



Stories We Live By

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“Like a flower that blooms whether someone sees it or not, we must strive for goodness and love whether it is seen or not because that is who we are by grace. When the road is long and our feet dirty, we must sometimes inevitably “go home”, tired, vulnerable, and worn out, to a place of acceptance and therein is grace, the spiritual understanding that we are more than our parts. And last, the open pomegranate Sometimes, when we are broken, open, and vulnerable, we are most beautiful.”

Artist: Inette Bruwer

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“Unseeing”

We need to “unsee”
what has held us back
in the past and
embrace things in a
new light.

Artist: Santie de Bruyn



Foreword



“When you think it is all over, that is exactly the moment when God starts something new.”

- Donna Sinclair and Christopher White (Emmaus Road)

Dear Sisters and Brothers

The theme for 2023 for the Diocese is: “Encourage and build each other up in love” (1 Thessalonians 5:11). We thought it fitting to launch the theme with the beginning of Lent, and to do so, we invited individuals in the Diocese and beyond, to share their stories of encouragement and to offer it to us as a source of inspiration and comfort. We decided to present the stories anonymously to protect writers’ privacy and cast focus on the story, not the person.

We are immensely indebted to each one who contributed a story and, in some instances, more than one. The result is this Lenten Booklet, titled: “The stories we live by” with the sub-title “Unseeing.”

As we embarked on this journey of the compilation of this Booklet, we were blessed with collaborators as companions. Here we need to mention by name Dr Thea Caroline Smith, a Clinical Psychologist who specialises in Relationship Counselling. She assisted with process planning and concept formulation; Lizaan Swanepoel, a Freelance writer and researcher, did the editing for us; and my Personal Assistant, Kim Maritz, did the design and layout. We are grateful to the artists Santie de Bruyn for the pottery image and Inette Bruwer for the three panels on the front cover.

It is my prayer that these stories will enrich the most spiritually weary traveller on their journey of faith. Every story speaks to the heart. You are invited to use them for reflection, meditation, and spiritual growth.

If you believe, as I do, that the story begins where the storyteller’s story ends, you will allow yourself plenty of soaking-in time after reading each of the stories. Open and read any story, and you may find your own story; dare to open your own story, and you are sure to find the real you; risk opening yourself, and wonder of wonders, you will find the presence of God. Some of the stories will make you stop, gasp, smile, or cry as you see yourself in the struggles and triumphs of other travellers. These stories are to be read slowly, and read again, a thought-filled companion to keep close as we sometimes shuffle and sometimes skip toward the eternal kingdom.

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I wish to offer for you, for your Lenten Journey, the following prayer by Rebecca Ruiz:



“Lord, come beside me, walk with me through Lent this year.
Come beside me, let me feel your presence, hear your voice.

Open the eyes of my heart,
Illuminate within it
Places of eternal Lent where
I have not permitted your Love entry.
Help me to open these places.
Root out that which needs to leave,
And make room for the joy of your Resurrection.
Open the eyes of my heart to see you
In those with whom I live and work and walk.

Come into those Golgothas,
Those broken places in me, in relationships with others, in the world around us,
In need of reconciliation,
And the healing of your Resurrection.
Open the eyes of my heart to see you
in those whose walk through Gethsemane is long.
Allow me to accompany you in them.
Remain with us, remind us, instil within us
The quiet confidence of hope in
The joy of your Resurrection.”

Grace and peace,

Your fellow traveller in Christ

+ Susan Kimberley & Kuruman

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Week 1



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A Mother Knows...

'A mother knows.' This saying only resonated with me after the birth of my younger son, Joshua. It was a fairly relaxed pregnancy, followed by an uneventful labour process. As she passed him to me, the words of the nurse still echo in my ear: 'Congratulations on your healthy baby boy.'

We went home. Joshua seldom slept. He did not eat, and he cried constantly. This meant that I did not eat or sleep. And so, I began to experience the reality of postpartum depression. The convulsions started when Joshua was about 18 months old. Multiple visits to the doctor's surgery later, the paediatrician's response became predictable: 'He is fine; just give it time.' ...But Joshua was not fine. He was visibly an unhappy child. On his fourth birthday, he was still unable to communicate with words... but it was not until the uncontrollable tantrums and the three-hour meltdowns started that I knew....

Society labelled Joshua as uncontrollable, disobedient, abrasive, and aggressive. Wrestling through something we did not understand had an exhausting effect on our family unit. Gregory and I decided to get a second, a third and a fourth medical opinion. Unlike many neurological disorders that can easily be detected and explained, autism is particularly difficult to diagnose because the baby does indeed look healthy. However, any neurological disorder has an impact on a person's behaviour. Naturally, babies have limited abilities to communicate, but for children on the autism spectrum, communication skills are even more restricted. Four years later, a diagnosis was finally made.

The neurologist confirmed that Joshua was on the autism spectrum with high sensory sensitivity.

This simply means that our world, as we know it, is an overwhelming place for him to live in. Joshua's sensory over-sensitivities include sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, which means that basically everything irritates him. Another shock to our reality was the high mortality rate for people on the spectrum. This is mainly attributed to their inability to sense or experience fear. At the time, this information made perfect sense to us, because, from a very young age, Joshua made several trips to the emergency room. He would cross a road without looking, pick up broken glass or simply jump from high structures without considering the consequences. Until this point, we could never understand his behaviour.

Needless to say, the prognosis was not favourable. Doctors were unsure whether he would ever be able to speak, write or learn. Joshua attended various schools, but communicating and socialising were always challenging. At the age of seven, Joshua walked onto a stage at his very first school prize-giving event. Gregory and I were sitting in the back, fearful of another unpredictable meltdown. And just like that, Joshua Clark Blaauw recited Psalm 61 without a script.

A Mother Knows...

It was at this moment that I knew that nothing is impossible with God. We could only watch and cry.

By God's grace, Joshua will turn 16 on 8 February 2023. When I count my blessings, I count him twice. His hobby is writing screenplays and performing them to any willing (and unwilling) audience. It was through his struggles that I have learned that desperate times can either drive us towards misery, ... or towards Jesus Christ. I have learned that in chaos and uncontrollable circumstances, He is our only peace. Jesus not only suffered for us, but He knows our pain. We can attest with conviction that God gives us the grace to walk through life's fiercest storms. I have learned that it really does take a village to raise a child. God sends people on our paths to help us carry the load....a supportive husband, a praying mother (thanks, Mom), patient siblings, and understanding teachers. But the greatest lesson I have learned is that no matter how seemingly hopeless, senseless or discouraging the circumstances, we remain unworthy beneficiaries of Jesus' redemptive work.

Yes, a mother surely knows, but a family that has been given the responsibility of raising a child with neurological challenges does not need to understand God's plan. We must maintain faith in His promises, believing that 'In all things, God works for the good

of those who love Him, who has been called according to His purpose.'

Allow me to conclude with a few verses from Psalm 61.

Psalm 61: 1-5

A psalm of David (and of Joshua)

*Hear my loud crying Oh God and listen to my prayer
From the ends of the earth, I called to You when my
heart grows faint*

Oh, set me on a rock that is higher than I.

*For You have been my refuge and my strong tower
against the enemy.*

*I will dwell in your tent forever and find shelter in the
covering of your wings.*

For you have heard my vows Oh God,

*You have granted the desire of those that fear your
name.*

When the picture changes

I embarked on a part-time Ministerial Course when my children were small. The face-to-face teaching for the course meant that we spent an evening every week, one weekend each month away from home, and a 10 Day Residential every summer. There was much reading and written work as well. When you have three young children (9, 7 and 3), this feels like quite a challenge! Richard was out at work all day, so every Tuesday, a group of teenagers from our Church came to give the children their tea and look after them. At weekends Richard and the children were often invited to eat with friends and church members. During the extended summer schools, the children enjoyed staying with their grandparents. My training was more than my offering to God – it was the offering of a community and a family.

In the final year of my training at one of the residential weekends, I experienced one of those moments of doubt that are so sharp that it feels as if there is no future in what you are doing. I don't remember what, if anything, triggered this – but I do remember how I described my feelings about it to a good friend and mentor. "Elizabeth," I said, "I feel as if I was just putting the final pieces into a complicated jigsaw puzzle when someone came along and tipped it onto the floor."

I could no longer see purpose in my Calling or my training. I no longer felt as if I was 'nearly there' on the road to Ordination but simply lost and in pieces.

This sense lasted for a month, and I approached the next residential weekend in fear and uncertainty. During each of our weekends, we had some free time, and I had planned to go for a walk with some close friends. It was my turn to help with the washing up, so I was late for the meeting place, and by the time I was ready, they were gone. The retreat house seemed empty – like me. I was angry and upset; I really didn't know what to do with myself. I wandered around the garden of the place we were staying in, came upon a row of small trees with a tree stump at the end, and sat down on the tree stump. I felt utterly alone. I honestly don't think I articulated any prayer – I wasn't conscious of praying except for the depths of despair that I felt; I had wasted my training. If this was not what God wanted, I had lied to myself and others, let down all those who had helped me and, perhaps, the worst fear of all – what would happen next? I was scared.

When the picture changes

Then I felt someone standing alongside me – a hand on my shoulder. I wasn't alone after all, and I experienced an extraordinary sense of warmth and light. I took a breath, gathered myself, and looked up to thank my companion. Yet there was no one to see, and still, I knew I wasn't alone. In that instant, I understood that Jesus stood alongside me and that my calling was true, not the doubt and despair I had felt.

I know that some people have a strong sense of Jesus alongside them often, but for me, this was not and is not a 'common experience' and, therefore, something I remember very clearly. When the friends with whom I should have walked returned, we rejoiced that I had found myself again. Even though this took place almost thirty years ago, I am aware of the importance of the companionship of those fellow students, and my mentor Elizabeth. They listened to my despair – they saw that my calling remained – but they did not lecture or tell me I was wrong; they simply accompanied me through the darkness, encouraging me to keep walking. In the end, Jesus came and walked with me. I was ordained twenty-eight years ago – something that would not have happened without the companionship of my family, community, mentor, and fellow students.

I have never forgotten the power of simple companionship and have since been privileged to enjoy it many times.



God is always by my side, through thick and thin

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

(2 Corinthians 12:9,10)

At some stage in our lives, we have all experienced "mountaintop and swamp/valley" encounters. "Mountaintop" experiences when we encountered happiness, success, prosperity, joy, and peace. Moments in our lives where we felt we were on top of the world. Things are going so well; we think it cannot get any better. During these times, we are happy and boisterously testify: The Lord is good to me.

"Swamp/valley" experiences signify those times in our lives when we felt life had turned its back on us. These are the times when our diet consists of tears, and we feel that everything is going wrong in our lives. Times when we felt that everything wrong and bad was happening to us. When we felt that God is not listening to us and that He has turned His back on us. These are times of endless tears, sadness, anger, resentment, humiliation, loneliness, and even depression and despair.

What makes the "swamp/valley" experience worse is that it is often caused by people close to us, like family, friends, colleagues, or brothers and sisters in Christ. Often when we go through these experiences, we have to struggle alone without real support. Instead, we are often humiliated and insulted even further.

I have had similar experiences in my own life many times. I can testify of glorious moments and days when I was privileged to experience success. I was ecstatic. I danced with joy, and my heart sang of happiness. Tears of gratitude rolled across my cheeks involuntarily, and in my heart, there I heard a whisper: Thank you, Lord...Thank you very much that You carry me...Your grace is enough for me.

However, there have also been days in my life when I stumbled through the swamps and valleys in my life. Days when I felt I would never get out of the mud; there would never be victory and change. I have experienced so much suffering and heartache in my life. I know what it is to be humiliated, abused, and rejected. I know the feeling of loneliness. I have felt this throughout my whole being.

God is always by my side, through thick and thin



Still, I can testify with absolute certainty that, during these times, God was always omnipresent. God was always there during those days when I experienced my most difficult situations. Sometimes it felt as if He had abandoned me, but He always came through for me in the end. Every time I was weak, hopeless, and tested, He carried me in a unique way. I will testify with Paul that God's grace was and is enough for me in all circumstances. I also know that whatever the future holds, whether it be "mountaintop" or "swamp/valley" experiences, I have Someone on my side who will never fail or leave me. He is there in all situations because His grace is enough for each and every one of us.

Prayer

Father, thank you that Your grace is always, in all circumstances, enough for us. Amen.

God is wherever you are

Whenever I open my wallet, I see a little card a friend gave to me about 15 years ago. The verse on it is Joshua 1:9 “Be strong, be courageous...because the Lord will be with you wherever you go.” This guy had a vision from God that he had to give all his possessions away, and he and his family had to do missionary work. He asked the Lord for guidance as to where he should go. He just saw a big white object in the dream or visions he had. Through internet searches, they discovered Mercy Ships (they are hospital ships which give various types of health care). Mercy Ships are big white ships (remember the big white object) which do missionary work. He contacted the ships, and surprisingly they told him that the morning they prayed for someone with his credentials as an engineer. They told him they felt so sure that someone would call.

He had never been at sea before. They tried to sell their stuff, but they just couldn't. In the dream, God told him to GIVE their stuff away. Eventually, that is what they did. This man who earned a good salary had to start depending on sponsors to provide for him and his family. On the ship, they slept in a room which they divided with a blanket between him and his wife and their three children.

He told me of one occasion of worship and prayer, the Holy Spirit moved in a way he had never seen. He found himself washing a black man's feet, weeping and asking for forgiveness. As he reflected afterwards, it came to him what he was taught in the army: When you see a black man, KILL! Upon his reflection, it also dawned on him that his hatred for black people was still embedded in his heart. That evening God cleansed him and set him free of that hatred.

How many of us would have done what he did...being obedient? It taught me that you must listen closely to God when he reveals something persistently to you. What people sometimes say to encourage you doesn't come close to when they share something they have experienced. Action speaks louder than words.

After he and his family came from the Mercy Ship, I was privileged to work with him on his first ship away from the mercy ships. He was broke, but not broken. When we shared and talked about God, he often had tears in his eyes. I asked him about the tears...and the response was that God is just so good. We prayed together every evening. One evening we discussed fasting.

God is wherever you are

At sea, this is probably one of the hardest things to do. For four days we only had water. We prayed every time we were together. What stood out was how content we were. Breaking the bread and giving each other communion was so special. It showed me once again that we serve a living God.

My friend died a few years ago, but he left me with the knowledge that God is wherever you go. Don't be afraid to tell and show people who your God is, and to be faithful to Him at all times.



Walk in faith, not by sight

Be kind, they say, you never know what someone is going through. For the longest time, I didn't truly understand the essence of this saying. My own experience of hardship and struggle compelled me to understand that everyone faces a different struggle and that not all our struggles are measured the same.

I know what it is to grow up in a home with a single parent; I've felt what loss feels like. I know depression and anxiety, but I promised to always find a way to work through it all. It's the practice of continuous faith and believing that God has a bigger plan for each of us.

Walking in faith and not by sight are the words I live by. Trusting that we all are put here on this earth for a divine purpose; to fulfil our destiny. That's why I encourage you to place your hand in God's hand so that he can guide you and keep you safe no matter the struggles you face because, with Him, there's always a way through the storm. I understand now that God is with us always; simply turn your face to Him.

Broken and Beautiful

Most of us have experienced a time when we felt less than, not enough...dare I say “broken.” I know I have experienced this feeling of brokenness in many forms, physically, emotionally, financially, mentally, and spiritually; sometimes one or the other, sometimes a combination.

During my coaching career, I had a client that carried so much hurt, unhealed childhood trauma that it had a ripple effect in his life: low self-confidence, diagnosed with anxiety and depression, underperforming in the workplace, not being able to verbalise emotions...and the list could go on. I saw this person’s potential, but they couldn’t see it; the fear was just too great. During our sessions, over time, the vulnerability started showing; the walls were coming down slowly, the tools he received during coaching were helping, and I could see his confidence grow. There was also feedback from the workplace that things were going much better. But something was still holding them back. My coaching supervisor suggested I share a story and do some reflection based on the story during our next session. Here is the story.

The cracked pot

An elderly Chinese woman completed a daily trek to the stream past her home and back to supply her family with fresh water.

In order to do this, she fashioned a heavy pot on each end of a long pole, which she carried across her shoulders.

One of the pots was in perfect condition and always delivered a full portion of water. The other had a deep crack in it, causing water to leak out. At the end of the long walk, the cracked pot arrived only half full.

This situation occurred daily for two years, with the woman bringing home only one and a half pots of water. Of course, the perfect pot was proud of its accomplishments. But the cracked pot was ashamed of its imperfection and miserable that it could only do half of what it had been made to do.

After two years of what it had perceived to be bitter failure, the cracked pot spoke to the woman by the stream. “I am ashamed,” it said. “This crack in my side causes water to leak out. You work so hard and yet have little water once you return home.”

The old woman smiled and replied, “Did you notice that there are flowers on your side of the path?”

Broken and Beautiful

I have always known about your flaw, so I planted flower seeds on your side of the path. Every day, while we walked back home, you watered those seeds and helped them to grow. For two years, I have been able to pick these beautiful flowers to decorate the table and give to neighbours. Without you being just the way you are, there would not have been this special beauty to grace our homes and lives."

I sat and watched as they read the story and saw the tears start building.

Sometimes, the "cracks," or what we perceive as imperfections, create something unexpected and beautiful. Each of us has our own unique flaws. You may think that, like the cracked pot, you are inefficient or useless in certain ways, but these flaws can turn out to be blessings.

Kintsugi is the Japanese art of putting broken pottery pieces back together with gold. It is built on the idea that you can create an even stronger, more beautiful piece of art by embracing flaws and imperfections. Because of my own brokenness, my "cracks", I could relate to my client, and help them heal, putting their pieces back together.



Our cracks enable us to be more accepting of others' shortcomings and to have more empathy and understanding of their life journeys, allowing us to support and assist them in healing and embracing their "cracks."

We're all cracked pots, but God gives us gold in many forms to put ourselves back together.

A reflection from the Jesuit Institute:

"Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not "How can we hide our wounds, so we don't have to be embarrassed," but "How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?" When our wounds cease to be a source of shame and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers."

Broken and Beautiful

The leper who was healed and came back to thank Jesus is sent on by him – “Get up and go on your way. Your faith has made you well.” (Luke 17:19). Out of the empathy and compassion born of his own experience of suffering and social isolation he is now able to go out and to be a source of healing for others.

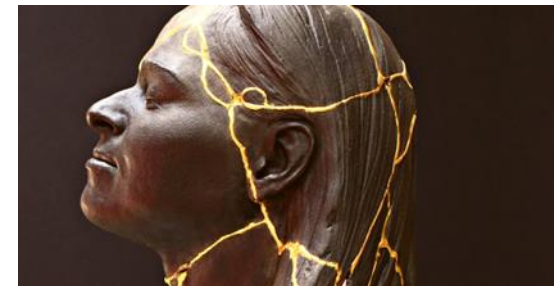
We suffer from many wounds in life—physical suffering, addictions, depression, anxiety... We may suffer the scars of experiences like grief, divorce, abortion, or exclusion because of our race, gender, or sexual orientation. All too often, we are ashamed of our wounds instead of seeing that as we journey with Christ and find healing, our wounds may become a source of grace for others who are struggling.

The experience of our woundedness gifts us with compassion and understanding of the sufferings and frailties of others. We have known our own needs and dependence on God and others, which gives us humility in accompanying others on their journeys of suffering. Our woundedness takes away our arrogance and judgement, and we become safe harbours for others in the storms of their own lives.

So often, the experience of having lived through something painful helps us to be present for someone else struggling in a similar situation and to understand at a depth that we would not have otherwise been able to.

Being a wounded healer is part of what God calls us to do. Healing from our wounds is never about us alone. Instead, it equips us to minister to others. In this, there is an experience of redemption for our suffering. Though painful (and its scars always remain), our wounds can now become a source of life and hope for others.

What are the wounds in your life that God has healed and made you a wounded healer for others?



A Story of Faithfulness

This story is about a little girl who never had too many playmates or play dates but spent her days with her “best friend”. Him, she could not see, she could not hear, but He was someone she always felt. Of course, her grandmother gave her a big thick book with wonderful pictures and stories that happened many, many years ago. The little girl’s friend was the main character. Innocence is such a wonderful thing; the little girl never wondered how her friend could still be alive.

As she grew older, she walked the journey of life; there were many confusing and troublesome moments. In each, she found solace in her best friend. She could always talk to him, and even though he never answered her, she felt that he was there. The older she grew, the more she began to understand his story. He that had created so much; also created her. She would ask him sometimes, why did you give me this or that, and why did you let that happen? Almost scolding. She never ever feared him; in fact, talking to him felt like the most natural thing on earth.

One year she was to be confirmed in the church. It was supposed to be a joyful event. She was excited. But this decision caused a break in her family. This confused her, but she had no doubt; this was her path. The week it was to take place...a terrible tragedy! Her family home burnt down.

She was so confused. She asked her friend: How could you let this happen?! She wondered whether he was trying to tell her not to do the confirmation or wait until the family was mended and stronger. As she watched the firemen carry out the soiled furniture and the burnt coils of the bed she slept on, she noticed something lying in the ashes on the floor. It was a bookmark she had received in class; it had a Winnie the pooh picture on it, it was laminated in plastic, and it was just lying there in the ashes...It had not one single flame mark, not an inch of scorched plastic; it was perfect. The message read: God is always with you.

The girl, for the first time in her life, saw her best friend and heard her best friend. Her heart filled with joy. Her eyes filled with tears. God was telling her that He would always be with her. The girl never doubted her path in life again. She also never wavered in her loyalty to and trust in God.

Today, the little girl is a woman who lives her life in complete faithfulness to her best friend.

God answers even the simplest prayers

I gave this much thought but could not decide which one story to share. I prayed and asked for clarity about which story would be the best to communicate. It then came to me that I should relate a few practical and ordinary experiences that impacted my life and may bring hope to others. These stories are examples of how God came through for me, like a thread weaved into my life and the challenges I faced.

The first real crisis in my life came when my children were small and I had to get out of a very bad and abusive marriage. I did not have the financial means to afford an apartment, and my work required me to be away from my children for some days and nights. My parents would look after them during these times. It seemed like an ideal solution when an apartment became available in the same building. The only catch was that I could not afford the rent at that stage, which was R1500 per month. I prayed for an answer and a miracle, as there was only one week left for me to sign the contract for this apartment, and I had not managed to find any other suitable housing either. On Monday, I went to work and received an e-mail from my employer. The company I worked for had made a mistake with my salary adjustment when I was appointed in my new position, and they would give me back pay and a salary increase. The amount per month with which my salary was to

be increased was R1523, the exact amount I needed for the apartment. A coincidence, some might argue, but I know this was my Heavenly Father providing for me the exact amount I then needed.

My mother always believed in the strength of prayer and said nothing was too small or insignificant to pray for and leave at the feet of Jesus.

The second testimony is about my cancer journey. In December 2017, I went for a routine mammogram, and it was found that I had HER2-positive breast cancer which was very aggressive. I had to undergo radical breast surgery and chemo and Herceptin treatment. This was devastating news, and the treatment was very expensive. Each year in November, we have the option to choose if we want to stay on the same medical plan or change to another option. I completed the forms and decided to change to a lower plan which would be less expensive. I had to submit this form by the 30th of November, 2017. Every time I tried to submit the forms, the system did not allow them to go through. By the end of business that day, I had not managed to submit the forms on time.

God answers even the simplest prayers

You may ask why I am sharing this seemingly irrelevant information concerning receiving the devastating news and having cancer... After the surgery, I had to go for chemo and then start with the Herceptin treatment. Eighteen of them. The oncologist informed me that should I have had any other medical plan and option, I would not have been able to receive the full treatment. Herceptin is a life-saving treatment for HER2-positive breast cancer patients.

Again this was a Godly intervention. I was determined to change my medical plan and only realised the miracle and Grace of God when I sat down with the oncologist that day to discuss the treatment.

My cancer journey was not easy, but I had a lot of friends and family that prayed for my recovery and to be in remission. People from different churches would come and pray for me. Neighbours who were retired pastors added me to their cell group prayer list and even took me to meetings, making my vulnerable and often desperate soul persevere in trusting God.

I have been in remission since April 2019.

During my recovery, I was invited by the charity Reach for Recovery to attend a morning tea made possible by another

charity, Look Good, Feel Better. Not really in high spirits and looking terrible with no hair or eyebrows, it took some doing to attend. The previous night I looked in the mirror and cried because I had bags under my eyes, and the hair loss made me look like an alien. I prayed and said, "Dear Lord, I know that I am so vain by asking this, but please make me accept my appearance and the fact that there is no money for something as frivolous as eye cream."

These ladies do wonderful work as they also teach people how to cope with the change in appearance and give useful tips for looking better during chemo. They get sponsors and then give every lady attending their events a goodie bag with products to lift their spirits. When I got to the event, we had a beautiful place setting, and in front of each plate, there was a cosmetic bag for every patient. I opened my bag and started to cry... The first item I took out of the bag was a very expensive eye cream. When the people asked me about all the tears, I could give testimony that God even listened to my prayer about being vain and needing eye cream.

God answers even the simplest prayers

My last story is as recent as December 2022. My son had a very bad motorcycle accident and suffered a traumatic brain injury in 2013. After many years of rehab and trying to allow him to live in a normal environment and have a job, it became evident that I had to look for an alternative solution. Again my friends and family prayed for a solution and spiritual support for my son and me.

I found a suitable place, and then it was a question of making this possible as the facility near Cape Town is only one of three places in the country that caters for mentally challenged people who did not have a defect from birth. It is also more expensive than what I paid for his little garden flat and living expenses. Also, making the decision to let him go and stay there was a difficult one as I had exhausted many options to keep him independent and live a meaningful life.

While completing the forms, trying to make my budget work, and finding peace with the overwhelming decision I had to make, I was in a bad spiritual space and exhausted from having to make this important decision. I doubted my judgement, and as I am the only living parent, every decision is mine alone. I do not have another parent to support my plan and motivate me that this was indeed a good decision. So, tearfully I cried and desperately poured out my heart to God and asked for a

clear sign that I was doing the right thing for my son.

The next morning very early, I received a phone call from an unknown number. Usually I ignore these calls with all the marketing and spam calls going around. Yet this day I decided to answer. On the other side was my son's previous employer, and also a member of the church my son attends. He told me that they were aware of my plan to take my son to Camphill Village and that they had decided the previous night during a meeting of church elders that they would pay 50% of the costs for the next six months.

I was speechless, and again I praised the Lord for answering my prayers, for the sign I needed, and for the money to make my burden light.

So please, when you read my stories, know that I am an ordinary person with many flaws and maybe even fewer challenges than others. But I know that God promised never to forsake His children, and I can give many more examples of this from my own life. Never lose faith, and always keep on praying; God does answer. God loves us and will provide even when we do not know how we will make it.

Hope turns into a miracle

Is there really something like a miracle? Are miracles alive today? Do miracles happen to everyday people? And can we still hold on to hope in this skewed world we live in today?

YES! One thousand times, Yes! I believe this with my whole being. How do I know? I KNOW because I have experienced it so many times in my own life. Whenever I feel hopeless or devastated, God has ALWAYS sent an angel to comfort me and teach me wonderful and precious lessons.

On 13 January 2020, our beautiful granddaughter was born...a perfect little princess. She immediately became our bundle of pride and joy and was instantly the Love of her dad's heart.

However, six weeks later, she was diagnosed with a very rare disease involving the frontal lobes of her brain. My son phoned me, stunned and devastated by this shocking news. The doctors sketched a very bleak and scary picture...all doom and gloom. They said she would never leave her cot; that she would be paralysed and spastic; and a whole lot of awful, incomprehensible things.

My son, always so in control, phoned me the day they received the news and cried like a baby. He was stunned and heartbroken.

To hear my son like that nearly broke my heart. I knew he had phoned me because he needed words of hope and comfort from me, but for once in my life, I was speechless and could only cry with him. As I was holding the phone, the angel God wanted to comfort both of us, took the phone from my hand and started speaking to my son. She has worked for me for the past 20 years and watched my children grow up in front of her. "Ouboetie!" she calmly but very passionately called his name. She continued gently: "Listen to me, Ouboetie, you do NOT believe what those doctors said. GOD AND GOD ALONE formed that little baby girl in her mom's womb, and He WILL take care of her...ONLY GOD can Tell. Please believe this". I was so grateful to her for comforting my child.

That night was the worst of my life up to that point...I cried and prayed and doubted. I felt so broken because my children and grandchildren are my EVERYTHING!!! Could there really be hope for our little girl? Would we as a family be able to live with this and help her to live the best life she could? But with the dawn of each day, God's Grace is NEW. I got up and promised God that I WILL KEEP ON PRAYING FOR A MIRACLE.

Hope turns into a miracle

I immediately contacted everyone in my prayer circle and asked them to pray with me because I knew God had a WONDERFUL Plan for our little girl's life.

God touched this little girl's mother in a mysterious and magnificent way; it was like she knew EXACTLY what to do to help our little girl during her pregnancy. She never gave up, continuing to believe that our baby would be okay. I KNOW this was God keeping her and giving her insight into our little girl's special needs.

Our little princess turned three just a few weeks ago. She is a stunning, lively, intelligent little girl, born to laugh and enjoy life. She faces some obstacles but tackles them with a smile and zest for life. She leads an everyday, normal life - whatever "normal" means to the world. She started to walk recently and never gives up trying. She is one of the greatest Blessings in our lives.

I will never forget Mieta's words to my son: "ONLY GOD KNOWS...He Formed her". Those words continue to give me hope. GOD is STILL our Rock, Protector, and Hope during our darkest time. God is still the One who turns our Hope into Miracles. Now, more than ever before, I KNOW this.

Because of our Loving Heavenly Father and the hope he continuously keeps alive in me, I can face tomorrow!



Week 2

Somebody to Lean On

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the
broken](#)

[She never
gave up
on me](#)

[One
person can
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[God sent
an angel to
restore my
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[People
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[My personal
mentor and the
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inspired me](#)

[Tap into
sources of
encourage
ment](#)



Restoring the broken

Many years ago, while I was a student, I met and fell in love with a beautiful, intelligent, caring and loving young lady. We got married after a few years, acquired a comfortable family home, and were blessed with two beautiful children. We both succeeded in our respective professions and were soon promoted to senior positions. Our kids were healthy, excelled at school, and we were a happy family. Like most people at the time, we were living the proverbial “New South African dream.”

A few years later, my wife suddenly fell ill and died. This was devastating to us as a family. Our once stable lives had been turned upside down. The picture of a once-happy family had been destroyed. The kids were totally shattered. I had no words to console them. I felt totally useless as a parent - unable to alleviate the terrible pain my children were enduring. I felt completely hopeless whenever I looked at our two broken souls. The spark that once radiated from their happy eyes was gone...How this sight broke my heart into a thousand pieces. I think the worst pain any parent can experience is seeing their own flesh and blood suffering and not being able to take away the pain. Our kids asked me how God could allow their mom, my wife, to be taken away from them when they still needed her so much.

I was equally sad, I was broken, I was confused, I was angry and felt cheated. I reasoned that I had always tried to be faithful to God and serve Him to the best of my ability. I attended church regularly and always took my church duties seriously. I did not see this coming – I usually plan everything. According to my human and worldly reasoning, I had statistically worked out that I would probably die before my wife, probably at the age of approximately 70 and that my family would be okay. Being widowed and a single parent at a relatively young age was never part of my plan. This is not what I signed up for.

In my misguided anger, I asked God many questions. I asked Him which God takes away a healthy, loving mother and wife. If He was a God of love, how could He allow such a terrible thing to happen? We had so many plans – so many dreams. I often wished that He had taken the three of us along with her. Yes, I was mad at God, for no child should grow up without a mother. I found it impossible to pray – the only prayer I managed to say was, “Lord, have mercy.” I continued to attend mass, despite my state of disappointment and confusion.

Restoring the broken

After the funeral, most friends and family gradually disappeared, and visits to our once happy and noisy home ceased. Invitations from our family friends also became less. This is normal and happens for three reasons, 1, people need to get on with their own lives; 2, people generally do not know how to deal with such uncomfortable situations; and 3, this is your pain, and you must deal with it on your own.

Mercifully, not everyone deserted us. Our close family, a few friends, parishioners and our then parish priest remained by our sides. Our priest prayed for us and regularly sent WhatsApp messages to check on us. Parishioners showed genuine concern by always asking after the well-being of the children – these acts of love meant a lot to us. Our close family paid us regular visits, had chats with the children, came around occasionally and took the kids for a quick ice cream. They also spoiled us with delicious meals. My siblings and their families living far away adjusted their holiday plans to coincide with the reopening of schools to help me organise the kids. They kept a close eye on me and stepped in whenever they suspected we were not coping.

Occasionally, some friends would pop in, just for five minutes, sav a prayer for us, and be off again.

It always seemed as if these prayers came at just the right time. Friends would send messages whenever there was a birthday, or just to remind us that we were in their thoughts and prayers. But there were these special friends of ours who really carried us. They did not only speak words of comfort, but their actions showed that they cared sincerely. They remained silent but present, navigating that tricky path of trying to be close to us without being intrusive. They extended invitations to join them on outings but also allowed us the option of declining if we were not up to it. They would regularly call to check whether we were coping. They offered to drive the kids to school if my work commitments became too much. They brought us meals. They spent time with us and supported us whenever there were special occasions to be arranged, such as the first day of school, matric dances, etc. They remembered our birthdays and always made them special for us, be it with balloons or some humour. They would step in whenever one of us fell ill – offering to take us to the doctor, collect medication, offering to mow the lawn, and assist with maintenance around the house. In short, my close family and friends

Restoring the broken

inconvenienced themselves and their structured lives to help us. I came to realise that If you really want to help someone, there is no opportune time; it is always inconvenient – that is what genuine help asks of us.

I was still angry with God, and one Sunday in church, the Gospel reading was about something to the effect of “why should bad or painful things only happen to other people and not to us.” I do not know the precise piece of scripture. This helped to place my situation in a spiritual perspective and assisted my healing. These acts of kindness further encouraged me and made me realise that angels are indeed placed on this earth to help the weak and vulnerable. I was always fond of traditional Anglican hymns. I was particularly intrigued by the skilful way the words were strung together. The words of the hymns, The Lord is my shepherd, Guide me oh thy great Redeemer, What a friend we have in Jesus, and others suddenly came to life and served as a tool for me to navigate these uncharted waters. I also realised how helpful it is to belong to a church because they become family when you are down and out.

With the support of friends, family and God, we have come a long way since my wife’s passing. I know that we could not have done it alone.

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Remember the story of “Footprints in the sand”? We could not have done it without our Maker – the help, support, prayers and love He provided us through His angels (our family, friends, priest, and parishioners). Today, those two broken souls are less broken, all grown up, successful and occupying positions far away from home. I still miss my wife; her absence is ever present; I miss the noise, I miss the smells of delicious food permeating from the kitchen, I miss the chats we had, I miss the companionship, I miss the support, I miss my family, I miss the life we had.

Despite all this, I can boldly say that my faith in humankind has been restored. I will never forget all the people who prayed for us, sent us messages, helped us, and had our backs. I pray that God will grant me the opportunity to pay these favours forward someday. I pray that I will remain close to my God until I take my last breath here on earth and never forget what He has done for us. “Oh, Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end...”

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She never gave up on me

My husband and I had been married for five years and did not have any children. But, like any other married woman, I also yearned to have a baby.

Our previous bishop's wife encouraged me to continue my teaching studies to distract my thoughts from wanting to have children. I was reluctant because I would be on my own, and I wondered, "How can a married woman of 27 years be a student?" I did not want to do it. Our bishop's wife continued to encourage me and list all the advantages. After a few months, she brought up the subject again, and I continued to refuse, citing every possible excuse I could think of.

One day she called me and said, "I have paid your registration fees. You can fetch the receipt from me". I was so angry, but she did not give up. Instead, she tried to encourage me even further by sourcing textbooks from other students. After that, there was no turning back. She continued to ask about my progress, showed much interest, and reminded me regularly that I just had to focus on my studies and trust in God to answer my prayers.

By the grace of God and through her encouragement, I was able to complete my studies successfully... AND fall pregnant with our first baby. Our second child was born a few years later. After 30 years of teaching, I retired in good health a few years ago. I thank her where she rests in peace, that she was a blessing and encouragement to me. May her soul rest in peace.



One person can make a difference

During my faith journey, I encountered a time when I did not feel close to God. It was a very painful and difficult experience for me. I felt distant from God, wondering whether life was worthwhile. I felt lonely and disconnected from others and disconnected from God. I questioned my love and faith in God. I questioned my beliefs from time to time. I questioned the existence of God in my life. I was so confused. I was asking myself so many questions... Are His ears closed to my prayers? Is it really necessary for me to pray? I started to doubt my leadership skills, and I ended up losing confidence in my own abilities. I was lost and without direction, doubtful whether I'd made the right choices in the past. Many times, I felt completely discouraged.

One person supported and encouraged me during this uncertain time. She once said using lectionary is a discipline and rule of life. A routine you need and should never break. She said, "don't allow yourself to be in a toxic relationship with your God. Keep it going, simple and genuine. God knows your heart when words are not there." She continuously prayed for me and with me. Her prayers and support helped me regain my confidence in myself and my faith in God.

God sent an angel to restore my faith

There was a time in my life when I hit a brick wall to the point where I questioned my faith and God Himself. It was way too much for me to handle on my own.

During that difficult time, I was blessed with an Angel that encouraged me. At that point, I was on the verge of giving up. But God Himself sent an Angel that helped me through those times. She simply reminded me that God created me for a purpose, and she held my hand and walked with me throughout this journey, and I never looked back.

I won't forget how she held my hand every step of the way and, most importantly, her words of encouragement and being there for me still every time I need her.

People who carry me

Some of the people who have encouraged me will never know that they've done it – the person who offers a cheerful “Hello, it's good to see you” or a cup of tea just when I'm stressed. It's who they are, and they think nothing of it. But it means the world to someone who needs it. Acts of kindness can have an impact far greater than what people think they are offering.

Then there is the friend who always seems to know from afar when I need a word – into WhatsApp pings a message of hope, a favourite Scripture verse, a reminder of God's love. “How did you know?” I say, given new energy and hope. “God is good,” they respond. I thank them and ask myself: have I been as open to promptings from others and letting someone know I'm thinking of them?

And then there have been the times of deeper pain when unhelpful thoughts, words and deeds – my own or those of others – left me confused and upset. The world seemed distorted, as my sense of being accepted and sustained by God, the centre without which nothing has a place, wavered.

At those moments, I was held by people who took my pain seriously and made three things clear – that they loved me,

that God loved me, and that they were prepared to hold me in God's love at a time when I was struggling to perceive that love for myself. They may have comforted me during my faith struggles and given honest insights or sage advice. Or they may have used no words at all, simply offering to carry my burdens to God in prayer, not asking me to explain what I could not explain, not suggesting that I was condemned for having doubts or concerns or trying to solve situations for me. Their confidence in God's love, their love, and their willingness to accept my burden enfolded me. Gradually, I could be open to a deeper knowledge of God and the extent of God's love and forgiveness. Thanks be to God for these people.

My personal mentor and the person who inspired me

'There goes a man - a great of a man - although not physically but spiritually a great man'.

Gentle, kind-hearted, 'wise as a serpent, yet as humble as a dove'. I can pour one accolade upon another regarding the Late Canon Williams Peters.

He was indeed my personal mentor and spiritual father during his lifetime. William Peters was a true source of inspiration and motivation for me, especially when I entered the priesthood ministry. I often visited him when he retired as a priest and during his many years of pastoral and priestly ministry and sought guidance and advice from him.

He always encouraged me and gave sound advice, often in difficult situations within the ministry. At one such time, I was asked by one of our Bishops to assist a certain place within our Diocese where we had encountered various difficulties. William Peters informed me about a vacancy within another Diocese. I was hesitant to give it a go, as I felt I was abandoning our Diocese.

Canon William encouraged me to give this opportunity a chance, so I did after much thought and prayer. I was then accepted to minister at this specific Parish, which was also going through many difficulties at that point.

This became a blessing for both the Parish and me, as through the grace of God and the encouragement and leadership of Canon William, I was able to uplift this Parish once again.

Thus, the late William Peters had personally been my encouragement, as a young man, especially in the sphere and field of my ministry as an Anglican Priest; he embodied for me the saying that "we must be our brothers' / sisters' keeper."

Tap into sources of encouragement

A clergy friend of mine said he often felt like an old water pump ... Everyone who came to him for help would pump a few times vigorously, and each time he felt something drain out of him. Ultimately, he reached a place of spiritual emptiness, with nothing more to give. He felt dry, parched.

Every time my friend found himself in a place like this, he would go and see his spiritual director. He would expect her to offer soothing words about what a sacrificial, unselfish person he was or perhaps recommend a rest period. Instead, she said there is only one thing to do if your reservoir runs dry; you have to go deeper. Each time he would leave his spiritual director convinced that his faith depended less on his outer journey of life and ministry than on his inner journey toward spiritual depth.

What wonderful sources and gifts of encouragement was my friend blessed with? A spiritual director that kindly offered him encouragement by giving him honest counsel and sound spiritual direction. He could also draw on Scripture for

inspiration, guidance, and strength. Over the years, he also built up a deep inner resilience of faith upon which he could draw.

The prophet Jeremiah writes of a bush that sets its roots in parched desert soil. In times of rainfall and abundance, the plant flourishes, but during drought, its shallow roots shrivel and die. Jeremiah draws a contrast to the one who lives in faith:

*... blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord,
whose confidence in God.*

*He will be like a tree planted by the water
that sends out its roots by the stream.*

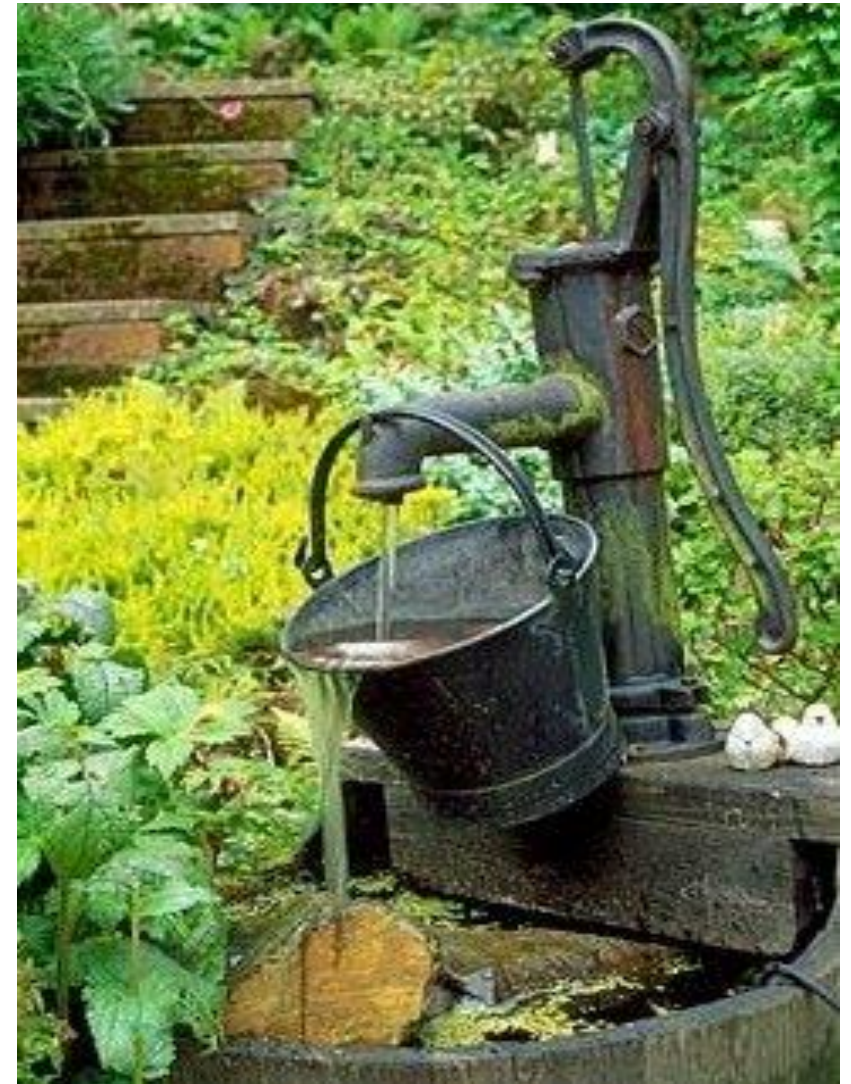
It does not fear when heat comes;

its leaves are always green.

*It has no worries in a year of drought
and never fails to bear fruit.*

Tap into sources of encouragement

Scripture makes no rosy promises about living only in springtime. Instead, it points toward faith that helps us to prepare for arid seasons. Harsh winters will come, followed by scorching summers. Yet if the roots of faith go deep enough, tapping into the Living Water and sources of encouragement, we can survive the drought times and flourish in times of plenty.



Week 3

Somebody to Lean On ...Continued

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and build
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Encourage one another and build each other up

It is said that it takes a village to raise a child. As I reflect on my faith journey and my expeditions as a woman of faith, wife, mother, sister, daughter, friend, and ordained priest, the words from St Paul to the Thessalonians, “Encourage one another and build each other up”, have sincere meaning for me.

I have always enjoyed the support of my nuclear family while I was in the early stages of formation and, in later years, the support of my spouse and children. Over the years, there have been times when I cannot be at family gatherings or school events, and this often causes us sadness and disappointment. I now only ever get to bring a dessert to our family gatherings (because I can always just pop in at Pick ‘n Pay to buy some ice cream as a last resort), and my spouse is the one who mostly attends prize-giving and eisteddfods. He is often referred to as the Revd’s husband!

My ordination meander was a combination of trials regarding my gender and age. After completing my theology degree at the age of 23 and having been in the fellowship of vocation programme, I naively presented myself to be ordained. I was told that I needed to experience life and live a little, so I connected with my chaplain from school days, who had immigrated to the USA. I said, “They don’t want me; they think I’m too young!” He said, “Get on a plane and come to the USA.”

There he arranged for me to enrol in a Clinical Pastoral Education Course while serving as an intern at the church where he was rector. I managed to travel a bit and found my way to the Episcopal Divinity School, where I interviewed for a master’s programme. On my return to my home away from home, Archbishop Njongo Ndungane was having some rooibos tea while sitting at the kitchen table. “And what are you doing here?” he asked.

Arch Njongo provided a sterling endorsement for the application at EDS, and I was offered a place. On receiving the news, the arch practised his episcopal authority and called me home, citing that I would never return to SA and the diocese if I continued to study in the US. So, I returned to Cape Town to a newly created position at Bishops court called Intern to the Archbishop. Well, you can well imagine how that went down! “How does this little brat manage to get a position like that” were some of the rumblings that made it to my ears!

My time at Bishops court and the PEO’s (Provincial Executive Officer) office proved to be invaluable as I was given opportunities to learn more about the

Encourage one another and build each other up

Province of Southern Africa. Canon Luke Pato, then the PEO and now the retired Bishop of Namibia, always encouraged me to read more widely and to ensure that I knew what was going on in the Anglican Communion. Mrs Gail Allen, the PEO Administrator, helped shape whom I would become as a priest, wife, and mother. It was from her that I learnt to juggle my own life and those of my children while being available to God's people. I learnt how to prepare for the Provincial Synod and Synod of Bishops and to assist in research for the archbishop's sermons and addresses.

My regional bishop and my spiritual director kept a careful and loving eye on me while I had to re-enter the fellowship of vocation. I felt this was just another way that the powers that be were controlling my future in the Church, but these wise men helped me focus on my calling rather than the negative attitudes that I felt were stumbling blocks.

In the meantime, I registered for a master's programme at Stellenbosch University and was placed at St Michael's in Khayelitsha with Revd Rachel Mash to learn isiXhosa and to spend time observing her in her family life and church life; after all, I was going to be the priest and not my spouse.

Moruti Wilma Jakobson, who was one of the first female priests ordained in the diocese of CT, had already left SA for the USA. Still, her influence and encouragement during my days in the Anglican Students Federation cannot be measured, and I will forever be grateful to her for her continued friendship.

The race for marriage and ordination took place in 2004. My bishop took me aside and very quietly stated that it would make sense for me to be married before my ordination - in that way, my first placement would have to take into consideration where my husband's place of work was. Our marriage was quickly arranged to take place in September 2004, and I was ordained deacon in December 2004. Statistically, the youngest female priest of colour in the Diocese of Cape Town!

There are so many people whom I must thank today for allowing me to stand on their shoulders. Archbishops, bishops, the late Dean Rowan Smith, male and female clergy, my very good friend Canon Delene Mark and especially my training rector, Revd Mike Keggie.

Encourage one another and build each other up

The woman clergy monthly lunch gathering is a safe space for me, and I honour my friends and colleagues who make this meeting happen each month.

I have learnt over these 18 years that being a faithful follower of Jesus is not a popular thing to do and that having people around you who build and surround you like scaffolding is vital for your holistic well-being. The very people whom I have grown to trust and appreciate to surround me are also the people who will hold me accountable and call me out when I am not being faithful to whom I am called to be. They are the people with whom I can have difficult conversations and with whom I have learnt to disagree well. This is the beloved community that we all should strive for and long for. My journey is far from complete. "I am because we are.... umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu"



God always shows up

Our faith gets tested in a multitude of ways throughout the course of our lives. But this is part of the beauty of being Christians because we are often reminded of God's faithfulness when we get tested.

During the year 2021, my faith and mental health took a hard knock. My gran started getting sick, and I did not know how to process or accept what was happening. Because of this, I found myself lost, with no motivation or willpower to do anything that was expected of me. I was not performing well academically, house chores went undone, and I even started questioning God. I could not understand how she could get so bad so quickly. I found myself on the verge of crying every time I visited her, but I could not show her that I was worried. By the end of 2021, my academics were so bad that I considered dropping out of university and looking for a job. I had lost all faith that things could work out for the better at that point.

I thought I had messed up my entire future, so I confided in my best friend. She reminded me that God would never forsake me

and that this was only a test to see if I could fully trust Him to be in charge of my life. I was still panicking and did not see how I could escape the rut I was in. My gran eventually passed in January of 2022. A part of me was content that she no longer had to suffer here on earth. Then God showed up for me in the most unexpected way. I went to speak to one store manager, still looking for a job, because I was convinced there was no way to salvage my schooling career. He asked me what I had been doing since I matriculated, and I explained to him that I had been studying, but I messed up; hence I wanted to start working. He did not even hesitate when he told me to go back to school because he could see that I had the potential to do greater things. He even went as far as to offer me the help of his sister, who worked at the university, to have me readmitted to school. A man who had no idea who I was believed in me more than I believed in myself at that moment, and I

God always shows up

knew that could only have been God's work. A few hours after I left his office, I received confirmation from the university that I could register for the new academic year. I had to redo my second year, but that was a small price to pay for the future I dream of.

What I will always remember about this is that God will show up for me. Sometimes in the most unusual and unexpected ways, but He will show up. I was so worried that I did not know what I was doing with my life, but God showed up for me and showed me that He was not done with me yet. I no longer doubt that things will work out, even when I am unsure how, because I have seen what He is capable of.



My Heavenly Father sent my earthly father to carry me

My engineering degree as a whole has been the most difficult set of challenges I have ever had to face, but one event stands out in particular: the second semester of my final year.

I had to do two years extra because of maths modules, mostly, and these were my first two years. In South Africa, you are only allowed two additional years per degree, meaning I was on my last chance for most of my student career, further adding to the stress and exacerbating the procrastination, which in turn fuelled the stress, causing the vicious cycle to repeat and worsen over time.

Throughout this trying time, my parents were a constant source of strength and encouragement. They never got mad at me for failing and were always very supportive and encouraging.

In the last few months of my final year, my workload almost got the better of me. My final year project still lay in front of me like a mountain, and I didn't know if I could complete it in time. In retrospect, I definitely would not have succeeded on my own.

To make matters worse, I had a difficult subject adding to the pressure. All this stress had a negative impact on my sleep, which was not typical for me at all. As such, I did not have good coping mechanisms to deal with such severe sleep deprivation, especially when I needed to be operating at my best. I started sleeping at random intervals during the day, I barely ate, and every waking second was filled with the dread that I might not make it after all. I prayed a lot during this time. I prayed that God would save me again, like so many times in the past.

Then my parents phoned me with a proposal. They suggested that my father would drive from Jeffreys Bay to Potchefstroom, a distance of more than 1000 km, to come and help run the house, which would give me the time I needed to complete my project and report. And so he did.

He took charge of my sleeping schedules and home affairs like cooking and cleaning.

My Heavenly Father sent my earthly father to carry me

He ensured I would eat well and took me on walks through the neighbourhood to clear my head in between work. Most importantly, he helped me renew my exhausted mind, which at this point, struggled to reason. He reminded me how many times I had prevailed in the past, despite it having been difficult and stressful back then as well. He never let me doubt I would succeed this time as well. "Zero negativity", he would repeat to me. All of this rejuvenated my mind and body and gave me the time and energy I needed to complete my final year successfully. I even got a decent mark for the project.

In short, my father was my pillar of strength and my fountain of wisdom. My Heavenly Father answered my prayers by sending my earthly father to carry me in my darkest days.



A Student's Prayer

During my second year of varsity, I found myself questioning my purpose more than ever before, and I was experiencing what would become one of the most difficult years of my course.

The year was 2018, and I was experiencing challenges in different areas of my life, but mostly academically. I struggled to keep my head above water, and how I compared myself to those around me added an extra weight around my ankles, dragging me down. Our cancel culture, social pressures, and worldly values magnified my comparison to my peers. Up to this point, everything that had happened was undoubtedly the work of God because God is not a random God – from my achievements in high school to acceptance to vet school and making it through my first year. On numerous occasions, I would look at my peers, and from my viewpoint, they had it all together, and no one appeared to be phased by any of the academic challenges that seemed to be using their best efforts to swallow me whole. Because of my journey so far, my anxious heart thought, *I know I'm supposed to be here, but WHY am I*

struggling so much? On the verge of giving up, I turned to more than one person in search of something to help me make sense of what I was experiencing.

Although I had many late-night and teary-eyed phone calls with friends and family, it was the conversation I had with one of my Anatomy lecturers to get advice on how to approach my studies that stuck with me. This life-changing meeting left me with a whole new perspective on not only my studies but also my feelings of being an imposter. She reminded me that every one of us in the programme deserved our place, and no one can make you feel bad for filling that place. The second piece of advice she shared with me was shared with her when she herself was going through a hard time, and that is “Study as if you did not pray. Pray as if you did not study.” This was a quote I displayed on my room's wall every year until I graduated, and I believe it to be the most powerful quote I learned. It encouraged me to remain dedicated through the years and emphasised the value of prayer and that God is in control of everything. God's Hand over my life and my faith remains the rock on which I stand, especially when the water levels rise.

Lifting Others Up



During my journey of faith, I experienced times when I felt unsure about guidance from God. People supported and encouraged me during these times. Strangely, this always happens during times when I believe I am not on track. God sends people to remind me that I am at a place where He wants me to render a service. It happens during my journey as a police officer; it happens when I dream of becoming a priest/deacon in our church...

God blessed me with a husband who encourages me. He continuously reminds me of all my success and the joy I have brought into people's lives. He reminds me of the difference I have made in other people's lives.

During my faith journey, I have experienced how you can serve others to inspire their personal growth and success.

I will never forget my husband's words and actions of believing in me and making me believe in myself.

Greater is He who is within me than he who is within this world.

Lean On Me

As the songwriter Bill Withers once sang in his famous song, *Lean on me...*

Sometimes in our lives, we all have pain, we all have sorrow, but if we are wise, we know that there's always tomorrow, Lean on me, when you're not strong and I'll be your friend, I'll help you carry on...for it won't be long, till I'm gonna need somebody to lean on please swallow your pride, if I have things you need to borrow, for no one can fill, those of your needs that you won't let show, you just call on me brother when you need a hand, we all need somebody to lean on, I just might have a problem that you'll understand. We all need somebody to lean on...

So, too, we all need someone to lean on from time to time. Everyone has in their lives encountered a situation in which they needed that shoulder to lean on. Whether we ask for it or not, God always sends us that shoulder, sometimes in the most mysterious way, so we can lay down our burdens for Him to take care of them.

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Our encounter as a family came six years ago when everything changed for us. My little girl, who is now 12 years of age, was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. Some may say that is not such a bad thing, it is only a drop in the ocean, but to me, that ocean merely consisted of my 6-year-old daughter, facing needles and endless torture alone. So many thoughts crossed my mind. I wondered if this was my punishment from God, if He was testing me. We were standing at the cliff of this huge mountain behind and all around us, looking out at the ocean about to jump as we had given up hope, hope for either a cure or things to get better, but God was there all the way.

A few months later, we visited the Optometrist for our daughter's first check-up, referred by her Paediatrician, to see if the Diabetes had a negative or no effect on her eyesight. Thank God, it didn't; instead, something greater happened that day, and we indeed had an eye-opener. Before we left, the Optometrist looked at my girl with a smile and told her, "One day, you will become a Diabetic Paediatric specialist so that you can

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Lean On Me

take care, guide and maybe find a cure for all the children suffering from Diabetes, so see this as a blessing.”

We all had a change of heart instantly, but my daughter’s was greater; she was relieved, as if this heavy burden had been lifted from her shoulders. God had turned her sorrow into a blessing and sent us this one person to ensure us that everything will be ok and that we should turn this little drop into something greater. Today, six years later, she’s healthier than ever and more determined to reach that goal. She only needed to hear those words of encouragement and reassurance, and that from a stranger, from another point of view, to give her and all of us hope again. We realised that our ocean is indeed full; we are not alone. Others face greater sorrows and encounters, but God will never forsake us. God will ensure that we always have that shoulder to lean on, catch us and even swim with us so we do not drown in our sorrows. It is up to us whether we accept and borrow that shoulder to lean on.



My journey with God through hardship

I was raised by Christian parents and have known about the power of God my entire life. “He promised that no weapons formed against his children shall prosper.” He has declared that his children are “heads and not tails.” My life was smooth from childhood until about seven years ago when my husband and I started going through numerous challenges. We faced multiple financial and retrenchment trials, which took their toll on our marriage. We went through a very difficult time but persevered. The situation affected our children, our relationships with family and friends, and our spirituality and faith. It was a difficult time. I knew that my God was alive and able to assist, but I wanted answers to come in my own time.

My mother prayed very hard for us during this time, as did close family and friends. She encouraged us to seek the Lord and to raise our praying tempo at that critical time in our lives. We went through a lot, and God saved us from a couple of auctions, school evictions, etc. I hung on to the fact that my parents are Christians and that the Lord had come through for

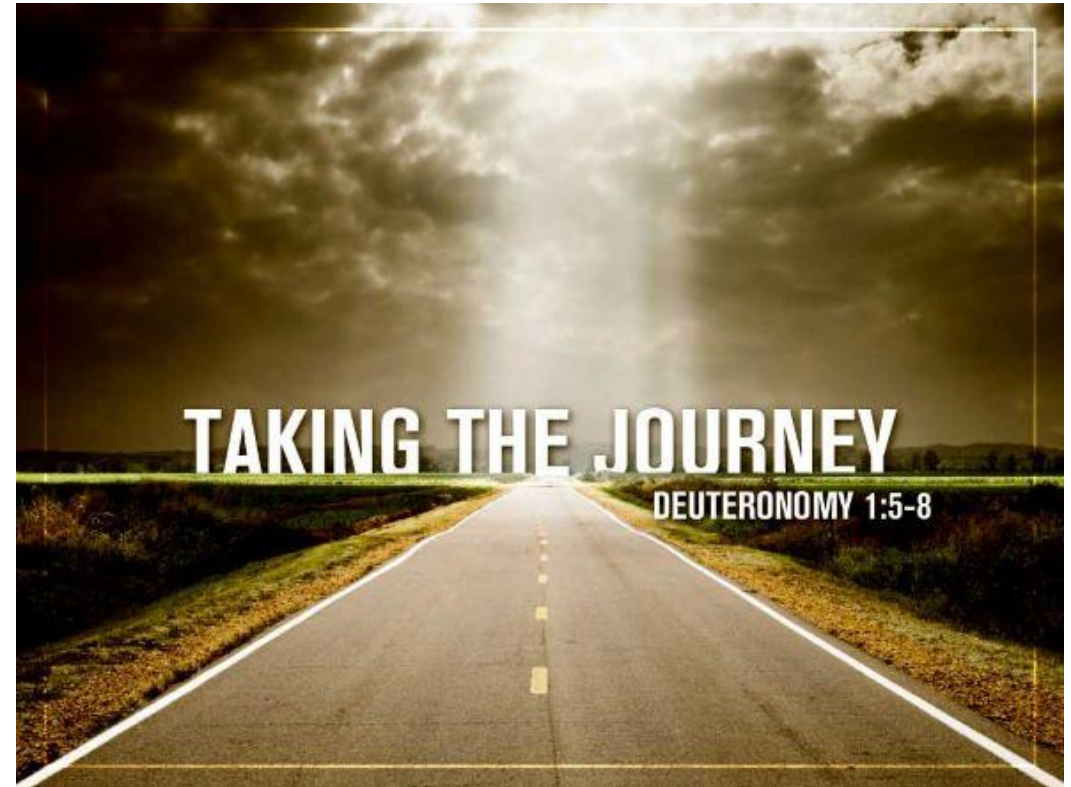
them numerous times. My mother is my biggest source of encouragement. Her strong faith and kindness just rub off on everyone she knows. Her ability to take action and assist others when they are weak, and her unwavering faith despite the challenges thrown at her inspire me. She negotiated with schools, supported us through prayer and kept us together despite all our challenges. No matter what we went through, she continued to pray for us, serve her God passionately, unite the family, and negotiate with third parties when we were too exhausted to do it. This includes my uncle, who is knowledgeable about the education sector and administration laws. God brought them as destiny helpers to assist in a time of need. After numerous confidential heart-to-heart discussions, one of my mom’s close friends, Mother Makhanana, referred me to a prayer group. The group leader was extremely helpful in reinforcing what God was telling me.

My journey with God through hardship

She sent me regular prayer points and prayed for me when I needed spiritual upliftment. She helped reinforce the Lord's Word and taught me how to break through in prayer.

My mother taught me that we go through different seasons, and despite everything, God, Jesus our Lord, the Holy Spirit, and angels are there to protect us and walk through the storm with us. It is only God who assigns our trials and allows tribulations. As per the book of Job, when we are challenged in all areas of our lives, we need to have faith and trust the process because he has "plans to prosper and not harm us." This was the basis of my mother's support. My prayer group leader taught me that God is ultimately in charge of our lives. He assigns trials and takes us through the storm. He also protects us when the enemy is at play. Most of the time, we cannot see him in action, but we must have faith that He will get us through difficult times. When we pray, God sends the right destiny helpers to uplift us; it is therefore critical that we listen to the inner voice.

Silence does not mean He is not listening. It simply means that He is still solving the situation behind the scenes.



Week 4

A Bend in the Road is not the End of the Road

Get
Involved

Trust in
the Lord
with all
your heart

Exchange
Bad for
Good

Those who believe in
Him will never be
disappointed

In the
Dark

“Hope” is
the thing
with
feathers

H.O.P.E. =
Hold On
Pain Ends



Get Involved

I encountered a spiritual drought when I lost my husband to a fatal heart attack. He was only 36 years old at the time of his passing; our children were 13 and 6 years old, respectively.

I was angry at God. I had all these questions, why, how, what, where to from here? We were fairly new to our parish, and I needed guidance and direction. None of the parish priests came to visit, nor did I reach out. I was just sinking deeper into this darkness that felt endless. My children and I did not set foot in a church because of my anger towards God.

Months passed, and one day a parish priest came to visit me, not to check in on the grieving widow, in fact, he did not know about my loss. He had come to enquire about my daughter's absence from Pathfinders, a youth group for those being prepared for confirmation. In hindsight, it was her absence that led him to me.

Once I started speaking to the priest, I felt that I could "spill my guts," so to speak, about how I felt, about all these questions I had, and the anger I experienced.

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After this conversation, I felt lighter in a certain sense. He had given me lots of food for thought, and I realised my wrong and knew I had to rectify it. I understood that the baggage I was carrying was not worth it and how it was weighing me down.

Lo and behold, on my first Sunday back at church, this priest's wife asked if she could sit with me. It was so comforting. I started finding my way back to church, but it was not easy. The priest's wife asked me to accompany her in visiting a few housebound parishioners, and I agreed, although slightly reluctantly. Yet this set me on a path of asking God for forgiveness. Forgiving me for questioning Him.

During this time of me finding my way back to the church, I met with my former parish priest, (Bishop Brian). His parting words to me were, "Get Involved." Another challenge ... where do I start? God works in mysterious ways indeed!

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Get Involved

Then came the invitation, “Would you be interested in joining the lady’s group?” I was not ready for this type of commitment yet. One or two of the ladies in the group were friends of my mother, making me the youngest member of the group. This was the devil whispering in my ear, trying to keep me away. Two words kept ringing in my head “Get Involved.” And so, I did... I got involved!

My children made their way back to Sunday school and Pathfinder and joined the choir shortly thereafter. A year later, I received a letter from the parish council asking if I would consider becoming a lay minister and then a Cell leader. The fellowship I shared with the ladies in the Guild and my fellow parishioners uplifted me. Thank God for the support from family and friends and strangers that may never know how they helped you along your way. I am forever grateful to the late Sr. Camilla Mary SPB, the late Revd Farieda Jacobs and Bishop Oswald Swartz for their role in my spiritual journey.

My faith was restored because I “Got Involved.”



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Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding (Proverbs 3:5)

I remember the year 2017. I used to pray before I made almost every decision in my life; however, that routine started to die during this time. I stopped asking for God's guidance, which led me down a path of poor decisions. I consulted the wrong people and ignored the Word of God that had guided me up to then on a journey which I was quite excited about. I found myself praying less and thanking God less than I usually would. I almost completely lost the spiritual guidance I once had.

2 Timothy 3:16 – “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”

I woke up a year later with no more direction, and I realised that I had lost touch with the person I wanted to become. I would read my bible, but there was no connection between me and the scripture like there used to be. This is when I started asking God to help me see what lesson I should be learning

from the situation I found myself in; what lesson could I learn from scripture that could help me find my way back and re-centre my life? I read the Bible to find a scripture that would speak to me. I used scripture to help guide me, and that would speak to me directly.

Philippians 4:13 – “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

This I when I came across Philippians 4:13. A good friend of mine, Marvin, who is much older than me, would often speak about God and scripture. I asked him just out of curiosity what his favourite bible verse was or which verse gives him the strength to keep going on days he feels like giving up. Immediately and with a smile, he said Philippians 4:13. The instant connection I felt with this scripture when he said it was like it was exactly what I needed to hear at that moment.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding (Proverbs 3:5)

Since that day, in all the hardships I have faced, I have repeated this verse to myself and made it through many tough days because of this scripture. I now ask what lesson God wants me to learn during a difficult time, followed by citing Philippians 4:13. I quote this verse to anyone going through a difficult time in their life.



Exchange Bad for Good

A certain young man lost his mom during his matric year. Since his high school years, he had experimented with alcohol and drugs. He was an intelligent young man but could not cope as a university student as by then he had become addicted, which interfered with his studies. He was forced to quit his studies because he made no progress and was in trouble on campus frequently.

His father was demanding and made the young man work hard for about two years. Finally, he overcame his addiction to drugs but started dealing drugs. Today he testifies to how much worse that had been compared to his addiction. He had to look over his shoulder constantly and felt worse about himself every day. In the meantime, he started studying part-time as he had a vision for his future. Yet he continued to deal drugs.

One day during church, he was so touched by the sermon that he felt very guilty about the double life he was leading: he was a respected community leader but continued his underground activities as a drug dealer.

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Slowly but surely, the Lord started to influence his life significantly. The feelings of guilt of witnessing the decay of young people and realising he was partly responsible for it became too much for him. He does not like to talk about how he escaped the drug mafia, but the bottom line is that he managed to get out. He was free and could focus on his work without the feelings of guilt he had been carrying with him.

He confessed before the Lord, and God forgave him. There was a newly found sparkle in his life. He could look the world in the eye and live with the certainty that his faith would carry him.

Today he is a married man and a pastor in his church. He was also recently promoted in his work.

This story emphasises the message that “God is not done with you until He has changed you according to His will. “

Prayer: “Lord, break my continuous tendency to sin. Help me to always, with Your strength, achieve victory over sin.” Amen.

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Those who believe in Him will never be disappointed

I grew up on a farm. My grandfather was very strict and hardworking. He was also my role model. He taught me many manual skills, and I imitated everything he did. During the week, we had to go to school in town, and on weekends, we worked on the farm. As I grew older, I grew tired of the school and work routine. So, when I was in town during the week, I started experimenting, like other children my age, with cigarettes and alcohol, even girls.

My grandfather became aware of my whereabouts in town while I was supposed to be in school. So instead of returning to the farm, I quit school and stayed in town with some friends, continuing the good life of smoking, drinking, and girls. Eventually, I forgot all the values instilled in me by my grandfather and lived a reckless life.

Subconsciously I knew I was on the wrong track. I started doing odd jobs using the skills my grandfather had taught me, but after a wild weekend, it wasn't easy to go back to work on a

Monday. Then, I met a woman, and we started living together, doing everything I used to do with my friends. This continued for a long time. We were unkept, and our bodies were full of bruises.

Slowly but surely, the little voice in my subconscious became louder. I started living less recklessly and more responsibly. My work became important to me, and my girlfriend started following and supporting me in everything I did. My grandfather's education was taking shape in my life. I also started going to church. My girlfriend and I got married, and living close to God became part of my life.

The day finally came when I bid farewell to everything that had ruined my youth, and my life changed completely. My Saviour and my work became priorities in my life, leading to spiritual, financial, and material progress in our lives.

Those who believe in Him will never be disappointed

Today I am my own boss, and we praise God daily for our salvation. He blesses me with good contracts. I will never let go of His hand. When I look at young people today, I realise from what depths the Lord saved me. I pray daily for salvation for people caught in the destructive web of addiction.

With Jesus on your side, you can only prosper.

Prayer: “Lord, like you saved me from the bottomless well and placed my feet on dry ground, I pray that You will guide our youth towards You.”

Read: 1 Peter 2:6b



In the Dark

The title of my story does not relate to Eskom and Loadshedding in any way.

As a child, I suffered from asthma, which was very severe. I remember being hospitalised at the age of about 4 or 5, and I recall having physiotherapy as part of my treatment for my asthma. I was later told that it was hereditary and that my father suffered from asthma, and hopefully, I would “outgrow” it as he did.

In my early adolescent years, I suffered a few terrible asthma attacks, experiencing a tightness in my chest, my heart pounding, difficulty speaking, clammy skin, and tears would always just flow. The asthmatic medication helped, and I would be fine within a day or two, with a slight cough being the only remnant of this incident. These asthmatic attacks became more prominent after I had lost several significant people in my life, by the age of 14, including my grandfather and my father.

Fast forward – I am an adult in my late 20s to early 30s,

a wife and a mother. I am working, I should be grateful – right? But there was a client who was super demanding, and had such high standards, that the mere thought of going to work left me feeling panicky and, at times, I was depressive. I always enjoyed working, but this client made me want to call in sick daily...I never did. I tried to hold my head high and just get on with it; nobody would understand anyway.

My husband and I had our fair share of marital issues, and finances were not always stable. I started feeling depressed; I no longer had any desire to be around people. I found myself struggling to connect with God. Many times, I questioned God and some of my life decisions. But I was a wife, and a working mom; my kids depended on me, so I soldiered on. “Ons hou die blink kant bo”. There was no time for me to feel sorry for myself. I just had to get on with it. But I was in a very dark space.

In the Dark

I always had difficulty sleeping, I only required a maximum of 4 hours of sleep to be “functional”. One night my husband was away on a business trip, and I was at home with the kids. This night was no different from any other: I put the kids to bed, said my prayers, and prayed that I would fall asleep. I awoke at about 2am. I could hear my heart pounding, and it felt like it was about to leap from my chest. I was in a cold sweat, hyperventilating, with clammy skin, and in tears. I called my mother; she came over to stay with the kids, and I drove myself to the hospital. Thinking back, that was probably not the smartest thing to do.

I was met by a nurse in triage who told me to simply “stop performing and breathe properly” ...Yeah, my brain was not having any of that. I saw the Doctor, was given medication and was sent home with a sick note and a referral note to see a psychologist stating, “patient presented with a possible anxiety disorder”.

I got up the next morning feeling like a complete zombie, got my kids ready for school, went to work, and never handed in the sick note. I never went to see the psychologist either. I was embarrassed.

Many of these attacks followed, with varying intensity levels, and spells of depression accompanied the attacks. I prayed about my situation and tried to figure out why this was happening to me. These were very, very dark times for me. I never felt like myself. I felt less than, not enough!

My boss saw the change in me and encouraged me to go and see a professional, and that was when I started making sense of what was happening to me physically, emotionally and mentally. I started reading and researching my condition. The realisation that I was not the only person that experienced this gave me a sense of relief and strange comfort. I felt less ashamed, and I felt a deep desire to encourage others to speak about

In the Dark

their mental illness and the taboo that surrounds anxiety and depression. I also understood that some of my asthmatic attacks could have been early signs of an anxiety disorder, given all that I was experiencing at that young age.

For the most part, I have this under control now. I use medication only when my anxiety becomes unmanageable. Other times, I practice grounding, breathing techniques and, more importantly, meditation, being still. This journey has strengthened my relationship with God. “Be Still and Know that I am God” is one of my favourite hymns, because the words echo so much meaning to me.

When the darkness comes, and it feels like it is consuming me, I start my day with some gospel favourites, which help calm me. I also know that I can call on my best friend, and all I need to say to her is, “I’m in a very dark space, pray for me”, and all she does is reply with “I am praying for you, and I’m sending your name to my prayer circle”. No explanation is required.

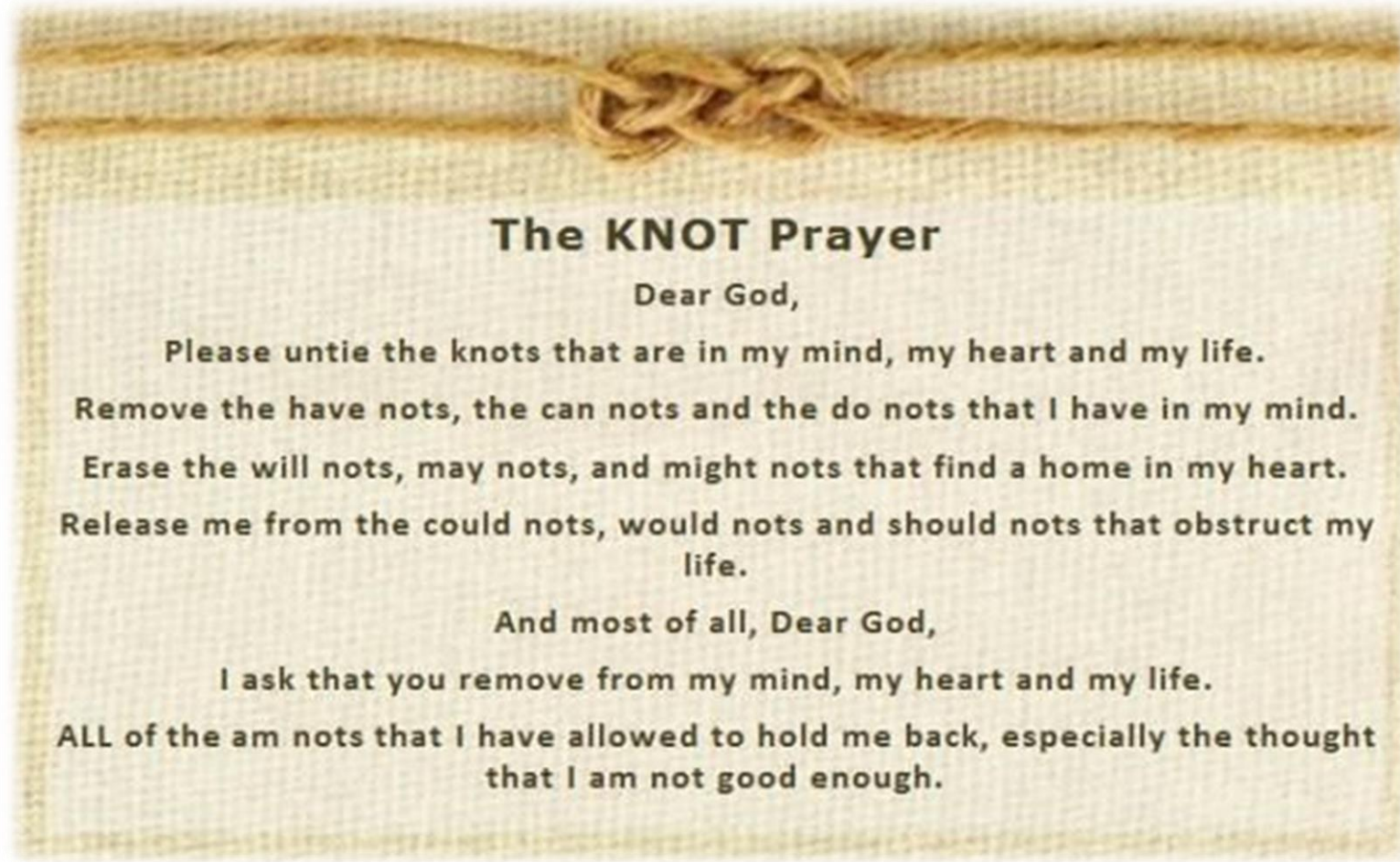
When I find it hard to pray for myself, someone once encouraged me to say just these three powerful words, “Lord have mercy”. Those words have carried me through many dark times. When people ask me to pray for them or keep them in my prayers, I do so earnestly because I know the power of prayer and how I have been encouraged/carried by the prayers of others.

Easter is my favourite time in our liturgical calendar, and I think it’s because the symbolism of Easter resonates deep within me. Moving from the darkness of the Passion of Christ into the Light of His resurrection! I know that my darkness will not last forever because, after any period of darkness, I am assured that there will be light!

I want to encourage anyone who experiences any mental disorder not to be ashamed. Seek professional help, and NEVER stop praying!

In the Dark

A prayer that I say regularly is The Knot Prayer:



“Hope” is the thing with feathers

Everybody has a vague idea of what bipolar mood disorder is. The common understanding is that you have a genetic/chemical imbalance, you have to take medication for it, and collaterally have psychotherapy to manage it. Although correct, it is only part of the picture.

Essentially, it is a disease of thoughts, an endless cycle of ups and downs. The ups are normally accompanied by fast thinking, rapid ideas of grandiosity, and irritability with “a world that just doesn’t get it.” Feelings of sadness usually accompany the lows, and loads of rumination about the past or future, together with a very real fixation on death and suicide. The impact it has on families and other social structures is often overlooked. The lens of science has looked in depth at both the biological and psychological sides, and extremely valuable insights have been gained.

When I have to describe my own journey with this, I can get wrapped up and lost in what happened TO me, running the risk of leaving out what happened FOR me.

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I want to tell a story of HOPE using the letter H to explain the road I started to walk upon almost a decade ago. And then place a big round circle on top of the H to finish my story.

I tick almost all the boxes for the diagnostic test for bipolar. Accepting it was a struggle. Getting help took decades. Hitting ground zero was, in hindsight, a blessing in disguise because I could not argue my way out of it anymore, forcing me to seek help. It started me on the first leg of the letter H, which I call the scientific one. I read all I could, learning and understanding the science behind it all. I got help through cognitive behaviour therapy. It brought valuable understanding and insights but required hard work.

It often happens during a depressive phase that your world becomes small – you have a limited pool of knowledge from which to pull data to make

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“Hope” is the thing with feathers

informative and correct deductions, decisions, and choices, sometimes resulting in catastrophic long-term results of bad choices. Not using myself as a reference point was key to understanding some of it. Having multiple explanations for a situation became helpful, e.g. if someone doesn't answer my call, it is not because they don't like me, they might be busy, or might not hear the phone ringing.

I learned that dreaming and obsessing about the future without taking action is just useless pondering. The key is in taking action. I learned that the constant bombardment from society and the world to be extraordinary, and the high price people put on individuality, is a high-octane fuel for creating not only unrealistic expectations but also an endless loop of negative self-talk. How we define ourselves (success and failure, health and sickness, intellectual or not intellectual) and how we so easily find comfort in these definitions of ourselves is a limited view of what it means to be human and is creating havoc in our lives. Without knowing it, I was building a solid understanding

and foundation for managing my illness. I made a commitment to drink my medication – always. But something was missing...I was busy to science my way out of spirituality, out of my humanness; I was not only the sum of my parts...

After having journeyed and being educated on the science leg of my letter H, I made a conscious decision to move horizontally towards an understanding of spirituality, my spirituality in particular, hoping to find value or substance. I came across a void. I jumped. “I went into the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach...” (Read this wonderful quote from Henry Thoreau written in 1854 – people since forever have struggled with this concept.) While plummeting down this abyss of nothingness, I discovered the value of art, theatre, poetry and visual art.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers

During one of my extremely dark ordeals, a song by Koos du Plessis with the lyrics: “wat ons is, is net genade; wat ons het, is net geleen” (who we are, is only by grace; what we have, only borrowed) came up incessantly in my thoughts – it often happens during a bipolar flair.

I commissioned my niece to create a painting using these words as a theme. She returned with three artworks depicting different scenes...one of a flower blossoming alone on desert rocks; one of dirty feet walking, captured from the back; and one of an open pomegranate. I couldn't see the correlation. She explained it to me: like a flower that blooms whether someone sees it or not, we must strive for goodness and love whether it is seen or not because that is who we are by grace. When the road is long and our feet dirty, we must sometimes inevitably “go home”, tired, vulnerable, and worn out, to a place of acceptance and therein is grace, the spiritual understanding that we are more than our parts. And last, the open pomegranate

Sometimes, when we are broken, open, and vulnerable, we are most beautiful.

Art gave me words of acceptance and love, gave me a neutral and universal language without the judgement of conventional religious dogma that I was brought up with. It gave me a unique entry point into understanding a different, much-needed part of me, and, consequently, a new understanding of the Biblical text in a way that was without the baggage and burden of the past. It opened me up to experiencing rather than intellectualising. I realised that the small choices we make in the privacy of our own thoughts are oftentimes the ones that become habits and have the most profound impact on our lives. Like the choice to go to a place of silence regularly, the choice to come back to the now, to the moment. The choice to accept guidance from somewhere other than our intellect.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers

Do I float around using the mystical way as my only explanation for my reality and understanding of my illness? No, definitely not. Together, this and science grow like the two lines of the letter H ...towards my imaginary circle. They both are equally important in managing my illness. They are both equally important in understanding ME and my perception of life.

The desire to experience God ...whatever your understanding, the communion with other people...wherever it happens, the sharing of our vulnerability, shortcomings, and fears – all of these are hardwired into our neurology, and science is starting to shift the lens of research towards this. With the rapid development of real-time brain imaging, scientists are beginning to understand the impact of our thoughts and the vast landscape of what we do not know. We now know that our interpretation of the world around us creates thoughts that in itself change physical structures in our brain hemispheres, and slowly , the words of prophets tell a different truth when looked at from another angle.

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I cannot disregard science, the help it offered me, and the fact that it saved me. But on the other side of the coin, I also cannot disregard my faith, the importance of actively thinking and living it, and the fact that it has an impact scientifically. It provides a clearer, broader, and more inclusive view of what it means to be human. It gives me an advantage over my biological disposition. Faith gives me hope, and together with medication to manage biology, I can live a fuller life.

The relevance for my depiction of the circle on top of the H lies in a plate made by a potter friend of ours. My life partner gave it to me on the night I had to make a choice about a career change. My existing career at the time was not representative of whom I had become over the past decade, and the stress of being out of sync carried all the trigger points for falling prey to both poles of the bipolar spectrum.

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“Hope” is the thing with feathers

The artist painted a blindfolded male torso, with suggestions of arms and hands in the background. The title is “unseeing”. When my partner handed it to me, she said I must learn to “unsee” the way I have come to see things and that the thoughts, hands, and arms that gripped me in the past are now only serving as remembrances. Without art and the consequent connection to my spirit, including an idea and experience of God, my story would be without hope.



The “H” ... hope. I want to conclude my story with a poem by Emily Dickinson, written in 1861.

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -

That perches in the soul -

And sings the tune without the words -

And never stops - at all –

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -

And sore must be the storm -

That could abash the little Bird

That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land -

And on the strangest Sea -

Yet - never - in Extremity,

It asked a crumb - of me.

H.O.P.E. = Hold On Pain Ends

Where does the story of bipolar begin? I was a happy child. Quiet and shy, and very sensitive. But a happy child. When I was 13, I was molested and fell into a depression. Into Depression. I was withdrawn and morbid. Because of the traumatic experience, I deducted. It did not get better over time. Instead, the feeling of depression escalated throughout my high school years. I was labelled a “difficult teenager.” But I knew it was more than that. I knew the dark thoughts came from somewhere else, somewhere deeper.

After I matriculated in 1987, I went to the University of Stellenbosch, but after four years, I had yet to obtain a degree and returned home. Was I just lazy? Did I party too much? Maybe. I thought so. Others thought so. That was the general conclusion. But, again, I sensed my inertia and complete inability to motivate myself stemmed from somewhere deeper. I spent three years at home. By then, suicidal thoughts had wholly consumed my thinking. Other, darker thoughts too. By this time, I had started writing. Not exactly journalling, but a form of expressing my thoughts and feelings on paper.

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After three years, I returned to varsity to complete my undergrad studies and an honours degree in psychology. Looking back, I have no idea how I accomplished this. By now, I was about 27 and convinced that I suffered from Major Depressive Disorder, or something similar. Yet, I did not seek professional help. Through my studies, I had developed a better understanding of “depression”, but still, it was such a stigmatised phenomenon, and I did not want to be labelled that way. I thought I could cope on my own.

After my honour’s studies, I enrolled at UCT for a master’s degree. The depression got worse. And worse. The dark thoughts got worse. The darkness was into me. I WAS darkness. I would fall asleep at night, wake up around 1am, and lie awake fighting demons for the rest of the night. I lived on the fifth floor, and inevitably I would end up on the balcony almost every night, picturing the fall. Somehow, by the Grace of God, I always found the courage to phone my sister.

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H.O.P.E. = Hold On Pain Ends

All I used to say was, “I don’t know how to get off the balcony,” and she would talk me down, literally. Still, I did not seek professional help. I felt that taking antidepressants would take away my control or numb my feelings. I wanted to be in control. But, ironically, I was spiralling out of control very, very quickly and dangerously. I was self-destructive and taunted God. My relationship with God was complicated at this stage. I struggled to stay strong in my faith while no amount of praying seemed to make any difference. I thought He had abandoned me.

My emotional experience of life, the universe, and everything was extremely intense. It felt like my nerve endings were outside my body, and every speckle of dust landing on them resulted in excruciating pain. There was so much noise. I couldn’t find my way through it. Throughout, I continued writing and praying. I still believe this saved me and kept me somewhat sane, somewhat in touch with reality. Eventually, after three years, I was at a point where I was almost entirely dysfunctional...I could not focus on my studies;

I could not meet deadlines at work; every breath was an effort. I decided to come home. Again.

This state of mind continued until 12 November 2002 when I coincidentally walked past the television set and heard that Ralph Rabie, aka Johannes Kerkorrel, had committed suicide. The news hit me like a ton of bricks. He had been an inspiration and idol to so many of us during my time in Stellenbosch. He articulated what we thought but were too scared or indoctrinated to say out loud. But what hit harder was the sudden overwhelming and certain knowledge that if I did not do something, I too would end up bloodied at the end of a rope, dead. For the first time, I did not want this. For the first time, I wanted to live.

The next day I made an appointment with my GP. She was so gentle and understanding, and literally drew a picture to explain how neurotransmitters in the brain function during depression.

H.O.P.E. = Hold On Pain Ends

She explained how medication could restore the chemical imbalance. At this point, it is essential to note that the cause or causes of depression are not as simple as purely a chemical imbalance in the brain. Depression can be caused by a combination and culmination of many factors, including hereditary and biological, environmental, emotional trauma and life events, and chemical imbalance. My GP addressed the possible chemical imbalance aspect, and I also saw a psychologist to work through traumatic life events. Yet, after two years of experimenting with every available antidepressant and mood stabiliser, I was no better. I began to think that I just had a crappy personality and that this was my “normal.”

My GP introduced me to a psychiatrist, and eventually, I was admitted to a psychiatric hospital for two weeks and diagnosed with bipolar mood disorder—finally, the correct diagnosis. And finally, a combination of antipsychotic and antidepressant medication was prescribed, laying the foundation for my life to change.

I had to adapt to many side effects from the medication, which numbed me in a way. My emotional experiences were much less intense, and it felt like a curtain had been drawn across my brain. But this was 1000 times better than the depression and the piercing, unendurable, and endless bombardment of stimuli that had short-circuited my brain before. I felt I could connect with God again for the first time in forever. I wanted Him to be part of my journey towards healing. I had wanted that all along, but 19 years of fighting demons in vain had created a rift between us. And the rift created hopelessness. And hopelessness, in the end, is what nearly killed me.

Feeling “down” is only one of the emotions I experienced during my period with bipolar. So many other intensely negative emotions and irrational thoughts accompanied the depression...

H.O.P.E. = Hold On Pain Ends

I was angry, irritable, impatient...It gravely affected my relationships. During my stay in the psychiatric hospital, I learnt many tools to manage my illness and deal with it constructively and proactively. Yet two weeks in the hospital and the correct medication did not cure me; managing my bipolar disorder is still a daily struggle. But it gave me a foundation from which to continue constructing a better life for myself and developing healthy relationships with others and God. For the first time in my life, I had hope that things could change, that things could be better, and that I did not just have a horrible personality that I had to endure. Becoming healthy and whole again is a process. It does not happen overnight; it takes hard and continuous work to reinvent yourself. And a lot of reflection and introspection. The process helped me to understand my illness better, embrace it, and grow through it as a person and a spiritual being. It is a holistic process that, for me, included taking care of my body and mind, my feelings, my thoughts, and my relationship with God.

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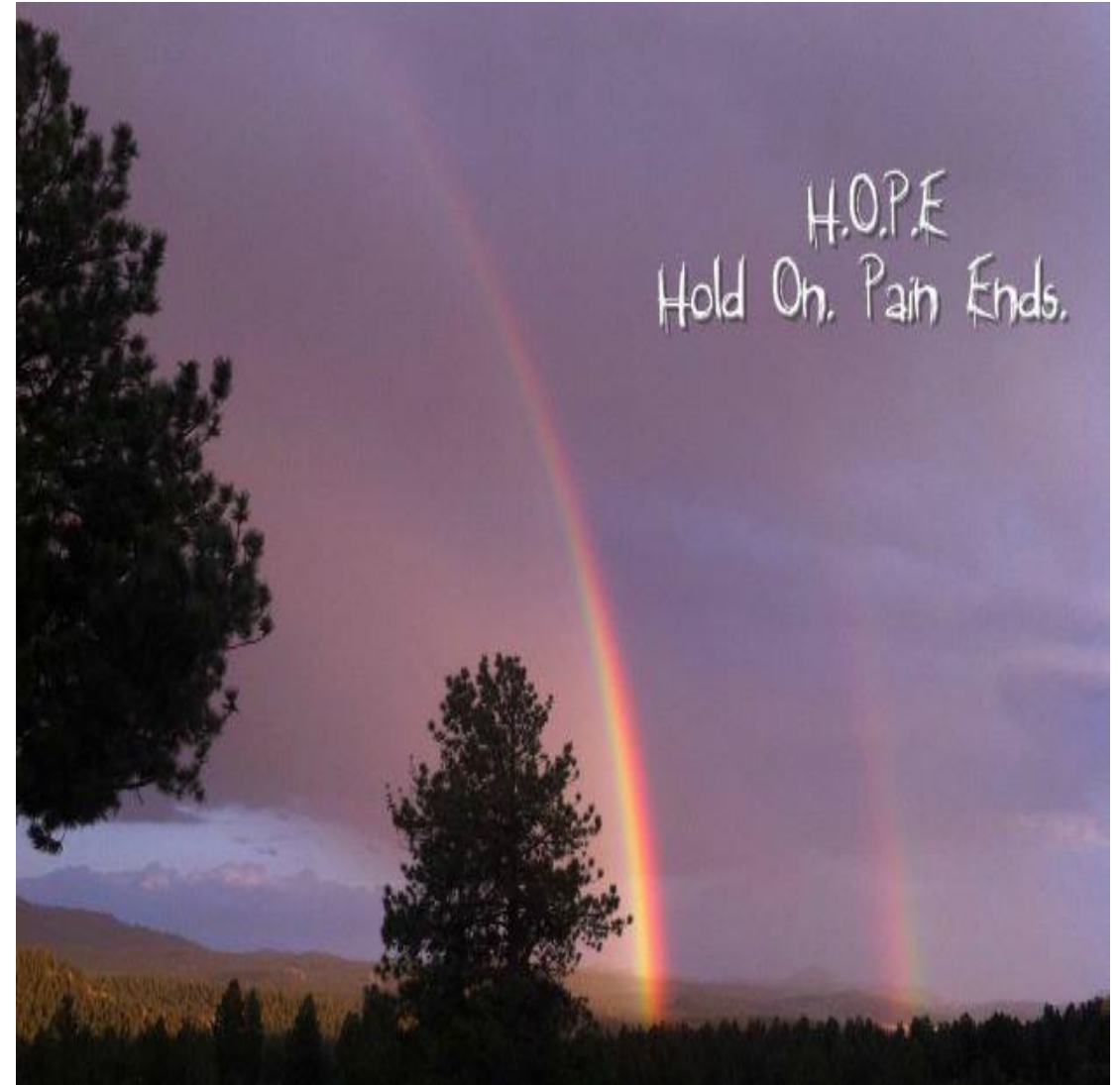
By allowing God to lead me, carry me, and lift me up when I stumbled, I could hope again. My faith allows me to persist even when I encounter bad days, believing that I will get through it.

Through my journey with bipolar disorder, I have developed more understanding, acceptance, and empathy for people struggling to “keep it together.” Some days I still struggle to keep it together, but I now have something that I did not have before – hope that the bad times will pass. When I struggled to connect with God, He sent people to carry me through the difficult years. Without family and friends, I know I would not be here today. Therefore, when you feel overwhelmed by depressive thoughts, reach out to loved ones, and allow them to carry you; do not try to handle this alone. The proper diagnosis, medication, and therapy can save your life. When you suspect you suffer from depression or bipolar mood disorder, or any other mental illness, contact your GP to set the treatment process in motion.

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H.O.P.E. = Hold On Pain Ends

Stigmatisation and ignorance can keep us from seeking help. Do not let this stand in your way of taking control of your illness. Depression, bipolar mood disorder, and other mental disorders are just that, an illness that needs to be controlled, like high blood pressure or diabetes. It is not something you brought on yourself. You are not “crazy.” You do not have to accept it and live with it as your “normal.” You CAN get better and experience a happy life. But not on your own. Reach out. To God, to loved ones, to professionals. And never lose hope. Hold on to the belief that things can and will get better. It did for me.



Week 5

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Being different

I always knew I was different. Not sure how exactly, but different. When my sisters played with dolls, I ran around playing cowboys and crooks with the boy from next door. When my girlfriends oohed and aahed about a pretty dress, I rolled my eyes. And I was much more interested in what Sandy was up to than replying to Ewald's embarrassing will-you-go-out-with-me notes. Yet it did not bother me. Only when I went to high school could I really put a word to my otherness...homosexuality. And then all hell broke loose. Literally. Hell. That was where I was headed. An abomination before God and humankind. A freak.

So, I did what other girls my age did and started dating boys. But I was miserable. I was a sullen, angry, and rebellious teenager. And the thoughts about Melanie didn't go away just because I was dating Bertie. I was torn and confused and didn't understand why I had these "unnatural" feelings. I felt so alone. It felt as if no one understood me. I fantasized about taking my own life almost daily.

Eventually, in my matric year, I went to see a psychologist. This was in 1987. After almost a year of therapy, she said she had taught me all she could and that it was up to me now to choose whether I wanted to be gay. Yes indeed. Choose. The "choice" was easy. Of course I didn't want to be gay. Who in their right mind wants that? Great. I was cured.

Or not. The thoughts about and feelings towards other girls did not magically disappear. I tried dating guys, but it was awkward and felt unnatural. The confusion and self-hatred continued throughout most of my student years. During all this, I thought I had a loving relationship with God. Yet I also believed He had condemned me to hell. People made me feel that. Christians. I had grown up in a Christian home, so I did what Christians did and believed what Christians believed. That meant "homosexuals go to hell." Eventually, I ended up seeing a student counsellor.

Being different

With his guidance and my psychology studies, I gradually realised that being gay was not a choice. Gay was the way I was born. And that it was not God that condemned me to hell, but people...the church. I was hurt and, therefore, angry at the church and its people for a long time.

Until I met Arina. She is a minister and a kind, open-minded person. She listened to my story in a gentle and understanding manner. Her non-judgemental ways restored my faith in humankind. She guided me closer to God. She taught me to accept others' non-acceptance and to forgive others' unforgiving judgements. She helped me to find peace, with myself, with others, and with God.

Unfortunately, churches worldwide are still divided on the issue, and many still condemn me to hell. It hurts. It hurts like crazy. But I choose to forgive. I refuse to allow the church to keep me from God. There is so much we don't understand, and so much pain is inflicted on people because of this.

My journey has taught me not to condemn what I do not understand. It taught me empathy and acceptance of people on the periphery, outcasts; otherness is just that, it is not right or wrong. My journey taught me to never, never, never judge another human being. It taught me to love unconditionally because Jesus did not love conditionally, nor does His Father love me conditionally. My journey has taught me that I am NOT going to hell. Amen.



My relationship with a gay colleague taught me acceptance

I grew up in very conservative household. My brother and I had to attend church every Sunday at the 7.30am service at St. John Anglican Church, Bellville. We also had to attend Sunday school. We had regular contact with priests in our Church community. The concept of being gay was not discussed in our household. However, the general belief was that it was sinful and against the Word of God.

My first encounters with same-sex relationships were two appointments of alleged gay senior clergy at my church. These appointments led to gossip within the church, and I was conflicted about what to think about the appointments and the individuals. At University, I also encountered gay people but did not have close relations with them and never got to know them personally. As I never had further interactions with gay people, I never thought about it in depth nor formulated to myself my position on the matter. I just continued to hold the beliefs I grew up with.

Recently I was confronted with the issue in person for the first time when I was working late one evening. When I exited the building, I saw a female subordinate kissing and hugging another female. I did not know how to react and instinctively turned around. I was surprised and shaken that one of my subordinates had a same-sex relationship. For a while, we ignored each other at work. As her superior, I knew I had to address the issue. I realised that I had to set an example for the rest of the staff members and that my attitude towards her could influence others. This was my closest encounter with a gay person, and I had to do a lot of introspection and soul-searching to determine the correct approach to the situation. I asked God for guidance. I contemplated and reflected on the matter for a week, digging deep and wrestling with myself, my faith, my upbringing, and all the preconceived ideas I had acquired over the years regarding gay people.

My relationship with a gay colleague taught me acceptance

I knew I had to make a mind shift.

During my reflections, some thoughts stood out in impacting my attitude:

- We don't have to impress people but to inspire people.
- We need to add flavour to the lives of others and give hope to the people around us.
- Our constitution enshrines human dignity and equality for all citizens.
- We need to serve others with an attitude of compassion, kindness, selflessness, and humility.
- We should be unbiased in our relationship with others and not discriminate.
- We must acknowledge the dignity and worth of every individual we encounter.
- We should strive to make every person feel valued and respected in our daily activities.
- We must love others as God love us.

After a week of contemplation, I went to her while she was sitting with other colleagues; I asked her whether I could hug her. I spoke loud enough so others could hear me and follow my example. I told her that I accepted her for her sexual orientation and as a sister in Christ. Since that day, her productivity has increased, and I can call on her for assistance with any task for operational requirements. It feels good to work in an office where we can be open and accepting of one another, building each other up instead of judging.

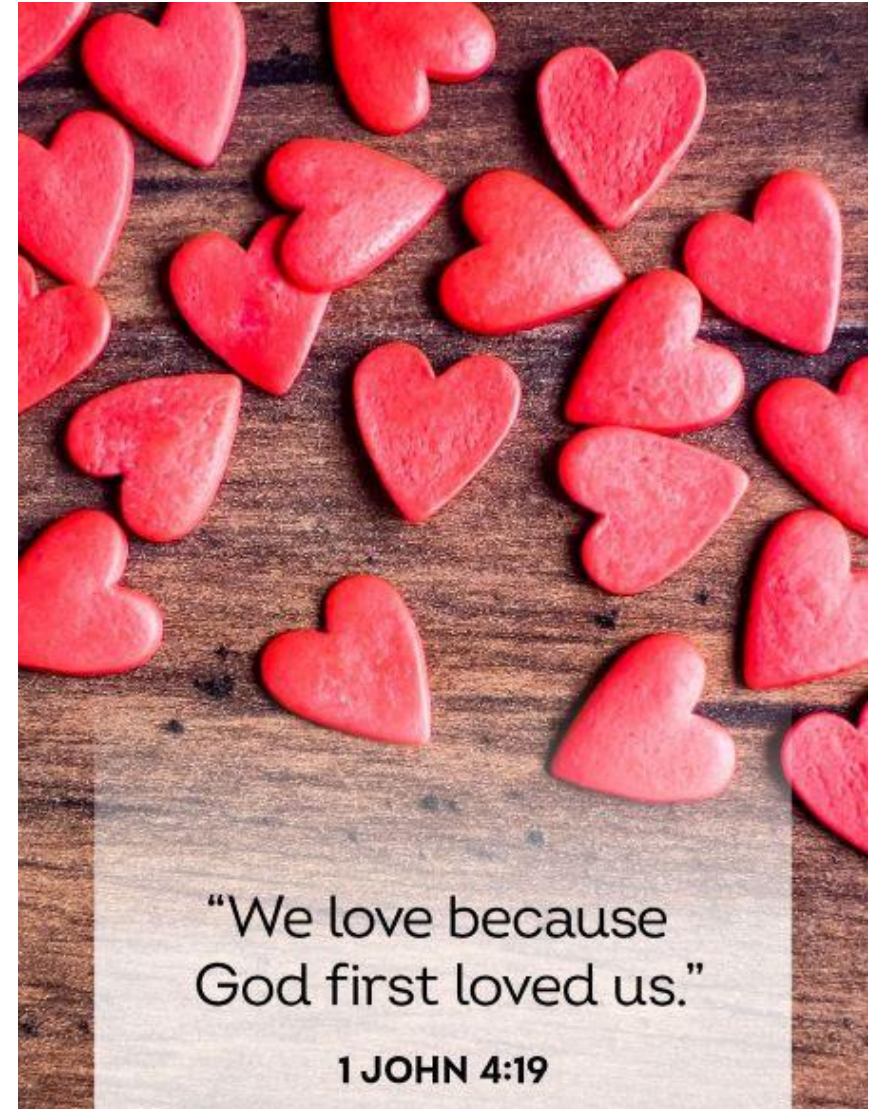
Who we love

Who we love by Sam Smith and Ed Sheeran is my go-to song just to remind myself that no matter what, no one knows my heart like I do because society is not always fully open to us who are part of the LGBTQI +++ community. There is so much pressure from society, especially if you are a gay man or lesbian woman. We sometimes struggle to tell others about our sexuality and who we really are. We end up carrying a heavy weight on our shoulders.

We spend most of our time at our workplaces and should be comfortable in our skin there. Coming out to my colleagues was difficult, but luckily for me, I have colleagues who never once treated me differently or pushed me aside because of my sexuality. I was accepted by all, especially by my Head of office.

No matter whom I love, I am still human and have a beating heart, just like you.

God loves me just the way I am!



Wear a raincoat whenever the rain of gossip overwhelms you

When I was 23 years old, I fell ill and had to undergo training for traditional healing. It was one of the darkest times in my life. I was conflicted and stigmatised, unsure if I could return to church. My faith in Christ had grown because of what I went through during training, but upon finishing, I questioned my path. How family, friends and the church treated me differently and the stigmatisation. I eventually returned to the church through the encouragement of the late Ven. Makhanana.

I became a Sacristan, then a Sunday school teacher and Lay Minister, and church council secretary. After some time, I stopped attending church because of the traditional healing calling and how fellow Christians talked about me and stigmatised me. I went back to church after meeting Fr. Moloï at my late uncle's funeral, where he learned that I was active in church and good at the secretariat. I was appointed Secretary two weeks after I returned to the church.

I later learned that when I was elected alternate warden and then the following year secretary again, a certain block in the church called a meeting to discuss how they should try to remove me as the secretary because the priests give me 'more power' in church and I think I know everything – always running around church 'fixing' things, welcoming every priest and never sitting still in church and why the Bishop invited me to Diocesan synods, out of all secretaries in the Diocese, to be lay secretary. The stories are many...

I have almost always found myself in a space where I wanted to give up and asked God why He allowed people to speak badly of me and treat me lowly – even clergy and fellow MU sisters – when I am doing my best to serve Him. What is it that I need to do to stop this onslaught?

Wear a raincoat whenever the rain of gossip overwhelms you

Even to this day, I am called 'deputy archdeacon' because of my role in assisting the archdeacon.

Throughout this time, there have been people who supported and encouraged me. Three people stand out:

- My mom always supports my decisions, encourages me to pray, and to trust God's timing and work with my life. She always says, "Hold your head up high, walk tall, never cease to pray and trust God."
- The late Mrs Maud Chulu would always send me daily Bible verses and call me. Whenever we met, we would discuss the verses. She would say, "V.M. (that's how she addressed me) – we are in the majority." (From Psalm 91:4). She would always make sure that I attended church events even out of town and reminded me that I am God's wonderful creation and have a purpose in His vineyard.
- Fr Ananias Mloi always encouraged me to "wear a raincoat

whenever the rain of talks" overwhelmed me. He said: "Remember, you are appointed by God, when you do His work, never mind what people say – walk tall, wear your best high heels and strut confidently. That will make the Lord proud and Satan and his followers jealous." He gave me space to shine in my work for the Lord despite what people said or did.

I work hard during times of hardship to never forget that God is always with me and within me through painful and difficult experiences. He will always send people to lift me up during times when I do not 'feel or see' His help. I strive never to be shaken by the words of mere mortals who are jealous of my shine and Holy Spirit empowerment. I am wearing my Holy Spirit 'raincoat' and strutting proudly and confidently by God's grace and mercy.

Unspoken, wordless penance

Ever since I can remember, I have loved God and wanted to do what pleases His heart. I cannot explain it, I did not question it, it was me. I was the kid my parents did not have to beg to get up to go to Church on a Sunday morning. Quite frankly, I cannot really recall many occasions where they were the ones who took me to church on a Sunday. I do remember frequently taking them to Church when I was a young adult. As a child, my older sisters, brothers, and I usually attended Mass on a Sunday morning. I grew up Catholic and was proud and passionate about this.

So, the fact that I was enrolled in a Catholic school was no surprise nor a problem. In grade 5, our classrooms were not situated on the same grounds as the rest of the school. We were housed in classrooms that bordered a Catholic Church and an all-girls Catholic school managed by nuns. This meant that every Thursday, the Catholics in the class got to go to confession in preparation for the Mass that was held on a Friday.

We attended the Mass on a Friday with the pupils from the Catholic girl's school, the nuns and other parishioners who wanted to attend. This was a highlight on a Friday for me, another chance to visit the house of God.

But this came at the cost of having to go to confession on a Thursday. It meant recalling my sins and wrongdoings of the past week and voicing them to Father M, so he could absolve me from my sins and thereby grant me my 'ticket' to attend Mass on Friday.

My Catholic classmates and I discussed our sins while waiting our turn, trying to calculate our penance, wondering if it would be more Hail Marys and Glory Be's than the lengthy Our Father's. But we never discussed the unspoken penance, the hand of absolution that I would find out in later years was not a 'normal' part of Catholic confession. We would push

Unspoken, wordless penance

each other ahead and jump to the back of the queue, not wanting to go first. Quite frankly, I just did not want to go, period. But the privilege of attending Mass nudged me into the confessional, willing me to accept the punishment that would wash me whiter than snow.

Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned; my last confession was last Thursday. My thought-through and rehearsed list of sins would roll off my lips. Then as Fr M would share my penance, his hand of absolution would slip into my green school panties and mete out more punishment than just required prayers. He meted out the unspoken, the wordless penance. I never spoke of this; we never spoke of this. Who wants to uncover their 'terrible 10-year-old trespasses' to all? Only a few decades later, I learnt that I was not the only one who had suffered this unspoken penance. I believed in my little heart that it was all part of being Catholic and being privileged to have my sins absolved by the holy man of God, Fr M, with the penitent hand.

I praise God that the ungodly penitent hand of this old man did not taint the love I had and still have for my Abba Father, the One who taught me about true repentance and unconditional forgiveness.



JAMES 1:12

Blessed
is the one
who
perseveres
under
trial

Week 6

Let us
keep
courage

Wait on
the Lord

God's
timing is
always
right

A test for
the
authenticity
of faith

Be patient
and wait for
the Lord

Thanks for
the prayer

Let go and
let God

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Let us keep courage

In his autobiography, *A Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela recalls the scene when he first laid eyes on his granddaughter. At the time, he worked hard labour on Robben Island in almost unbearable conditions, cutting lime in a quarry under the sun. It nearly blinded him. He writes that only one thing kept him and other prisoners from despair: they sang together as they worked. The songs reminded them of family and home and tribe, and the world outside the prison walls they might forget.

During the fourteenth year of his imprisonment, Mandela got permission for his daughter to visit. She ran across the room and embraced him. Mandela had not held his daughter since she was a young girl, and it was moving for him to hug this fully-grown woman, his child. Then she handed over her own newborn baby, Nelson's granddaughter, into his callused, leathery hands. 'To hold a newborn baby, so vulnerable and soft in my rough hands, hands that for too long had held only picks and shovels, was a profound joy. I don't think a man was ever happier to hold a baby than I was that day.

Mandela's tribal culture had a tradition of letting the grandfather choose a new baby's name, and Nelson toyed with various names as he held that tiny, helpless baby. He settled on Zaziwe, which means HOPE. 'The name had special meaning for me, for during all my years in prison, hope never left me – and now it never would'.

As it turned out, Mandela had served barely half his sentence and would not gain freedom for thirteen more years. The vision of hope, however, encouraged and sustained him despite little present evidence at the time.

Like Mandela, future faith holds out hope for all of us. Let us keep courage.

Wait on the Lord

This is a true personal story which I would like to share, to encourage those who might be encountering the same pressure I once had.

I was blessed with two boys with an age difference of 10 years, and later in my life, I was blessed again with a girl child whom I fostered from the age of 8 years after the passing of her biological mother.

As a parent, I was obliged to provide to the best of my ability everything my kids needed, such as food, clothing, schooling, medical needs, and most importantly, shelter ... a home.

Yes, I couldn't have afforded all my obligatory responsibilities to them if I wasn't blessed with a stable job. However, being a single parent who was supposed to foot the bill alone, it was difficult to secure a home loan from the bank to buy or build a house for my children due to affordability. Life being so expensive with the economy going down every day, I lost hope of owning a house that would be a home for my kids. I was praying and asking God for a breakthrough, but every time, my application wasn't successful.

Fear, doubt, despair and anxiety started clouding my mind to such an extent that I felt God had forgotten about me. But I continued to pray and to engage one young woman who was working at the bank to keep on checking some cheaper offers for me, because one strong voice was always telling me that, when you pray and pray in faith, God will answer your prayers even if it can take longer. Still, eventually, He shall answer: "God's timing is perfect it is never late nor early."

One day, I was in meetings for the whole day, and my cell phone was on silent mode. After the meeting, I noticed that I had 18 missed calls from the lady at the bank. I quickly returned the call, and she said, "Ma'am, I've got a house for you." Puzzled, I asked, where? She gave me the address and asked me to meet her there so she could show it to me. Dumbfounded, I hurried to the house. I arrived at the place before her.

Wait on the Lord

Immediately when I saw the house, I knew the Lord has answered my prayers. I screamed out loud and claimed it in Jesus' name. She quickly arrived and asked my opinion about the house. With Faith and gratitude to the Lord, I said, "This house is mine", NOT even thinking about the affordability. She looked me straight into my eyes with amusement and said, "Ma'am, I'm seriously humbled by your Faith; we have NOT even started with the paperwork, but you speak with such assurance that the house is yours, indeed ma'am, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The next day she submitted the application again. The anxiety of waiting for the outcome of my application was Killing me, but in my prayers, I was not praying for the house Anymore BUT was thanking God for blessing me with the house of my dreams. Guess what? After three days, I was called to say that my home loan was approved and that I must come and sign the papers at the bank.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make straight your paths." (*Proverbs 3:5-6*)



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God's timing is always right

There was a time in my life when everything was not going well, my finances, my health, my family, and my marriage. I was asking myself whether God doesn't hear my prayers. I was newly married and could not conceive. Every day when I saw couples my age with children, I cried when I got home.

I always spoke to my mother and the owner of the shelter where I was volunteering at. These were two old women that were my pillars. My mother told me I needed to stop being angry at God; my time to have kids would come. My boss at the shelter told me that maybe God wanted me to take care of the kids at the shelter as they do not have mothers; they are orphans.

The shelter owner told me that God's timing is always right. She told me that God blesses us when it is our time. She said, sometimes when it is your time to be blessed, God sees that you are not ready or that there is something that you are lacking. He will then pass and come back when the time is right.

I stopped being angry at God and gave my volunteering job my undivided attention.

I am happy to say today that I am a mother to two boys. When I held my son for the first time, my mom told me, "This is your turn to shine."



A test for the authenticity of faith

Masks...We were obligated to wear masks for two or three years because of a dreaded disease. Do you know what it feels like to wear a “mask” your whole life? A mask for work, one for church, one for friends, one for family...I know such a woman. She has been married for many years, living a happy life, in the eyes of the world, with her husband and their three children. They attend church regularly and are leaders in the community, with promising careers and steady incomes.


Deep in her heart and on her face, this woman had to wear a mask of happiness while she hurt inside. Her husband had a gambling problem and gambled away all his money, month after month. Then, when his money ran out, he borrowed money while she had to take care of the household and the children’s school fees. She tried talking to him, pleading with him to change, but in vain.

She prayed, and is still praying, that God will change her husband’s behaviour. She believes that God will step in at the right time. Everybody knows her husband as a good person

with a friendly personality. He is well-loved among people. He is not a lousy father to his children or an abusive husband to his wife. They fight from time to time when she feels he takes advantage of her because she must take care of the household. There is never money for unforeseen expenses because he is deeply indebted and must pay his gambling debts monthly. He has been for rehabilitation, but it did not change his behaviour.

Friends and family who know the truth have pleaded with her to walk away from the marriage, but something prevents her from doing so. Whether it be love, habit, or pity...something stops her from leaving her husband. So many years of pretending have caused the cracks to show and the masks to slip sometimes. Still, everyone admires this strong woman’s faith and steadfastness in life. Her faith has been carrying for many years, and she continues to believe that a breakthrough will come.

A test for the authenticity of faith



So be truly glad.
There is
wonderful joy
ahead, even
though you must
endure many
trials for a little
while.
1 Peter 1:6 NLT

The Lord walks with you on your journey through life. If you let Him, like this woman who has looked for the fault in herself so many times, He will continue to carry you the way He carries this woman. She will not allow evil to drag her down, and she will continue to fight for her marriage.

God's time is not our time. So, keep on praying for this woman.

Prayer

"God, strengthen our faith like that of this woman. Thank you for giving us Your Word and faith to cling to." Amen.

Read: 1 Peter 1:6

Be patient and wait for the Lord

A woman was very fond of potted plants. She spoke to them lovingly when she watered and cared for her plants every morning. That was her wake-up routine every morning. She loved witnessing the life and growth of her plants. But, unfortunately, one plant did not flourish like the rest. She tried in vain to revive the plant by changing its pot and adding fertiliser. She had contemplated removing the plant from her collection for weeks but changed her mind every time.

One day she decided to attempt one last time to save the plant. She cut the dead leaves and loosened the soil around the plant. To her amazement, she noticed new life in the plant soon afterwards...the colour of the leaves had begun to change, and the ends of the leaves were not so withered anymore. She began to lavish more love and attention on this plant. Soon she noticed two flower buds, and after a few weeks, she was greeted one morning with two beautiful white flowers. This was the first time in almost four years since she got the plant that it had produced flowers. She was overjoyed and felt like she had achieved some victory.

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Immediately she thought: “How does my life look through God’s eyes? How many chances has He given me during my life? How often was it necessary for Him to use pruning shears to cut out my dead leaves? How often did he need to loosen the soil around me to bring me to my senses”?

Again she realised how patient God is. We expect a prompt response to the things we desire. We expect everything to happen according to our time and our will. When things don’t work out that way, we start to doubt and question God. However, God’s time is not our time. So we need to be patient and wait. Then, when His time is right, we will know the joys of happiness and victory. He blesses our lives and knows when to answer our prayers.

“Wait on the Lord. Believe in Him and trust Him.”

Prayer: “Lord, forgive my impatience and betrayal. Thank you that I can celebrate the joy and victory You offer through Your love and mercy.” Amen.

Read: 1 Peter 5:10

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Thanks for the prayer

A few months ago, I had the urge to visit someone with stage 4 cancer. It was as clear as daylight in my mind that I had to go and pray for her. Keeping me from going was that I didn't want to see her in that condition. The prompting of The Holy Spirit eventually gave me the courage to go to her.

We talked and laughed just like we did when we saw each other more frequently. Absolutely no pretence! We spoke about our spiritual journeys and our struggles in our respective lives. She then asked me if she may pray for me. I was taken aback. This really sick woman wanted to pray for me! She prayed for life and the goodness of God over our family and me.

Going home, I was still in awe and, at the same time, so uplifted and encouraged. I also knew that God wanted me to share this story with others. It reminded me of Isaiah 40:29 -31: "He strengthens those who are weak and tired." Trust in the Lord and continue to do His good work irrespective of the type of struggle you face. It is a true mark of someone who is walking with the Lord.

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I know God is fighting for my friend because she hasn't given up on Him. He is her anchor, and like the hymn says: He will keep her steadfast and sure about her place in Heaven.

I learned from this that God knows who needs prayer; that is why she prayed for me.

The circumstances you are in should not stop you from praying for others – it will strengthen you.

She also told me that she is content and that everything is in God's hands.

I took everything she told me to heart and am already applying it to my life.

We should strive to run our races like her, and we will wear the Crown of Victory. Your relationship with Jesus will determine where you end up in your race.

PS. We are so fearful of the word cancer. According to us, it is a death sentence. In times of various trials, as James says, we must persevere. Apply your mind to Jesus and live your life to the fullest, no matter your physical state of being.

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Let go and let God

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to be a professional athlete, more precisely, a rugby player. My Dad recalls taking me to the rugby field when he was a player, and I played on the sidelines while he practised. My mom was not always in favour of me playing this rough sport; she was afraid of the injuries I may sustain. I started pursuing this passion of mine at very young age.

I grew up with a solid Christian foundation, I was involved in my parish, and many individuals have helped me along my faith journey. But nothing could prepare me for this...

In pursuit of my rugby aspiration, I moved from my home and my family at the age of 16. This was the first time I was on my own. I had high expectations of myself in terms of what I wanted to achieve and excel in this sport I love so much. I have never shied away from hard work, and I poured myself into proving myself. I was quickly faced with adversity; and was left feeling mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually drained. I felt lonely & neglected...

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The pain helped me get up some days, gave me the courage to keep fighting...But pain is still pain...and it kept me in dark spaces a lot of the time...I quickly developed anhedonia, because nothing else mattered but to make a success out of rugby. It was a big investment that never paid off as I had hoped. My grade 11 year ended with me not having achieved any of the goals I had set out. No one was seeing me. No one heard of me, and I found myself in a negative space. My mental health suffered. It felt as if I had nothing. I wasn't just putting pressure on myself but on my family as well.

I started my matric year with a vigour that was pain related. I had goals, but they felt lofty, having been through the "politics" of the previous year, the discrimination and classism. Having been confronted with all these challenges/hurdles at the time, rugby as a career started looking less and less like a reality and more like a farfetched dream.

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Let go and let God

Rugby was what I knew and could hold the key to the opportunities I foresaw for myself, the key to my success and future.

The first school holiday of my matric year was yet another failed attempt at kickstarting my rugby career. I had to realise the reality that I put everything into this, and some things were just out of my control. The thought of letting go was too painful because I didn't know where to next...The future was bleak...

My father always encouraged me to think about a career outside of rugby. I started looking at Universities and exploring my options. Those requirements seemed out of my reach. I also worried about the financial pressure this would place on my family. I felt lost and troubled and had an immense amount of anxiety about myself and my future. Many tearful, sleepless nights ensued.

During that holiday, I visited Sr. Camilla, she was ill at the time, and the conversation was repetitive; nevertheless, the questions she asked came from a place of care and concern.

She never stopped uttering the words of the Lord and encouragement. I took a quiet moment sitting outside of the chapel, and amid everyone's conversations, I started praying. I prayed for my mother, my grandmother, my brother, and Sr. Camilla, those that were in the room at that moment. Through my prayers and through her presence, I quickly realised what being a devoted Christian means. Being selfless, caring for others, not hating, no judgement, and trusting God to light the way always, no matter how dark, trust God in all that you do. Having complete faith makes the outcome irrelevant but the journey worthwhile. Before leaving, I prayed for myself; I said, "God, if rugby is supposed to work out for me, you will make a way for this impossible situation to work out. God, I trust you will create a way. Help me to be selfless and help me to always follow your way regardless of my ideals. May you drive me to my purpose. Amen."

Let go and let God

I left feeling as if a weight had been lifted from my shoulders, and for the first time, I felt God, the presence of the Holy Spirit was with me.

I arrived back at school the Monday morning after the school holidays. In two weeks' time, it was Craven week trials. I spoke to the coach about giving me an opportunity to go to trials. It was not a positive conversation, and there was immense doubt about my success at these trials. He said, "Before I put your name down for trials, you need to prove your adequacy for an opportunity by performing against our next opponent, one of the most successful rugby schools in the world." The challenge may have seemed daunting to any other person, but I still felt God's presence with me. The morning of the game, I prayed, "God, be with me today as I prepare to go to war; help me in the face of adversity. Help me to show what you have created within me. Protect me from any serious injuries, and help me make my family proud. Help me express the talents you have given me. Thy will be done. Amen."

I had a good game that day; I scored three tries and made four try-saving tackles.

For the first time, I got affirmation from my teammates and spectators. I remember walking into the coach's offices the Monday morning after the game. His words to me were. "It's embarrassing seeing a 4th team player go to Craven week trials, but I am a man of my word, and we'll see how far you get."

We were placed in groups at the trials, and my coaches placed me out of position; I never touched the ball in that game. I remember coming off the pitch feeling discouraged as I had no impact on the game, and I was played out of position due to the coaching staff of my school. As I walked off, a selector asked for an 8th man to take to the field if anyone was keen. I remember praying through that moment, and I quickly grabbed a jersey for the 8th man position. I felt a burst of energy, and that gave me the strength to have a good

Let go and let God

game. Walking off the field after that round, one of the selectors asked me for my credentials. He said, “you did well today; keep it up.” As I came off, some of the players congratulated me on my performance, they had never seen me play like this. They did not know what I was capable of because I had never been given an opportunity to show them. I had little to no expectations for these trials; all I could do was hope that my name would be on the list for the next round. Week after week, I found myself playing in the main game of every round at the Craven Week Trials.

I was focused and determined, but most importantly, calm because of my faith.

At the end of the trials, I was the first 4th team player to make a Craven Week side. I had a contract from a prominent rugby institution in the country, and two scholarship offers to study at university. This is where I found my hope renewed. This chapter of my story taught me to ‘Let Go and Let God.’

