

1981 - 1983

HOW I ALMOST LOST MY FAITH DUE TO THE INSENSITIVITY OF  
CHRISTIANS AROUND ME OR HOW OTHER CHRISTIANS KEPT A BROKEN  
REED SMOKING BY CUPS OF WATER OR LORD BE GENTLE

*"The Lord knows the way through the wilderness, all I have to do is follow---*a favorite chorus out of my childhood. My dad sang it at the top of his lungs as he walked through the house, done with his work for the day, headed for his bedroom to change into comfortable clothes.

It was all I could think when I got the news my mother had less than a year to live and I was in a new job outside of Chicago, my friends a long distance phone call away. I sat on the beige carpet of my bedroom, without a bed, without my dog (my arms ached to wrap around her neck) and prayed, "Lord, I've never been through this before. I don't know where I am. I don't know where to put the next step. Be gentle. Lord."

I'd talked to the doctor that day, calling him directly from work to get straight answers. He named precious organs the cancer was already attacking or would soon attack: lungs, brain, bones. He gave my mother nine months at most. "I told your parents they should get their will in order." I hung up the phone and went to a vacant office, shut the door.

My mother who cooked simple meals was walking out on me just as I was setting the table for us to sit down and talk, with so many things I wanted to ask her.

Finally we'd become interesting to each other. Just that summer she'd said she liked me as a person. My mother who told me to finish what I'd started was finishing her life just as I was starting mine.

A semi roared by outside. All I could think of were the grain trucks hauling corn out of the fields on the family farm. I wanted to be outside to find comfort in the privacy

the land offered. I could pray in a field and no one could hear something like the Spirit's intercessions with groans beyond words.

June opened the door. A widow, she was beautiful in middle age with jet black hair, green eyes. "What's wrong?" she asked. I did not know June. I had not earned her respect. When I was sitting at my desk in the open office, trying to concentrate, to pull down my thoughts from the blank air by speaking them out loud, she said I was a weird one. June mothered the office girls and that scared me. She wasn't my mother. I wanted my mother. I shook my head. "A boyfriend?" she asked. "I used the company phone to call my mother's doctor." "Why did you do that? He can afford to call you." I told her the prognosis. "I'm so sorry," June put her arms around me. I smelled the clean soap of her and sat very still.

I took the Kleenex June offered and went back to my desk. The rest of the day I typed and made a few calls. I sat in a job I'd never done before, a job the company never had before. Those two burdens of proof sat on my shoulders: to prove myself and prove to the company the public relations was worth my salary. I knew I could do publicity. In my gut I knew it. My bosses and co-workers weren't so sure. So I dug in and worked long hours to prove them wrong, using the terrible energy of grief.

That weekend I drove to Chicago to meet with a very important author who controlled his parents' books, books that would settle my new company firmly in the marketplace. Even as a brand new publicist, hardly a few weeks into the job, I'd heard the stories about Franky Schaeffer. He'd become legendary as a temperamental, difficult, demanding man. I'd heard how he could be kind one minute and insulting the next.

At dinner after the radio interview at WMBI, I sat with Franky and two of his colleagues at a restaurant I remembered from my college years that happened to be half torn down at the time. We walked through sawdust, past plywood walls to our booth. Contrary to rules of good business eating i.e. order something soft like an omelet, I ordered a half slab of ribs. I listened to the men talk about The Cause. As far as I could

figure it, The Cause was bringing The United States back to its status as a Christian nation. I wondered if it had ever been Christian and what gave these men the authority to define the rules for everyone else. I wondered where Christ was in The Cause. They talked about stopping abortion. It wasn't so much babies' lives or the mothers that I heard them talk about but rather something they called a slippery slope that would slap our society into something like Nazi Germany. It scared me. Franky scared me. He sounded like someone becoming what he fought against. The legends were right. He could switch from insult to kindness so fast the side of my face ached from a knot twisted in my neck. He could not believe I had to ask him how to use the company credit card, since I was the publicist for the company that would spearhead The Cause. My inexperience made him nervous. But he got gentle after I told him I'd just heard about my mother. I left the meeting frightened and sick.

I've only told you the beginning of the wilderness. That summer I wrote in my journal: *Thou shalt not have any graven images but the man on the gray stallion; but the man on the tractor; but the man in the three piece suit. I lift up my heart with a heave, a baled weight once grass and a good smell to the Lord. I lift it up, my back strained to the Lord. He catches twine from my fingers. Catches the skin with it. I lift it up to the Lord. It is meet. And right. But I can't give thanks.*

*Abraham had a place where he stood before the Lord. I used to lean against an apple tree beside barbed wire, looking along a cattle path at a television antenna on top of a hill.*

*Now I lean against a maple dresser and face a closet full of clothes that are the personalities I wear for the week. I sit and lift up my heart. I heave at sighs until I'm breathless, finally say, "Give me a place to stand." And having done all to stand.*

*So I run through the graveyard half a mile from my apartment. But a guard finds me running towards drunks. "Do me a favor," he says, "Go the other way." I run along stones where a Madonna looks as if she prays to monster jets landing at O'Hare. I look*

*for an image, but the Lord says nothing graven or clay.*

*I look for Christ in people. I look for a vein of quartz, rippled streaks of quartz in limestone caves. I look and stand back and hope He appears suddenly; quietly as a deer. I listen for his voice as I'd hear a hawk call in the background of the forest. Wind ripples leaves in sunlight. Christ plays on my surfaces like the sun. He plays with shadow. Like the wind He plays with my feelings. God been and gone. I look for a man.*

*I look until there is nothing left. Just the damp walls and the sick, sweet odor of wine poured out. Not even sleep can fill me. I don't run in the graveyard. The spirits are too rough. I'm too empty to block them out.*

*People push me like a pawn into dark squares while they tell me I should land on white. I lift up my heart.*

When my mother died I was blanketed by an incredible peace, almost as if my mother, her body and all, jumped out of the ground headed for Jesus the moment we set her coffin down into the dirt. It all felt more like a wedding than funeral. I wished for tears, but knew in my deepest heart that death was dead.

What can I say but it happened again with my father. A heart attack while he was getting ready for church. A heart attack while I was in Lynchburg, the second day of a three week author tour for the Schaeffers. My family said he died so quietly all they had to do was close his eyes. I'd just gotten back to my hotel from a meeting with the Schaeffers and Jerry Falwell about alternatives to abortion when I picked up the four messages to call my brother at my aunt's. I knew then my father was dead. My fingers stumbled over the numbers to call home.

The Schaeffers were good comfort. They'd seen it before. They knew what to pray about my brother and I, our future. I didn't get home until late the next day.

Because I didn't start to hurt until just before the Christian Booksellers Convention (CBA) that summer, six months after my father died, ten months after my

mother's death, the wilderness darkened, tangled around my legs. The pain eased into my soul as the numbness faded. I wanted to stick a gun down my throat. I said this to my girlfriend Pam. She said I was like a bicyclist who knew she was falling but hadn't hit the ground yet. She described the man she was the last to see leave a bar, the first to see dead by a shotgun blast to the mouth. It wasn't pretty. Pam pointed at a man riding a motorcycle and said, "He likes you, or he wouldn't have done that wheelie." Pam knew about men on motorcycles. She knew about pain.

Three weeks later I sobbed in a Dallas hotel room: "I don't want to be a Christian. Lord be gentle with me. I need you to hold me". Four times that CBA week I broke into this prayer. It felt like a stone floor. I could taste the stone.

I did not see any difference between activist Christians and the bikers Pam talked about. Christians talked in terms of sides to a battle, how their side was right, they were coming into power. Christians talked about how God would reform his church using accountability groups, and all I could think of was Mao's Red Book and small groups butting into other people's business. I saw people disciplined by gossip, not love.

Christians said that if a Christian didn't do something about abortion, they weren't Christian. They said the world needed to be confronted, popped in the face with its evil. And I wondered where was the kindness; where was the respect for the pain for those who walked in darkness; where was the humility, the Lord be-merciful-to-me-a-sinner stance?

I looked for someone to bear Christ to me. And I saw Christians walking over my living body to get to the authors I escorted. It was eerie to watch other Christian leaders pay homage to the Schaeffers as if they were gods. I felt the power swinging around me, and sex didn't hold a candle to its attraction.

Petty things stuck in me that week: a complaint I didn't bring a book to an interview; editors from other companies stealing our authors' time; no support from my colleagues; a boss angry that I couldn't smile at dinner. And big things like putting Dr.

Schaeffer on the plane, and his goodbye sounding just like my father's when I last saw him alive; the Schaeffers oblivious to my pain even though they'd been with me when I got the news my father died; the Schaeffers with their own pain--Dr. Schaeffer dying of cancer, working hard to save America from its reckless, ungodlike policies; my own church cliquish; and stuff back home--my brother and I fighting over the estate, relatives in so much pain they offered no comfort--all wore me down to the cry "I don't want to be a Christian, Lord be gentle with me".

The afternoon I returned to work and to Pam's advice I got on the back of a motorcycle and rode with a man. On a road between cornfields he warned, "I could rape you." "You won't," I said. But I asked him to make love to me even when he insisted we could be friends, he understood women like me saw lovemaking as holy. I was angry at God. I needed someone to belong to. I wanted a god I could see and hold that would wrap his arms around me, and I could feel his warmth. The man told me I'd be sorry if I let him drink a six pack of beer because then we would. I said no I wouldn't be sorry. We tried, I chose to make love, wilful, but my body shut down as if God really did put *truth in the inner parts; and taught wisdom in the inmost place.*

It was the best way I knew to separate myself from the militant, fundamentalist Christians around me. It was the best way I knew to shake my fist at God. And God brought a calm over me.

I perceived Him to say, *Now you can come back. You've done it. You've said what you needed to say. You don't have to be like the Schaeffers. I've called you to be Katie. I've called you to walk a road that's different than theirs.*

I've walked a long, odd road back, or has it been forward and through, in the years since then? Sometimes I feel swept by the nausea: *I don't want to be a Christian.* I look around at other Christians, at myself and wonder where the reality is, what difference does knowing Christ make? We're supposed to be converted; our lives changed by Jesus, that is what we present to the world. Where is that change? Where is the love that Jesus

said they'll know we are Christians by?

But I stand before you as a witness: God did not throw me away even though I shook my fist in His face, even though the man on the motorcycle was only at the beginning of sexually immoral behavior. God continued to bless my work, and He led me to people and words that brought healing. The immorality didn't stop, but the God who works all things (like stiff clay) together for good used that sin to drive me to get help. Soon after that I married a good man.

I've come to understand some things I didn't know right then. In a private conversation with Philip Yancey when I confessed this spiritual nausea, he drew from insight in Fearfully and Wonderfully Made by saying that people get sick, vomit when there is poison in their system.

In Madeleine L'Engle's book The Irrational Season I found I wasn't alone by being appalled by Christianity being made into a cause: *But I watch in horror as a great liberal, passionately interested in the cause of--shall we say--the leper, very carefully avoids speaking to the leper in his path, in order to get on with the cause. And it occurs to me that Jesus couldn't have cared less about the cause of the leper or the rights of the leper...Jesus stopped. And healed. And loved. Not causes, but people. If I see and rebel against activism in others, it is because I have had to see and rebel against it in myself.*

Six years later during Bible Study Fellowship I found that God did supply my need in the way Jesus promised when He sent the disciples on a missionary journey: *He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me...And if anyone gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.* (Matt. 10:40, 42. NIV) He sent many people, often the ones who didn't have a reputation for caring, who gave me cups of water, sometimes buckets over the head. There was Jutti the office manager at my company who sent secretarial support when I was overwhelmed by the clerical work required by my job and who went out to dinner with me every week. She listened, did not

condemn me when I struggled, and we prayed together. There were Ken and Katie Myers who put me up at their house the second weekend after my father died when I returned from the funeral to escort the Turners on their tour and needed people to listen to my rage. There was Pam who gave me the gift of her pain; who received mine and in that exchange we both healed. And "liberal" journalists who took my phone calls, gave my company the publicity, and helped me understand my place in christendom. I think of Rev. MacFarlane who once a month counselled me out of a stillness like the kind in *be still and know that I am God*. Others like these, like Jesus, who did not *break a bruised reed, or put out a smoldering wick*.

I kept alive by opening myself, sometimes just barely opening myself to Grace: Grace from reading scripture, sitting in silence before God feeling my anger well up like a fountain of dirty water to be cleansed by air and sun, receiving the people God sent, going to church even when it pricked my conscience, taking communion.

From my own pain, I know how important it is to be careful of others. Christians have pushed me towards grace. Christians have pushed me away. I remember C.S. Lewis's words from *A Weight of Glory*: *It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations.*

I have it in me to push someone closer or farther away from the Lord, so I remember forgiveness, I remember to forgive and to bless the people who have made the reality of Christ seem impossible; in the hopes that when I do the same for another, they will remember to forgive and bless me. And over all of us is the Cross and God's forgiveness and on the third day the killing of death, Love's ultimate, persistent victory.