



difference between following falsehoods and following God. The terrorists are NOT fundamentalist Muslims — there is no such thing! (Journalists are trying to view Islam like other faiths that have different

religious sects and levels. Islam only has Sunnis and Shi'ites, which is a "political" division, not a religious one. There is only one interpretation in Islam, though since their split centuries ago, the Shi'ites have developed some different hierarchical structures.) Most terrorists have never read the Quran and use Islam as an excuse and outlet for their pent up anger and thirst for power.

Before we invaded Afkanistan after 9-11, the Taliban leader was interviewed and spouting what I knew was a bunch of nonsense about the Quran, which I had read five times and debated extensively. The leader was asked if he had ever read the Quran; and surprisingly, he admitted he had not.

Many of their followers are following what some guy is telling them that Islam is, rather than taking the time to read it for themselves. Not unlike, God showed me, the followers of Jimmy Jones of the Jonestown massacre or David Karisch and the Branch Davidians, whose followers were Christians. **God says that you cannot be led astray if you know your scriptures.** In Mark 12:24, Jesus says, "Is not the reason why you go wrong, that you understand neither the scriptures nor the power of God." You must regularly read and get to know your Bible, praying for guidance and understanding from the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, you too could be led astray.



READ THE BOOK

Reading scripture also helps you keep your focus. You'll find that the Apostles wrote about what we should be keeping our focus on — the importance of Jesus, His fulfilling prophecy as the Messiah, and His Words. Not such nonsense as the controversial *Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown or other off the wall theories about Jesus. By Christians getting upset over such nonsense, we only drive up the sales for the author and publisher. Let's look at why it's false. The Bible has the answer:

John 19:25-27, "Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary the Magdala. Seeing his mother and the disciple he loved [John] standing near her, Jesus said to his mother, 'Woman, this is your son.' Then to the disciple he said, 'This is your mother.' And from that moment the disciple made a place for her in his home."



Now, if it was important enough for Jesus with his dying breath to make sure His mother would be taken care of, don't you think if Mary Magdala had been His wife and carrying His child He would have ensured John would take care of her, too? She was right there! So, read your Bible, and you won't have to deal with such issues as authors who are out to make a fast buck at the expense of Christianity!

4. Lastly, God showed me the importance of reconciliation and the importance of forgiving, as much as being forgiven. Though taught to hate Americans and the U.S. throughout their schooling, many Muslims have a lot of built up anger. They don't have reconciliation as part of their faith. They have no way to release the anger. Their faith teaches a more ritualistic form of worship, rather than a personal relationship with God. And they don't have the Holy Spirit for them to feel God's love in their lives.





RETURNING HOME

After being in limbo for a while without any spiritual community support and living in Florida in 2001, God told me He wanted me to return to Christianity. This stopped me dead in my tracks. This time I did argue and even cried over this request. I still wasn't ready to face the divinity of Jesus issue. How could I do an about-face and return to Christianity? By this time, I felt like a yo-yo. After a month of protest, I finally returned to the Catholic Church at the Cathedral of St. Ignatius Loyola.



The first Mass left me feeling a bit strange. I was so abundantly aware of my lack of belief in Jesus' divinity. Several Sundays later, God gave me a vision during the processional (the priest and servers were entering the church to begin Mass). The vision held me spellbound. He explained much about the Garden of Eden story. I was relieved, when I realized that the vision ended just as everyone was to be seated. It seemed as if it had gone on for a very long time.

Such visions continued for some time. I had trouble remembering everything that God was giving me, and He was bouncing all over the Bible with the stories He was covering. Finally, I asked if we could do this "Bible study" from the beginning with Genesis. It has been going on now for almost six years. It isn't something we

do constantly, because I get thoroughly overwhelmed at times. I would have to put it down, sometimes for months at a time.

From this point, I spent two years with God, working intensely on reconciliation. He brought up things from my childhood to the present — things I would never have remembered on my own. He taught me that reconciliation was more than just confessing my sins. It's also about forgiving those who have done wrong to me, which is just as important since we harbor ill will toward such people — sometimes without realizing it. Both are offensive to God; because they build a barrier between God and us, lessening our ability to connect. Through this process, I resolved all that had happened to me in the past, none of which has much meaning when compared to my relationship with God.



In May 2006, now in Iowa, God began pushing me to temporarily table our study of the Old Testament in order to do the New Testament. As usual, I protested. I just didn't want to address the issue of Jesus' divinity. (I'm so glad God puts up with my stubborn streak!)

I finally relented and began with the smaller books, then St. Paul's writings, and then the more prominent writings and Gospels. We only have 2½ Gospels remaining to finish the New Testament, except for Revelations, which I've never read. (That will probably be the next thing the Lord will ask me to read.)





THE LIGHT COMES ON

While we were studying 1 John, God explained the divinity of Jesus to me in a vision. Though I'd heard it all before, this time it made sense to me.



I always thought the resurrection was the most important part of the Easter events. I found it is actually the crucifixion. By canceling out our sins that are offensive to God through His own death, Jesus not only cleared the way for eternal life but also for the Holy Spirit — our direct link to God. The Holy Spirit was only given to a few elite in the Old Testament, generally prophets. The resurrection was actually icing on the cake, giving us proof that there is life after death and a Kingdom of God — fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies. Without Jesus' death, we wouldn't have our connection to God from this side. Like creation, it took a divine presence for it to happen. That is why the Trinity is the Father (God) → the Son → the Holy Spirit (and back to God again). Jesus' divinity was no longer a question for me.

My travel to Islam also made sense — God had to get me “out of the box” in order for me to see more clearly from a new perspective. I was much too close to the subject and too entrenched in Christianity to actually understand.

God even showed me that other non-Christian religions were without that direct connection to God, because they are without Jesus — again, another new perspective.

Here is what I wrote about this vision:

With Islam and other non-Christian religions, God is a remote god. There is a barrier, a wall if you will, between the people and God. That wall continues to build higher each time we offend God, who is all good and wants us to be so, as well. Jesus not only tore down those walls for us with His sacrifice, but He gave us the ability to continue tearing them down as we build them — through reconciliation.



Offenses build from this to

.....

THIS!

Jesus also brought the Holy Spirit to us, allowing us to have a “real” connection to God and a personal relationship with Him. Without the sacrifice of Jesus and His resurrection, there would be no Holy Spirit. I would never have had this special and truly intimate connection to God through the Holy Spirit and through Jesus. The thought of never being able to speak directly to God and to hear His voice is devastating to me.

Though I know that many people, even the most devout, don't always have this experience, I cannot imagine living in this world without it. My connection to God is everything to me. God was there, when no one else was — even my family. He has always loved me unconditionally.



And I have Jesus to thank for it all. No human being, alone, could have done all of this for humankind. Only God Incarnate was capable of such a feat, and He continues to be right here with us in the Eucharist.



The realization of all this was like a light bulb exploding in my head. It was thoroughly overwhelming. I felt so small in this vast universe, yet had the realization that God loved me enough to see me through my journey to

get me to this point. How special I felt, yet knew that God is there exactly the same for everyone who seeks him.



Now, you would think after this that I would run to the first Catholic Church and throw myself down at the altar. Not so. I now understood and believed in the divinity of Jesus. Yet, I was reluctant to move forward with it. I can't tell you why, because I truly don't know. As Monsignor once said in his homily, people have a problem taking the last step in returning to church.

In the early morning of May 23, 2006, God gave me a dream. Here it is:

My mother, 89 years old, was feeling ill and asked me to take her to a "healer". (If you knew my mother, you'd know she has to be really ill to ask for a doctor, and she would never use the term healer.) We get in the car and begin driving to the hospital. I see a man, whom I instinctively know I want to avoid. But he runs to me before I can get away. He puts his arms around my mother and heals her. The healing leaves him very weak, which someone explains (in the dream) that the healing took a lot out of him (meaning that the illness was very serious).



Then, the man puts his arms around me, one of His lost lambs. I knew at this point the man was Jesus. He whispered in my ear, "I have missed you. Don't ever leave me again." I answered, "I won't. I promise."

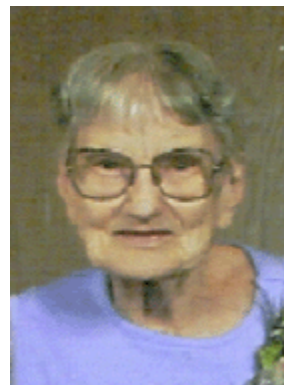
I immediately woke up, feeling for the third time in my life the unconditional love of God. For the first time, I truly understood the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. I totally recommitted myself to Jesus right there and then — completely this time.



I tried attending St. Ambrose in downtown Des Moines the following Sunday. While driving there, I passed Christ the King parish. God said to me, “There is where you should be going.” I said, “Not after my last experience there!” and continued toward downtown. (I am, if anything, stubborn to a fault!) I truly didn’t like the Mass that day and returned home in dismay. I knew I wouldn’t return to St. Ambrose.

On July 31, 2006, my mother came to me on a Sunday morning, complaining of a pain in her stomach. God told me it was appendicitis. I examined her as the doctor had me, when I had appendicitis over 30 years before. She had the same reactions. I suggested I take her to the hospital, and she agreed without hesitation. So, I knew the pain was really bad. It was indeed appendicitis. They did tons of tests that day and emergency surgery at 5 p.m. that evening.

Mom was in the hospital for a week. I spent most of the daytime hours there, doing much of what the nursing staff would normally do. I wanted someone familiar to be with her. It was a terribly stressful time for me, taking care of her and trying to continue my freelance work on my laptop at her bedside. I spent many captured



moments in the hospital chapel — every time I went for something in the vending machines, on my way to her room in the mornings, and before going home at night. The funny thing is, I wasn't praying that she would be okay. I already knew that she would be, deep inside me (though I had forgotten that part of the dream). And God had given me an inner peace that told me she would be okay all during her surgery. I was praying to get me through it all. A lot happened to her that week. She had a heart attack because of the anesthesia and needed a blood transfusion. She was being monitored so closely, she got hardly any sleep. She was in pain and in distress; and she was experiencing dementia from the anesthesia, normal for her age but terrifying for her and overwhelmingly frightening for me. It was a very difficult time for both of us, but she came through it okay.

At the end of September, I took Mom to her doctor's appointment, many of which she had after her hospital stay. I had taken my spiritual notebook with me to look



for a Bible passage I was trying to find, knowing I had noted it in the notebook. It was then that I reread the dream of May 23rd. It was then that I realized that God had already told me of Mom's surgery. It was then that I knew Jesus had healed her and was with us both all through that week. Jesus had given me His promise in the dream — and He kept it! I thanked God and Jesus for loving both of us so much.



THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

The following Sunday, I returned to Christ the King and was pleasantly surprised by how it had changed. It reminded me of St. Pius X parish in Virginia. I joined the parish the following month in October 2006. I now attend Mass only for the Eucharist, to be with God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit — and, of course, for Monsignor's jokes at the end of Mass. <smile>



At Mass, I sit next to two lovely ladies. One is a bit hard of hearing; so, when they talk during Mass, they sometimes get a bit loud. I just smile to myself and genuinely cherish these moments.

I cry often during the Mass. I feel God's presence so intently. Sometimes, it will be a song or something said in the homily that just hits me right through my heart, and the tears come without warning. I've learned to always carry tissues with me — just in case.

The most significant gift God has given me is to know that God does pursue us. Yet, it's up to each of us to accept His love and continue to build that relationship by seeking God in return. Having faith alone isn't enough. Doing good deeds alone won't do it. We must pursue Him in return.

One of the most important things I've learned is that love is spelled G - O - D — unconditionally! God is love; and with God, I'm never alone.





God has blessed me with numerous gifts. I thank a retreat I participated in for showing me just how blessed I am and to fully appreciate these gifts — even the gift of tears (which is actually a combination of the gift of empathy and the gift of compassion).

God is now asking me to share these gifts and knowledge He's given me with other Christians by helping them build their faith and relationship with Him. I have since developed my own personal ministry under the Lord's direction. My ministry's anthem is:

FAITH! It's your life ... make it real!

In Luke 12:48, Jesus tells us, "When a man has had a great deal given him, a great deal will be demanded of him; when a man has had a great deal given him on trust, even more will be expected of him."

I don't know what all God has planned for me, but my goal is to eventually change my career to work only for God. Mom passed away last fall and is now in God's arms. It's been tough on me financially, but God has been there through it all. He is so awesome!

I know my journey is only at its beginning. I'm ready to go out on a limb, and put some action in my faith! And I just wanted you to know my story before I do.

Yes, God has pursued me all my life, but only because I accepted His invitation by pursuing Him ...

Just like you can do right now!



My faith journey is truly not unusual or even rare.

**I have been chosen and gratefully so.
But so have each and everyone of you who read this.**

Seek God in every way possible, especially through constant prayer. Make Him the center of your life and everything will follow — and you'll begin to see God more in your daily life!

Faith

It's your life ... so, make it real !



Thank you for taking the time to read my witness.

I hope it gives you something on which to
grow your faith stronger.

May God bless you!

