

SUPERNATURAL SOLUTIONS  
Letting the Lord Rescue You  
By Melissa Huray

## WHAT IF THIS IS A DIVINE APPOINTMENT?

You've heard of those, right? Well, if you haven't yet, you should start looking for them in your daily life. God will send them if you're open, so get your pitch ready!

Your pitch is your witness- preferably a minute long nugget of your life which could be shared with a random stranger - or within the time it might take to reach your floor if you're in an elevator. Most people stare awkwardly at the floor, fix their eyes on the lighted buttons, or pull out their smart phones in an effort to discourage any good old fashioned human interaction. But what if this is your ONE chance to speak into this person's life? You should ask yourself every time you come into contact with another human: *What if I never see this person again and this is my only opportunity to make an impact on their life?*

When I get to heaven, I don't want the Lord to say, "Hey remember that time I put you in Bob's path when the two of you were all alone in the waiting room at the dentist's office? You felt the stirring of the Spirit, yet you did nothing."

Several years ago, I became seriously about listening to my Father's voice. I even wrote "I am about my Father's business" on a sticky note and anchored it to my computer at work so I would be more likely to remember my calling. Since then, I've been trying to witness more boldly to a hurting world. I cannot say I am always obedient to the quickening of the Holy Spirit, but I *am* becoming more likely to act when prompted.

Here's my elevator pitch:

"Would you mind if I tell you my story? I am practicing sharing it with others." (More than likely they are going to say yes).

***My name is Melissa. I am a believer in Christ Jesus, a wife, and a mother. I grew up in an alcoholic home but God placed a Christian couple nearby who ministered to me and when I was 9 years old I accepted Jesus at their church. Like many teenagers, I eventually fell away from the faith and when I was 15 I started getting blackout drunk every weekend. This led to a decade and a half of alcohol addiction, empty relationships, and emotional pain. After a two year struggle with relapse, I finally got sober for good in 2003. I surrendered and asked God to free me from my addiction, and He answered my prayer by supernaturally removing my obsession to drink. Then, He immediately placed a call upon my life to reach others still struggling. I'm here to tell you about freedom in Christ. I didn't want to spend the rest of my time on earth tethered to a twelve step program and white knuckling it through every day. I experienced true deliverance and haven't looked back since. Do you want to know more about how to have a relationship with Jesus?"***

Usually they listen politely and say 'no thanks,' or 'I already know Jesus,' and they almost always take the gospel tract I hand them afterwards, especially if we're in my home state where Minnesota Nice is the norm. Almost *never* are they mean or angry (even in other states). Every once in while though, someone says yes, they want to know Jesus, and then we pray and God does the rest. Even if they ARE angry, that's not my problem.

If you don't have an elevator pitch, you can try other simple questions to engage someone.

-Do you think there's any afterlife? Why or why not?

-Do you believe in God? Why or why not?

-Do you think heaven exists?

-Are you going there?

Jesus is the answer for an empty, directionless, hurting world. So many of us self-medicate with alcohol, drugs, and mind-numbing behaviors, but none of it fills the void very long. Many are struggling to find purpose in life: claiming, "if only I knew what I was supposed to be doing, I'd be happy."

You don't have to be a pastor or have a job in human services to help people. Jesus wants us ALL to be in the business of HUMAN SERVICES - whether we work at Burger King, a used car lot, a bank, a daycare center, or a home business. It doesn't matter if you're a stay at home mom, a cancer patient, a bartender, or a welder. God can use you wherever you are, whoever you are - all you have to be is willing. Once you start moving in tandem with Him, being responsive to the promptings of His spirit, you'll naturally get where you're supposed to be.

It's hard to know God's will sometimes. You may ask yourself: is this God's will, or an outcome I'm trying to force? When you're moving with God, it should feel effortless, natural and right. It will align with the Word of God (the Bible). You should have a sense of peace about it. And even when you make mistakes or end up in the wrong place or with the wrong person, don't fear! God will still use it to get you where you need to be.

Instead of obsessing over whether you're in the right place - right job, right relationship, right town - whatever - START RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE NOW, and ask God to take you where He wants you to go. Do not fear His will for your life. He knows what is best for you!

Here are a couple of simple prayers to start you on the road of walking with Jesus. You don't need to pray long, detailed prayers or copy the religious leaders of Jesus' day. Just be yourself.

**-Use me for your purposes Lord**

**-Keep me within your will**

**-Help me, Jesus**

**-Open up the path before me step by step**

**-Take me, I'm yours**

**-Come and get me Lord**

**-Show me the root of my problem and how to overcome it**

**-Reveal anything I'm doing that is getting in the way of Your work in my life.**

My transformation and desire to serve Jesus didn't happen overnight, but looking back I can see God's hand in situations, guiding me. In many cases, I can now understand why my prayer wasn't answered or why I had to wait. Most importantly, I've come to realize that it's *never* over with God. He always has another trick up his sleeve, even when you may think you're hopelessly stuck. God can make a way where there seems to be NO way. He can open a window when every single door has slammed in your face.

Lately I've been thinking about how I was spared from so many accidents that should have led to untimely death, and about how patient and faithful God has been with me. It brings me to tears when I ponder His grace and truly understand that he WAS WITH ME through all of the garbage. He promises never to abandon or forsake us.

All of this goes back to a simple prayer I recited in 1982, not realizing the impact in my nine year old brain. The fact that I agreed to say that prayer didn't mean God removed my free will, or that He would prevent bad things from happening - but it signified something truly awe inspiring: HE MARKED ME AS HIS CHILD...and nothing could snatch me from His hand. He allowed me time (plenty of years in fact) to come to the end of myself, and room to make the free will choices that would create a desperate awareness of my level of need for Him. I think this dawned on me because I was pondering why I'd been spared so many awful things that should've killed me. He was protecting me. It's as simple as that.

The second most impactful prayer I didn't immediately understand the power of - was in 2003 when I walked the fairgrounds sick and in alcohol withdrawal, begging God to remove my desire to drink. He completely transformed me after that day - and I'm still walking the path of transformation with the Lord.

***“See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wasteland and streams in the wilderness.” -Isaiah 43:19 NIV***

## I DON'T EVEN WANT TO BE HERE!

Sometimes God does super amazing things in places I didn't even think I wanted go. Once, I was prompted strongly by the Holy Spirit following an incident I observed at Chuck E. Cheese restaurant in Burnsville, MN. I must admit this joint is not my favorite place. I was there with my husband and two of my children, when I witnessed a mother become very angry with her child. As I stood watching, she grabbed her son (who appeared to be about eight years old), picked him up by the arm, and threw him into the corner of the booth where her husband and other child were sitting. The boy was huddled in the corner, crying to himself, as his parents silently resumed eating.

I was so heartbroken after witnessing this, and not because I wanted to judge the mother. I, too, have been in situations where I simply lost it (sometimes in public) with my kids. Although I would never be physically abusive to my children, I have been guilty of yelling, swearing, overreacting, and making them feel bad for something that was at least partially my fault.

Well, this couple did NOT look very approachable, especially right after they'd finished disciplining their child, and to be fair I missed a large part of the whole scenario so I don't know what the boy may have done to generate such a severe reprimand. As I continued to watch, I thought about how Chuck E. Cheese can indeed be a stressful, overly stimulating environment, although it is *supposed* to be fun. I thought about how I hadn't wanted to go there that day, and then suddenly wondered if God had placed me there for some purpose.

I could tell that God wanted me to say something and my heart pounded as I rationalized with the Holy Spirit, trying my best to defend why I didn't need to get involved. It was their business, I reasoned, and the family should be left to deal with whatever problems were plaguing them. But the Spirit was persistent and would not let me rest until I awkwardly approached their table (still not knowing what I was going to say).

***“When you are brought before synagogues, rulers, and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.” -Luke 12:11-12 NIV***

I remember breathing deeply, leaning over, and placing my palms flat on the table as I gathered my thoughts, then simply telling them I knew they were having a tough time and I completely understood how this wonderful “kid-friendly establishment” could indeed be quite stressful - I'd been in their shoes before. After that I simply asked if there was anything I could pray for them about.

Surprisingly, they were not angry, and did not tell me to get out of their business, as I expected. After sitting silently for a few moments, looking at each other, the mother spoke and admitted the couple had been struggling with disciplining their older son and asked if I'd pray for all of them.

I don't know how the story ended, but I like to think about how maybe that was the moment God showed up for them. Perhaps I was just the vessel to help the parents become aware of their actions in public, or maybe I was even the answer to a prayer. Who knows, perhaps the frustrated mother had been praying for help and my obedience to the Holy Spirit offered a confirmation for her.

It's easy to get caught up in wondering if a prayer 'worked' or reached its intended result, or maybe even to become discouraged if someone rejects our offer to pray for them, but God doesn't always reveal His plans to us. Although He may not show us how the story ends, we

can be assured we'll never regret it when we allow him to work in and through us to reach others. He uses EVERYTHING for the good!

It's one of the most loved verses in the Bible, and if you've spent any time at all within a church, you've more than likely heard it:

***“For we know that God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.” -Romans 8:28 NIV***

One of my all-time favorite songs is “Don't Stop Believing” by the band Journey. Maybe you want to believe this verse is true, but do you, really? Do I?

If this is true, how do we make sense of accidental death, disease, sickness, divorce or other devastating events?

Dr. Vernon Grounds, longtime president of the Denver Seminary, explained it like this:

“Romans 8:28 begins with God, and the words “God works.” More modern translations put God at the beginning of the verse and not the end, where he should be. He is there before anything happens, when it happens, and he is still there after it is all over. The Bible never asks us to spin a tragedy as something else or to ignore our pain, and we may not understand why God allowed it until we get to heaven. *The point is, we must see the active involvement of God in every circumstance.* Many of the things that make no sense in isolation are in fact working to produce something good in your life.

The hope present in Romans 8:28, that God works to bring good out of ALL things (because he doesn't *will* everything; things happen outside of his will) is only for Christians and not for the whole human race. You must be following Christ for it to operate in your life. Then, although it may not be easy, you can be assured that even when you don't understand why something is happening, God is working behind the scenes to fit that circumstance into a pattern for the good. Our definition of good is not necessarily the same as God's. To God, anything that makes you more Christlike is good, and anything that takes you away from Christ is bad. No matter what happens, you can be sure God would not allow a hardship or struggle to touch your life unless he had a plan to bring a greater good from it. If we are frustrated with life circumstances, then we are not grasping Romans 8:28.”

This past summer, my husband and I took the two ‘little girls’ on a road trip to Galveston Island, Texas. Along the way, we passed through some depressed and impoverished areas. I will never forget stopping somewhere in central Texas - I forget the name of the town - for a bathroom break and some snacks. It was a massive and busy truck stop, and as we pulled into the only empty spot in front, I was face to face with a woman who appeared to be homeless sitting next to the store's entrance.

I am going to be honest here, and I will tell you that I sighed and said, “I don't want to, God.” I didn't want to minister to her or make a connection at that moment, I only wanted to relieve my bladder and get myself some creature comforts to feed my belly, which honestly was not all that empty. So when our eyes met, I looked away and busied myself with my purse, pretending not to notice her. She looked away, too.

While I was finishing up in the bathroom, the Holy Spirit persisted again, so I told Him, “ok, if she's still out there when we leave, I'll talk to her.” Secretly I hoped she'd be gone, but there she sat. The woman was not panhandling or asking for help, but I could somehow tell that she was down and out. Her eyes were hollow and empty. I walked over and still not knowing exactly what I would say, leaned down and whispered, “Do you need help with anything?” She

seemed startled that I'd addressed her at all, and initially asked me to repeat what I'd said. After I had, she mumbled, "No, I'm good."

I got the feeling though, that she was not good at all, so instead of walking away, I asked if I could buy her lunch and she shrugged. I handed her a ten dollar bill and a gospel tract and told her she'd be in my prayers.

We were having some problems getting our car started (strange, no idea why) so I had the chance to see her return to her spot by the door a few minutes later with two large fountain drinks (it was a very hot day), a hot dog, and bag of popcorn. Our eyes met again as we pulled away and for the first time she smiled and waved.

I will never forget that woman, and she comes to mind often. I will probably never see her again, but I like to think about how God used me to touch her life that day. Maybe she gave her life to Jesus as a result of that gospel tract! Who knows, maybe five minutes before I showed up she had prayed, "God, if you're real, show me right now." I love to think of the possibilities. You just never know. Kingdom work is never predictable!

## PLANTING SEEDS

My childhood was peppered with a hodge-podge of eccentric and imperfect relatives, but many of them shared nuggets of truth about Jesus I still carry in my heart today. My father, uncle, grandmother, the minister of the first church I attended, and my confirmation teacher all helped shape my belief system and had primarily good intentions. Some were better examples than others, and their messages were often confusing. In his endless grace, the Lord knew my need and positioned a Christian lady and her husband a few doors down from my house. Marge and Harold were a godly couple right down my little country road in the 1970's, and it was pretty crazy to find a couple of charismatic Baptists among all the Minnesota Lutheran mainliners. They proved to be my lifelines, beacons of the Holy Spirit, fortresses during my formidable years. I shudder to think of where I'd be without them, because they are the reasons why I accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior.

Describing my parents is a delicate dance, a curious juxtaposition between labeling them neglectful barflies and recognizing their other role of fiercely protective cheerleaders. I don't want to throw them under the bus, but I also would be remiss if I made light of the deep resentments that developed largely because of them. Drinking was one of their favorite past times, but I'm sure it could've been a lot worse. I have memories of my dad filling the house with the gifts of his music, watching us swim in the lake from the dock that he built, and painstakingly helping me memorize all of the U.S. state capitals. But I also recall him always being drunk when my friends came by, embarrassing me on countless occasions, and writhing on the floor in seizures brought on by alcohol withdrawal while my mother and I stood by helplessly.

Until my dad's chronic alcoholism became far advanced, my mother was happy-go-lucky and worked hard to put forth a rosy persona to the world, even when she was the only one working and trying to keep her head up while dealing endlessly with my dad's nonsense. She let me read to her while she took a bath and liked to have her hair brushed. My early memories of her were good. We read many books and had tickle fights and she always cooked Sunday dinner. Her drinking was at first social and in response to my dad's habits, but later developed into a dependency which included her spending weekend days imbibing at the neighbor's house and downing mixed drinks every evening while we watched T.V., smoking Winston's from an easy chair in her long green robe.

Were they abusive? No, they weren't. We were provided for, had a roof over our heads, and my parents did their best to give us what we wanted on Christmas and birthdays. Mom used to canvas all the downtown sales on her lunch break in the months preceding Christmas, and would often come home and excitedly share "I got you something REALLY neat today! You're going to love it!" They were so thrilled to present me with a pair of used downhill skis with someone else's name engraved on them one Christmas morning. Dad was often unemployed and collection people harassed them a lot, but they always managed to scrape by. I am certain they loved my brother and me.

Sometimes, I think I need to reconstruct the narrative I've grown to believe about how I was raised, especially after the many years I've spent counseling others who had it SO MUCH WORSE than I did.

My parents, though impaired by alcohol abuse and the cares of life, did consider it important to teach me the Lord's prayer as soon as I could talk (come to think of it, I assume I learned it from them, although for all I know it may have been Marge!) and my head never hit the pillow without first reciting it dutifully at my bedside. I was also exposed to church fellowship and

enjoyed drinking watery Kool-Aid and attending Bible school at Pike Lake Presbyterian each summer. Two important things happened there: my brother and I were inspired to memorize all sixty-six books of the Bible, and I engraved John 3:16 into my heart - the first verse I ever committed to memory.

Although our converted cabin house was modest, the living room offered two impressive bookcases adjacent to the fireplace. Once I learned to read, I began pulling different tomes from the shelves. Small fat picture books about Adam and Eve, Noah, Moses, Daniel and the Lion's Den, Jonah in the belly of whale - they entertained me for hours. Even before I'd reached my sixth birthday, I preferred the Bible stories over the other selections crowding the shelves (but also enjoyed perusing my dad's old 1948 encyclopedias, especially the section containing all the facts about the state of Minnesota. Dad said there was no reason to purchase updated editions since much of the material didn't change). My fickle attention was captivated by the fantastic illustrations in the Bible stories, and after digesting them I'd be filled with the most wonderful golden glow; a spiritual food that helped me endure the long and sometimes lonely days. I'd hover near the shelves and attract the perfect selection for that moment in time. Books have always been my friends.

My parents identified strongly with their allegiance to a Presbyterian church, back when denominations were a big deal. They had many strong opinions about Catholics and other groups that harbored what they perceived to be strong or strange beliefs and focused a lot on semantics: "we say this word and not that, it's a minister and not a pastor, we hold the red hymnal and stand up for the reading of the Gospel, we display reverence and don't talk during communion." I don't know whether they benefited from their sporadic church attendance or if they simply went out of duty, but I always sensed that Christmas Eve was a special time for my mom. She used to talk about the lump that would form in her throat whenever she heard "O Holy Night," but in a way that noted worship to be extremely private, and not for outward display. My grandma, however, was very showy with her beliefs, thumping Bible truths to anyone who'd listen and walking a couple of miles on Sundays to attend a favorite local church. She also attended Pike Lake Pres. when she could, and was undoubtedly a major reason why we dragged our butts there twice a month. Gram seemed to have spies stationed everywhere; tallying up points for my parents when they showed up in the house of the Lord.

Although she was haughty and judgmental, Gram loved two things above all else - the Lord, and babies. She'd often berate us for not being more consistent with church, and she made sweeping supernatural claims like, "it always weeps on Good Friday" meaning there would be some sort of precipitation - and she always seemed to be right. Her very favorite thing was to be tucked between her two sons in a church pew, or better yet - watching her older son deliver a commanding sermon from his very own pulpit. When she visited our Caribou Lake cabin house (which she rented to my parents), she'd sit at the piano and bang out a commanding rendition of "The Old Rugged Cross." Gram had an imposing wall hanging of Jesus kneeling by a rock and praying to the heavens in the bedroom of her own house in Proctor, and although I knew it shouldn't - that print made me fearful. When I sometimes stayed overnight I'd screw my eyes shut and turn away from it, while at the same time reminding myself that he was not supposed to be scary.

Gram drank a lot too, and was mean and argumentative when she was half in the bag - or 'in the cups' as she liked to say, mostly when referring to others who happened to be imbibing. She'd often get wasted off Brandy Manhattans when my brother and I spent the night and I'd be nervous and hypervigilant until she passed out. I was careful not to anger her and remained confident that she'd be better in the morning when all remnants of her drunk

persona vanished with the rising sun. Never hung over a day in her life, she always greeted me with a chirpy 'good morning' that smoothed everything over like the melted butter on her stale French toast I pretended to love.

The religious adults in my life were confusing. Gram loved the Lord but filled me with fear, and my dad took great pains to explain every detail of Passion Week so my brother and I understood - all while polishing off a twelve pack of Blatz beer. My uncle was a 'man of God' but my mother and aunt whispered about his alleged drinking problem when we went to visit. What was the difference between God and Santa Claus anyway? I begged my mother to explain. How could both of them know everything we did, and how could I tell them apart? Mom didn't offer a very satisfying answer.

My parents kept everything God-related tucked within the confines of that single hour on Sunday morning. Though we weren't regulars, Mom and Dad saw to it that the family followed through with the necessary rituals. Most notably, getting dressed up and standing before the church in third grade for the presentation of our first Bibles, and being confirmed - big party and all. Once we made it through confirmation class, we were only required to darken the church doors on Christmas Eve and Easter.

My dad bragged about being an elder at Pike Lake Presbyterian, which reminds me of the Pharisees with their hypocrisy and fancy titles. Dad had musical gifts for sure - and although he'd been performing Barbershop music and playing guitar for years, he refused to participate in the choir because he didn't think any of them possessed any real talent. Dad would flick his watch during the sermon to point out the minister was too long-winded, then roll his eyes to the heavens when the men in the back row of the choir loft hit a sour note.

My dad's brother was a minister in Presbyterian and community churches across the upper Midwest. He always passed me a cheap, tinny pocket cross stamped with GOD LOVES YOU when we went to visit, and his special wink let me know I was a favorite. We visited his many congregations over the years and I liked watching him from the pulpit, he had a commanding presence and people were drawn to him because he spoke with true authority. At the social hour following church, everyone clamored for a handshake or a brief exchange with him. He also taught me one of life's most important skills: swimming. In the Marshalltown, Iowa community pool, he led me out to the deep end and wrapped his arm tightly around my middle as I flapped about hysterically. He soothed over and over, "Relax Tookie. I'm not going to let you sink!" He was always very kind but apparently had a drinking problem like many others in my family. I never saw him drunk, but did notice him sleeping it off the next day and heard stories in hushed tones. In his later years, he developed health problems and passed away almost one year to the day before my own dad did. And in his own fumbling way, my uncle tried to offer advice when he learned of my struggles with alcohol, even sending me an endearing handwritten note imploring me to 'try and stay off the stuff,' along with a flimsy metal cross tucked inside the envelope.

My neighbor Marge was my strongest influencer. She was bold about Jesus and witnessed to everyone without fear. My parents allowed me to attend Vacation Bible School at her Baptist church (although they were leery of "The Baptists" - they probably liked having free babysitting and put aside their reservations) every summer. I don't remember a lot about the week spent there, other than being sent home at the end carrying a Ziplock bag full of goldfish earned in a carnival game, much to my mother's dismay.

The most important event happened on the very last afternoon in a musty basement. I've continued to think of it often over the years as I've grown older, and its significance has

become crystal clear. We were invited to recite the Sinner's Prayer that day. Somehow this seemed very serious and ominous and as I crouched on the floor, I let my long blond hair fall and obscure the HELLO MY NAME IS tag, stuck above the breast of my pink polo shirt. After learning my name was Melissa, the leaders hastily scrawled "MISSI" in black Sharpie on that tag, even though I didn't like to be called Missy. Only Gram did that and I wasn't about to correct her. Even if I had been a "Missi," I would never have spelled it in that girly way with an "i" if I did. Apparently the youth leaders assumed I wouldn't care. Wearing the imposter label filled me with a sense of not belonging, something I was very accustomed to, and I felt weak and spineless for not correcting them. Nine years old and not even sure I belonged in the circle, I'd already determined that trying to escape would've made me even more conspicuous so I knelt on the tile floor and followed the prayer. I didn't feel any different afterward, other than a vague sense of unease like I should've asked my parents' permission first.

Later on that day, I sat on the counter in our kitchen and told my mother. She seemed apprehensive as she listened, eager to sweep this uncomfortable "Jesus talk" under the carpet as she fumbled through an attempt to explain how Marge and Harold were 'different' and had 'interesting beliefs.' I was tearful as I blubbered about feeling that I'd done something wrong. Would I be labeled as a Holy Roller and ostracized from my family? I'd taken a step outside of our safe and acceptable religion realm. Mom assured me it wasn't a big deal, then neatly moved on to the menu for my brother's upcoming confirmation bash.

There was a gaping spiritual hole after that conversation, almost like I didn't want to speak of anything relating to God, too worried people were onto me and would see my weirdness displaying itself. Did I withdraw from Jesus even more after accepting him? I didn't want to do anything that may call attention to my budding spirituality, so we never spoke of it again. My brother's party came and went and after that we didn't seem to attend church anymore other than obligatory C & E (Christmas and Easter). Maybe my parents felt they'd done their duty for Gram's watchful eyes and could relax. Marge wasn't my babysitter anymore, I was old enough to stay home alone so perhaps my parents no longer needed to take advantage of her services. She still attempted to stay in touch with me, and although I had drifted away I carried the many pearls of wisdom she'd shared. I wished I could bottle her bubbling enthusiasm for life - she was so elated to just - be living, and would often exclaim, "Isn't it great to be a daughter of the King?" I wasn't really feeling it.

I had many neuroses as a youngster which included fear of retribution, fear of lying (Gram embedded that one through her constant admonishment: "I HATE LIARS WORSE THAN POISON!") I was so afraid of lying that I couldn't even tell my own mother I loved her for a period of time because I feared it might not be true. In addition to all of that, I struggled with extremely high anxiety and many irrational fears. Once time in fourth grade, a tornado watch was announced and our teacher ordered us into the hall and into the disaster position. Huddled against the wall with my knees pulled up to my chest and my arms cradling my head, I experienced an excruciating panic attack, fully convinced a real tornado was barreling toward our town. My mind always went to the worst places - the school would be destroyed, my house demolished, my family dead. I was inconsolable until my teacher assured me it was 'just a drill.' I have never felt such relief.

Although I had anxiety and panic attacks, they co-existed with strange discrepancy, sharing an uncharacteristic love of performance. My parents sometimes hosted parties or 'afterglows' following my dad's barbershop events where I'd sing and dance for the guests who swilled cocktails and sang tags into the wee hours.

I started doing something peculiar when I was around 8 or 9. I constantly looked at other people (usually people on T.V. or characters in books but occasionally some in real life) to figure out how to act. I remember being 8 or so and calling it 'mature time.' I wanted to grow up fast and to be mature, so I started setting a time, say 9 a.m. the following day, and would tell myself that starting right then, I'd be perfect. The only person who knew was my brother and he thought it was really silly, assuring me that people didn't "become mature" overnight. It's hard to explain, but I didn't want to be who I was or live in my body so I'd model myself after people who appeared to have it all together. The first person I remember wanting to become was Nancy Drew. This was difficult, since her dad was widowed and her housekeeper served as her maternal role model. Not to mention her dad was a lawyer, they seemed to be wealthy, she drove a convertible, etc. Many problems with that, but nonetheless I admired her boldness, smarts, mental aptitude and the adventure and mystery which shrouded her. I remember asking my dad daily to give me a mystery to solve. He always made up lame stuff like 'The Mystery of the Missing Light Bulbs' or 'The Mystery of the Missing Toilet Paper.' I also adored Harriet the Spy, Ramona Quimby, girls from Judy Blume's books, and Little House on the Prairie - although it was really hard to create a pioneer lifestyle while living in the 1980's.

I also wanted to emulate girls from T.V. shows, especially sit-coms. I loved Brenda (Shannen Doherty) on "Our House," namely because she wanted to be an astronaut; and was popular, smart, and skinny. Unfortunately, her character also had a deceased parent which was hard to work around and I had to make concessions in these circumstances. Alyssa Milano on "Who's the Boss," Heather on "Mr. Belevedere." I just wished I had lives like them. Pretending to 'be' someone else helped me to escape the reality of my life. I'm not sure who I thought was watching as I tried to become these other people, just myself I guess. Everything was locked up in my own mind.

I had a fascination with horror movies through most of my youth and young adulthood, slasher types like Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, Halloween, Nightmare on Elm Street, and everything else from the horror rack at Pike Lake Video. My Bloody Valentine, Last House on the Left, Texas Chainsaw Massacre, I watched them all. The bloodier the better. My favorite pastime was to spend the weekend watching VHS tapes via a rented VCR that went home in a large, black suitcase. My parents didn't care about me watching all this blood, gore, and profanity. My dad would even rent his own favorites to include Charles Bronson's 'Death Wish' series and also offerings from behind the red curtain which he'd watch after we were in bed. I was mortified when he ducked behind the curtain, because my school mate's mother managed the video store and I'm sure she was thinking my dad was a pervert. Maybe he was, although I never saw any outward manifestation of that.

My identity as a space and science nerd began to emerge when I was twelve and in the seventh grade. During Mr. Birman's earth science unit at Jedlicka Junior High, I finally discovered something I was enthralled with and passionate about! Each day I could hardly wait for last period so I could tuck myself into a glossy manual showcasing Saturn's rings, the asteroid belt, and distant galaxies like Andromeda. Mr. Birman was funny and entertaining and made science come alive. Soon I started telling everyone in class about my plans to become an astronaut. My path to space flight would be ROTC, then the Air Force, followed by flight training school. I had it all mapped out. But I still needed to ditch my glasses (my dad had informed me that all pilots had 20/20 vision), become super fit, and earn straight A's. Focusing on my future career as a pioneer in space filled me with hope and excitement. My home life didn't matter as much now. My future was so bright I needed to wear shades!

Sometimes I look back and wish I could've stayed tethered to this healthy diversion, like my brother did with sports and academic endeavors. Another year passed and in January of 1986 the Challenger explosion rocked the world. Along with my entire class, I was captivated by the news coverage of the flight, since it included the first teacher in space: Christa McAuliffe. But more than just that, her addition to the crew offered hope that might pave the way for civilians like me. I was glued to every bit of news coverage leading up to the launch, but later on watching the debris trailing through the sky was surreal and sickening. In March of that year, I tried to keep the faith by scanning the skies each night, hoping to catch a glimpse of the return of Halley's Comet on its 1986 visit. I named my first daughter "Halley" after the interstellar visitor (although her name was misspelled on the birth certificate and everyone ended up calling her Hailey anyway).

I continued loving science even as Halley the Comet faded away (I'm not even 100% sure I actually observed it, but wanted to believe so - the 1986 trip was thought to be one of the least favorable on record for skywatchers) and the fractured space program struggled to reclaim the public's confidence. But I still carried hope that it could recover and rebuild. Additionally, I became obsessed with science fiction, gobbling down everything written by Isaac Asimov and Carl Sagan, forever distracted by futuristic things. It seemed impossible to keep my mind in the present moment or in reality, which led to adults thinking I was profoundly 'spacey' and not in the way I would've hoped. I dreamt of a day when you'd be able to 'see' the person you were calling on the telephone or be identified simply by fingerprints at the local bank, and became an instant fan of Max Headroom. I was devastated when his show left the air after just a short time and pounded cans of New Coke in commemoration.

Starry nights were still enjoyed from my perch above our neighbor's garage which had an upper workshop addition they'd added later that offered wonderful views of the night sky. The elderly couple who lived in the house adjacent to the garage didn't mind if I huddled up there peering through my cheap Tasco telescope and pretending to be a real astronomer. I carried along my dog-eared copy of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, loving Douglas Adams' satire and absurd view of life, the universe, and everything. Loving science made me feel and appear smart, something I valued highly. I decided around then that I believed in the Big Bang theory, and vaguely wondered how it could co-exist with my Biblical lessons from the past.

I was getting chubbier and chubbier as seventh grade flew by, and heavy textbooks and Sally Jessy Raphael spectacles were helpful to hide behind. Surprisingly, no one in junior high made fun of my weight until I was nearing the end of seventh grade (I was really banking on the fashions of the day: leggings and long sweatshirts - to camouflage my size). Back in the 80's, few kids were overweight (not like today) so an extra 30 pounds was hard to hide from my skinny or average-sized peers.

What was I like in eighth grade? It's hard to remember. I seemed to slip from science to trendy stuff. I liked paisley prints and perms and bobbed hair, I shopped for sweater dresses and shirts with poppable collars at the Deb store in the mall. I was into teeny-bopper music: Madonna, the Go-Go's, Prince, and Tiffany. I asked my parents for rides to the mall to shop at Spencer gifts to buy cool stuff like incense, glow in the dark velvet posters, and keychains with edgy sayings ("I Wonder What Your Head Would Look Like on a Stick") stamped on them. Gram labeled me a 'follower,' which wasn't a compliment. She praised my brother for being an 'individualistic individual.' Yes, she actually said that. It made me want to punch her in the face!

As the year drew to a close, I developed a strong hatred for the body I'd been residing in for the past fourteen years, which had never bothered me much before, and soon an insatiable drive to lose weight manifested. The devil began peppering my mind with many lies too, supplanted with those he'd already been pandering about the counterfeit joys of alcohol and the mysterious wonderment that came over the adults in my life when they were drunk. I started to have very compelling thoughts about my weight and size all the time, pertinent messages like: "No one is going to love you unless you lose weight. You need to lose weight to get a boyfriend. You need to be pretty and skinny for someone to love you. If you can get someone to love you (preferably someone slightly dim-witted and unmotivated) you will never be alone again. But back to the first belief: 1) if you stay fat no one will love you, and 2) if you get skinny you will earn someone's undying love and they'll never leave you.

Oh, how I envied Dana Hollingsworth. She was a year older with the most gorgeous amaretto-colored iridescent hair which she wore expertly flipped into a plastic banana clip. She cheered for the football AND hockey teams and had a perfect Barbie doll body. When she passed by in the hall I flipped my eyes to the floor in horror, unworthy to even meet her gaze. She sailed by after looking right through me like I was a hologram. I went home and watched Star Trek reruns, pretended I lived in another galaxy, and ate ice cream bars without judgement, forever grateful for Friday afternoon. Monday morning and the disdainful looks of my skinny peers seemed light years away.

My slightly nerdy friends and I rated the girls at our school exclusively based upon their physical bodies. We guessed that Kim Anders more than likely had a 26 inch waist, Sadie Adams wore tiny clothes originally designed for life-size dolls, and Deanne Walters (although she was vaguely slutty and engaged to a 22 year old guy) was a total knockout in her size 24 Guess? Jeans, fitted acid-washed denim jean jacket, and pink fringed moccasin boots. She was so breathtaking I had to look away for fear I'd fall onto the floor in a swoon, although just to be clear, I was not attracted to women.

As eighth grade drew to a close, we had our final school dance of junior high. I'd just spent two months starving myself and had shed 25 pounds in a very rapid timeframe through starvation and desperation. I stood at the mirror in the bathroom, running a purple plastic pick through my chin-length permed bob, when Gretchen Olson came out of a stall. We exchanged a brief greeting (it wasn't like we were really tight or anything) but then she did a double-take and said those magic words that became my second drug of choice after sugar: "Are you losing weight?"

YES! FINALLY! I screamed inside. My excruciating work, endless hungry hours, rounds of floor exercises on the musty shag carpeting - it was all paying off and *people were noticing*. It was no longer just the size 32 Guess jeans that had finally become baggy or the dingy 1960's wall mirror leftover from Gram in my basement bedroom parroting this blessed information. I WAS losing weight - and people were *finally* seeing it. Crazy that it took 25 pounds for that to happen. People's approval became my drug and the devil's message was reinforced: being skinny = praise = security = love.

This was a very pivotal moment in my life, a point in time where I shifted from pleasing myself and my own interests and passions, to striving for the approval of others.

## STRONGHOLDS

The word *stronghold* is found only once in the New Testament. It is used metaphorically in reference to the Christian's spiritual battle.

***“Though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of strongholds.” 2 Corinthians 10:3-4***

Along with the messages about my physical failures, the devil planted many other strongholds into my mind from a young age which paved the way for my alcohol addiction. His lies included:

1. You're not good enough
2. No one loves you (not *truly*, they say they do because they have to)
3. Everyone you love is going to leave you
4. You don't matter
5. You're invisible
6. You're stupid
7. No one cares about what you have to say (back to you're stupid)
8. You're powerless

The evil one could see God's call on my life from a very young age and was plotting a valiant attempt to destroy me through drinking myself into oblivion on a regular basis. His scheming began when I was as little as three years old, sitting on my dad's lap and licking my lips as he offered me sips of beer from his Blatz can. As I grew, I observed all of the adults in my life using alcohol for entertainment, enjoyment, stress relief, and to change their moods. I witnessed a power that seemed to be magical come over them, and I couldn't wait to be old enough to experience it. My dad's chronic drinking caused him to be emotionally unavailable to me. He was a talented musician who was in his own world much of the time, and as his addiction progressed, my mother's need to babysit and caretaker him took over our lives. I felt invisible and unworthy of attention. So when I was barely old enough, I began looking for love and approval through superficial relationships. I believed that if I could only find someone who needed me as much as I needed them, I'd be set for life.

My early patterns with relationships set me upon a highway to hell that very shortly included sex at a young age coupled with regular heavy binge drinking and doing dangerous things while in alcohol blackouts. It seemed to be the easiest way for the enemy to ensure my destruction and to squash any hope of me having an impact on the Kingdom.

My poor self-image led to relentless crash dieting in a vain attempt to use my physical body to attract the attention of others. The constant restriction and other unhealthy habits eventually did result in dramatic weight loss, and by the time freshman year started I was around 135 pounds and feeling pretty confident. My pal Beth and I spent our afternoons in the pool and did well on the swimming team for PHS (her much better than me). Meanwhile, I was also preoccupied with scouring the school for any guy who might be an easy target to capture. I'd tried to get the attention of a few in my class, but so far had struck out. There had been a brief encounter with a seventeen year old dude who performed odd jobs around my

grandma's house over the summer, but he'd disappeared as quickly as he came. Gram had lured me to her house a lot in the months preceding ninth grade to work for cash, and that kid and I ended up alone in the basement one afternoon. We'd been goofing around and flirting a bit as I washed out flower pots in the utility sink when he leaned over and kissed me under the naked lightbulb. Later on, Gram drove him to the mall to meet his friends and the three of us were squashed into the front seat of her big Chrysler. I was in the middle, just a little too close to him. It was simply thrilling; we shared a secret. We'd have some other history later on.

But I'd been striking out with the boys my age. I attempted a date with Brian Ross, a bespectacled brainiac, but he declined, probably too devoted to Knowledge Bowl to think about members of the opposite sex. After that it was Zack Lawrence, who interestingly, also dreamed of being an astronaut (although he genuinely had a shot and for all I know actually became one) but he turned me down too. I even lowered myself for Travis Mitchell, a kid from the wrong side of the Proctor railroad tracks known to smoke behind the school and huff gas in his dad's garage. He agreed to a couple of phone calls but our connection quickly fizzled out.

Then there was Mason. I later discovered he ran in the circle with the guy from my grandma's basement. I watched that group of boys with veiled interest, slinking down the halls with their top dog senior class status, peach-fuzz mustaches and nylon Budweiser windbreakers - D.A.R.E. program be damned. Why was I drawn to him? He was a little more than slightly overweight (although his jacket and hooded sweatshirts did a decent job of hiding his ample gut), quiet, nondescript, and I sensed him just a bit vacant - certainly NOT the academic type. He was known for sporting a well-formed and slightly grubby Ford baseball cap, wings of blond hair curling out from the edges - back when feathered hair was all the rage. I had a feeling he probably wasn't being pursued by anyone and probably never had a girlfriend in his life. He was an easy target. I gravitated toward people who did not seem to have present any competition or challenge.

Before long Mason and I were dating and I had abandoned everything I once loved. No more science fiction, no more astronomy, no more devouring stacks of books every week. I was possessed and immediately adapted to what I thought he wanted me to be, which was compliant, available and accessible. With Mason, the booze flowed freely and my brain was always electrified. I lived to get drunk, and never again lacked keg parties, Pabst Blue Ribbon King Cans or passable alcohol buyers. Mason and his friends knew which liquor stores would sell and at what times the right cashiers worked. We molded into one entity and everything else just folded away. I was already making plans for our wedding before I'd reached my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, and I was pretty sure he wouldn't put up much of a fight.

The devil had done a smooth and seamless job of selecting Mason for his bidding. Mason was adopted as a baby by a daffy elderly couple who had no clue what he was up to 90% of the time and although he didn't speak of it, I knew he carried the scars of abandonment. I only asked once about his feelings about the subject of his adoption and he shrugged as though having an opinion about it had never occurred to him. He had no desire to seek out his birth mother. Our missing identities mirrored each other like big gaping holes we'd plug with beer and 80's rock.

I'd never listened to hard rock music before I met Mason; my life had been filled with Dad's oldies and Barbershop, as well as Neil Sedaka, the Carpenters, Roy Orbison, and the Beatles. Mason introduced me to Duluth's classic rock station and I began diving head first into just about every glam rock band that came upon the scene in the 80's and early 90's. My new

interest in this genre of music intersected with my soon-to-be love of getting drunk every Friday and Saturday night. Guns 'N' Roses, Dokken, the Scorpions, Great White, George Thorogood, Aerosmith and Whitesnake were the soundtracks of every party and every blackout. I still like some of these songs, and don't blame them for my descent, but back then I didn't have any defense, much less discernment. Listening to hard rock and heavy metal made me want to party hard, be rebellious, drive fast, and live on the edge.

Mason went off to the army after graduation, seeking, no doubt to "find himself," to establish his print in the world - that, and his dad had demanded he either enter the military or find a suitable trade school - but I still faced three more years within the dreary walls of PHS. As Mason professed his enduring commitment to me, I promised to wait for him as well - and I think I meant it at first. But as soon as he was scarcely out of town, the gaping void in my soul was too much to bear and I was soon on the hunt for his replacement.

During sophomore year church made a comeback, with the good old Pharisee-i-cal Confirmation Rite. Although I had little interest, my parents were adamant I follow through - after all, Dave had. There was no big party planned for me, I just needed to earn the empty certificate.

My teacher was a very sweet lady named Karen. Although by that time I was getting drunk at keg parties every weekend and had a vague sense that *she knew*, I still strove to please adults and authority figures and wanted to win her approval. Always an ace at memorizing things and putting on a show when I needed to, my peers were appropriately astounded when I stood up and recited the Apostle's Creed without missing a beat. The other students needed to take a peek or two at their notes, but not me. Did I really understand the words? Not really, but it was an impressive performance nonetheless. Who's the Pharisee now?

As soon as I'd delivered my spotless oral presentation of the creed, which was the final exam of sorts, I scuttled out into the hall to use the phone.

Chad answered on the third ring. "What's up?"

I swallowed the dry clump of inferiority in my throat and attempted to sound casual. "Not a whole lot. Just getting done with this stupid church thing. You want to hang out?"

"Yeah. I've got beer. When do you have to be home?"

My heart skipped and scampered over itself as euphoria started to rise like a semi chugging up a freeway on-ramp.

"Whenever. I'll tell them I'm going bowling with the church people."

Chad snickered. "That's believable."

"It'll work. They don't check."

He said he'd be there in fifteen minutes and we hung up. I went back to the basement classroom and Karen smiled.

"Well Melissa, you're our superstar! I can see you've been working really hard on your confirmation materials!"

I nodded as I gathered up my binder and purse. "Yep. Can't wait for next Sunday!"

Minutes later I was climbing into Chad's white formula Camaro (hoping Karen didn't spot me), case of Pabst in the trunk, two cans ready to be cracked in the cupholders, and David

Coverdale blaring from the tinny JVC cassette player. That moment is indelibly burned into my hippocampus, what thrill and what euphoria, dopamine galore! “Bad Boys” was blasting and Chad commanded the wheel like a maniac. I almost dumped my beer into my lap as he careened out of the parking lot, kicking up arcs of gravel.

In eleventh grade, I began to dabble heavily in witchcraft - or at least I wanted to carry the aura of a witch - and scored a temporary place among the ‘goth’ people. My wardrobe carried only black clothing and I rimmed my eyes heavily with cobalt liner, burned incense, and shopped at the Electric Fetus. I found my higher power in nature and Mother Earth and plunged into astrology (not astronomy). My jewelry was loud and bold and intended to scream my astrological sign of Scorpio to the world. In eleventh grade art class, I painted a picture of a baby lying above a pillar of flames under a heavy black heading: WITCH AMONGST US. My teacher, Mrs. Peterson, found it necessary to pull me aside and inquire about the meaning behind that painting. I sensed she was more than just a little freaked out by it so I assured her it was just for fun, and my two accomplices, Jill and Scott, laughed at my audacity.

Our trio was very into a band called the Cult and enjoyed glaring with slitted eyes at all the posers in art class who made stupid stereotypical crafts like pot holders and vases painted with 2-dimensional tulips. My latest creation had been a simple canvas print of a black and white yin-yang to quietly assert my budding Buddhism. Mrs. Peterson gave me a ‘B,’ on that project, which I strongly disputed. Yes, it was simple, but she didn’t get the statement I was making. I never went so far as to worship the devil, I can assure you that, but I figured witchcraft and Buddhism were harmless expressions likely to just make me cooler and more mysterious.

On weekends, Jill and I went downtown to the Electric Fetus or Ragstock to buy vintage clothes and disparaged anything popular or trendy. We also drank a lot, every Friday and Saturday night, and started running with a group of boys from Cloquet. Most nights I’d be piloting my dad’s green F-150, drunk and driving ninety miles an hour down Midway Road in a reckless attempt to make it home before the clock struck 4 a.m. (as if it mattered at that point)!

The last thing I wanted to be now was one of the *popular people*. My best guy friend Scott labeled those girls “Chrissys,” a disdainful phrase meaning a rich snob lacking depth, and I certainly didn’t want to be one of *them*. I belonged with the goth crowd. Scott was one of my best friends and we never dated, although we kind of tried at our ten year class reunion. Unfortunately, we were both drunk and nothing went anywhere.

Junior year was quite black indeed, I felt empty and didn’t really believe in anything. A friend of mine who’d gotten really weird claimed she was able to do automatic writing, which she later explained meant that another spirit was channeling inside of her and doing the writing. I watched her do it wondering if it was real, doubting that it was. There was still a silver of me that knew this occult stuff was just a dead end road, and deep down wasn’t REALLY who I was. Honestly, I was more into it for the rebellion factor than anything else. I really enjoyed shocking people with my heavy silver jewelry, black clothing, sour attitude and scowls everywhere I went. Interestingly though, I was still a people pleaser and remained polite to adults and authority figures. My new persona squelched any nighttime prayers and at times I was blindsided by the realization that I’d lost all grounding in my Christian faith. Everything felt so black and empty - that’s the only way I can explain it. Still, I had no real urge to draw near to God and was extremely annoyed when any suggestion of church was made, even on the previously approved C & E visits. My room morphed into a gloomy goth-cave: Ouija board on a makeshift altar (more or less for show), pack of tarot cards fanned out next to it in case

anyone stopped by unexpectedly for a reading, combat boots and long hanging black drape sweaters my perpetual costume, gigantic poster of the Rocky Horror picture show pasted to the ceiling over my bed so every morning I opened my eyes to that seductive, bitten lip. Mom just passed it off as a teenage phase, although the Cult t-shirt I'd bought after seeing them in concert mysteriously disappeared from the clothes dryer.

I'd messed with the occult as a youngster, you know, having seances and dabbling in the Ouija board at slumber parties - didn't everyone? Looking back, this was definitely when everything I'd been toying with suddenly flung the door to the devil open wide.

During my eleventh grade witchcraft phase, I was also finally successful in making myself throw up after my frequent after school binges. Previously, I'd never mastered the art of sticking my fingers down my throat, but then I learned about something called Ipecac syrup. It was an emergency treatment only to be summoned when poison was accidentally ingested, certainly not for casual use. This seemed to be a miraculous antidote for a binge episode, I could simply chug some of that nasty-tasting syrup, wait half an hour, and throw up everything from my head to my toes. My friend Katie and I had a blast gorging ourselves from the Ponderosa Grand Buffett with impunity, knowing we'd escape a long-term scale consequence thanks to the magical syrup.

I didn't know then when I was foolish and seventeen that this was the same elixir Karen Carpenter had been abusing daily for only two months prior to her death and was thought to be the reason her heart stopped beating. Apparently, Ipecac syrup damages the cardiac muscle, eating away a little bit of it with each use.

Using the Ipecac was inconvenient, though, because a discreet place to empty your guts was needed afterwards and doing that in public or around my parents' schedules wasn't easy. This caveat kept me from anything more than occasional use (I'd even sometimes throw up in plastic bags in my bedroom and dispose of it later). The worst consequence of Ipecac by far was the hangover feeling that was even worse than the most excruciating drinking-binge type. I would feel absolutely horrible and be sick for about two days - probably because it *really* was poison and caused an extreme adverse reaction to discourage its use for recreational purposes.

After I left high school, I quit purging when I discovered a new and very effective appetite suppressant while working at a convenience store. We sold small bottles of white pills in a locked case behind the counter I manned four days per week. I didn't know what they were at first, but my boyfriend who worked the graveyard shift at the store explained they were very helpful for maintaining alertness and that he used them during overnight shifts. I swallowed a few one night and instantly loved the effect; I was speedy, my hair was crawling, and I was manic and talkative. Another side effect I quickly discovered was that Ephedrine was a fantastic appetite suppressant, until I developed a tolerance, anyway. I continued to abuse it daily, often drinking alcohol in combination, for two years until my first pregnancy. I did quit while I was pregnant, but afterwards went right back to it in an attempt to drop post-baby weight. After leaving the convenience store and landing a job at the mall, I was introduced to a whole slew of Ephedrine-continuing products masquerading as herbal supplements and weight-loss aids. They were sold at the 'health food' store, so how could they be dangerous? Initially, they were quite effective in helping me to drop pounds, but after years of abuse my body rebelled and swung in the opposite direction when my deranged metabolism finally crashed. Ephedrine caused many alarming and unpleasant side effects, too. I would sometimes consume up to 20 pills daily, divided into two doses of ten tablets. Gulping down a handful that big would often cause horrible stomach pains, sweating, and heart palpitations. I

was so afraid to stop though for fear of gaining weight and kept up my addiction until my first attempt at sobriety. I packed on the pounds then, and it drove me absolutely insane.

Maybe the devil had hoped my body obsession and disordered eating habits involving Ipecac and Ephedrine products would put the final nail into my coffin and cause my heart to burst or a maybe even a fatal seizure. This actually did happen to quite a few people who were using even less than I did. Abuse of ephedrine was found to be clearly dangerous and it was taken off the market. The devil then resumed his quest to kill me through alcohol.

Most people, including my fifteen year old self, fail to consider the spiritual consequences of consuming a mind-altering substance like alcohol. The word alcohol comes from the Arabic "al-kuhl" which actually means "body eating spirit" and gives root origins to the English term for 'ghoul.'

I used to behave very bizarrely when I became drunk, completely unlike my usual self which was somewhat reserved, cautious, and naïve. When I was intoxicated my behavior was extremely erratic. I'd often fall into periods of inconsolable weeping without provocation, then refuse to go home at curfew and suggest doing crazy, impulsive things. My parents were furious when I'd stay out all night and not be able to explain why (even I didn't know), and when I was fifteen I tried to persuade the guy I was drinking with that evening to drive to Las Vegas so we could get married. I was not joking, either. After I sobered up the next day, I was never able to explain why I'd acted the way I had when people demanded an explanation.

Friends who witnessed my extremely intoxicated or blacked out self would point out the fact that there was nothing behind my eyes, it was exactly like I had vanished from my body and an evil entity had taken up residency. My mother claimed I looked possessed by the devil, and others described me as appearing blank and vacant. I did very humiliating things in public and in front of people I'd previously sought to impress. To be clear, not every drunk person behaves this way. Sure, some get tipsy, or loopy, or loose. Everyone knows that alcohol consumption results in lowered inhibitions, loose lips, the urge to let one's hair down maybe - but my actions went far beyond mostly harmless stuff like this. I was very much an empty vessel for the devil to occupy when I was intoxicated.

The most blatant way that I routinely risked my life and the lives of those in my path was to drive - not only drunk - but in full-fledged blackouts. Here are a few illustrations of blackouts and/or drunk driving events from my past.

When I was fifteen, I was invited to a bash in a neighboring town by an older friend. The party was at the home of someone whose parents were out of town, there was a keg, abundant bottles of cheap vodka for screwdrivers, and the house had a beautiful deck on the back for drinking and socializing. For the early part of the night I walked around with a drink in each hand and people teased me and said, "Double fisting it tonight?" I remember feeling so awesome for the early part of the evening; boys were giving me lots of attention, I felt amazing, full of sass and wit. My last memory was of falling from the deck and spraining my ankle, and after that I dimly recalled a guy I didn't know carrying me around because I couldn't walk. Some demented part of me was happy I was light enough to be carried.

I came to the next morning in the backseat of a strange car. Whose car, I had no clue. I was still wearing the same Guess jeans with a button fly I'd had on the night before, and now I stared at the Metallica logo I'd carefully penned onto one leg the day before. It seemed so long ago. My back was propped against one of the back doors with my knees drawn to my chest. When I opened my eyes, I looked straight at my legs to find I had peed my pants and the jeans were soaked with urine all the way down. I didn't know where I was, what had

happened, or why I was in the car. I started to panic, big time. My mind reeled as I realized I went home the night before, my parents probably thought I was dead, yeah my pants were on, but what did that prove? I scrambled out of the car and ran down the street, desperate to figure out which house I'd been in the night before because I didn't recognize a thing. I was completely out of my mind, panicking and unable to think. I ran up to the parked cars lining the street hoping someone had forgotten keys in the ignition because stealing a car seemed like a good option in that moment. I had no idea what time it was but maybe thought I could get home before my parents woke up.

No keys were found so I eventually wandered into a house I found familiar to discover bodies strewn all over the floor, presumably passed out from the previous night. Thirty years later, I still have the memory of scurrying into the bathroom and frantically rummaging under the sink for a blow dryer to dry my urine-soaked pants, completely terrified I'd get caught in my pee-pants. Then I stood in the kitchen and used the phone to call the friend I'd been with the night before to come and pick me up. Who knows if I was even in the right house?!

I once had a school friend named Randy who lived across the lake. Although he was not bad looking, I never had any real attraction to him. When I was in eleventh grade, he invited me over to hang out at his house and I took my dad's truck about five miles to the other side of Caribou Lake. As luck would have it, Randy's parents were having a party with some neighbors and a keg of Blatz beer (which was probably why I went in the first place). Although I'd been repeatedly telling Randy how gross Blatz was because it was my own dad's preferred swill, I had no problem sneaking cups of it from the garage. His parents didn't seem to care, either. I remember very little other than sitting at the kitchen table with the adults playing a card game. It's hard to tell when I'm drunk, and unless you know me well, you won't notice the vacancy behind my eyes or the complete disappearance of my spirit. I was soon blacked out and would have no memory of anything other than playing a few hands of cards. Apparently everyone thought I was fine to drive home, including Randy's parents.

Late morning the next day, I came to in the basement bedroom at Caribou Lake, instantly filled with horror as I searched the archives of my mind and realized I didn't recall much of anything about the previous night - save for a few glimpses of a card game around a folding table. I wandered upstairs and figured out my parents had gone somewhere. A quick scan from the kitchen window assured me that dad's green Ford was in the driveway; I had even backed into the parking spot fairly straight - well, it was a little crooked but passable, I was still a young driver after all. Wandering outside, I tossed nervous glances toward the neighbor's houses to ensure I wasn't being watched as I walked slowly around the truck, examining it from every angle. Nothing was out of place. No dents, no scratches, no blood.

My parents were across the road at the neighbor's house I later found out, so this must mean they weren't mad at me. No angry note had been left and there had been no attempt to wake me from my drunken slumber. I guess I made it home by curfew? Had I talked to them when I came in?

I returned to the house, apprehensively retrieved the yellow wall phone from its cradle, and punched out Randy's number.

He chuckled in an almost sinister way after realizing it was me on the line.

"Wow, you made it home in one piece, huh?" he laughed.

I pretended to giggle but was filled with dread and fear, not wanting to know, but needing to know.

“What happened?” I implored.

“You were so wasted last night,” he continued. “All you wanted to do was make out.”

My mouth dropped in horror. *Make out?* I wasn't even interested in this kid!

I laughed too and agreed I had been *a little* drunk, but deep down I was destroyed to know my buddy had just packed me into my dad's truck with his blessing and watched me hit the road, even though he apparently knew I was really trashed. Or maybe he didn't?

When I reached legal drinking age, my boyfriend at the time and I moved in with my parents to save money for our wedding. I got into the habit of driving to Superior, WI to drink all night at the bars and would then drive back to Caribou Lake (a 20 mile drive) completely in a blackout, never remembering a thing the next day about the drive home.

There are so many blackout drinking stories from my years as a mobile disc jockey - including all the same elements, blacking out, scamming on some guy, bringing some guy home, or waking up in a strange place with some guy whose name I didn't know. A common theme was to leave the DJ equipment set up in whatever banquet hall I'd been performing so I could hurry up and move to my next drinking establishment, then retrieve my gear in the morning, not even caring if anything was damaged or stolen.

One Christmas around 1998 I was hired to DJ a holiday party at a VFW in International Falls, MN - two and a half hours from home. I drank the entire time (about six hours) and also downed a lot of wine (something I rarely drank). By the end of the night, the party goers were understandably concerned and didn't want me to drive, even offering to pay for a motel room or let me crash on one of their couches. I stupidly refused to listen, packed up my car and got onto the highway in frigid temperatures and steadily falling snow. It wasn't long before I was unable to keep my eyes focused on the road, and I had wandered off the highway and gotten lost. As I meandered down a dark, two-lane road, I prayed for any glimmer of light to help me find my way. Suddenly in the distance I spotted a small farmhouse and parked my car deep in a snow embankment (no clue how I didn't get stuck) and ambled up the driveway, not knowing who lived there - it could've been some crazy rapist. I drunkenly asked the old lady who opened the door for directions back to town so I could get a motel and ended up spending all of my night's DJ wages to rent a room at the Budget Host Inn.

For a poor mobile DJ just struggling to make ends meet, landing a recurring weekly gig was quite a blessing, and I was pretty pumped to secure a DJing job every Thursday night at Grizzlys Bar in Pine City. Each week I'd drive 90 miles, drink six or eight very stiff Bacardi Cokes, and make the trip home after midnight. I was usually in a blackout or at best very, very slightly aware. My custom was to leave Pine City and make a stop about ten miles north in Hinckley for a bag of fast food from the White Castle. After I'd gobbled down a few sliders, a fish sandwich, fries, and an order of mozzarella sticks (thinking this would miraculously sober me up), I'd instead be dangerously close to passing out from not only alcohol, but a full-belly food coma too. Somehow, I made it home every week.

One Halloween, I was drinking heavily and partying at various Superior bars, dressed up whorishly in a vintage green velvet formal gown that had once belonged to Gram. It was a cold October night, probably in the 20's. I had blacked out early in the evening but came to in the middle of the night wandering around an industrial area in Superior's north end. I had no idea how I got there, or where I'd left my car. I was jacketless and freezing in my strapless dress. I remember crouching in an alley to pee because I was close to wetting myself, and squinting at street signs trying to get some grounding of my location. The sign I could barely

make out through my impaired vision revealed I was on Winter Street, a part of town I'd never visit. How did I get here? Did someone drop me off? The houses lining the street were tiny little cracker boxes and everything looked alike. I had once known a guy who lived in this area which made me wonder if I was looking for his house prior to coming out of the blackout. I continued stumbling down the sidewalks past uniform blank houses with no lights on, until I saw the glow of a television set. Inside, I spotted a couple (THANK GOD SOMEONE WAS AWAKE), the man appeared to be a biker with a fu-man-chu moustache and his lady friend was passed out on the couch, face down, dress hiked up over her pantyhouse and no underwear. The sight of *that*, stuck with me for some reason. I walked right into their house without knocking and begged the man to call me a cab. Again, no ax murderers, no rapists, there at 3 a.m. on Winter Street. The man looked puzzled as he surveyed me in my skimpy green velvet dress, shivering, very drunk, and sobbing.

"Just relax, calm down," he kept saying. "I'll call ya a cab. Geez girl, you're lucky something bad didn't happen to you out there!"

My strongholds have primarily centered around my identity, my worth, striving to please others, and feeling like a victim to my past. They felt so much a part of me - something I'd been born into - that I didn't know there was a way out.

## THE DEVIL'S LIES

As I ponder the few stories I've shared here and consider the hundreds more I won't revisit, I am reminded of the rock-solid assurance of God's hand upon me, how he spared me from death so many times that I cannot count. I didn't even KNOW to ask for his protection!

This realization brings me to my knees: Romans 5:8 before I even knew it, operating in my life: *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

It is a wonder I am alive today considering the countless episodes of near overdose, alcohol poisoning, and car accidents - not to mention the dangerous paths I traveled while naively seeking attention and validation from empty, spiritually bankrupt people.

I didn't make any attempts to quit drinking until I hit 26, and that was spurred only by fear of going to jail after my second DUI arrest in under a year. I managed to 'stay off the stuff' a full eighteen months, although I had never completely surrendered and eventually decided to return to controlled drinking. This proved to be an impossibility for me.

The devil made me believe I'd somehow cured myself by staying dry for 18 long months and started bringing up the subject a lot, whispering taunts and wonderings, ideas and propositions.

*"You were never really that bad."*

*"You've never really TRIED to control it, you know that? You should at least give it an effort."*

*"You're not an alcoholic. You just drank heavily."*

*"You didn't lose everything like other people. All those blackouts were because you didn't eat or were overly tired."*

*"You were drinking because of bad stuff going on. You're much more stable now."*

*"There's no reason to stop completely! You just need to cut back and pace yourself."*

*"Drinking isn't your problem; drinking and DRIVING is. As long as you make sure you don't get behind the wheel, you can still enjoy alcohol!"*

*"Make some deals and rules about where and when drinking is allowed. You can trust yourself."*

*"You're not like your dad."*

I'd analyze and mull over these ideas and countless more, slowly becoming paralyzed by my own thinking. I didn't enlist the opinions of others or wish to have them weigh in, because I believed I was so brilliant on my own. Before too long, my plans made perfect sense and I bought into the devil's lies. *This time* would be different, I wouldn't get out of control, and I wouldn't black out. I'd just have fun.

When I'd ingest alcohol, I'd become polluted, like the illustration of just a smidge of food coloring adulterating an entire glass of water, insidiously bleeding through the whole batch before your eyes. Such was the case with alcohol, all it took was a drop to suck me back into the game. That may sound overly dramatic, but really it isn't. Tricking myself into believing I could quit "anytime I wanted" was also a delusion of the enemy, because it was a *partial*

truth. Truly, quitting wasn't even that hard; the challenge was to *stay* stopped. Although I made countless promises to never return again, my resolve eventually faded. Sometimes I'd last a week, occasionally I could make it a month - but always the inevitable return to drinking. One drop - and the gateway to the devil was split open wide. Even if I resumed with simple dabbling - not necessarily getting hammered every night - any meager spiritual connection I'd been able to forge would vanish. Alcohol and Jesus just could not co-exist for me, it had to be all or nothing. My Savior faded into the mist when alcohol stepped onto the scene because my drug needed to possess all of me.

How I wanted to make my relationship with alcohol work! I witnessed many of my friends getting wasted in high school and into college, then seem to spontaneously turn into temperate drinkers with an off switch as they aged. These observations continued to delude me into believing I could have that, too. I tried in vain to orchestrate a way that alcohol and I could be friends and life partners like I'd seen so many friends do.

During the eighteen month stretch of sobriety I had from August of 1999 to February of 2001, I became really serious about my faith and relationship with God. He always got my attention when the pollution had been washed away and I became clear-headed again. Hailey and I started attending a very Spirit-filled non-denominational church my mother had dubbed the 'cult church,' and while there I was led to be baptized by full water immersion. Afterwards, the pastor began talking to me about baptism in the Holy Spirit, but I was suddenly freaked out and unwilling to move forward with anything else. When I learned my daughter had been taught to put on the armor of God while in Sunday school class and that they'd taught her to wear the helmet of salvation to prevent the devil from getting into her thoughts, that was a deal breaker.

Now, though, Ephesians 6:10-12 is battle material that I never leave home without!

***“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, and against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm.” Ephesians 6:10-12***

Back then, 20 years ago, I didn't want to believe all of that was going on, or that I was under attack, but oh what I've learned about the evil one's strategies! I should've been overjoyed that the staff was speaking truth to my daughter, but instead I was scared and scornful and soon quit the church.

We dabbled in a couple of others, most notably a Presbyterian congregation nothing like the one from my youth. The young pastor did altar calls every Sunday along with laying of hands, something I wasn't necessarily comfortable with. I was still clinging to my old-school roots, sitting reservedly, not calling attention to myself. Looking back, I can see how God was trying to get my attention, planting seeds for the future.

I fell out of church in late 2000, and a few months later was back in the bottle. No church to be had during those times, quite the contrary - I seemed to choose religious holidays like Christmas Eve and the night before Easter as prime-time for a drinking binge. This behavior did foster much discrepancy within me however, and as I was heading out the night before Easter just knowing I'd be out til dawn drinking and laying in bed sick beyond belief when Easter Sunday morning dawned - in the moment, I didn't care. God tugged at me but the drive to get drunk was stronger. My eyes would even mist over when I considered how

disappointed Jesus must be with my actions, how I was grieving him. I was convicted, but not ready to obey. I am reminded of Paul's writings to the church in Rome when he discusses his own failings of the flesh:

***“What a wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Romans 7:24***

Prior to that verse, Paul had been lamenting his inability to do the right thing and his custom of always falling prey to his flesh.

***“I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” Romans 7:15***

This most definitely described me to a tee. I had immense remorse, guilt, and shame after a night of drinking. Heaps of regret and self-hatred, always vowing to never do it again. I suppose this strong conviction was a good thing, but it only seemed to last a little while because another binge inevitably loomed around the corner.

The final two years of my alcohol addiction were horrible, meaningless, barren days. March through June of 2001 I sold myself out, making endless road trips to Eau Claire, Wisconsin while trying to force a long distance relationship with a guy who clearly was not that into me. Our brief courtship marked another horrible Easter Sunday morning where I woke up in a strange house having been unable to drive home, eyes puffy and almost cemented shut from crying. The night before, my future prince had made it clear he had no intention of pursuing a future with me.

So no, I was not gleefully hiding an Easter basket for my seven year old daughter or getting dressed up for church like I should have been, I was speeding back from central Minnesota, sobbing and swilling an enormous plastic jug of Mountain Dew. After picking up a cheap and thoughtless pre-made basket from K-Mart (I am not kidding), I made it to my parent's house to pick up my daughter. We were supposed to go to church, but that wasn't happening. They went without me. Mother of the year award again!

Fast forward a couple of days before Christmas Eve that year. My landlord and his wife (who occupied the lower part of the duplex I rented from 2000 through 2004) invited Hailey and I downstairs for a little holiday gathering. I proceeded to get hammered on White Zinfandel, put Hailey to bed, and then continued to drink and party in my apartment with one of my landlord's friends.

I thought I was going to die the next morning, I was super hung over and ill, but another party awaited in my old neighborhood that day. I slammed a few beers in the shower to start my day and stop the shakes. The following day was Christmas Eve and I was a complete wreck. Hailey and I spent the night at my parents' house, planning to have a fun evening of snacks and games, but I ended up going to bed at 7 p.m. because I was so sick.

I happened to stay sober on New Year's Eve, a feat in itself, but was soon drunk again.

Regular drinking continued through 2002, with no real efforts to stop. For the first time in my life I started feeling hopeless and began to believe there was no way out. Many drunken DJ shows peppered that year as well as superficial men through the spring and summer. Around Thanksgiving, my dad became very ill and was hospitalized. At first we weren't alarmed because this sort of thing was a common occurrence, but after a few days passed we realized it was serious. His liver finally gave out from all the years of abuse and he passed away on December 12, 2002.

Dad died on a Thursday, very early in the morning. I vowed I'd never drink again, but that lasted less than a week. All it took was an invitation from an attractive man and I was drunk the following Wednesday night. Although it was our first date and I badly wanted to make a good impression, I ended up getting extremely wasted and making a fool of myself. I didn't stay sober the following night, either, although I had a very important test the next day - its outcome would determine whether I received my bachelor's degree. I barely made it to class due to my hangover and withdrawal sickness, but somehow completed the exam. All of these terrible events where alcohol stole my self-respect and peace kept adding up, chipping away at the bedrock I was buried in, but they couldn't seem to squelch the devil's lie that I didn't need to stop.

I flew out to Denver, CO after completing my exam to visit my brother for the weekend. It was a refreshing visit with my daughter and family where I firmly recommitted to sobriety. After we returned home I stayed with my mom for a few days, maybe to safeguard myself. I did drink one beer on Christmas Eve. Just one. I was always making up reasons for a new sobriety date and what better anniversary than Christmas Day! This will be the last time. A *very special, ceremonial rite. Dad approved.* The beer was shoved way back in the fridge, the last remaining can from my dad's stash. I viewed it as sort of a special farewell, and I did not drink again until February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2003, the day we said goodbye to dad for good.

We waited to have his memorial service because his cremation removed the need for any urgency. The service took place at my old childhood church and was a very nice event. No thoughts of drinking had passed through my mind all day, not until everyone was gone and we were cleaning up and transferring left over food into everyone's cars. My brother reminded me about the gathering with his old friends at the Northland Country Club that evening, and I was suddenly excited. Hailey's other grandparents said they'd be more than happy to take her home for the night so I could go. You can see how the scenario was supposed to play out, a gathering of close friends remembering my dad and enjoying some special time together at a nice dinner.

As arrangements were being made, a drinking thought suddenly jabbed at my brain - a fiery dart out of nowhere. Not surprisingly, I'd been holding out for a man to turn the tide, waiting all day for a certain city councilor with whom I'd had one date to contact me again as he'd promised to - but no call had come. I was even telling myself "I'll stay sober IF he calls" and giving God ultimatums, but since the guy had remained silent, his interest flickering out after one brief dinner date, I decided what's the point of being sober? I had no reason to be. My daughter was taken care of for the night. I left the church parking lot in the darkening daylight and drove to Pike Lake Liquor for a six pack of Mike's Hard Lemonade to drink before heading out to dinner. I vowed I'd only have two, but instead drained my entire supply before dinner. Once I got to the country club, I was immediately on a quest for more booze and stationed myself at the bar to wait for my brother and the other guests. I was probably six beers and four root beer barrels deep (bookended at the bar by two nice, rich male members - one named Bart - I had not before and have not since ever crossed paths with someone named Bart!) when they finally arrived. The rest of the night was a blur, I was interested in amplifying my buzz and little else, and by the end of the evening my brother poured me into a cab.

That incident ensured sobriety for another couple of months. It had been hugely humiliating for my brother and his friends see me so hammered and out of control. I was beyond shameful. I even received a call from my mom where she chewed me a new one after hearing about what had happened. As I sobbed through her berating, she turned soft because she could see I was devastated and that I wanted badly to quit screwing up. She told me she truly

believed I was going to figure out how to stay away from alcohol sooner or later, and honestly tried to build me up. I remember another night shortly after that where she called especially to share that the wind had been blowing really hard outside her window, and she felt it was a sign that winds of change were on the horizon for me.

The horrible country club night stayed with me for a record two months - and during that time I honestly believed I would not take another drink. Inevitably my resolve faded though, as soon as the crisis passed. About two months later, Easter rolled around again. Was it possible that the devil especially enjoyed attacking me and watching my fall to temptation on the night before Resurrection Sunday? Of course I had no "plans" to drink, but that didn't seem to matter much because when I was hit with one of his thought darts I became paralyzed. I remember my daughter being invited to sleep over at a friend's house and right away I started itching for something to do. Her absence was a terrible danger zone for me; I've often told her that the only reason I stayed alive during those last two years of active drinking was because she gave me a purpose. Right on cue, a co-worker I rarely spoke to called to invite me to a party being thrown by a fellow colleague in the news media. Again, my daughter was not home, so why not get drunk? The switch in my brain flipped and I said "OH YEAH!" My resolve just melted off and I put up no defense, simply got into my car and drove to Wild West Liquor for an 18-pack of Coors Light without a passing thought. I was half in the bag when I got to the party and blackout drunk in under an hour. Luckily, a good friend also attended that party - unexpectedly, no reason for her to be - but thank God she was there. She served as my babysitter and prevented me from driving home. Having her present though meant I had a witness and wouldn't be spared all the excruciating details the following day. This woman had been a close friend since I was in diapers, and I learned I had been hitting on her husband at the party! My friend thought it was harmless (as did her husband, who chalked it up to me being a drunken fool) and just laughed it off, but I was horrified. I also learned I'd given the DJ a 'lap dance' - forever documented on camera.

That was one of the worst morning afters I'd ever had, I was so mortified by the thought of returning to work Monday to face everyone from the party with front row seats to all my lewd acts. I went to get Hailey from her friend's house and as soon as she got into the car, she called me out for smelling like alcohol. I lied and adamantly insisted I hadn't had a drop. I was useless to her and sick all day, and not better the next day when I had to return to work. I sobbed in the shower that Monday morning, hating myself and not wanting to face the world. *You should just quit so you don't have to face them. You're a disgrace!* I needed a paycheck though, so I didn't quit. I went and faced the music and it was just about as horrible as I'd anticipated. I was sick for nearly four days. My hangovers were excruciating at the end of my drinking; taking days to subside.

The house party and public lap dance helped promote another round of sobriety, six weeks or so, and I avoided alcohol like the plague until nearly the end of May. Around Memorial Weekend, I went to meet with a school board member for a news story. As the interview concluded, he unexpectedly began flirting and invited me out for a beer. Though I was convinced he was way out of my league, I agreed. The devil had been insisting for years that I was unable to have fun or interact with members of the opposite sex in a dating scenario unless I was drunk, and also that I was super boring and unattractive while sober. I ended up pounding several beers before we met up the following weekend and finished off the night blackout drunk, throwing up in the doorway of the bar while my date went back inside to retrieve all of my belongings.

Unbelievably, School Board Guy actually wanted to see me again as he had no problem putting back cocktails, and we ended up going out partying several more times until he moved away.

After he left town, I became caught up with a young kid in his early 20's from the shady Gopher Lounge I loved to frequent, and turned him into my partying boy-toy. Many blackouts happened during our brief courtship, but he didn't seem to care that I was an active alcoholic. I was often horrified to hear all the things I'd said and done because this kid preferred to smoke weed and didn't drink a lot - so he was aware of everything I said and did while blacked out. I knew our little arrangement wasn't going anywhere good, so the night before the Fourth of July in 2003 we drank together one last time and the next day I told him it was over. Yep, I thought the 4<sup>th</sup> would be a pretty cool sobriety birthday, why not?

From July 4<sup>th</sup> through August 21<sup>st</sup>, I somehow pieced together 49 days of sobriety through sheer will and white knuckling. I was skittish, tentative, and not at all confident. Also, I wasn't done drinking just yet.

Looking back on my numerous relapses, I am amazed to see how God's hand never left me, even though I'd strayed so painfully far from him. He continued to show up during brief moments of clarity and to pursue me, often using the imperfect people in my path. Even my mother, who struggled with her own alcohol issues as well as the insanity that went with being married to a chronic alcoholic, tried to keep my hope alive, often assuring me I'd eventually 'get it.' I'll never forget her words after that terrible night at the frat house, she assured me that every misguided step and devastating relapse was bringing me closer to quitting for good.

Somewhere along the line it became clear to me that Dad was a major factor in saving me from myself. A supernatural intervention. No, he had not been able to overcome his own alcoholism during his life on Earth, which had led me to believe he was a failure in some ways, but I see it differently now. **Only through his death was I able to find true recovery and ultimately an abundant life.** I still had a half dozen or so catastrophic relapses after he passed away, but I finally came to the end. During my many years working in outpatient treatment settings, I'd often tell my clients that *my dad died so that I could live*. I mean, look at my pattern. I couldn't go more than two months without relapsing and the cost of each episode was getting higher and higher. I'd surely be dead soon if I kept it up.

I just read an article about someone who died driving with a blood alcohol content of .26. During my two DUI arrests, I registered .26 and .29 respectively. I have also worked with clients who have tragically killed others in their paths while drunken driving. I am all too aware that this could've been me. In his unimaginable grace, God protected me from having to live with the guilt of such a selfish act. He has done so much for me already. I would be wise to just be content and never ask for another thing!

I honestly hoped I'd be able to claim July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2003, as my sobriety birthday, but I wasn't done yet. A supernatural intervention was going to happen, and God was about to take what the devil intended for my total destruction and use it for the good.

## THE LAST TIME

There was one more time.

If you've read my other book, *Wasted Time*, then you already know the story. For purposes of continuity, I will cover it briefly here.

The 49 day stretch of dry days seemed like quite a feat, and led me to believe I'd turned a corner and wouldn't be going back - but in similar fashion the scenario on the morning of August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2003, set itself up with a man, a road trip, and a remote location where *no one would know*. Always my relapse trifecta.

As was customary in the previous relapses I described, I fumbled through the morning as thoughts of sweet alcohol began to batter my mind. I continued to file them away in a compartment. The perfect storm was brewing, though, an amiable man who'd be up for whatever, my daughter squared away with her dad for the night. I appeared to be beaming myself three hours south; as though the act of leaving my hometown would enable me to peel off my alcoholic self and set it on a shelf for the night.

Shortly after noon, I picked up the guy I'd invited to join me to see a concert at the Minnesota State Fair, 150 miles away. As we hit the highway, I again began morphing into someone who could socially drink. This often happened when I was outside of my habitat. I carried a delusion that removal from the scenes of my old crimes provided insulation from the reality of what another relapse was likely to do.

I am certain of one thing. The act of relapse *starts in the mind*. The mind is a battlefield, aptly described by Joyce Meyer and I'm sure many others. It's probably not rocket science to anyone, but it's easy to forget. Through my years as an alcohol and drug counselor, this concept is frequently taught and most addicts will nod heartily in response. The thing is, though, many fail to see the enemy's work in what happens in the mind.

The enemy. Yeah. The devil. I am going to roll him out right now. He has a simple, three-part agenda for your life which is found in John 10:10:

***“The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and life to the full.”***

He uses the same old tactics. Nothing new under the sun. That afternoon, the devil presented some of the most ancient strategies in his playbook regarding me and my walk. These are strongholds he'd been planting and feeding for decades:

“You were never really that bad.”

“You've never really TRIED to control it, you know? You should at least give it another sincere effort.”

“You're not an alcoholic. You just drank heavily.”

“You didn't lose everything like other people. All those blackouts were because you didn't eat or were overly tired.”

“You were drinking because of bad stuff going on. You're much more stable now.”

“There's no reason to stop completely! You just need to cut back and pace yourself.”

“Drinking isn’t your problem; drinking and DRIVING is. As long as you make sure you don’t get behind the wheel, you can still enjoy alcohol!”

“Make some deals and rules about where and when drinking is allowed. You can trust yourself.”

As I continued making my way down I-35 to the Twin Cities, I contemplated and mulled and considered the enemy’s propositions, although I didn’t understand their origin at that time. The rationalizations just kept coming, building upon each other until the arguments they offered made so much sense and seemed to carry such credibility. I really believed it would be different, as I had so many other times.

That’s where the first problem comes in. Believing the enemy’s lies. You need to figure out what lies the devil is feeding you and come against them with the Word of God.

Example:

**“You were never really that bad.”**

Rebuttal: Yeah, I was bad. My drinking caused a total disconnection from God, the worst existence ever.

*“I am the vine, and ye are the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him; the same bringeth forth much fruit - FOR WITHOUT ME YOU CAN DO NOTHING.” John 15:5*

I know this is true. I cannot have it both ways. I cannot have alcohol, AND the life God wants for me, because consuming alcohol (in the way that I did) causes me to be disconnected from God.

Now, I am not saying anything here about the social use of alcohol. That is up to the individual and between you and God. If you enjoy drinking and it does not affect you in a way that separates you from God, then maybe it’s ok. Ask yourself: does alcohol add to my life and bring enjoyment without causing an unwanted consequence. That’s pretty much the basic question. If you can honestly say yes, then you’re possibly ok. I’m referring to the manner in which I drank - pathologically. Moving on.

**“You never really TRIED to control it, you know that? You should at least give it an effort.”**

Rebuttal: Total lie. I tried to control it more times than I can count, only my dumb dog pea brain would often diminish that reality and make it fade into the backdrop when I was craving a drink.

*“As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly.” -Proverbs 26:11*

**“You’re not an alcoholic. You just drank heavily.”**

Rebuttal: Um, no. I was drunk nearly every time I drank.

*“Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.” Ephesians 5:18*

**“You didn’t lose everything like other people. All those blackouts were because you didn’t eat or were overly tired.”**

Rebuttal: Drunkenness is a sin. Period.

*“If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” 1 John 1:10*

**“There’s no reason to stop completely! You just need to cut back and pace yourself.”**

Rebuttal: Deep down, I know this is a lie and doesn’t work. It never works.

*“So whoever knows the right thing and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” James 4:17*

I didn’t have this Biblical ammunition back on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2003. I also lacked a strong relationship with Jesus and was relying on my own thoughts and self-will. I allowed my inner urges to get *drunk just one more time* to synergize with the thoughts the devil had planted and it wasn’t long before I believed all of it. This brought me to the Point of No Return; the mental place where I’d convinced myself I was going to do it (drink), and I flipped to the other side and started to get excited about drinking and what the night may hold. The euphoria would ramp up and I wouldn’t want anyone to interfere with my plans so I’d keep them a secret. When I reached this mental place, it was too late for help because I no longer wanted it. I was on a course of destruction that only an act of God could alter.

Sometimes I think back about what may have happened had I *not* experienced that last drunk. I don’t think I would’ve been convinced I needed to stop for good. It was an exquisitely horrendous paradox; what happened that night will be forever burned into my memory, causing nightmares, triggers, and PTSD to this day, but it had to happen for me to quit. If the night of August 21<sup>st</sup> hadn’t been essential, I would’ve stopped after one of the other relapses. It might seem vanilla to someone else - just another forgotten night that could be chalked up to exceeding my personal limits - but to me it was the culmination of eighteen months of broken spirit, crushed resolve, and shattered self-esteem - and it could NOT happen again. I knew after that night that I couldn’t take the risk ever again. I couldn’t ever pick up a drink and start the train down the track, down the highway to hell.

So yes, I made a beeline for the beer garden as soon as we entered the fair gates and continued to gulp giant beers obsessively and frantically for as long as my memory remained - and many hours after that, too. Sometimes when I retell this story, I can just hear people scoffing - “Really?? BEER?” Yep. Beer. If I drank anything else that night (which is possible considering my history) I have no recollection, but I was perfectly capable of getting wrecked out of my mind on ‘just’ beer and especially after not drinking for a month and a half, my tolerance was reduced and I blacked out very quickly.

I have a few faint memories; I somehow made it right in front of the stage, even though my friend and I had entered with tickets way back in the 30<sup>th</sup> row. I have a snapshot clip of that in my mind’s eye, of being right in the front pressed up against the barrier in front of the security pit and the stage. Sad, really that I wasn’t even present to enjoy the reality of being center stage facing one of my all-time favorite bands. To accomplish this I’d apparently befriended a guy (go figure) who had the ways and means to get me right into the front row. I was a very slippery talker when I was drunk/blacked out. I would say things that didn’t even sound like myself. I only know this because people would tell me later, and I’d think *I said that?* “It” (the thing that operated during blackouts) was always so much slicker and suaver and more convincing than my ‘sober self.’

I don’t know how long I was up in the first row with that mystery man much less how I was eventually reunited with my original date. My concert guest retold the story later, it had apparently been a very distressing night for him as well; one that included police interaction, breathalyzers, and trying to babysit someone with a lethal blood alcohol content. I kept disappearing, he couldn’t find me, I refused to listen or to leave, I was unable to reason with

or to control. He was finally successful in getting me out at the end of the show by telling the police he would watch over me basically to ensure I didn't die of alcohol overdose, but I took several serious spills down the concrete steps at the grandstand on my way out and was more or less unable to walk.

The next morning was undoubtedly the worst day of my life. It was a defining moment that has never left me. The horror, the shame, the regret - worse than anything I'd ever experienced. It had started out so innocently; going to the fair with a casual acquaintance - yet it caused such wreckage.

God was with me in and through it however - and the shame and horror of that night birthed an entirely new existence for me.

## WHAT'S YOUR WHY?

Jesus did a miraculous work the following morning. He removed my desire to drink and implanted a healthy fear of ever touching alcohol again. He allowed me to see alcohol for what it truly was. My eyes were fully opened.

That doesn't mean I didn't have to do anything, though. Jesus' power works in our action, alongside us, like parallel tracks. You move, He moves. So although he did remove my obsession and fixation, he also expected me to do ongoing maintenance to stay on track.

The day after the state fair incident, my friend and I made the awkward three hour trip back to Duluth. I was sober now, deeply remorseful, and just wanted him out of my car before I had to hear anything more about what I'd done during my twelve hour blackout. I deposited him at his door, then went home to get ready for work. I was expected in Superior for a live newscast at the Dragon Boat Festival. The entire crowd appeared to be drinking, but that didn't affect me. I just looked right through it. I was terribly sick and still in alcohol withdrawal - a little 'hair of the dog' would no question fix me up right quick - but it wasn't going to happen that day or ever again. Alcohol held absolutely no power over me anymore.

## WHY do you want to quit?

You need to have a compelling and powerful reason why you want to stop, and you need to imprint it on your heart.

In Habbukuk, the writer tells us: ***"Then the Lord replied, write the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it."*** Habbukuk 2:2

You must see if for yourself, what making the change is going to mean to you and to the course of the rest of your life. No one ever said change was easy, and through the years of alcohol addiction I had crafted a very intricate relational bond with my drug of choice. Many serious things had already happened because of my drinking: DUIs, blackout car accidents, being fired from jobs, repo man showing up at my place of work, disconnect from my daughter and family, ruined relationships before they ever got off the ground, humiliation and shame brought on by public intoxication - but none of it had changed me for good. ***I needed a spiritual conversion.***

The morning after my last drunk when I prayed to God, I knew it was a powerful plea and I was certain I truly meant it - however the impact of that prayer didn't fully take effect until the coming days and weeks. I was finally absolutely sold upon the idea that I would NEVER be able to have the future I hoped for if I kept drinking. It became crystal clear that if I didn't stop NOW I would never find the two things I wanted most in this world: a life partner and soul mate, and more children. That thing I'd been wanting since I was very young. The thing I thought I had with my first failed marriage. I still believed God would deliver the dream I'd carried in my heart since I was very young, but it would take action and commitment on my part. It would just never happen if I didn't change and become intentional. I knew it and I believed it.

Why this reality become so clear to me on 8/22/03, I cannot say for sure, other than to describe it as 'scales' falling from my eyes. What does this represent? It means you finally see the truth after a long period of being deceived by something ("You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" -John 8:32). This had also happened to Saul (later to be renamed Paul) of Tarsus:

***“So Ananias went to the house, and when he arrived, he placed his hands on Saul. “Brother Saul,” he said, “The Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here, has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” At that instant, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and his sight was restored. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.”***  
**-Acts 9:17-19**

It is simply amazing how fast God worked to bring about my heart’s very desire after I truly surrendered and He knew I was done with alcohol.

First, though, (as the devil will do when he sees you becoming a threat to the kingdom) the enemy brought forth a counterfeit opportunity just one week later!

While at work the following week, I received a phone call from a strange guy. Apparently, this person and I had met, he was the one who smuggled me into the front row of the concert that night. He wanted to see me again. Would I like to meet him at a summer festival the following weekend? I didn’t immediately think about alcohol being a factor, I was more embarrassed about another potential witness coming forward. I had some reservations but ultimately accepted his invitation.

He was very similar to my usual suspects of the past, falling over themselves to score a girlfriend, and he’d already disclosed a little too much for comfort about his bad luck with women and desire to settle down with the right one. (“After I met you last weekend, I told my dad this just HAS to work! I need it to!”) Desperado. The usual types I’d go for. The red flags were already flapping all over the place but I still decided what’s the harm? Part of me was really embarrassed about my blacked out behavior and couldn’t fathom why he even wanted to see me again, but like I said I often fooled people into thinking I was simply a party girl, not a blacked out alcoholic.

I read this somewhere else in a book about blackouts, but I relate to it SO much that it bears repeating. The unnamed woman described her periods of alcohol-induced amnesia like this: “When I black out, it is like I die. Another woman takes over my body, walks for me, talks for me, acts for me.”

That is EXACTLY my experience. Referring to my other entity as just a “Jeckyl-Hyde” is terrifically underwhelming, but suffice it to say there was a cavernous discrepancy between Sweet Melissa and Blackout Woman. The former wanted to be sold out to Jesus, submissive to a Christian man, expertly juggling mom and work life - while the latter lived to skulk around West Duluth dive bars in shoplifted K-Mart shorts two sizes too small - exquisitely desperate, begging for attention, eager to dish out chunks of her soul in exchange for a few hours of admiration.

I had some reservations about this guy I’d agreed to meet again, this time while of sound mind, but concluded there was nothing to lose. As soon as I arrived at the festival (nine days sober), it was clear I’d made a mistake because he fully expected last week’s version of Melissa, not the me who was poised for reinvention. I can’t blame him, considering how truly wrecked I’d been *just the weekend before*. No doubt he was convinced I was a lush. After begging me to have a beer with him several times, he finally bought one and handed it over! When I passed it off to this friend instead, he could see that I was serious. I was not having so much as a sip. “I told, you I QUIT drinking!” I must’ve insisted this a thousand times and I couldn’t figure out why he didn’t get it. “Don’t you remember how I was last weekend?” Other than that statement, I didn’t ask any questions and he didn’t offer any firsthand knowledge about my state of mind. He just continued to rationalize it. “You were wasted.

Yeah. But so was everyone! You don't REALLY need to stop! You're fine! You just need to pace yourself. My buddy and I will watch out for you!" And so it continued.

Listen, anyone who will try to convince an addicted person that they're FINE, in spite of their pleadings to the contrary, is NOT someone you want in your life! I'll even offer him the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he really thought last weekend was just an isolated event; a fluke. He didn't know my history.

I maintained an intense and firm resolve that night that has not left to this day. I knew within ONE HOUR that I would not see this person again, I wanted to leave as soon as I arrived, but I stayed and watched the concert. By the end of the night he and his friend were stumbling, falling down drunk and super obnoxious. I was SO GRATEFUL to leave when the concert was over and drive home in my own car, alone, and SOBER!

But not before he forced me to go to Perkins for some after-bar drunk food. I remember staring at him across the table, not liking his face when I was sober. Alcohol had softened his edges I guess but tonight the beer goggles were on the shelf for good. He was repulsive when I was sober and he was drunk.

It probably wasn't the smartest idea to attend a huge beer drinking festival with just one week of sobriety under my belt, and there are probably many who'll disparage my devil-may-care attitude as a reckless recipe for disaster. Why would you put yourself into the path of temptation? How can you have such confidence? For me, it proved to be an effective test to demonstrate how serious I was, and how savvy the enemy was, and still is. He was confident I'd be weak enough to go another round, and maybe he'd destroy me this time!

It was different though, because I TRULY WANTED TO BE DONE AND WAS 100% CONFIDENT I WOULD NEVER PICK UP A DRINK AGAIN. I didn't know that God already had my back. He'd *removed* my desire to drink. It wasn't coming back!

I don't care anymore if people think that is an overly confident way of thinking, and as I sit here having achieved nearly sixteen years of sobriety, I have not wavered from this bedrock belief. When I finally quit for good I was tired of saying stuff I never really believed like "you're never really truly recovered" or that you need to spend the rest of your life in A.A. to stay sober, or that you'll 'always have this 'disease', because I knew it wasn't true for me. I hated being lumped in with this group-think mentality.

My obsession with alcohol was removed supernaturally by Jesus Christ on the morning of August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003. I BELIEVED I was delivered (I received this through faith) in the coming days and weeks and I have operated through and from that faith every single day since. I have been able to socialize, to be around people who may be consuming alcohol, and to do all of the things I used to enjoy doing when I was drinking - and feel perfectly fine about it. Not angry, not resentful, not on a 'pity-pot.' This truly is a supernatural occurrence because prior to this I WAS all of those things: angry, resentful, hating everyone who drank and seemed to be having fun, isolated, avoided social events, tried to insulate myself from the world because I couldn't be trusted around alcohol or temptations to drink.

People often ask me how I finally quit after struggling with relapse like I did. When I answer that I don't have cravings and have never entertained the thought of taking a drink for almost sixteen years, they regard me with a suspicious gleam in their eye as if I've just been beamed back from the dead by aliens. "SERIOUSLY?" They cackle. "You NEVER think about it? You NEVER want to?"

I will admit, sometimes I have the thought that it would be 'nice' to have a beer, a casual drink, like normal people- and not become an obsessed, out-of control psycho, but deep down I know that JUST ONE DRINK would be my ruin. JUST ONE DRINK would demolish everything I have built over the past decade and a half. Maybe not right away, but I'd be back in the game - back on the Highway to Hell.

There are some cases in which I have seen people forced into treatment against their will, and once they have become engaged in the process, they may have a spiritual awakening of sorts, they may surrender, and they may get serious about change, even though they were initially coerced into treatment. So I'm not saying that NEVER happens, but in my personal and professional experience it has been the exception rather than the rule.

I truly believe you must be ready to be delivered from addiction, you have to want to be freed, and you must possess a strong and easily accessible motivation or mission statement as to WHY you want that freedom. What makes it so crucial, NOW? Why not at any other time? What's going to stop you from going back?

The WHY must be a lot more compelling than the short-term relief that indulging in your chemical would provide. It's hard to defer short-term gratification for the promise of a long-term goal, but it can be done. For me, it means keeping the consequences and the reality of what picking up a drink again would mean to me - always accessible. We addicts don't like reality, we live in an alternate world of our own making. Sobriety forces us to get real and squarely face the magnitude of what another use event would *really* mean. The price tag grows higher and higher with each relapse. There's always the element of RISK. Will I REALLY not get behind the wheel? Or will I change my mind once I've lowered my inhibitions? Maybe this time I'll forget the oven on and burn the house down (which I actually did one time - I left a pizza cooking in the oven ALL NIGHT). The price we might have to pay for that harmless little drink could be a big-ticket item. Maybe it's the time we decide to drive drunk with our kids in the car, only this time we pass out behind the wheel. IS IT WORTH THE PRICE I MAY PAY?

If I drank again, I'd systematically dismantle everything God and I have built. There is no doubt I'd lose my faith, my marriage, and my family if I made that choice.

## BLESSING

I passed a major test that night, and God was getting ready to bring me the desire of my heart.

***“Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.”***  
**James 1:12**

My last drink was 8-21-03. The Rutabega Festival counterfeit man failed to derail me on 8-30-03. I had passed the test. God noticed, and ten days later on 9-9-03, He delivered the real thing.

I'd been praying for God to reveal my soul mate for a good couple of years, probably since my mother bought me a book called “Write it Down, Make it Happen” by Henriette Klauser. When I opened it excitedly with high hopes, Mom claimed it had basically fallen off the shelf into her hands and she knew it was for me. I had great excitement when I first began drafting the letters the author suggested in the book, letters she promised would bring about the very desires of a person's heart, but as the months went by nothing seemed to change. The steady stream of dead end men just kept coming.

The book talked about writing letters to God about your soul mate, and also writing letters to *HIM* - the guy. I did this off and on during my eighteen months of sobriety when I was focused on journaling and self-reflection, describing a man who'd would rather go to a kids' birthday party than to the bar with this friends, who was strong and caring, who would worship Jesus with me, share everything about life, be fiercely protective, know me inside and out and truly be my best friend. I can't say my faith was super great at the time or if I really believed God or 'the universe' would eventually deliver this dream guy - but luckily God had him all picked out. He knew I wasn't done drinking though, during that eighteen month self-analysis period, so I was forced to wait.

The State Fair changed everything. I finally passed the test, and as soon as I was serious, my dream became reality faster than I ever could have imagined. Strangely enough, I'd met this guy before! He was no stranger. That's the crazy thing. Five years earlier at a different place and time - different dimension, even, he had been the ex-boyfriend of my then-roommate who came by our apartment on two occasions that recall. I didn't really pay him no 'nevermind,' although I noticed he was cute. Because my former roommate was still basically in love with him and had never wanted it to end in the first place, I knew he was off limits and I didn't allow any queries about his present status to enter my mind. It was 1998, I was deep into my partying, working at a bar, and dating whoever fell into my path. Mike Huray was not on my radar.

I almost didn't go to that providential event which would mark our first meeting in five years, in fact I moaned and grumbled and whined about the news assignment I'd deemed so far beneath me and my journalistic acumen. A pie throwing contest? *Really, God???*

Ultimately I went though, trudging across the street with a tripod and bag of resentments. Why hadn't I been delivered from this dying town yet? I seemed to be the only news reporter who hadn't escaped. It didn't matter that I'd been furiously firing off resumes tapes from Flint to Fort Meyers and everywhere in between, no one seemed to want me. Now I know why! If I'd moved away, *I'd miss the one of most important divine appointments of my life.*

I reunited with Mike there, a brief 5-minute conversation with my future husband. After that, things moved fast. They always do when they've been blessed by God and the Holy Spirit gets

involved. There was no two year engagement, no foot dragging, no “I’m not sure if I’m ready.” We were both very ready and were engaged six months after we reunited and married almost one year to the day after that now infamous pie throwing contest. It may have seemed speedy to outsiders, but we *knew* it was right. There was no confusion or uncertainty, just peace and joy! Perhaps the recovery community would frown upon that sort of timeline: and tell me I rushed into things. And honestly some people in the AA meetings I attended told me I was rushing into things. I politely listened to them, but ultimately followed the leadings of the Holy Spirit. When something is ordained by God and you know it, there’s no reason to wait. I was 30 years old and wanted to spend the rest of my life with my soul mate. How different this was from my first non-covenant “marriage,” forced by my own stubborn will. What God ordains, He will sustain! As I write this, we will celebrate 15 years of marriage this fall.

At nearly 31, I was still somewhat young, but my biological clock was ticking. Luckily, God has an amazing way of making up for lost time. You may think it’s over, or it’s too late, you’re too old, you missed your opportunity - but those are all lies from the very pit of hell.

***“I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten.” -Joel 2:25***

After two heartbreaking miscarriages, I was able to deliver two healthy baby girls in 2008 and 2010. And with both pregnancies, I was over 35. But God!

As your recovery grows and you move farther away from the lifestyle of active addiction, you will continue to build a case that becomes more and more compelling about WHY you cannot go back. About what going back would mean. You begin to strengthen the muscle of your upper thinking capability and quiet the voice of impulsivity that had been screaming DO IT NOW! IT WILL FEEL GOOD! The more time you move away from the last use, the better off you will be. Building time certainly helps, but you also need to instill meaning and purpose into your new life of recovery.

I’ve worked with many clients over the past thirteen or so years, and when a relapse event occurs I think it is often because that person has not experienced what they would perceive to be a payoff to their new behavior. If you’re dry but still miserable - a sober life is going to feel empty and directionless. You may be able to white-knuckle your way to an acceptable sober streak, but sooner or later your resolve will crumble in the face of a trigger. It might be something huge and devastating like a death or sudden job loss - or it could be a seemingly insignificant thing like not getting recognized for a project at work or being turned down for a date. When you are reliant upon fluctuating circumstances to maintain your happiness and commitment to sobriety, you’re always at the mercy of some outside force. This is not a stable way to approach a lifetime of recovery.

***“But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.” -James 1:6***

Relying on outside sources like relationships, money, or status symbols as a way to preserve your sobriety is a recipe for disaster. When those things fall short or show their humanness, you may be compelled to return to substances for relief.

## HOW DO I GET SOBER?

*The answer is in the bedrock truth of Jesus Christ.*

You knew I was going to say that, right? Some people will get a glazed over look in their eye at this point. If you've ever seen the great dramatic movie rendition about the origins of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) co-founder Bill Wilson, you'll remember James Woods looking disgusted when his old friend Ebby Thacher shows up sober and healthy at his doorstep. Bill asks him what has happened, and Ebby gushes, "Bill! I got religion!"

To which Bill stomps off to shakily pour a tumbler of gin the 'clear the vision.'

Can you remain sober without Jesus? Maybe, but you will likely be white-knuckling it and pushing Him away won't change the fact that you still need to come to terms with what happens after you die and the cost involved in rejecting Him.

You might be wondering why He listened to me *this time*. After all, He'd seen this song and dance many other times. The promises to quit and the brief periods of stability followed by the inevitable plunge back into the sewer. He knew it all, and He knew when I was truly done and not just offering up more lip service.

Of course I 'knew' Jesus. Or I should say, I knew *of* him. But I can't say we had much of a relationship prior to 2003. We began one in 2000, but I opted out due to my fear of The Holy Rollers I'd met at my new community church - which at the time, was way out of my comfort zone. I still needed to take my head knowledge of Him and move it to my heart, and for that to happen I needed a personal encounter to occur.

My husband and I were at church the other night sitting in our small group study, and a discussion question was posed that we shared around the table. "Who would you say Jesus is to someone who asked you?"

Most everyone, including myself, spouted out academic, Bible-y sounding answers that were indeed factual, however may not resonate at all with someone *who does not know Him*.

We happily spouted off all sorts of good things: "He's the Son of God, He is God, He's the Messiah, Bread of Life, The Door, Great Healer, The Way, Truth and Life, the Great Shepherd, The Water of Life. I spoke of how John 3:16 was the first verse I memorized about Jesus dying for us and that back then I just committed it to memory but never pondered its true meaning. A lot of us do that. My husband identified Him as a Restorer, which was just beautiful because it was indeed very personal to him and to us. Some of us may have head knowledge about all these great things about Jesus - but many have yet to experience them personally. It's no surprise they're questioning his existence!

***"Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the LORD!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." A week later, his disciples were in the house again and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My LORD and my God!" Then Jesus told to him, "Because you have seen me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have believed." -John 20:24-29***

Then someone else at the table offered, "I'd probably just say He's someone who did something for me, and He loves me. And if they wanted to know more I'd share it with them."

So simple, and so brilliant!

I propose to you now, then, that you ask Jesus to SHOW YOU who He is. Go ahead, ask him for something only you will recognize. Dare to invite Him to show you. He wants to have a relationship with you. You probably already know he is seeking you!

It's ok if you doubt him, his existence, or whether he even cares about your life or whatever problem you're currently facing. Doubting is normal. God expects it. He doesn't mind when we 'wrestle' with him. There are also times when God only releases his blessing after a prolonged and painful 'wrestling match.'

In Genesis 32, Jacob is on his way back home and is scared to death about having to finally face his estranged brother Esau. Jacob intends to spend the night before the meeting alone, and in prayer. But a strange man shows up and wrestles Jacob until daybreak. At some point, Jacob realizes he is wrestling God, and somewhere along the way God dislocates his hip. Jacob, in pain, replies, "***I will not let you go until you bless me.***" **Genesis 32:26**

God is pleased by Jacob's response, apparently, and changes his name from Jacob (deceiver) to Israel (strives with God). Sometimes when we want God's comfort, he sends it in unexpected and unwanted packages. We might be praying desperately for one thing - like I was begging God to let me out of Duluth - but He may have much better plans (my husband and children).

God wants to bless you and he is okay with your doubting - to a point. We've all had times in which we cried out "WHY GOD!" How could you let this happen? When will this struggle end? I've been good, prayed hard, and sought You, why won't you help? But sometimes we find more blessing *in* wrestling than outside of it. We may have to fight and persevere for a time. But at some point you need to decide whether you're going to trust your own decisions for your life - or God's.

In my alcohol addicted years, God knew I would eventually come out from under the addiction and that my experiences could and would be used to transcend my past suffering and to bring hope to others. I was still in the dark about all of that, especially back in 1999 when I was arrested twice in the span of seven months for DUI. I was thinking "God! Get me out of this! I'll never touch another drink again!" Praying straight up crisis prayers, simply hoping I wouldn't do any serious jail time. In his mercy, God spared me from killing the woman I rear ended while in a blackout the night of my second arrest. My blood alcohol was .29 - nearly four times above today's legal limit for driving. This disastrous event was the catalyst for eighteen months of sobriety - but would you believe that wasn't enough? Not only did I resume drinking, I also got pretty heavily back into habitual drunken driving. I'd pledge to myself that I wouldn't get behind the wheel, yet when bar closing time rolled around, I was never ready to go home and had no reservations about driving over to Superior, WI where the bars were open later. Miraculously, I never was arrested a third time.

Any 'normal' person would've said NEVER AGAIN after almost killing someone in a blackout. But not me. After some sobriety, life inevitably settled down again, and the devil resumed his ancient strategy of assaulting my mind with half-truths. "*You never have tried to control it. You could if you tried. You need to not drink and drive, but drinking is ok. You're throwing the baby out with the bathwater. What else will you do for fun? You're so boring without alcohol, you can't even talk to people!*"

He continued with these assaults for a good three months, and I kept pushing off his propositions until one day - I didn't anymore. I believed all the lies and began again.

I definitely knew God had stepped up his pursuit of me during those dark and lonely last two years of my drinking.

I've been at AA meetings before where someone around the table introduced themselves as a 'grateful alcoholic.' At first I thought that was pretty annoying, and given my self-pitying state of mind it's not surprising I felt that way. I was certainly not sold out on sobriety and had the social drinking door still open a crack in the back of my mind. *How can anyone be grateful to have this problem?*

Now I know. This *problem* has shaped who I am in a great many ways. Without it, I would not be "me." It has given me an uncanny ability to connect almost instantly with so many varied types of people from an ex gang member, to a teen mother, to someone who unwittingly committed a tragic act while blacked out. Just the other day, one of my daughters was having a friend spend the night. I had met this child's mother a couple of times in passing, but had not spoken to her much beyond surface pleasantries. It didn't seem we had much in common outside of our children sharing a classroom. Then she mentioned she was involved in a podcast about women's issues, I told her I used to work in the news media, and gave her a copy of my other book. She responded that her mother was eight years sober. It is very rare to run across a person who has not been directly impacted by addiction, usually in a very direct way. This common bond resulted in almost instantaneous understanding.

They tell you that in television news. Once you're behind the scenes, it ruins news for you because it's impossible to look at it with an unbiased eye again. Every misspelled word, second of dead air, wrong video, or anchor flub becomes screamingly obvious to the trained eye. So it was with alcohol. I could no longer fool myself into believing that allowing alcohol back into my life was as innocuous as eating junk food all weekend or ignoring the maintenance light in my car letting me know my oil change was three thousand miles overdue.

Quitting is probably the easier part. But can you stay stopped for a lifetime? JUST ONE DAY AT A TIME, the old-timers will implore. Don't overwhelm yourself. No one is guaranteed anything beyond today. And other irritating platitudes. Yep, I know it's all true. But at the same time, I've seen many a client use the ol 'one day at a time' mantra as a way to keep the door open for their next drunk. It was a way for them to be vague and to never say never. I'd hear them say things like, "yeah, I'm sober for now, but you know it's just a day at a time. I can't tell you where I'll be a year from now." I notice a big difference between that type of person and someone who says "Nope, I'm done. I've been driven to my knees by my drug and I get destroyed every single time. I ain't goin' back."

Staying sober and creating a life with purpose and meaning takes a massive amount of action. You will probably have to dismantle your entire way of living and build it again.

Obviously if you've read this far, you've discovered I am a strong Christian, and if that were off putting to you, I assume you would've put the book down by now. Please understand I do not want to alienate people of other religions or belief systems, and I do not wish to forcefully evangelize anyone. I am just speaking MY truth. I strive to be a simple vessel for the Holy Spirit to move through. When I am led to share Christ with someone, I do my muddling best and the Holy Spirit does the rest. I get nervous and self-conscious, but God still

uses me. I do not, however, try to impose anything upon anyone. As I've practiced my witnessing, God and the Holy Spirit have helped me figure out where, when and how.

***"For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases Him." Philippians 2:13***

"Tell me a little bit about yourself."

One of the most cringe-worthy job interview questions, right? It seems many people struggle to put *who they are* into words. Most will fall back on works and roles and job titles - i.e. what they "do," or their position within the family. Honestly, I do it, too. It's a huge part of our identity. I am proud of my career and I established a lot of debt to earn the degrees hanging on my wall with no financial help from anyone else, so by God I'm going to be proud of that! I adore being Mike's wife and I love it when he refers to me as simply as that: "my wife." It just makes me smile, and I always want to be his wife, helper, and best friend. I love my children to the moon and back. I strive each day to be a better mother, someone more playful and fun. I wish I hadn't drank during Hailey's early years, but I'm doing what I can to reconcile that and I am proud that I've been sober for the majority of her life. I've raised all three of my girls in the Christian faith and provided that foundation come what may. I pray they'll give me grace through my abundant shortcomings as a parent and love me anyway. My marriage, children, family and career are of infinite importance in my life. But, they do not define me.

I could lose my job. I could lose my home. My children will grow up and move away and begin lives of their own. My husband and I will age, and our relationship may change. Our bodies will decline, and one day we will all die. The Bible says the span of our years is a mere handbreadth, nothing but a breath on the wind. WOW, that's a rosy picture. I am getting depressed just thinking about it! But you get the idea. We must anchor ourselves in something rock-solid, something unchanging, something unwavering.

***"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the LORD God. "Who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." Revelation 1:8***

My faith in Christ is the most important thing about me, it's the greatest part my identity and my most important truth. I suspect I will be coming into it for the rest of my time on planet Earth. It's the part of me that weathers the storms of life - the doubt, confusion, disappointment, and uncertainty that are part of the human condition. My life is often boiled down to this simple prayer: "I trust you, Jesus." When I feel myself getting out of control with spinning thoughts, overanalyzing things, getting overwhelmed, or just generally caving to stressful situations - often the Holy Spirit grounds me with these four simple words, and everything comes into focus.

***"Our focus is never on the PROBLEM, but rather in forming an identity in CHRIST."***  
***-Lance Wallnau***

Honestly, I'm not sure if that quote originated with Lance, but I will attribute it to him since that's where I first heard it.

When I find myself too into my own thoughts, ruminating on a problem, trying to figure something out, this truth often bursts into my mind like diamonds riding on a rainbow. TURN YOUR EYES UPON JESUS! As soon as I shift my thoughts I feel instant relief, because I know I don't need to carry the weight of the world and I don't need to figure everything out.

A major problem I used to deal with originating from my past inferiority complex, was worrying about what other people were thinking. Constantly I'd obsess over how I imagined others perceived me. Were they mad? Had I done something wrong? I was super vigilant to the moods of everyone around to the point where it became almost debilitating. I was always WAY more concerned about other people's opinions than my own and God's. It is so freeing to let go of that. Don't get me wrong, I still fall into the trap. I just did it like five minutes ago, in fact! I found myself obsessing about a co-worker at my relatively new job and spent a few minutes musing over my interactions with her, wondering if it's possible she doesn't like me? Could I have done something to offend her? She seems a bit different toward me than when I first started, no? After a few minutes on this merry-go-round, I recognized my thought process and got off the ride by simply shifting my eyes back onto the Lord. If someone has a problem with me, it's not my job to figure it out. I have found that God reveals everything I need to see at just the right time.

## REAL LIFE

I believe most addicts have a sincere issue with living in reality. Often when I was a drinking (before the blackout) I'd feel superhuman, powerful, like I was in a movie. Everything seemed more colorful, fluid, and alive. It was a deception, of course, because this illusion would only last a short time before I became drunk and was stumbling around, slurring my words, breaking promises, and compromising my self-respect. Over and over again I'd sell myself out for those couple of hours where I'd feel on top of the world, but later I'd pay a very high price.

I often implore clients to stop "B.S.ing" themselves. Take a look at your substance use and ask yourself honestly, does it add to my life? Does it bring enjoyment and pleasure? Because that's what it does for social users. They can stop when they want, they can take it or leave it, they are not mentally preoccupied with it, they don't become out of control when they ingest it. It truly does enhance their life.

This is not the case for me and millions of others. For us, the chemical takes over, wreaks havoc, gets progressively worse in its assault upon us, becomes our primary focus, and slowly erodes all sense of self as well as every good thing we once enjoyed.

So ask yourself - honestly - which is it for you? In those rare moments of clarity, even a person deep into their addiction knows what they're doing is not sustainable and that it cannot go on indefinitely. Using drugs or alcohol as a way to cope with everyday life is a recipe for disaster.

We have to learn to get high on life, corny as it sounds. I have found that as a long time procrastinator, the more I do - the better I feel. The more I delay and defer, the lazier and less motivated I will be.

I do my best to start each day centered on God. I wake up around 5:30, and after I've done a bit of my morning routine, I head downstairs with my Bible and journal. My first few minutes (even if I am only able to muster 5 or 10) involves prayer, a few Bible verses, and some scripture and declarations spoken out loud. I will jot down thoughts or verses that speak to me, or journal more in depth if I have time. On days where I am up earlier or moving at a more leisurely pace, I may devote up to an hour or more to Bible study and prayer.

After this is completed, I do some sort of exercise. Usually a couple of mile run, push ups, lunges, and stretches. Some days it is only ten or fifteen minutes of stretching or core work. Other days it may be up to 40 minutes.

I feel so much better when I start my days like this: connecting with the Lord through prayer and the Bible, and moving my physical body.

Next I finish the rest of my getting ready routine, assist the kids, and send my husband off to work (he gets himself ready - for the most part). I do not part ways with him without praying and pleading the blood of Jesus over him, often anointing him with oil, and the same goes for when I drop my kids off at school. We always pray for protection for them and the school itself - as well as that God will use them as vessels to witness to others. I do not force them to evangelize anyone, it just comes naturally.

There is so much fear in the world these days, a brief trip through the news channels will undoubtedly showcase stories of murder, assault, missing children, school shootings and threats of impending war. Some parents are so afraid to just let their kids be kids. Truth be told - my husband and I have been accused of being helicopter parents by our girls and

continue to be extremely serious about our kids' safety. Yet, I know I cannot be with them 24 hours per day. At some point, I must allow God to watch them for me - they are, after all, His children first. That is why I cannot and do not leave them without pleading the blood of Christ over them and their whereabouts. I draw the bloodline around the school. I command the enemy to back off. We pray in the car before I drop them off and our prayer starts with repentance for anything we've done to wrong anyone made in God's image. Then we thank Him for life, his sacrifice, and the new day before us and ask Him to guide our steps. I like to pray Psalm 91 over them, invoking his angels to encamp around the kids and their school. I thank Him for the promises in His word and plead with Him not to forget His promise to us in Psalm 91:

***“Do not be afraid of the terrors of night, nor the arrow that flies in the day. Do not dread the disease that stalks in darkness nor the disaster that strikes at midday. Though a thousand fall at your side, though ten thousand are dying around you, those evils will not touch you.” Psalm 91:5-7***

The thing is, I truly believe this scripture, as I believe all of the Bible, and it's what enables me to have peace. I can drop my kids off and go to work, confident that the Lord has them in the palm of His hand.

Jesus talks a whole lot about believing. Belief activates His work on your behalf! His word will not return void.

***“Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, Don't be afraid; just believe.”***

After they're safely at school, I return to my home office. Throughout the day I will often pray aloud in my heavenly prayer language, listen to some spiritual music or possibly a sermon, and yes, I also listen to a few 'secular' songs if I feel like it. I have a wide interest in music and my mood greatly influences what I want to listen to. Some mornings I am more reverent, and my selections may be along the lines of "The Old Rugged Cross," other days I may want to pump myself up more by listening to high-energy pop songs.

As my relationship with God and the Holy Spirit have grown, I am provided with discernment and wisdom about what music is acceptable for me to listen to and what is not (I will instantly turn off "Highway to Hell, Lick it Up, or Runnin' with the Devil," songs I used to sing along heartily to). I am not super strict about rock music in general though and don't go around preaching to people about what they should avoid. I listened to three 60's songs and a few from the 80's this morning and it made me happy. I still enjoy a lot of songs from my youth, something very legalistic Christians might oppose, but I've realized that my walk is between me and God. We will all stand before Him on judgment day and provide an account of our lives. Still, I avoid music with profanity or overtly sexual messages or lyrics. Is God happy with me when I spend \$150 on a ticket to see Guns 'N' Roses and revel in a night of drunkenness and filth, then get upset when He doesn't bless me in other areas of my life? No, I am certain this doesn't please Him. But is God angry when I take my disabled brother in law to see the Oak Ridge Boys perform at a casino? I don't think so. I use discernment in each situation that comes up. It's a constant balance trying to live in the world but not be OF this world.

For the most part, I appreciate well-written music that elicits emotion. When I was a teen, I loved 80's rock and heavy metal, mostly because I wanted to be rebellious and to party. When I listen to it now, though, I'm in a very different head space. I didn't go to that Guns 'N' Roses concert to get drunk, I went there to see a band I liked 30 years ago and later I regretted it. In more recent years I have naturally gravitated away from a great deal of my

old music, but in some ways it has shaped parts of me and I still enjoy a fun 80's rock song. "Gypsy Road?" Come on. We can't be so serious all the time. And don't get me started on the power ballad. "Something to Believe In, Heaven, Don't Know What You Got Til It's Gone." Painful, poignant, bleeding heart lyrics and beautiful lilting harmonies.

I also love gospel: Alan Jackson, Motown, many contemporary Christian and pop artists like TobyMac... as well as old standbys from childhood and beyond such as Boston and the Cars.

The point is, if I'm unsure about something I'm doing or involved with, I ask God, and He shows me. It's easy to get sucked in to others' opinions or belief systems and to feel guilty if you're not in line with the pace or direction of culture. This used to sound crazy, having an interactive relationship with God where He communicates with you, but believe me the more time you spend in communication with Him, the more you get to know Him, just like you would in any human relationship. A lot of people argue that God doesn't talk to them, but it's possible there are just too many distractions going on to hear what He is saying. It takes some practice and effort to develop the relationship, just as it does with any human one.

I also feel that becoming a member of a church and being part of the body of Christ is very important. There were many years where I did not go to church at all. I scoffed at it and said to myself I didn't need to 'go to a building' to worship. I could worship in nature, or in my very own bedroom! Yes, this is true, but there is something very powerful about coming together as believers and praising God corporately.

***"Not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another - and all the more as you see the day approaching." - Hebrews 10:25***

It is sad that many don't go to church anymore and fail to view it as important in terms of the family unit. I cannot tell you how grateful I am for the church, especially in the past ten years. Prior to that, I think I took it for granted. I didn't really need it, I didn't serve much, and I was more or less a 'pew warmer' who showed up a couple of Sundays a month, did my time, shook a few hands, but didn't give God much attention at all for the remainder of the week. I wasn't investing in my church home.

In 2012, my family and I moved from our home in Duluth to a Twin Cities suburb 170 miles south. My marriage was in serious trouble, I had a new workplace, new home, new everything - I was a fish out of water. My body began breaking down as the stress I'd been under culminated in extreme fatigue and adrenal dysfunction. I could barely make it past dinner and I'd be crawling into bed.

By the grace of God, my new job connected me with a couple of strong Christians who recommended churches in the area as well as a life-saving intercessory prayer ministry. I don't know where I would be today without the love of those two ministries and the humble people within them who were willing to serve. My family and I were going through a very dark period and almost did not make it through, but the church and healing prayer ministries were beacons of light during that very painful and bleak time.

I am happy to report that we did survive and are stronger than ever. God completely healed and restored my marriage and provided a way in the wasteland, a river in the desert, hope when everything seemed to be hopeless. We also sought worldly assistance through various therapy professionals, and while helpful in some ways this approach proved to be much less significant than the spiritual transformation only God could provide. We used many of the tools provided in therapy and developed a good bond with the therapist, however the

intercessory prayer, laying of hands, and the renewal of our relationship in Christ were the real solutions.

Shortly before we left Duluth, I found this Bible verse, wrote it on the whiteboard in my office, and stared at it every day:

***“I have told you all of this so that you may have peace in Me. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world!” John 16:33***

This scripture carried me through many dark days, depressing moments when I'd have to close my office door and cry. When I thought I couldn't go on another minute, I reflected upon Jesus' pilgrimage to the cross and I continued to live one breath at a time, believing God would eventually bring the turnaround. I didn't know HOW, I didn't know WHEN, but something inside kept urging me not to quit. Don't give up five minutes before the miracle happens! I'd been experiencing extreme anxiety about our impending move as well as obsessing about what might go wrong (tactics of the enemy and his demons I'm much better equipped to combat now), but 8 years ago I feared it might make our situation even worse. So I meditated on John 16:33 and let it sink into my heart, and the Holy Spirit revealed to me that that GOD WAS GOING BEFORE ME. I was no longer fearful. The revelation that I was never alone and no matter what happened God was with me - was a turning point that gave me the courage to take the leap.

It didn't get better instantly after we moved, and honestly for a time it actually got worse! The devil had his hooks into my family and wasn't going down without a fight. But God was stronger. He fought battles behind the scenes for us I won't know about til I see his Kingdom, and eventually he brought us through.

I am so grateful today that I didn't give up, because honestly, when it was hard I just wanted to run away and for the struggle to end. I felt like Jacob in the Bible where he's wrestling with God and God won't let him go. God kept telling me, *I want you to stay and work it out* - and for a while I fought him tooth and nail, meantime believing all the devil's lies: "It's too hard, you deserve better, too much has happened, you'll never heal, things will never change" and on and on. For a solid year, I would take one step forward and two steps back. How I wish I'd learned how to effectively battle the enemy sooner!

Ultimately, He brought the turn around on Easter Sunday, 2013. What a beautiful day to be blessed!

I never want my connection to the Lord to take a backseat again. Now I attend Bible study on Wednesday and church on Sunday, faithfully each week. My husband and I are involved in the marriage ministry. I sing on the worship team twice a month, and we try to serve as much as we can.

## WALKING IN AUTHORITY

Several years ago, before I was very good at hearing the voice of the Lord, I asked Him to give me a *word of knowledge*. Then I laid down expectantly on my bed and rested my mind. I tried to just clear it of all chatter and let myself sink down into a deep, quiet place where time and space did not exist. I understand this is probably not easy for anyone, and it was not easy for me with people slamming their car doors outside my bedroom window and loud semis jake-breaking down the highway next to my house. The natural world will make it a challenge to get quiet, and not only that, the enemy will begin bombarding your mind with thoughts like: “Oh shoot, I forgot to shut the garage door” “What should I make for dinner” “I wonder if I have cancer” “Am I going to lose my job??” And other random whisperings all intended to distract, scare, or steer you off course. It takes discipline and practice to combat this common process. First, accept that it’s going to happen, and if you stick with it things *will* get easier. Don’t judge or berate yourself if your mind wanders, you are bored, or you notice thoughts like “this is stupid, it’s not working, etc.” Be gentle with yourself and just try to sit in silence a little longer each time, even if initially you can only make it one minute. If you reflect over the course of your experience on any given day, it’s pretty astounding to note how distracted most of us are much of the time. It’s no wonder we have stress and anxiety when we lay down to sleep at night, our minds are still going 1,000 miles per hour! It reminds me of the movie Wall-E where the characters are constantly fixed on computer screens, riding around in motorized chairs where everything is done for them and they are required to put in very minimal effort. When you are constantly distracted, the enemy can keep you in the dark about the reality of your life or about the direction GOD (not the world) wants you to take. The evil one becomes very adept at getting you fixed on the cares of this life rather than the promise of eternal life in the next.

Well, anything worth having takes effort, and I would venture to say that the reward you reap is directly contingent upon the amount of effort you put into the endeavor. So it is with training yourself to quiet your mind. Quieting your mind allows you to tap into the still, small voice. We talked a few chapters back about how relapse starts in the mind, and I’d pair that with the idea that all self-diagnosed “PROBLEMS,” in fact, start in your head, too. The devil knows this very well, which is why your mind is his prime battleground. If he can get you thinking and dwelling on anxieties about the future or regrets and shame about your past, there’s a very good chance he can cripple you from doing any REAL work for the Kingdom here in the present, where God is.

Back to that day laying on my bed. I asked the Lord for a word, and after laying quietly, DOMINION dropped into my mind.

I’ve never thought much about this word. I mean, I know I must’ve heard it before, although I never thought about its meaning.

***“Far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.” Ephesians 1:21***

In the Bible, dominion appears to be a rank or order of angels. At the time, though, I didn’t pray much or investigate the meaning of God dropping this little jewel for me; I just thought it was cool that I asked him to give me a word of knowledge and He actually delivered.

That’s another thing to remember. You must wait upon God expectantly, believing He is going to respond to your prayers!

***“Now faith is the confidence in what we hope for, and assurance about things unseen.”  
Hebrews 11:1***

***“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must BELIEVE (emphasis mine) that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek Him.” Hebrews 11:6***

You may recall the story of Abram (Abraham) in the Bible in Genesis chapter 12:

***“Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father’s family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you.” Genesis 12:1-3***

Abraham began to call himself this, and he *believed* what God had told him, even though it took a very long time to manifest.

***“For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God’s wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ.” Romans 5:17***

This goes back to the beginning of my journey with the Lord. I said right at the beginning of this book that I received Christ when I was 9 years old - truly, I received the free gift of salvation - but at that time some 35 years ago - I had no idea there was SO MUCH MORE. All I received when I was 9 was the promise of going to Heaven when I died, because I chose to accept Christ as my Lord and Savior.

I have later learned that there are many other Kingdom blessings available for followers of Jesus Christ. Yes, salvation is a free gift that must be received through faith. The same is true for the other perks and blessings of choosing to follow Christ. As with salvation, one must first BELIEVE that the promise is true and available, and then RECEIVE it. I cannot stress this enough. If your faith is weak and you refuse to believe you are entitled to the other Kingdom perks as a follower of Jesus, you will never walk in full authority! The second part is choosing to follow Christ and to live a righteous lifestyle. None of us will do this perfectly, the point is to purposefully turn from sin and earnestly seek the Lord, and asking forgiveness when we fall short.

God isn’t seeking perfection. He is looking at the state of our hearts. Sometimes in church when I’m singing in front of the congregation with the worship team, I become aware of how I’m being overly concerned with people watching me, and maybe I start putting on a show a little bit. When I notice this tendency, I turn my attention back to worshipping the Lord and away from myself. It’s easy for me to shift into performance mode when my focus is supposed to be on Jesus and what He has done for me.

You were made in the image of the almighty God, and this provides you with access to many Kingdom blessings that a great many believers never realize they’re entitled to. This power includes subduing the enemy. Out of everything God created, MAN was made to look like God and so that you could exercise dominion! Because we are products of God, He invested dominion, power, and control into you!

The devil does not respect you because of your position (authority), he respects you because of the POWER that backs you up. Power is not money. You can have money and not have power! Money is empty without the enforcement of power! There are three types of power:

political, financial, and spiritual. Spiritual power is superior to all! Many believers do not walk in authority though because they do not know how to walk in their identity as a child of God. God has given you DOMINION over EVERYTHING to exercise and TAKE CHARGE!

We often don't exercise or walk in this authority, because we don't know we CARRY IT!

***And in the synagogue there was a man, which had a spirit of an unclean devil, and cried out with a loud voice. Saying, let us alone, what have we do to with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? And Jesus rebuked him saying "Be quiet! Come out of the man," he ordered. At that, the demon threw the man to the floor as the crowd watched; then it came out of him without hurting him further. Amazed, the people exclaimed, "What authority and power this man's words possess! Even evil spirits obey him, and they flee at his command!" Luke 4:33-36***

Jesus said he gave us this same authority, *to use our words to cast out demons*, call upon the Holy Spirit, and change the atmosphere! Boldly proclaim: In the name of Jesus, come out! Without the power of the word of God backing you up you are like a barking dog!

One way Jesus did this when being tempted by Satan was to always begin his statements by saying "It is written." In Matthew Chapter 4, Satan tempted Jesus while he was fasting in the wilderness for forty days. Every time Satan challenged his authority, the Lord responded like this:

***"For it is written, people do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Matthew 4: 4.***

And later, when Satan asks Jesus to bow down and worship him in exchange for all the kingdoms of the world, Jesus says:

***"Get out of here Satan, for it is written, you must worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him."***

***Matthew 4:10***

You must be heavily grounded in the Word of God if you wish to access it to defeat the enemy and other situations that come up in life. Many people do not realize the power released when you speak the Gospel!

***"Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the intentions of the heart." Hebrews 4:12***

When there is no GOSPEL - THERE IS GOSSIP! Pay careful, careful attention to the words that come out of your mouth. You will not be able to cast out demons when filth comes out of your mouth, you will compromise your authority.

Your spiritual delivery is through deliverance.

**BELIEVE - BELIEVE - BELIEVE...and YOU WILL RECEIVE!**

There are times when I just don't want to identify as someone "in recovery" at all. I simply wish to exist as a person who doesn't live from the reality of having conquered an addiction and lived to tell about it. Most of the time though, the privilege of connecting with another recovering person around this reality of my life is just too powerful and compelling. I usually am led to find this thread I share with so many people.

This common bond makes it possible for me to connect with just about any person I meet on the street, in a store, at the Starbucks counter, in the gas station - wherever. I recently read a statistic that said about 50% of all people grew up in a home with at least one addicted parent. WOW! And even if there wasn't addiction, there's often some sort of dysfunction from mental illness, workaholicism, absenteeism, bullying at school, self-esteem or body image issues, and zillions of other things. The challenge becomes finding that link, sometimes like a needle in a haystack.

I recall a meeting with a client years ago who had grown up in the ghetto of Indianapolis, had been involved in a gang, didn't know his father, and had experienced many other traumas which had left permanent scars. Now, I haven't been involved in a gang. I grew up in a lower middle class family. My parents were indeed alcoholics, but I was never abused or severely neglected. Still, I quickly found a way to connect with this person. One of his first questions after taking a seat in my office was "have you ever struggled with an addiction?"

This query annoys my non-addicted colleagues to no end - and at certain places of employment I'd be reprimanded for sharing the answer. Instead, we were supposed to coyly deflect the question back to the client (something never lost on them - they are much smarter than we may give them credit for) and respond with, "Why is whether I'm in recovery or not important to you? How would knowing this impact our therapeutic relationship?" Or some such other B.S. In my experience, this only worked to make them angry that I was avoiding transparency about something that was truly important to them.

So when I was asked this, I responded with, "Yes, I was addicted to alcohol for 15 years. I was a blackout drunk and struggled with relapsing for about two years before I finally quit for good. I've been sober for X years now though. I did get out of it, and so can you."

Let me be clear - I never want to make a therapy session about ME. I may share tidbits that instill hope with the client, help to strengthen our alliance, or are relevant to a struggle they are having. Sometimes the Holy Spirit prompts me to disclose things about myself at a certain time. This is always done carefully and limited to just what is necessary.

After I told that gentleman I was indeed in recovery, his jaw just about dropped to the floor. He said "I can't believe you've been addicted! I never would have guessed."

He went on to tell me it was very important for him to have a counselor who understood what it was like to battle an addiction. This was very important information to know, because if we don't take a client's preferences into account, it is going to be very difficult for them to benefit from the counseling relationship.

The devil would love for us to forget the awesome authority the Lord grants us when we become His children. We can speak scriptures out loud in power and watch our circumstances change. We can rebuke the enemy and plead the transformational blood of Jesus over all situations. We can receive His promises in faith. And we can trust Him with our very lives. HE IS FAITHFUL!

The Bible tells us to "Seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness and all these things will be added unto you." Matthew 6:33, NIV. We will never go wrong when we put Him first. Remember to work on your vertical relationship with Jesus FIRST, and everything else in your life and circumstances will fall into place.

Maybe you've never invited Jesus to be the Lord of your life. "For we have all sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 6:23, NIV)." Jesus died to pay the price for our sin and to be a mediator between man and God. We must believe in Jesus and give our lives to

Him. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart God rose him from the dead, you will be saved.” Romans 10:9, NIV. If you believe in Jesus, your sins are forgiven and you will have eternal life. Start reading the Bible, join a Bible-based church, and get into a Bible study.

Be on the lookout for divine appointments, and follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

## ENCOUNTERING THE LIVING GOD

We serve a supernatural God, and his handiwork is everywhere. Unfortunately, often we are too blind or distracted to see what He may be trying to show us.

Like many people, many years of my life have been spent searching for God, asking for signs, or pleading with Him to ‘show Himself’ to me. Looking back, I could point out several occasions of divine intervention as well as times I can now see why something turned out the way it did. Not to mention, the countless times where I was offered unmistakable peace in the midst of a painful and trying season. Yet, I didn’t really see these as “signs from God” in the moment.

I have spoken throughout this booklet about the many times God’s presence and guiding have spared me serious harm or death. Throughout my fifteen years of alcohol addiction, He protected me from alcohol overdose, drunk driving accidents, injuring others, and harming myself while blacked out. During my first episode of sustained sobriety in 2000, He intervened when I was heading home on the freeway one night after work and a driver came speeding toward me, heading the wrong way in the northbound lane. My view was blocked by a bridge abutment, and I would have been directly in this car’s path had I not changed lanes for no apparent reason just a fraction of a second beforehand.

In 2003 when I was mightily trying to force my own agenda to move away from Duluth by sending out countless resume tapes of my work as a news reporter across the country, God kept me “stuck” (or so I thought at the time) by blocking my big break from happening. Little did I know, He had planned for me to meet my husband on 9-9-2003, and if I’d left town, that would never have happened, and my middle and youngest children would not be here.

In hindsight, I can recognize all these events now. But in 2013, I was still hungering for a real encounter with the Living God. I’d been seeking Him like never before, pressing in, fasting, praying, and attending a special prayer ministry. God had also led me to a program at church called “Learning to Hear the Voice of God” which went into detail about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. I had been vaguely aware of them, but didn’t understand the tremendous power waiting to be tapped. After completing the program, I was praying with a team of people a couple of weeks later, and they ironically (or so it seemed at the time) inquired about whether I’d like prayer to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit - including the gift of praying in tongues. I agreed, not really believing completely that I would experience anything transformative.

Nothing much happened right away. The team had instructed me to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit, and suggested that during my personal prayer time I might focus on receiving the gift of tongues while making some sounds with my mouth. I did not think about their words for the next couple of weeks, when I found myself alone in my office after a tough day at work. No one else was in the building. I was weary and exhausted, and bowed my head to pray at my desk. As I did so, I suddenly remembered the advice of the prayer team: “make some little baby noises with your mouth and invite the Spirit.” I started to do just that, saying “ahhhh...” in a low voice. Suddenly, my tongue began to roll and move and flow on its own. It transitioned from one syllable to the next - without any force or will of my own. I remember thinking, “it’s happening!” After sitting and listening to myself for a minute or so, another amazing thing happened. I began to feel a Holy presence enveloping me, almost like warm oil was being poured over my body. It was completely surreal. I understood in that moment that I was being filled with the Holy Spirit.

I don't know how it happens for other people, I have heard it can be very different. Some do not experience any physical experience, and I understand this is not necessary to be filled with the Spirit. I can only report my own experience.

I received my heavenly prayer language 7 years ago. I have continued to pray in the Spirit almost daily, but since then I have not encountered the Lord in such a powerful way. Yet I know He is with me. I am becoming less dependent on "evidence" and have learned to instead focus on faith.

He did this for me after a long trial and testing period, I believe as a way to tell me "It is finished" and also a promise of his ever-present help.

I saw a very dynamic pastor speaking at the Salvation Army the other evening. He began his sermon talking about Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble." (NIV) Then he said, "Do you have troubles?" And everyone raised their hands. Then his promise to us from the Word: "Well if you have troubles, you have an ever-present help!" AMEN!

This is what we need to remember. So often, we take our eyes off Jesus and focus on the storm which may be swirling around us. The temptation, the chaos, the events of the world - our own fears and projections become our reality, rather than the bedrock truth of the Bible: **YOU HAVE AN EVER-PRESENT HELP! AND HIS NAME IS JESUS!**

Nothing of this earth will ever satisfy you the way Jesus can. While you may not be able to trust other people, politicians, the economy, or even yourself - **YOU CAN TRUST HIM.** He will never fail you. You can trust that His plans for your life are good, so start letting Him run your life, and watch it transform.

I pray that this booklet has blessed you. Remember this: your focus should never be on the "problem" - whether that may be a drug addiction, your fears for the future, something else in your life that has snagged you - but rather on finding out **WHO YOU ARE** in Christ.

"Obviously, I'm not trying to win the approval of people but of God. If pleasing people were my goal, I would not be Christ's servant." Galatians 1:10 (NIV)

