

Writing as a Mode of Therapy: The Path to Healing and Selfcare

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By
Lolita Law
Liberty University
May 12, 2023

Liberty University
College of Arts and Sciences
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Student Name: Lolita J. Law

Professor Anna Anderson

May 12, 2023

Thesis Chair

Date

Dr. Andrew L. Smith

May 12, 2023

Reader

Date

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Abstract

When someone is plunging into a deep depression, they may not know what to do with the next moment in their lives. All they do know is that they would like the pain to stop. There are many modes of therapy used to assist people with healing. However, writing for many has the most rewards. It is an expression that allows the individual writing to dig much deeper than any spoken word could allow. Writing can help clear, evaluate, and purge the mind of negative thoughts before it leads to action. Poetry, journaling, and songwriting are just a few methods to assist in healing from trauma or depression. I started writing to discuss my journey to healing and restoration. This is an in-depth journey where I disclose and discuss the different reasons writing is beneficial. For this project, I will discuss spiritual memoirs and how to write reflectively to enhance the spiritual memoir writing process. This paper will also include my spiritual memoir, which consists of nonfiction writings from my time at Liberty.

Keywords: depression, trauma, therapy, healing, writing, memoir, spiritual, journey

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank God, the head of my life, for pulling me out of the pit of darkness, depression, and suicide by giving me the gift of writing; thank your Lord for never leaving my side. This project has been an actual labor of love. I started my formal writing journey six years ago, and it has been the most rewarding experience of my life. I have started my blog post, written, produced, and directed my first play for our church's youth and adult drama ministry.

I also thank Dr. Anna Anderson for your support during this project. Thank you for agreeing to chair my committee. Thank you for helping me stay on track and for your prayers and encouragement. Thank you, Dr. Andrew Smith, for agreeing to become my reader for this project. I appreciate your advice that assisted me in completing this project.

I would also like to thank my therapist, Dr. Jacqueline Phifer. I am grateful to our Father for allowing you to come into my and my daughters' life at the most tumultuous time in our lives. You equipped me with the necessary tools to help clear my mind so that I could hear God's plans for me.

Thank you to my daughters ShaRonda and Morgan for being willing to listen to me talk about this project. I love you so much! You both always encourage me and give me fresh and innovative perspectives. Thank you to my Chapter Two, Sam "The Weatherman" Moore, for your continued love and support of all I do. I love and thank you for always having my back.

Finally, a special thank you to my family, my FLMGS family, my spiritual sisters, my sorority sisters, and the Leavenworth, Lansing faith community. Thank you for your constant prayers, words of encouragement, and listening ears when discussing this project, degree plan, or my future ideas. I love you all in life and beyond.

Artist Statement

Writing As a Mode of Therapy: The Path to Healing and Selfcare

Inspiration: A Gift in Waiting

Writing is a gift. It is my belief gifts God has given to His people are for His people and the lost who can become His people. God's blessings come as we grow and mature into the vessel. He wants us to become. The book of Corinthians states, "A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other" (1 Corinthians 12:7, NLT). Sometimes a delayed gift will be a tool to help us survive a painful season leaving only contemplation of ending it all by taking our life. I am the voice of the people who are hopeless and desperate. I believe this is when God steps in with a gift in waiting.

When my late husband passed away, I thought I would never breathe again, and I did not want to dream about my future. I was so hurt and hopeless and could not see past my pain. I tried to stop the pain by any means necessary. Even if it meant the very thing that I talked against. I felt like I was at the lowest point in my life. The night I decided to end it all, I was ready to leave this earth and join my late husband. God told me it was not my time, and He still had work for me to complete. This was when God presented me with my gift in waiting.

I started writing Facebook posts to help channel my pain, grief, depression, and thoughts of suicide. The more I wrote, the more people voiced how much they were inspired and encouraged by my posts. The more I wrote, the better I felt. My therapist suggested I start a blog to document my posts and progress better and give each post an opportunity to reach others. That is when I launched my blog post site called "A Blessing in the Storm."

Through prayer and therapy, I have written myself out of a depressive and suicidal state. I used my Facebook and subsequent blog posts to channel my feelings into words that transform

into a therapeutic experience. The words I wrote enabled me to dig deeper into the depth of my soul and mind to discover a creative output for my grief, sadness, and anger. Writing gave me a healthy and productive way to express exactly how I was feeling and what I was going through. This type of writing has launched a new appreciation of using writing as a therapeutic mode. Writing has enabled me to encourage others while healing and reassuring myself. My anger, rage, disappointment, sadness, and pain were reflected in my writing.

I want others to realize the euphoria that comes with writing. I want anyone suffering to discover the joy and liberation I have experienced. The book of Psalms states, “My heart is stirred by a noble theme as I recite my verses for the king; my tongue is the pen of a skillful writer” (Psalm 45:1, NIV). The bitterness consumed my heart like a sponge, soaking up spilled water from the floor. God replaced this animosity with words of love that flowed from my heart to allow healing. His grace and mercy were so generous to me, and I knew I could never keep quiet. I want to intentionally share what He has done for me with others who are processing their grief. I want to show readers that there is a more productive way to deal with the negative thoughts that will try to make a home in their heads.

Background Information: Why Do I Write

Once my therapist encouraged me to write, I became obsessed with the expressive disclosure method of therapy. A study led by Mugerwa and Holden (2012) on writing therapy details the importance of therapeutic writing. “Writing therapy, otherwise described in the literature as ‘expressive (emotional) disclosure,’ ‘expressive writing,’ or ‘written disclosure therapy,’ may have the potential to heal mentally and physically” (Mugerwa & Holden, 2012, p72). I knew I wanted to use what I learned and experienced to help others. I want others to feel better about themselves and their direction in their lives. I want to see depression and thoughts of suicide

severely reduced in our society. I have had many difficult times during my short time on this earth, but I have persevered through them all, and God has been with me every step of the way. I did not realize this important development until I started writing about how God was moving in my life.

My life before I discovered writing was typical of a woman who married her love. I had children and focused on my family and ensuring their well-being. I had a very good life until tragedy struck, which knocked me so far off course that I did not know if I could ever get back on track. It was not until God introduced me to writing and then writing discovered me. Writing my innermost thoughts and fears brought me closer to God and eased the pain and suffering I had been expressing. Writing allowed me to see and know who I am outside of being a wife and mother. Writing has guided me back from the brink of self-destruction in my life and my family. It allowed me to refocus by exposing my raw emotions and bringing all that hurt to the surface.

Sometimes, I did not know how or why I made it out of a bad situation, relationship, or circumstance. It was not until I was going through the most painful time that I looked back and appreciated God for what HE has done in my life. This is the type of revelation that writing has brought to my life. When I started writing about my life circumstances, I began to see the work of God, and how He was preparing me for this journey I have been embarking upon. When I see the words on paper and read them for myself, I can see God's amazing handy work. Writing has allowed me to relive my past, the good, bad, and the ugly. It allowed me to come face to face with those demons that tried to eradicate my life from existence.

Writing Process

My writing process for this project will be more challenging than I thought when I decided on my topic. This topic is near and dear to my heart, and I want to do it justice. I will research

different writing modes but focus more on non-fiction. I want to bring more attention to writing as a therapeutic method. I want to discuss how others have used writing in counseling and therapy. Some have used writing in workshops which benefited their personal growth, and others have used poetry writing to heal.

The work in a non-fiction writing course gave me the tools I needed to focus on writing a memoir. In September 2022, I started a nonfiction writing workshop which was a phenomenal experience. As an older student at the ripe young age of 56, I am surrounded by the younger generations. However, God has instilled such a fire in my heart that I want to give Him my best. I want to push myself, my writing, and my research to show how, what, where, and when writing is a therapeutic method that will work for others. I will consider my struggles with grief, depression, and thoughts of suicide and how writing has changed my life.

When to write is just as important as what to write when writing for therapeutic reasonings. For example, writing helps me stabilize my thoughts and refocus my mind when I am emotional. Reaching for the notes in my phone or the pad I keep in my purse helps me to stay focused and also allows me to remember important talking points for my therapy appointments.

These components have given me the necessary tools to create a project reflecting my vision that writing is therapeutic.

My Vision

My vision for this project is to enable struggling people to consider writing as a catalyst to help them understand and address the issues they may struggle with. For example, my therapist suggested that I journal my thoughts and emotions. I decided to take that suggestion further by utilizing my social media platforms. There is a place in the therapy profession to use writing in

the mainstream of therapeutic process. My literary works are a testament to how my experience with writing has helped me in my therapeutic journey.

As stated earlier, my blog posts have become instrumental in my therapeutic process. However, my coursework in this MFA program catapulted my writing to new levels. My experiences, skills, and knowledge of the world of creative writing through my coursework have been superior. Innovative instructors, first-class reading material, and practical experiences have given me the tools I need to help realize my vision.

Literary Context

This literary project will primarily focus on my creative nonfiction memoir. My project will also be supported by poems I created at Liberty University.

My reason for choosing this project was the difference between life and death. My life was spared because I was introduced to a method of therapy that helped to better navigate my thoughts of suicide, which would cause harm not only to myself, my family, and my community. Instead, I could physically use the gift that God had given me to turn my life around. I can help heal myself and give back to my community simultaneously.

My culture still has a stigma about depression and mental health issues. My goal is to help end the stigma people in my culture and other cultures have concerning mental health. My grandmother did not seek help to deal with her grief when my mother died. Instead, she chose alcohol. Her decision caused so much turmoil in our family, affecting me today. I knew I did not want to drink my way out of pain, so I chose to go into therapy. The only way we can break the stigma is to continue to evolve and learn from our mistakes and the mistakes of our parents. This effort must be accomplished sooner rather than later because our lives depend on our ability to conquer our fears and preconceptions regarding therapy and therapeutic methods.

This topic became so important to me because writing provided an outlet, I did not know I needed. When I write, I can dig deeper into the essence of my soul and feel a release and relief when writing. This type of depth cannot be accomplished when vocalizing thoughts aloud. When I write, I can reveal a part of my soul more intimately to those willing to pick up an article or book and read it. When I reveal my thoughts and feelings to the public, I am putting a face to what depression looks like. I am showing others that if I can do this absolutely hard thing, so can you.

Christian Scholar

I believe the church still has a stigma with seeking therapy for depression, grief, and other mental illnesses. As a Christian scholar, I hope this project will bring another tool to the faith-based community. For example, in times of grief, we are told the typical "Christian" sayings, "The Lord needed him more than you," or "He is in a better place," or worse months later, "God told me that you had grieved enough." These prophetic sayings often hurt more than heal. It took God, prayer, and therapy to get me out of my dark place. Mental illness still dramatically affects our society, even our Christian communities.

There is a stigma in the church when it comes to depression. Prayer is an excellent method that ministers can give to their parishioners, but it must not be the only method. Writing and therapy can be an excellent way to bridge that gap between the church and mental health preventive and treatment methods.

I believe church leaders can help to erase the stereotypes and stigmas regarding how we deal with depression. The Bible instructs us to seek wise counsel. The book of Proverbs suggests, "Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future. Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand" (Proverbs 19:20-21).

I was severely depressed to the point of suicide, and I started drinking to ease the pain. I did continue to pray, but I prayed for a way out of this depressive state. At the suggestion of my pastor, I sought out therapy, and the Lord guided me to the perfect Christian therapist. My therapist led me to write as a treatment method. My pastor at the time supported my family and me in every way. As a Christian, my journey with writing as a therapeutic method has brought me much joy, and I want to share that pathway to happiness with others.

My Journey to Faith

As a Christian artist, I am responsible for sharing the gospel and what God has done in my life. My creative manuscript, “My Journey to Faith, From the Valley of Darkness into His Marvelous Light,” chronicles my faith journey. It is a renewal of my journey to believe and heal. Grief and depression turned my life upside down, and I had to put my total trust in the Lord and allow Him to guide me. The 23rd Psalm states, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (Psalm 23:4-5). There were times during the first chapter of my life when I was in the valley of darkness, overcome with sorrow, but I knew the Lord was always with me. God gifted me with these words to tell others about my journey.

Writing this narrative has allowed me the time to reflect and heal from bad memories that have piqued my life. This is a revitalization of my journey to survival, my faith in God, healing from grief and depression, and discovering how to survive and thrive. This testimony of my journey will show what God can and will do in your life when you are not expecting anything. My journey to writing this memoir was a therapeutic learning experience I would never regret. I had no idea my journey would test my faith in many ways. This memoir is the testimony of my journey out of the Darkness and into God’s Glorious Light.

Critical Paper: Therapeutic Aspects of Writing

“Nothing is more desirable than to be released from an affliction, but nothing is more frightening than to be divested of a crutch” (James Baldwin).

Introduction

Writing has become a lifeline enabling me to develop a voice I did not know I had, a voice that is strong, resilient, and fierce. Writing gave me my life back to when I thought I had nothing to live for. The black words on the crisp white paper provided strength to fight and bring others along for the journey. It is a journey I never wanted to take but did not know I needed. It was a journey I needed to travel to become the woman I am today. A memoir is a writer's story written by them and for them about a significant time frame in their lives that will also help and encourage others in their lives. It can focus on events, certain areas of importance, all from their personal experience and memories. My memoir is a historical record of my personal and spiritual growth and how it eventually helped me to heal from my grief-stricken depressive, suicidal state.

This critical paper aims to discover how and why writing, specifically memoir writing experiences, can be a therapeutic healing method. This paper encompasses two main points, The benefits of writing and the therapeutic aspects of writing. In the first section, the benefits of writing will discuss how writing can improve communication skills, memory, mental mindset, and writing to heal. Secondly, the next section will discuss how writing memoirs can be therapeutic in treating patients dealing with grief and depression. It will also discuss non-traditional writing methods, how to start the memoir writing process, and how the memoir is formed. My goal for this critical paper is to help educate how writing can be used as a therapeutic healing tool. However, why one writes is just as important as how one writes.

The Benefits of Writing

Writing is an expression that is much deeper than anyone can speak vocally. Michael Jackson, an anthropologist, and professor of world religion at Harvard Divinity School, states in his book, *The Other Shore: Essays on Writers and Writing* states, “Writing mediates relationships with others. Through stories, we create avatars who can do what we cannot do, understand what we cannot understand, and go where we cannot go” (Jackson, 2013, p. 87). Writing helps authors dig deep into their innermost thoughts, dreams, and desires. Writing allows writers to tap into issues they may have buried and forgotten about. During the writing process, the writer will come face to face with their life and life choices. This will allow the writer to face their bad choices and grant them an opportunity to celebrate their good choices.

Some writers start writing because it helps them clear their thoughts and purge any negativity hindering their life. Elizabeth Andrew, an author, and instructor of spiritual memoirs, confirms, "I have written myself out of the closet, out of depression, out of regular employment, and into work that fosters a similar passion for writing in others. And still, how writing binds the self to creation remains a mystery. I write to find out" (Andrew, 2005, p. 3). To add to Andrew's reasons for writing, many people also started writing to help others find their way. The late Mahalia Jackson recorded “If I Can Help Somebody,” a song that has inspired me over the years. The lyrics state, “If I can help somebody along the way, then my living will not be in vain” (Jackson et al., 1968). Self-help authors can write to inspire others to write themselves out of depression, suicidal thoughts, and any other challenging situation. Their efforts will be worthwhile if they can help just one person. When writers can write unrestrainedly, they can be candid and open about any experiences they want to communicate.

Better Communication

Writing is an excellent way to improve one's communication skills. In an article from the Institute of Entrepreneurship Development, a technical writer and professional editor, Casey Harward, states, "Writing is an excellent way of improving their (students) capacity to communicate in their original language while simultaneously improving the fluency of their second language at the same time. While writing, one can improve grammar, spelling, punctuation, gestures, paralinguistics, and other skills like adverbial words through the use of writing (Harward, 2022). Not only can writing enhance the writer's academic skills, but writing can also benefit the writer's career.

In a Penn State article Jordan Conrad, founder and publisher of *Writing Explained*, states, "Your writing, however, provides you an excellent way to lift yourself above the rest of the applicants. And since someone's written work is usually the first interaction a hiring manager has with an applicant, your words are your introduction. They are your only chance to make a good first impression" (Conrad, 2019). Writing will permit the writer to gain advances in their career field. This confidence will help to increase their self-confidence by building a sense of accomplishment when they can develop new ideas and navigate everyday tasks.

Improved Memory

Another benefit of writing is the ability to improve one's memory functions. Writing can help the mind retain the information it is trying to remember. In Education Week, an English and Social Studies teacher, Larry Ferlazzo, states, "Writing also improves students' reading fluency. When students have to stop and think about what spelling patterns to use when they write, they are making a deeper connection in their brains about sound and spelling patterns. This deeper connection makes it easier, and faster, for students to recall those same patterns when they read"

(Ferlazzo, 2021). Writing allows the person writing to retain information and the chance to imprint that information in their mind and memory banks. Mark Murphy, the CEO of Leadership IQ, and the author of *Hiring for Attitude*, talks about how information travels to the brain called encoding. Murphy states, “Writing improves that encoding process. In other words, when you write it down, it has a much greater chance of being remembered” (Murphy, 2022).

For those who are goal orientated, writing will help individuals accomplish those goals. The book of Habakkuk states, “For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it lingers, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay” (Habakkuk 2:2-3, NIV). Writing what you need to remember, goals, lists, and other essential things will assist in keeping them at the forefront of the mind and will aid in making the information clear. Murphy confirms, “Vividly describing your goals in written form is strongly associated with goal success, and people who very vividly describe or picture their goals are anywhere from 1.2 to 1.4 times more likely to successfully accomplish their goals than people who don’t” (Murphy, 2022). Writing not only improves the way the mind memorizes information, but it will also improve how the mind processes information.

Improve Mental Mindset

Writing affects an individual's mindset and meditative state of mind. Zachary Wright, an educator and contributing writer to the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), states that a mindset must be created for writing. He says, "Fixed mindsets are among the most sinister impediments to student growth, particularly because they are pervasive among students and teachers alike” (Wright, 2018). Frequent writing sessions will build up the mindset, especially if the writer is writing for their mental health or about something that could be challenging in their life. Christian rapper and multi-Grammy Award artist Lecrae states in his

spiritual memoir, “Beyond having a contented mindset, I developed muscles that I didn’t even know I had. We must use each “muscle” of faith and every human tool at our disposal in its proper context as God intended it” (Lecrae & Burns, 2021, p. 160). A person's mindset can affect their physical and mental health. The meditative state is vital to their overall wellness. It is a powerful way to link to the inner self.

Since to meditate means to ponder on something, this reflective writing would be a good starting point for meditation. Writing can help one reflect on issues in their life through this creative process on a deeper level. In the *Journal of Work-Applied Management*, Ruth Helyer states, “Reflection is closely tied to how we view ourselves both physically and mentally. By actively considering our thoughts and actions, we become aware of the power of reflective thinking as a tool for continuous improvement, and this obviously has implications beyond the personal” (Helyer, 2015, p22). This reflective type of writing can significantly positively affect the writer's mental well-being. This positive effect will impact and improve their mental mindset and put them in a good position for healing and restoration.

Journal writing can be a reflective writing tool of choice. Regular journaling can help one focus on a more positive frame of mind. The writer can express their feelings about their past, heal, and focus on their future. When you can get things out of your head and onto paper, it can allow you to face issues head-on. An article from Otago Polytechnic discusses a method of reflective writing adapted from Rolfe, Freshwater, and Jasper that uses three questions, “What? So what? Now what?” (Otago Polytechnic, 2021). Include “What” happened for the topic of reflection. They should include as much vital information that can be remembered. The “So what” section should consist of the problem the writer is trying to solve or dissect and how they may feel about it. The “Now what” section should include the writer's ideas for their way

forward. This is where a therapist can help the most. They can help their patients navigate their “Now what.” Their guidance helped their patients to stay focused and on track for their healing process. The article suggested questions such as: “What? What are the facts? What do you feel about them? So what? What happened this way? How does this relate to your past experiences? And now what? What have I learned? How can you apply this in the future?” (Otago Polytechnic, 2021). An example of the reflective writing process is shown below.

Figure 1

How to Write Reflectively

Use the three “W”s to write reflectively. The three “W”s are *What*, *So What* and *What next*.



Note: This image produced by Journey Cloud in 2020 illustrates how to write reflectively. Adapted from Rolfe, G., Freshwater, D. and Jasper, M. (2001). *Critical reflection in nursing and the helping professions: a user's guide*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Writing also connects the writer to their inner being and innermost thoughts. An article on Language Arts from the National Council of Teachers of English discusses reading and writing as meditation. James Moffett states, “What is new in composition are connections. Composing connects. The bits and pieces of thought, memory, feeling, and imagery already lie within, but old habits keep turning these over in the same patterns or simply ignoring them. The act of composing rearranges our store of inner material” (Moffett, 1983). The connection from writing can bring new depth and revelation into the writer's thought process. This connection can break down barriers to therapy and the healing process.

Writing That Heals

Writing can enhance one’s journey to healing. For those suffering from trauma, grief, or depression, writing can be an essential asset in the healing process. In an article in the Harvard Business Review, Deborah Siegel-Acevedo, author and founder of *Bold Voice Collaborative*, confirms:

A certain kind of guided, detailed writing can not only help us process what we’ve been through and assist us as we envision a path forward; it can lower our blood pressure, strengthen our immune systems, and increase our general well-being. Expressive writing can result in a reduction in stress, anxiety, and depression; improve our sleep and performance; and bring us greater focus and clarity. (Siegel-Acevedo, 2021).

Guided writing can significantly help with grief and depression. The session can become therapeutic when the writer decides to share their experience with others. Writing and journaling daily while being open about their feelings, thoughts, and prayers. They will begin to feel the heaviness lifted as they write about their feelings. This type of writing will also improve their positive outlook on life.

Writing can also be a means to an end for a healthy mental state. In an article published by the National Council of Teachers of English, JoAnn Campbell suggests, “I urge meditating writing teachers to combine meditation with writing to provide an anodyne for the wounds of schooling and to offer a model for healthy living” (Campbell, 1994, p.251). Starting at a young age to include reflective writing can help instill good healthy habits early in life. Writing can heal internal trauma from the past. Siegel-Acevedo states, “While it may seem counterintuitive that writing about negative experiences has a positive effect, some have posited that narrating the story of a past negative event or an ongoing anxiety “frees up” cognitive resources” This type of healing will significantly impact the life of the writer’s past traumas. It allows them to be free from stress and gives them the tools to help the writer face future challenges in their lives positively.

Memoirs

What is a Memoir?

A memoir is a personal narrative of one’s life. In the world of memoir writing, there are many choices. There are anthologies, short books, and personal essays. There are also coming-of-age memoirs, personal experiences, spiritual memoirs, memoirs of travels, and memoirs of famous or political persons. It is a matter of personal choice which form to use. Beth Kephart, author of *Handling the Truth, On the Writing of Memoir*, states, “Memoir is a strut and a confession, a whisper in the ear, a scream. Memoir performs, then cedes. It is the work of thieves. It is a seduction and sleight of hand, and the world won’t rise above it” She goes on to say, “Real memoirists open themselves to self-discovery and, in the process, make themselves vulnerable, not just to the world but also to themselves” (Kephart, 2013, p72). It does not matter the type or form of memoir being written as long as the writer is honest to themselves and their audience. It

builds trust and aids in the healing process. Writing a memoir benefits the one writing the memoir and the one reading the memoir.

As I previously stated, choosing the right type of memoir is a personal choice but also an important decision. In an article by Jennifer Xue, an award-winning e-book author and a cooperate content specialist, she states, “A memoir consists of snapshots of the author's life. Unlike a biography or an autobiography, which includes events, ideas, secrets, and philosophies that may cover a lifespan, a memoir speaks about specific parts of life that can be delivered in several chapters” (Xue, 2019). My memoir is specific to my spiritual journey, how God was present in my life even when I did not know he was working in the background. My memoir is more of a spiritual quest because God led me along this path not only for my healing but also so I can help others.

In Carol Blair's *Faith for the Journey* memoir, she discussed how God works to reach the people He needs to reach others. Blair states, "He used people, books, scriptures, music, and circumstance to meet me at precise moments in time to convince me of my need for Him” (Blair, 2016, p. xxi). God can use pain for a greater purpose beyond anything anyone could imagine. The book of Matthew states, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16, ESV). To heal from grief and depression, writing can also enable the writer to help someone else heal.

The memoir writing process is a wonderful healing journey for the writer. Richard Lischer, a professor at Duke Divinity School and author of *Our Hearts Are Restless: The Art of Spiritual Memoir* discusses the Christian memoir. In his article, *Writing the Christian Life: The Essence of Spiritual Memoir*, he states, “At its best, Christian memoir serves as a kind of reality check for our own, less literary lives of faith. The art of memoir imaginatively reprises the language and

experiences of ordinary Christians and their communities—prayer, testimony, praise, confession, doubt, and lament” (Lischer, 2015). The Christian (spiritual) memoir is like a guide written in layperson's terms that most people can relate to and glean from. The reader can use this type of advice in their everyday life. Lischer also states, “A spiritual memoir becomes explicitly Christian when it derives its literary power from the power of the gospel. It does not preach, it shows, and it does not—or should not—generalize or go soft-focus at the hard parts” (Lischer, 2015). A spiritual memoir should always be an honest account of the writer's story. Healing can occur only through that authentic and straightforward accounting of events in the writer's life. Even the most difficult memories must be honestly told.

Writing as a Therapeutic Method

The whole point of this paper is to show that writing can be a therapeutic mode. So, memoir writing can only improve the healing process. Nancy Aronie's book, *Memoir as Medicine: The Healing Power of Writing Your Messy, Imperfect, Unruly (but Gorgeously Yours) Life Story*, discusses wearing your heart on your sleeve when writing about difficult things in your life. Aronie states, “In memoir, you can't use subtext and hide the truth. If you're gonna do this, you're gonna have to deal with some tough emotions” (Aronie, 2022). Writing about your life story will be difficult, especially when dealing with grief, depression, or trauma. However, once the first step is taken, it will be a rewarding experience.

During the writing process, it can be challenging to think about the specific difficult moments of their life, but those experiences in writing will make them tangible. If the writer is in therapy, they can use writing to talk about those experiences to their therapist. The therapist can help develop a plan to start their journey to healing. Licensed psychologist Dr. Jacqueline Phifer, Ph.D., was asked why she uses writing to treat some patients. Dr. Phifer states,

“In your case, you were already doing considerable writing and sharing heartfelt posts on social media and getting very positive feedback. Encouraging you to keep a journal gave you instant access to write down your feelings and thoughts, and you did not have to wait for a computer. This way, you can make changes when you take a second look at your journal. This enabled you to dig deeper into your second look to include what you may have forgotten. This journal also was an excellent tool to use during your therapy sessions. When you came into your session, you did not have to remember that we needed to discuss” (J. Phifer, personal communication, February 2, 2023).

Writers can also use their creativity to chronicle their journeys. They can use different methods to channel their grief and depression to aid in the healing process. Many writers use poetry as an outlet. Nancy Scherlong and Laura Santner conducted a study on creative arts-based group therapy with adolescents. They found that “poetry therapy techniques and elements of therapeutic journal writing can help adolescents in groups to clarify and express issues of identity and belonging, find and use their individual and collective voices, and connect and work with one another to increase engagement and resilience” (Scherlong & Santner, 2019, p. 149).

Monique Kwachou uses poetry as her writing method. She wrote a book called “Writing Therapy.” Kwachou's poem, *I'm Writing*, examines why she is writing.

I'M WRITING

I'm writing for my freedom
I'm writing for my dreams
I'm writing this here poem
For my heart expresses the need!

I'm singing for my future
For the vision that I see
I'm singing of my heart's desire,
For the reason that I live.

I'm living for tomorrow,
And for a better day!
When dreams shall be reality.
And joy shall move sorrow away.

I'm hoping in a miracle,
Believing in a wish,
Praying God blesses me soon
And his purpose in my life fulfill!

(Kwachou et al., 2010, p 3)

In this poem, Kwachou wrote about how writing brings her joy, and that joy will replace the sorrow in her life. Writing things down makes them real and tangible. The written word brings the writer face to face with their issues or problems. It gives the writer extra time to reflect on their day and life.

Only some people are sold on writing as a therapy method. Bridgette Murry discussed Dr. Helen Marlo, a psychologist and a Ph.D. at Notre Dame de Namur University, studying therapeutic writing. Murry states of Marlo, "I get concerned that if people just write about traumatic events, they get raw and opened up and aren't able to work through it on their own." Murry says, "Her study did not, however, provide evidence that writing poses any long-term risk to people" (Murry, 2002). When my late husband died, I felt I had no purpose or reason to live. I kept thinking to myself, why am I still alive? I wanted to be buried with my late husband. However, God showed me a better way. God gave me a reason to live. Greif, depression, or a traumatic experience can drive their passion for writing.

Tara Dapra teaches writing at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, and confirms "Writers, no matter their genre, find inspiration to write from the same source: something they hear or see, or otherwise experience stays with them. They can't stop musing; they must investigate. Writing is just another form of problem-solving. Like psychology or medicine, it is a drive to understand

the human condition experientially, one that's led by emotion and instinct" (Dapra, 2022).

Therapeutic writing can help writers discover what they are and why and reveal their passions.

That self-discovery starts with just writing. Lutgendorph concluded in her study on *Journaling About Stressful Events* how writing can help increase understanding. She states, "Journaling that highlights emotional expression and cognitive processing, that is, efforts to understand and make sense of a traumatic event, may offer greater benefits than journaling focused on the expression of negative emotion" (Ullrich et al., 2022). Therapists can use the writing from their patients to help them focus on the negative aspects of the traumatic events in their lives and then guide them through those events. These writings can also assist the writer when ready to pen their memoirs.

Starting to Write

Read, read, and reread memoirs of other writers. Beth Kephart, the author of *Handling the Truth: On Writing of Memoir*, states, "Reading is equally about exiting and entering, about going away and going nowhere. I read, I am saying, and without moving anywhere, I go, into the deep, wild, sometimes contradicting, mostly illuminating language and landscape of memoir" (Kephart, 2013, p. 15). The key to writing good memoirs is to read good memoirs. While memoirs are being read, some steps should still be taken. Kephart suggests, "write what you remember, what you feel you remember, what you wish you could see but can't." (Kephart, 2013, p. 114). The memoirist is responsible for writing about the most important details of their life. The memoirist must ensure they are writing for the right reasons. Some writers can use their experiences to help others. Their writings can also aid their mental health and those of their family, friends, and strangers. Kephart suggests, "Write for the right reasons, I implore. Write real. Write with understanding. Write knowing that there are those who will inevitably walk away, and after that, there are those who will mock the form, who will dangle on their suspicions

who will attach the terms' memoir" (Kephart, 2013, p.27). If the memoirist knows why they are writing, no one can question their motives for writing, including the writer themselves.

Prayer

For the sake of this paper, a spiritual memoir is an example that will be used. First and foremost, the writer should pray to God for guidance and direction in their writing process. Philippians encourage Christians to pray about everything. "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank Him for all He has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7 NLT). Spending time with God in meditation and prayer ensures that what is written is true, good, and beautiful. An article by John Stackhouse Jr, a professor of Theology and Culture at Regent College, discusses true, good, and beautiful. He states, "For one thing, it reminds us that we typically understand the gods, and our God, not only as powerful, good, wise, and eternal but also as beautiful" (Stackhouse, 2022). Christian memoirists must ensure they are honest in what they are writing. Seeking God in prayer during the writing process will keep their focus on God and not on themselves or their situation.

Advice Of Mentors and Therapists

Many therapists will encourage their client's writing process and seek their guidance and advice when they meet for therapy sessions. This writing would ensure honest opinions about their writing and solid advice on continuing and moving forward. In her memoir, *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone: A Therapist, HER Therapist, and Our Lives Revealed*, Lori Gottlieb states, "Generally, what happens between therapist and patient also plays out between the patient and people in the outside world, and it's in the safe space of the therapy room that the patient can

begin to understand why” (Gottlieb, 2019). For many patients, their therapist is their safe place and someone they can bounce the most absurd ideas to receive honest, constructive feedback that enables them to move forward towards a healthy relationship in the world around them.

Historical Timeline

When writing your memoir, one task that should be completed is establishing a historical timeline. In a *Writer’s Digest* article, author and activist Cheryl Suchors state, “For some writers, structure appears like a bridge in the mist; for others, like me, there’s only the mist. Either way, memoir structure is as crucial as structure in fiction, and no good memoir will be able to stand tall without it” (Suchors, 2018). The memoirist should establish their structured timeline early in the writing process. As the writing progresses, the writer will fill in the gaps as their memories of past events become more evident. As they write, they reflect on past events, and their memory becomes more apparent.

Different methods can be used to structure the historical timeline of the memoir. Chronological order of events, storyboarding, sectioning, and time are some methods used to compose memoirs. The chronological order of events is the most popular method when writing a memoir. The memoirist will focus on how the events in their memoirs changed their life or perspectives. Dr. G. Thomas Cousior, a professor emeritus of English at Hofstra University, wrote *Memoir: An Introduction*, where he discusses developing the plot of the memoir. He states, “Since memoirists do not invent their plots, however, we are less likely to infer themes from what occurs. We are more likely to be interested in how an event shapes personality and identity: what choices a real person makes, what influences they detect in the formation of their character” (Couser, 2012, p. 172). The memoirist must be selective when they choose events and life situations in their memoirs.

Descriptive Writing

Creative descriptive scenes of events to help lure the reader into your space. The memoirist should give the reader a front-row view of their experience. Couser states, “So when we read memoirs, we may, among other things, witness and in some sense participate in this marvelous act of self-discovery” (Couser, 2012, p. 184). The descriptive words that the memoirist will use should be colorful and creative and invoke the reader's imagination.

Poetry writers utilize imaginary and figurative language when creating poems. In her book, *A Poetry Handbook*, Pulitzer Award-winning Poet Mary Oliver discusses imagery. She states, "imagery, more than anything else, can take us out of our own existence and let us stand in the condition of another instance, or another life" (Oliver, 1994, p. 108). When memoirists use imagery in their writing, they must use all five senses: sight, touch, taste, smell, and sound to bring their audience into their world. This type of writing will give their narrative more intensity.

Conclusion

When someone suffers from grief, depression, and suicidal thoughts, they will find any means necessary to numb or kill the pain. The Mayo Clinic says, “Major depressive disorder, or clinical depression, affects how you feel, think, and behave and can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems. You may have trouble doing normal day-to-day activities and sometimes feel as if life isn't worth living” (2022). Writing can become a lifelong gift that will satisfy the therapeutic and personal needs of the writer. As a bonus, their writing can help others in certain situations in the reader's life. As I have stated earlier, writing was the catalyst that gave me my life back. This mode of therapy can be instrumental in developing one's healthy mental health status. Writing memoirs is a method of writing treatment and a way for the writer to establish peace, happiness, and joy in their lives.

Through improved communication skills, mental mindsets help writers dig deeper and reevaluate their lives, dreams, and futures. There are many benefits to writing. Writing helps the writer to heal the broken and barren areas of tier life. Writing helps writers think clearly, enabling them to make practical decisions about their lives. Not only can writing help to heal, but writing can also lead to advancements in careers and increase self-confidence.

Improvement in memory functions is another added benefit for writing. Writing helps the writer focus on what is essential and helps them to retain that information. Keeping a journal will allow the writer to focus on developing a positive frame of mind. It allows the writer to be the catalyst in helping themselves heal and others. Reflective healing, prayer writing, and therapy are excellent formulas for success.

Memoir writing combines all the above benefits for writing. Writing my spiritual memoir helped me improve my memory and communication skills. Memoir writing can also help to improve mental mindset giving the memoirist a positive, healthy outlook on my life. I could look back on my life and realize how God has protected and carried me along the way. The memoir writing journey partnered with therapy will help the reader heal and live a healthy, productive life. The memoirist must be honest in their writing, drawing authenticity to them and their writing, enabling their readers to build trust. A memoirist should know why they are writing and their intended audience.

Creative Manuscript: From Tragedy to Triumph: The Blessing in the Storm

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

(Romans 8:28 NIV).

Note to the Reader

If you are in a state of depression and don't know where to turn, I pray that these pages and my circumstances move you toward healing and peace. I pray that my life experiences will encourage you to know that God will never leave or forsake you. God will always be there for you without failure, condition, malice, or guilt. In the following pages, I hope you will realize the Lord's pure unconditional, agape love for you and me.

Chapter 1: There Is Always Hope

*"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."
(Hebrews 11:1 KJV).*

These two scriptures have inspired and sustained me for the last six years. Sometimes I wonder whether I had faith, even the tiny mustard seed size faith. There have been many trials in my life, but I had hope. My faith has been run up and down the pole, dragged around the block, down the dark alleys, through the trash cans, and slammed back in my face. Since my faith has been through all those filthy dark places, how could I even dare proclaim to have faith and anything, especially God? I loved God, so He was supposed to work things out for me according to his purpose, but I had to have hope.

My journey had many ups and downs, but I knew I had to trust in God.

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

This scripture has become one of my favorites. It tells me that no matter what I do, if I trust in God, do not depend on myself, give God all the glory, and He will always guide me in the right direction. Sometimes, I had to put my total trust in the Lord and allow Him to show me. I have walked through some deep dark valleys. During the early years of my life, I was in the valley of darkness, but there was light because I knew that the Lord was always with me.

God Is Always at Work

When I did not know it, God was by my side working things out for me each step of the way. I had no idea that my walk, journey, and the road I would travel would test my faith in many ways, from tragedy to triumph. If my story can give hope, then this is a story that must be told and needs to be told. The Book of Psalm states,

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."
(Psalm 23:4 NIV).

Seven years ago, my faith journey was shattered into a million pieces, along with my heart. I knew I was angry at God, and I was questioning everything I learned, everything I knew, and everything I believed. I felt like I had slipped from the valley of darkness into a bottomless dark pit. The enemy grabbed my soul, and I had to hold on to what hope I had left during my healing journey. This journey has also been a revitalization of my survival, my faith in God, and discovering how to live again. God still found a way to place people in my life strategically. He always had his hands on me and was constantly at work in my life.

This testimony of my journey is what God can and will do in your life when you are not expecting anything. I knew I could not be afraid to write the personal story I knew I could not avoid because it is the story that has shaped my life for better or worse. Suffering many atrocities in my early life, I have often asked myself and God why my life was chosen to bear such a heavy burden. To heal, we must confront and deal with our past and have the power to face it head-on.

Chapter 2: The Early Years: Entering the Darkness

Motown and Loss

I grew up on The Temptations, The Jackson 5, Smokey Robinson, and the Motown Sound Machine. During a time when the Fox Theater was the place to catch all the latest acts. A time when we could play on the streets of Detroit without worry. I remember waking up early every Saturday morning in my grandparent's home listening to our favorite artists on the radio or the record player as we cleaned the house. The smell of the coffee brewing in the percolator, bacon, and homemade biscuits for breakfast filled the house. Sunday Mornings, before heading to church, we listened to James Cleveland and Shirley Caesar and a preacher from Macon, Georgia, with a high-pitched funny voice.

I was born in Highland Park, Michigan, in 1966, to two parents who initially loved each other. My mother was a beautiful woman with her coco-colored skin, big, doe brown eyes, and high cheekbones that made her look like an African queen. I lived the first part of my life in Detroit, Michigan. I do not know the circumstances of my parents' relationship, but they split about two years after my birth. I would see my father again when I was 19. My little brother was born in 1968, and my mother was to be married again, but unfortunately, my brother's father died suddenly.

About a year later, my mother was diagnosed with cervical cancer when I was five. During one of our visits to the hospital, my mother made my grandmother promise to care for my brother and me. After a short but courageous battle, my mother died a year later from the complications of cancer. A family member told me years later that my father did show up at my mother's funeral, but my grandmother threatened his life and told him never to try to see me again. My father lived in Louisville but has since passed at the moment of writing, my father

passed.

We never had much of a relationship because he refused to discuss what happened between him and my mother. There is much mystery surrounding their breakup. I have heard speculations, but I have never gotten any real answers. So, I am still in the dark about their relationship, breakup, and all parties involved have taken those secrets to their graves. My mother's death left my brother an orphan and me with the void of being fatherless. Despite my parents split, and my mother's death, my mother's parents tried their best to ensure I had a decent childhood. However, I was about to experience the first of many tragedies that would turn my life upside down.

Mama, BeBe, & Tragedy

My grandparents promised my mother on her deathbed that they would care for us and provide the best home they could. I started calling my grandmother "Mama." My grandmother was the youngest girl of 10 children, born in Warrington, Georgia. She married my grandfather, a World War I veteran from Birmingham, Alabama. My grandmother, her third oldest sister, and her husband moved to Detroit when my grandfather was offered a job at the Chrysler auto plant, and my uncle was offered a job at General Motors. My grandmother's youngest brother and his wife joined them later. This move was typical of the times because many African Americans from the South moved to Detroit because of the lucrative jobs at the auto plants, and I had relatives that worked at all Big Three auto plants.

I grew up with my second cousins, my grandmother's youngest brother, and his wife's children. They had eight children, the first four were raised with my mother and uncle, and the latter four were raised with my brother and me. My cousins were like my siblings. We spent almost every holiday, birthday, and other event together. My grandmother was very strict, so my

aunt's and uncle's home were the only place I could stay overnight. We lived a good life, I had people who loved me, and I loved them, but that did not stop tragic events.

My grandparents did their best to raise the two of us, but their love and protection could not stop the actions of others. One evening I was left with a family friend who was supposed to care for me for a few hours. Her husband molested me. I never told my grandmother. Instead, I just buried that experience and never spoke of it. My grandmother was lovely unless you crossed her or hurt those she cared about; deep down, I knew she would kill that man.

As sweet as she could be, my grandmother was not someone to be played with; if she threatened your life, it was a promise. Tyler Perry has a character in his movies affectionately named "Madea." Madea is a tough, no-nonsense woman who pulls no punches. Tyler Perry states of his character in an interview with Fresh Air, "Madea is "exactly the PG version of my mother and my aunt, and I loved having an opportunity to pay homage to them. She would beat the hell out of you but make sure the ambulance got there in time to ensure they could set your arm back" (Gross, 2012). To give people an example of the type of person my grandmother was, I tell people she taught Madea everything she knows.

The Glass Door and God's Grace

There are instances in my life where I can look back and know that God kept me from death, hurt, harm, and danger. One of the bright spot moments in my young life was my grandfather, whom I called "BeBe" and loved with all my heart. He died when I was in the 7th grade. My grandfather was one of the male figures in my life that I trusted. When I was a toddler, he would come home from work and pick me up.

He would say, "Hey, Baby."

I could not say, Baby, so I said, "Hey, BeBe."

BeBe and I spent much time together playing Dominos and the card game Tunk. One of my fondest memories was when he would take a brown paper bag and tear it open, spread it out on the bed, and that became our Domino playing table.

In the summer of 1972, at six years old, I experienced the first of God's many miracles in my life. Some of these events I was told when I was much older, and some things I clearly remember. My grandparents bought me a cute pink car for my 6th birthday. It was a two-door with shiny pink paint with white daisy decals on the front hood, and the car doors were trimmed in silver. This car had pedals on the floor that enabled the vehicle to move forward. I loved that car.

We lived on the top floor of a four-family flat on Detroit's west side. It was a beautiful sunny evening, and I wanted to take my car out for a spin. My grandfather worked for the Chrysler auto plant and typically worked long days, and he had just gotten home from work. "BeBe, please take my car out. I want to drive it," I pleaded.

"No, baby, not yet; I am tired," as he looks down at me with weary eyes.

Nevertheless, I was adamant about driving my car.

"Pleased," I begged. "I have been good; you can ask Mama," I insisted.

"No, Baby, maybe later," he said sadly.

I was furious, so I pouted and stomped off to my grandmother.

I asked, "Mama, can I go to the park and play with my friends?"

"No, I need you to stay close because dinner is almost ready so you can play in front of the house," she explained.

My jaw clenched as flashes of red filled my head. Infuriated because my request was denied again, I stormed out the apartment door.

How could he tell me no?

The stairs in our four-family flat were very steep, and you had to be careful going down the stairs. When I would get to the bottom two or three stairs, I had the habit of jumping off the last two or three stairs to the floor at the bottom. At the bottom of the stairs was a massive wooden door that led out of the building. On the outside of the wooden door was my nemesis, a glass door. Still highly upset at my grandparents, I started stomping down the stairs.

In my anger, I made the brilliant decision to be bold and mad, so I jumped from the fifth stair to the bottom landing. My foot slipped when I landed on the bottom, and I reached out my hand to break my fall, and I hit the glass door. As I quickly pulled my hand back from the hole, a circle of sharp glass shards was sticking out from the gaping hole like a disconnected spider's web. When I pulled my arm out, I did not realize I had cut my arm on the glass until I looked down.

I cut into my arm just above the elbow, down to my wrists. I could see blood and a thin white vane jumping near my wrist. I screamed for my grandmother, but she could not hear me screaming.

"Mama! Mama, can't you hear me calling you," I screamed.

Then my grandmother came running down the stairs with my grandfather and uncle.

She yelled, "Oh, girl, what have you done!"

Tears streaming down my face, I said, "I am sorry, mama. I did not mean to break the glass."

"Don't worry about that; we have to get you to the hospital," She assured me nervously.

"Larry, go upstairs and get me a clean towel," she commanded my uncle.

My uncle ran up the stairs for the towel. My grandmother wrapped the towel around my arm tightly.

“Let’s go,” she said to my grandfather.

My grandfather picked me up, and we jumped in the car and headed to the emergency room. 1972 in Detroit was a turbulent time for the Motor City. It was just a few years following the 1967 riots. An article in the Detroit Free Press said, “Violence surged in Detroit after 1967, and paranoia took hold across the tri-county region. The city buzzed with rumors. Heroin use was growing. Gun sales tripled in the city in the first several months after July 1967. Mayor Cavanagh called it “an arms’ race.” Gun clubs flourished in the suburbs; crime jumped in Detroit: Homicides, which were 281 in 1967, even with 43 riot deaths, hit 389 in 1968 and in 439 in 1969” (McGraw, 2017). Racial tension was still high, and the city was still trying to recover from the riots. So, a trip to the ER in 1972 Detroit could be chaotic.

When we arrived at the ER, my grandfather carried me in, and I sat with my grandmother, waiting to be seen. The ER was very busy. People were coming in with all sorts of injuries and illnesses. As we were waiting, a man was rolled in on a gurney. He was a black man with a short afro. I remember he had on blue jeans with a red shirt. I could see the gunshot holes in his shirt. He had gunshot wounds all over his body.

“Lolita,” a nurse called out.

My grandfather carried me past the man on a gurney, and I looked into his eyes. His eyes were full of pain and sadness. Even at a young age, I could feel this man's pain, and I was afraid for him, me, our city, and our world. As we walked past, I asked my grandfather what was wrong with that man. My BeBe told me to close my eyes and pray for that man because he will need it. I closed my eyes and started praying, but I will never forget his eyes.

We finally made it to the exam room, and my grandfather left my grandmother and me in the room. We waited for a long time because the doctors saw all the critical cases first. The nurse

came in and put my arm into a basin full of liquid, and we sat for about an hour.

“Mama, I am tired, my arm hurts, and I want to go home,” I insisted.

As she was preparing to speak, the doctor entered the room. He was a tall man with salt and pepper hair with the bluest kindest eyes I had ever seen. I immediately felt safe. That was the biggest setup!

The doctor said, “We will need to check to make sure there is no glass in the wound.” When I looked at the nurse, she held a huge giant needle.

I hope that is not for me!

I looked at my grandmother.

“Noooooo,” I screamed. and screamed

“Mama, please don’t let me use that needle on me,” I begged.

My grandmother looked down at me as she held me tightly so the nurse could perform the procedure. I pray that the medical profession has found a better method of detecting glass in a wound.

“Lolita, the nurse has to do this to make sure there is no glass trying to hide in your arm,” my grandmother told me.

She said, “Close your eyes.”

I did as my grandmother said and closed my eyes. The nurse lifted my arm out of the solution, and she poked the inside of my arm with the needle-like device.

I screamed.

The pain was the worst I have ever felt in my six-year-old life. She poked my arm several times to look for any leftover glass shards. This pain felt like large bee stings inside the flesh of my arm, stinging me a million times over. I know I must have died and come back to life several

times.

Okay, I passed out.

When that horrific procedure was over, the doctor returned to examine me. That old, gray-haired man with the ice-blue scary eyes did not seem very kind anymore. I glared at him with so much rage as he took my arm.

He said, "I am very sorry that you had to go through all that pain. But it was necessary." Then he had the nerve to smile at me, but I still did not like that man.

"You have a very lucky lady," the doctor said as he looked at my grandmother.

He showed her a white vein in my arm that was jumping.

"This is a major artery, and if the glass had cut the artery, your granddaughter would have bled to death," the doctor explained.

*Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."
(Isaiah 14:10, ESV).*

The doctor finally said that I was ready to go, and he needed to finish up. So, the nurse passed the doctor what looked like a needle and some thread.

Oh no. Not again!

I believe a look of horror came upon my face because my grandmother and the doctor started smiling and laughing. I did not know what was so funny. However, I did notice that my arm did not hurt anymore.

The doctor said, "When the nurse tried to detect glass in my arm, she injected me with numbing medicine. The medicine would take away the pain as I put the stitches in her arm."

However, I still clenched my teeth and stared right at my arm while he poked the needle in my arm, and magically I did not feel a thing! I was so exhausted that I fell asleep during the process.

He was finished as I woke up, and my arm was wrapped up. Six hours later, I was discharged to go home.

I remember most of this story because of God's grace. Genesis 50:20 states, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20, NIV). In the middle of all the turmoil that was going on in my city, in the hospital ER, or in my life, God has always been there to pull me up and see and guide me through the tough times. I was about to come face to face and meet God and accept into my life, I think?

The Glass Door of Horror

There it was from my childhood, the glass door of horror.
It made my heart jump every time I had to walk through it.
I try to remember every moment of that dreadful day,
As my mind will permit.

My grandpa (BeBe), my first love, walked up the stairs from work.
His brow was moistened by the heat of the day.
Of course, I jumped up into his arms,
I demanded, "*BeBe, please take me out to play!*"

Greeted by my grandpa's imposing, empathetic voice,
"*No, baby, not yet; I am tired,*" he sadly said.
As I left his arms, I ascended the stairs,
My jaw clenches as flashes of red fill my head,

Like a mouse lured to the trap,
Little did I know I was to meet my fate.
Step by step, creak after creak,
The glass door of horror was ready to celebrate.

As I thought, "How could he tell me NO!"
The closer I came to meeting my doom,
I met the third stair and landed with a thud.
As the angrier grew, like air in a balloon.

I came face to face with my tormentor.

My hand hit the smooth, clear, clean, spotless surface,
As it dove inside the glass door of horror's clasp.
It grabs my arm with the web of its teeth,
As I yank my arm from its wrathful grasp.

Relieved to be free from the fangs of this contraption,
Looking down at my arm, this horror was not over yet,
As I looked up with horror-filled dreadfulness,
As its shards of bloody teeth smiling is an image I will not forget.

My newly free arm mangled, brown flesh gaping open,
red insides, my vein is like a white shoestring,
jumping like an overstretched rubber band.
The pain finally found my mouth as I screamed.

With the creak of the door and thumping down the stairs, they came,
Scooped up in strong arms of steel through the door to the hospital.
A red, wet, soaked towel swaddles my arm as a baby carried away.

My BeBe, My Grandma, with me cushioned in the middle.

Stealing one last look at the horrible scene of terror,
The massive door that stole my flesh still provokes me.
Adult me saw the glass door of horror met a wrecking ball,
finally destroyed!
I am now forever free!

Chapter 3: Life Changed Forever

*"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."
(Jerimiah 29:11).*

God has the perfect plan for our lives if we follow the path, he has set for us. This task is easier said than done. I have always believed in and loved God, but I don't think I loved Him with my entire heart, mind, and soul. My abuse at a young age forever changed my life. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, in a 2020 Child Maltreatment report, states, "There are nationally 618,000 victims of child abuse and neglect. The victim rate is 8.4 victims per 1,000 children in the population (ACFHHS, 2020, p 20). This same report states that most victims knew their perpetrators. "According to states' commentary, this category includes non-related adult, non-related child, foster sibling, babysitter, household staff, clergy, and school personnel" (ACFHHS 2020, p 27). The psychological effects of childhood abuse can follow children into adulthood with lifetime consequences. These numbers are horrifying. I wish I could say that my experience with abuse ended with that first abuse incident.

Introduction to Jesus

I grew up as a tomboy, not wanting to draw attention to myself. When I was 12, my aunt and uncle, my grandmother's sister and brother-in-law, took us to church every Sunday. I attended New Harmony Missionary Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan. Despite the rules and procedures in my childhood church, I loved New Harmony and my church family. The leadership at New Harmony was "old-school." We had all the elements of the Baptist Church. There were the Deacons, Deaconess, Missionary Board, Nurses Guild, Usher Board, Choirs, and the Pastor's Aide. We had to dress a certain way. There was a sign at the entrance of our church that said a woman could not wear pants. The only youth program was Sunday school,

and to participate in any ministry in the church besides Bible Study and Sunday school, you had to be a baptized member of the church.

I have always had abandonment issues. My mother died, and my father left; there were moments when I wondered where God was. I always felt the need to belong to something. I wanted to participate in everything, and my church's tradition was that if you wanted to participate in any ministry, you must be baptized. I loved music and wanted to sing in the choir and participate in the Junior Usher Board ministry. I made up my mind that I was going to walk up to the front of the church and say that I wanted to be baptized so I could participate in those activities.

I followed the church's rituals for years and believed everything I was told. These rituals and traditions led me to what was the start of what I like to call my "mock relationship" with Christ. I felt it was unreal because I did not commit for the right reasons. I said all the right words, but they did not come from my heart. I remember sitting in Sunday service waiting for the pastor to extend the invitation.

The pastor asked, "Would anyone like to accept the Lord Jesus as their personal Savior?"

This my chance, stand up.

I stood up and walked down to the front of the church. I walked past my aunt and the other smiling women who served on the Nurses Guild wearing white nurses' hats. I passed the church mothers who looked at me approvingly in their fancy church hats of all different colors, shapes, and sizes. I sat down on the first pew of the sanctuary.

Pastor Scott asked, "Have you come forward on your own?"

"Yes, Sir," I proudly said.

I was embraced by the church's mothers, and other members followed. It was the best

feeling in the world. The following Sunday, my little brother also joined the church. On the first Sunday in October, we were both baptized. As I walked to the baptismal pool, my thoughts were all over the place.

Am I doing the right thing? What does this all really mean?

I remember stepping into the warmth of the water in my all-white everything. Pastor Scott reached out his hand, and I stepped forward and faced the congregation.

“Lolita, have you decided to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Savior?”

“Yes, I have.”

“You have come to this decision on your own accord?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Lolita, I hereby Baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

As I went down into the water, peace came over me, and as I came out of the water, everyone was smiling and clapping, and I began my life as a follower of Christ. I felt safe with my new church family and felt accepted and loved. I was learning about God and the role he plays in my life. However, I felt as if something needed to be added.

Faux Christian

I continued this "faux" relationship with Jesus throughout middle and high school. I would attend church, attend choir rehearsals, and participate in all the church activities. I went through the motions and checked all the "I do this because I am Christian" boxes. Looking back, I do not believe Jesus was truly in my heart yet. I now know that some of my childhood church's practices, methods, and beliefs were solid, biblical, and for my good, but some were inaccurate.

As a young Christian, you can't make life-altering mistakes without a proper and solid

biblical foundation and support based on the TRUTH of the Bible. You can traditionalize and govern people so much that they will turn away from what they need the most. This is why I abandoned church in college and young adulthood. Proverbs state, "*Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it*" (Proverbs 21:6, NIV). I always remembered the good poured into my heart, mind, and soul. Although I strayed away from God and the church, I eventually returned. God had a plan for my life, even if I didn't know it. God knew His plans for me and never gave up on me.

Mr. R

At 16, I was finally starting to understand who I was as a young Christian woman until I was introduced to Mr. R, a man from my mother's past. He pulled up to my grandmother's house in a giant black Cadillac, and during the '80s, this type of vehicle was a sign of success. He was a tall, nice-looking man with skin the color of dark brown wood and teeth that were so white they glowed.

I would be proud to introduce Mr. R as my dad.

My grandmother told me Mr. R had been engaged to my mother before she died. The phone rang.

"Let me take this call upstairs. You two talk," as she climbed the stairs to her bedroom.

Mr. R entered the living room and sat beside me on my grandmother's white and green couch, which was covered in plastic, and as he sat, the plastic squeaked.

"You are so beautiful," Mr. R said.

"You are the spitting image of your mother".

"Thank you, I get that a lot," I said.

I loved it when people compared me to my mother. Mr. R put his hands on top of my hands.

“I want to take your dad's place and give you everything you deserve.”

This notion excited me because I always wanted a real daddy.

Why am I trusting what this man is saying? I don't know him. But he must be okay. My mother was going to marry him and make him my father.

However, this man was not even close to a father figure. As I sat there, Mr. R began to rub my back while talking to me. When I looked up at him, he motioned me to keep quiet by putting his index finger over his lips as he touched me. I was so terrified that I just sat there. On the other side of the couch, I picked a hole in the plastic to take my mind off what was happening. I was once again a victim of someone else's actions, and my life was never the same. I broke away from him, ran upstairs to my bedroom, closed my door, and silently broke down. When Mr. R had left my grandmother's home, I came out of my room and acted like nothing had happened. My grandmother asked, "How was the visit?"

I told her, “It was okay, but he seemed weird.”

My grandmother said, “Really? He wants to pick you up and take you shopping and out to eat next week.”

Mortified, I told her, “Mama, I don't want to go. He makes me uncomfortable.”

I am unsure if my grandmother understood what I went through, but she never questioned my decision. God placed it in her heart to accept my decision and tell him he needed to move on. I knew my grandmother would never put me in harm's way, but I never told her what happened because she would have killed Mr. R, and I was afraid to be left alone. As much as these situations inflicted havoc on my life, God would not let anything destroy me. Would He?

Opening of the Flood Gates

The incident of sexual abuse from Mr. R opened the floodgate of memories from my

younger childhood. I remembered every horrible detail of my attacker and what he did to me when I was five. I was headed down a path of personal destruction due to the memories that confronted me. I became a magnet for evil people who meant to hurt and harm an enemy that wanted to destroy me and me. Wrong decision after terrible decision seemed to plague my life. If a young man truly liked me, he wanted something from me because I was not worthy of true love. I was vulnerable to bad, destructive relationships and people. Everyone was out to get me, and no one loved me. However, somehow deep down, I knew that was not true. I was acting out of desperation and reacting to the pain plaguing my life, and no one understood.

Except someone did understand. God knew what I was going through because He was with me. Sometimes I was in my room in the dark listening to the radio, with the only light coming from the strobe light of my Bee Gees record player. My soul hurt. I would cry and yell out of desperation. But God loved me. He kept me from greater evil. I knew that at 16 years old, God protected me. If my mother had married that monster, I could have been subjected to many years of emotional and sexual abuse, or worse; I could have lost my life. The book of Deuteronomy states, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6, NIV). I would not know how true these words were until much later. But I know that God has never left me or let me down.

When I look back on those dark moments in my childhood, I still see how God protected me. Those incidents of abuse only happened once, but it was enough to change my life. I always wonder what would have happened if my mother had married the man who attacked me. God protected me from something awful. However, during this time in my life, I could not see God's protection, and these moments had a lasting impact on my life, future

relationships, and trust in God. I started feeling like I was the doormat of the world, and I would need Him now more than ever.

Chapter 4: Collateral Damage: More Challenges

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing, you may discern what the will of God is, what is good and acceptable and perfect.
Romans 12:5*

My mother died from cancer when I was five. Not long after her death, I was molested by a family friend, and then at 16, I was molested by the man my mother was engaged to marry. I was left behind in my brokenness as collateral damage. I tried to fill the void from being fatherless with other things instead of trying to fill that void with Jesus. I trusted no one, not even God. I felt that God failed me, and He failed my family. I felt like I was living a life without any purpose. Emotionally, I was a shell of the person everyone saw. No one knew the pain I was going through. I could not show how I was doing because it would affect my grandmother's mood, and she could start drinking. However, God strategically placed people in my life to help me. Looking back, I realized that God had protected me from self-destruction. Life had become dark and gloomy, and I was trying my best not to be consumed by the darkness surrounding me. I had an excellent high school experience because God strategically placed my grandmother and others in my life.

Living With Grief

My grandmother never dealt with her grief when my mother died. She would often drown her sorrows in alcohol. My grandmother was tall and slender. She was black and part Cherokee Indian and had beautiful caramel skin with a great sense of fashion and style. As a result of her grief, she scratched the top of her head so severely that she started going bald. But that did not stop her sense of style. She wore carefully styled wigs that looked fabulous on her. My grandmother was a tough woman and a hustler. She did what she needed to ensure her family was well cared for when times were lean. A relative once told me that in her younger days, my

grandmother would play cards or dice if it meant putting food on the table for her family. My grandmother was a beautiful lady who loved cooking and caring for others. Her sweet potato pies were famous.

I remember many days and nights sitting at our small green-gray Formica table crammed in the corner of the kitchen, and I would help her prepare the holiday dinners. My grandmother, her sister, and her sister-in-law would split the holidays. She was in charge of hosting Easter Dinner. I still smell the turkey or ham in the oven and the collard greens simmering on her olive-green stove. My grandmother taught me to make her famous mac and cheese, sweet potato pie, cornbread dressing, and baked beans. During those many cooking sessions, while we were shelling peas, picking collard greens, or making homemade jams, jellies, and preserves, I would be filled with words of wisdom and funny stories about her and her nine siblings' childhood.

My grandmother would make mac and cheese in a big, huge black stock pot, where she would boil and drain the noodles. Then we would put all the other ingredients in the pot. We would then pour that pot into a pan, top it with more cheese and butter, and bake in the oven. It was so good. I was always the official cheese grater. (Thank God for today's modern technology and the Kitchen Aid Stand Mixer with a greater attachment.)

“Be careful, girl, don't skin your knuckles,” she would call out.

“Lita, make sure you keep stirring that macaroni. I don't want the noodles sticking to the bottom of that pot and burning. Nobody wants to eat macaroni and cheese that taste burnt.”

“Yes, ma'am,” I continued to stir the enormous pot.

My grandmother once told me about when she and her younger brother got in trouble because they were playing with a magnifying glass in the sun to see if they could start a fire. They had a

barn cat growing up, and just as they got the fire going, the cat came past, and its tail caught on fire and ran into the barn and set it on fire.

“Chile, Uncle Walker, and I got into so much trouble because the barn nearly burned down. We had our tails tanned that day. And we never saw that cat again!” she chuckled.

We would laugh and laugh and have a great time cooking and talking. My oldest daughter would enjoy and experience that kitchen table time experience with my grandmother when we visit for the holidays. They would sit at the kitchen table, make homemade sausage and biscuits, and watch the Price is Right. My grandmother was my heart and tried her best to care for my brother and me after our mother died. But it still was not enough.

After being traumatized by my late mother's boyfriend during my sophomore year of high school, I felt my life was in a downward spiral. However, I played the part of an average teenager well. I smiled, I was respectful, and I did what I was told for the most part. Most people did not know that my grandmother was a full-blown alcoholic who sometimes went into fits of rage when she drank.

*No one knew the turmoil I was feeling inside every day.
No one knew of the raging fire that consumed me every moment.
No one knew that I was slowly dying.*

Slowly Dying

I had many instances where my grandmother was acting out. I remember my grandmother had been drinking one night and wanted to go to the grocery store. I did not want her to drive in a drunken state because she had been stopped before, and the police just led her back home and gave me the keys. I remember following her around as she talked and pestered the store's people. The people in the store said she was funny, and most of the workers knew her, but I was so embarrassed as a teenager.

My grandmother was not a horrible person. She suffered an enormous loss when my mother died, so I knew I needed to protect her. I did not always understand her behavior and sometimes resented her, even to the level of hate. However, now I know her pain. When I lost my late husband, I was so instilled with pain that I wanted to numb that misery by any means necessary, and I did not care about anyone else.

When I was in high school, I had less-than-stellar grades. I was never the smart or “popular kid” in high school. However, I was a well-behaved student whom everyone liked. I was a nice girl who never caused any problems, with a few friends in many social groups. I had friends who were jocks, cheerleaders, band members, and science and debate clubs. I was always trying to find myself and have yet to find exactly where I fit. Later in life, I realized I was trying to conform and fit into a world I was never designed to live in.

Life with my grandmother was not always easy. Her grief was deep, sorrowful, and full of pain. She never received therapy because, during the '70s and '80s, therapy was not seen positively by the African American Community.

“Whatever happens in our house stays in our house. Don’t go running around telling our business,” She always told me.

So, she did not utilize therapeutic methods to deal with her grief. Instead, she turned to alcohol to numb the pain. Pastors and ministry leaders used to tell us to pray things away, and God will help us through our trouble. Prayer does work, but sometimes, when you are in so much pain and grief, you need someone to help you clear your head so you can hear from God.

My grandmother's life never got better. She spent her life in mourning for my mother. Losing a child is something that we don’t want to think about. Nevertheless, I understood what

she was going through, and she still provided a good life for my brother and me. She loved us and provided what we needed. Our lives could have been worse if we had ended up in the foster care system. God always provided a ram in the bush, and angels planted along the way.

Chapter 5: The Angels

*For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.
They will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.
(Psalm 91"11-12, NIV)*

I was like many Christians who gave their lives to the Lord at a young age. My childhood church was very strict, but this was the first place I met God. From the age of five, I was raised by my grandmother after my mother passed away. My grandmother did not attend church because of something a minister said to her during her husband's funeral. I was told that this minister commanded her to "go back" to church, and my grandmother was livid about this order. From then on, she was done with the church, but she always ensured my brother, and I attended church. Remember, I said God strategically placed people in my life when I needed them the most.

One set of angels was my aunt and uncle, my grandmother's sister and brother-in-law took my brother and me to church every Sunday. Something was missing in my spiritual life, but I did not understand what was missing. Due to my lack of interest in the church, I struggled to build a lasting relationship with God, and going off to college did not help. However, God continued to have his hand in my life.

I loved attending church, but it was more of social time, spending time with my friends, and singing in the choir. Attending once a week for Sunday school did not prepare me for life in the real world. I tried to fill the void from being fatherless with other things instead of trying to fill that void with Jesus. Because of something that happened in my life, I trusted no one. Not even God. I felt that God failed me, and He failed my family. I felt like I was living a life without any purpose. Growing up without a mother or father and having an alcoholic for a grandmother significantly impacted my life. Then in the 7th grade, my grandfather passed

when I needed the most support. He was always my rock and the one I could always depend on.

In the early 80s, I entered my teen years with a massive void in my life and heart. During those years, I felt alone and missed my mother the most. I do not remember much about my mother, but I know what I missed by not having her in my life. My grandmother tried her best but never stopped grieving for her daughter and husband. My brother was in and out of the juvenile detention centers. I was playing the good, obedient granddaughter.

For the most part, I got into typical teenage-type troubles: missing curfew, talking back, and not doing chores or other things I was asked to do. I was the one that took care of my grandmother after a drinking binge, the one to chase her down when she tried to drink and drive, and the one who was there when she was having one of the many emotional moments of my mother. Emotionally, I was a shell of the person everyone saw. No one knew the pain I was going through. When my BeBe died, I felt a huge part of me died with him. He always seemed to understand me and was my shield from harmful things. When BeBe came home from the hospital, I thought he would be all right.

“BeBe, are you okay,” I asked.

He said, “Yes, baby, I will be just fine.”

We talked for a little while, and then I went to bed. BeBe was not fine. He died a few days later, and I felt all alone again. I was grieving my mother, father, grandfather, grandmother, and the normal life I could only imagine. I could not show how I was doing because it would affect my grandmother's mood and drinking. Thank God for my cousins and more angels in my life.

Growing up, we spent a lot of time together. We were more like brothers and sisters. We spent most of our holidays together. My Aunt Lucy and Uncle Walker were the perfect married

couple. They had eight children, and I was nestled between the two sets of four children. They were all excellent students, as were my role models growing up. I wanted to be just like them.

On many evenings at their home, we would sit in their front room lined up on the stairs and sit on the floor to watch the only television they had in their home. Sometimes my aunt and uncle were in a playful mood, and I caught a glimpse of what it was like to have a healthy relationship with a man. I knew one day I wanted to have that type of relationship. When it was time to go home, I never wanted to leave. I felt a sense of normalcy whenever I spent time at my aunt and uncle's home. I would pretend I was their child, and my cousins were my siblings. However, I eventually had to return to normal and the brokenness of my home.

My drama and English teacher, Mrs. Perryman, was a lifesaving angel during high school. She took me under her wing when I babysat her three children. She lived in Southfield, Michigan, in a big, beautiful house. Her home was all white with African-accentuated decorations from her travels. One of my favorite pieces was a platter that hung on the wall. It was brown and tan with a ring of elephants around the rim of the plate and some fruit trees in the middle. Mrs. Perryman said that that plate came from one of her trips to Africa. She was well-traveled, intelligent, and beautiful. She was every student's favorite teacher. I was honored to become her right-hand girl and always hang out with her.

Mrs. Perryman wrote and directed many productions at our school and our community. I became her stage manager, working behind the scenes. These plays were my first taste of working on a major production, and I loved it. However, I was not up to the task. I was timid and would not speak up.

"Lolita, if you are going to work for me and be my right hand, I need you to become me." "How can I do that," I asked.

“First, I need you to learn and know your job. This way, no one can question your knowledge. Then I need you to speak out and give instructions with the confidence and boldness I know you have inside of you.”

I built confidence daily with Mrs. Perryman because I learned to speak for myself. I remember how I would spend my weekends at her home as she went to galas, screenplay premiers, and many important events. I watched her prepare and was in awe of how she carried herself. She imparted so much wisdom to me during those crucial teenage years.

“Lolita, you can do anything you put your mind to doing. But you must work hard and fight for what you want.”

She also had a great way of encouraging our cast before our productions.

“Small minds can’t comprehend big spirits. To be great, you have to be willing to be mocked, hated and misunderstood. Stay strong.”

Mrs. Perryman was so excited and proud of me when I earned my bachelor's degree in 2017 and graduated with honors following Michael’s death. I will always carry those words of wisdom and her memory in my heart. My thoughtful, talented, and beautiful mentor died in April 2020 from Covid-19. She left a lasting impression on me that completely changed my life. Mrs. Perryman’s influence set my life on a different path, and I hope this sweet angel realized the lasting impact she had on me and thousands of other students that have crossed her path. In those that love her, her legacy will forever live on. I will never forget her teachings as I continue to my collegiate years, or should I say a couple of years.

Chapter 6: Collegiate Darkness

*Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they are?
Matthew 6:26 NIV*

In 1983-1984, when I was entering my senior year, I knew I had to escape from my toxic environment. I wanted to attend college, but I could have had better grades. I was still learning to survive in this reality. I came from a family that valued education. I grew up with cousins who were high achievers and had successful high school careers and then went on to college. I had always admired them and wanted to follow in their footsteps, but I needed better grades. I celebrated when I got a C because I knew I had worked hard to earn that C. I started to inquire about college.

My guidance counselor, Mr. Jones, was absent from his office. Whenever I went to the Guidance Center, it was the same story. The Guidance Center, decorated in our school colors of blue and white, had blue chairs with a giant stuffed polar bear in the corner. Polar bears were our school mascot. Mrs. Jackson, the secretary, gave literature about local universities in the area: Michigan State, University of Michigan, Wayne State, Oakland College, and many others. I wanted to attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), notably Clark Atlanta University, but I needed more information. I would walk into the Guidance Center with my dreams and aspirations in my head and walk out with my head held down and another excuse about why my guidance counselor was not in his office.

I would always start with, "Hello, I am here to talk to Mr. Jones about my college applications."

Mrs. Jackson would reply, "I am sorry. Mr. Jones is not in today." "Do you know when he will be back?" I would ask.

“No,” Mrs. Jackson would reply.

This interaction at the Guidance Center would go on every week. I got tired of seeing Mrs. Jackson and thought she got tired of seeing me. However, God always has a ram in the bush, and finally, someone intervened. God always has a way of taking care of me. A week later, I was getting fed up with the runaround from Mr. Jones because he was messing with my potential future. I burst into the Guidance Office, highly upset.

“Good morning, Mrs. Jackson; I am back again looking for Mr. Jones. I have been here several times. I have some questions about colleges, and I need your help. Please tell me he is in today.”

But before Mrs. Jackson could disappoint me again, a breath of fresh air entered the lobby that day. Another angel in my life was Mrs. Paulette Fitzhugh. She was the guidance counselor for last names beginning with H-K, and my last name began with W. She was many students' favorite in the Guidance Office, but I was assigned to someone other than her. Mrs. Fitzhugh was a beautiful, stylish African American woman. I remember that day clearly as she wore a red blazer, and a beautiful tan scarf, with swirls of red, green, blue, and gold. When Mrs. Fitzhugh walked into the room, she had a personality that would command attention. Mrs. Fitzhugh had been listening from her office.

“Baby, what is wrong? Why are you so upset?” Mrs. Fitzhugh asked.

With tears flowing down my face, I said, “Every time I come in to see Mr. Jones, he is never here. I am trying to get some answers to apply to schools.”

“Baby, calm down and come into my office so we can talk.”

Defeated, I walked into Mrs. Fitzhugh's office, heaving a huge sigh as I slumped into one of the oversized chairs that faced her desk.

Mrs. Fitzhugh said, "I know you are frustrated at Mr. Jones, but what if I added you to my group so I can take care of you? How would you like that?"

Smiling under my tears, I said, "Yes, ma'am! I would love it."

Finally, someone will listen to me!

I was transferred to Mrs. Fitzhugh's counseling group, and she helped me navigate the college application process. But the road to getting me into college was not all sunshine and roses.

Mrs. Fitzhugh said, "Lolita, you don't have the grades or the study skills to make it at the university level. You should consider going to community college first."

She was right. However, I wanted to avoid hearing what Mrs. Fitzhugh had to say.

I told her, "Ms. Fitzhugh, I have to get out of my grandmother's house. I can't live there anymore."

She said, "Well, Lolita, if you are that determined to go to school, I will do all I can to help you. But I want you to know that I don't think you are ready, and you are definitely going off to school for the wrong reasons."

I admit I was excited about the potential of going away for school, but I was also nervous about Ms. Fitzhugh's warnings. I thought going away to school was my ticket out of the house, so when Mrs. Fitzhugh suggested that I take the SAT and ACT, I was determined to do well on those tests. I had to get a good score. After taking those tests a couple of times, I received a score that allowed me admittance into Oakland University's Project Upward Bound Summer program. This program allowed students to stay on campus during the summer and have a guided college experience. Peer group sessions, actual courses in math, English, science, career goals, and guided study sessions rounded out my summer experience. More excitingly, I was finally getting out of my grandmother's house! It was my first time away

from home, and I was excited. However, I had to talk with my grandmother before leaving for the summer program.

“Lita,” My grandmother called. “Ma’am,”

“We need to talk before you leave this house,” my grandmother said firmly. “Mama, I need to finish packing. Uncle Walker and Phill will be here any minute.”

“Girl, if you don't bring your little butt in here right now, I will send them back home, and you won't be going anywhere! Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

I went into my grandmother's room and sat on her bed, where we had many conversations. I loved spending time with my grandmother in her room. She always had the best snacks, and we would sit on her bed and watch television. She loved green, and she had green drapes over the window, and her westerns were always playing on her television. My grandmother was a smoker; her room always smelled smokey, and the white walls had been yellowed over the years from smoke residue. As I would call her, Mama always had treats in the small refrigerator she kept in her room. Later in my life, my oldest daughter would love to spend time in her great-grandma's room for the same reason.

“Lita, I know you are going off to college, and we need to discuss a few things.”

Oh Lord, here we go.

“I know you will live away from home, but you must remember you are there for school.

You don't need to worry about boys. Just focus on your schoolwork and not some good-for-nothing boys. You hear what I am saying to you?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

My grandmother added, “Because you know I will come up to that school and drag your

behind home!”

“Mama!” I yelled.

“Don’t mama me! Play with me if you want to.”

“Can I go finish packing now?” I asked. “Girl, go!”

Under my breath, “I won’t miss this.” “What was that?” Grandmother asked. “Nothing, mama.”

“Humph, it better not be. You are not too old to get your behind beat! Do you hear me, girl?”

“Yes, ma'am," I said.

Whew, that was over!

I finally made it to school and moved into the dorms with my roommate for the Project Upward Bound Summer Academy. My roommate and I got along well and supported each other. We both loved to cook, so we snuck in hotplates and electric skillets to cook our home-cooked meals. One night we whipped up some potatoes and onions, cubed steak (all we could afford as college students), and fried corn. You could smell the aroma of the onions down the hallway.

"Something sure smells good in this hallway." We hear some other students as we giggle from behind the closed dorm room door.

There is a hard knock on our door.

“What are y’all cooking in that room.”

“It smells good, and I am hungry,” said another student.

“We don’t know what you are talking about. You better go to the cafeteria!” We yelled back.

"You two need to stop cooking in this building like this. You know the cafeteria food does not smell like this." They continued as they walked away, as we laughed and ate our delicious

dinner.

This scenario went on the entire summer whenever we decided to pull out those pots and pans.

My summer was successful, and I made some good friends and started college with skills and tools to help me succeed. However, there were some dark days ahead, and I will need to hold to my faith in God and remember that he still loved me no matter what.

Chapter 7: Undecided

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.
In all your ways, submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.
Proverbs 3:6 NIV*

Once I went to college, a new world was opened to the somewhat sheltered existence that I had lived as a child. The parties, drinking, and other college activities around me did not help my faith journey. I did not attend church or any religious events when I was away at school. I always knew that God was directing my path. He was a significant part of my life, but, at the time, I felt that if I totally submitted to Him, I would miss out on the fun of my youth. I made many mistakes during this time, and those bad decisions significantly affected my future.

Living life can be challenging, and I have faced many challenges along this road. I want to have my plans my way, but God has always had His path that I'm supposed to follow. At 18, I was trying to navigate my and God's plans and was off to a good start. My summer at Oakland University's Project Upward Bound Summer Academy was successful. I made some good friends and started college with skills and tools to help me succeed. I thought I was ready for this next phase in my life. However, there were some dark days ahead. I would need to hold to my faith in God and remember that he still loves me no matter what detours or roadblocks lie ahead. I had yet to learn to trust God's plan for my life. So, with every mistake, misstep, detour, and roadblock, lessons were learned, and God strengthened my faith.

I started my first year hoping and dreaming of becoming a computer programmer. I loved computers but was not fond of math, so my advisor strongly suggested I change my major. We talked about a few ideas I thought about when I was younger. I sat in front of his desk as he asked these probing questions.

"Lolita, what did you want to be when you grew up," he started.

“I wanted to be a medical examiner like the character from my favorite show “Quincy MD.”

My cousin and I were going to go into business together. We were going to run a funeral home.

I would be the medical examiner, and he would be the funeral director.”

“That was an interesting plan,” he states. I started laughing.

“Yes, I was going to send all my business his way. But I also wanted to be an entertainment lawyer.”

“Both of those careers require years of school and math.”

That was not going to happen.

“Let’s review some other possibilities,” he suggested.

We talked a little more, and I realized that my dreams of programming or becoming a medical examiner would never happen to me. I had no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up. I was classified as undecided.

My roommate, Jenny, was sweet, and we got along great. We lived in a two-room suite with three other girls. Our room had two beds, and our suitemates’ room had three. Jenny’s side of the room was nicely decorated in orange and brown, with pictures of desert and mountain scenery on the wall. On my bed, I had a handmade quilt with squares from my cousin's clothes my aunt had given me for graduation, which I cherished. I had posters of my favorite entertainers like George Michael, Culture Club, Michael Jackson, the Jacksons, and Prince on the wall. I learned that as much as Jenny and I were different, we were the same. We were both freshmen in college away from home for the first time and excited about it.

Jenny and I both had 8 AM classes and were excited to start our first official day of college. As we walked across campus, it was an early warm sunny morning, and the sun was warm on my face; the beauty was breathtaking. I was from the city, so I was in awe of the

beautiful pond with the ducks floating on top of the water. Flowers and park benches surrounded the pond. Students sat casually on the benches laughing and chatting as they waited to start class.

Yeah, this is a good life, and I am ready.

But I was not even close to being ready for this change.

I walked into my first class, held in a large auditorium. I got there early, so there were plenty of seats. I decided to sit in front of the hall to pay close attention. I slowly walked toward the front of the class, passing by and smiling at the seated students. Some smiled back, and a few looked at me as if I was weird. The room steadily filled with students the closer it got to 8 AM. A podium was at the front of the class with a giant black chalkboard that said, “Welcome to Biology 101.”

Why did I take an 8 AM class and biology at that?

At precisely 8 AM, the professor entered the auditorium, and as I looked around, I there had to be 300 students in the class. My professor introduced himself and started talking non-stop for an hour.

“Today in Biology 101, we will discuss the blah blah blah...” I spaced out. I tried to take notes but felt lost and out of my element. When I looked down at my notes, I knew I was in trouble because I could not understand my writing. It looked like a chicken dipped its feet in ink and did the *Electric Slide* across my notebook. I left the class filled with doubt, and the hope I felt earlier that morning was gone. I had a couple more classes that day, leaving each class with a dark cloud over my head. Maybe Mrs. Fitzhugh was right, and I was not ready for college life. During the semester, I discovered that even if I was not academically ready, socially, I was prepared for all the college life had to offer. I wanted to be at every party and social event I

could attend. I did, and my grades suffered tremendously. I thought the curse of bad grades from high school was following me into college. So instead of dealing with my academic issues, I decided to ignore them and party. I could have made better decisions. One night, my floor had a progressive event, where a room prepares a drink, and everyone on the floor progresses to each room until they reached the last room. Jenny and our suitemates prepared some fruity concoction in a blender with gin.

We started at our suite and moved to the following two suites. We lived on a coed floor, and the guys in the third suite prepared a drink called the Trash Can. They took a trash can lined with a plastic bag. They filled it with ice, fruit juice, and different types of alcohol. As we walked past their suite, they said,

“Hey, beautiful ladies. How about a fruit drink for some lovely ladies.”

Jenny and I giggled. I asked, “What is in that can.”

They stirred their trash can concoctions, laughed, and handed us a cup.

“We can’t tell you our secret recipe.”

We took the cups and drank their concoction, and everything started to spin. Jenny and I did not remember making it past their room, but by the grace of God, we woke up in our room safely in our beds. Things could have been so much worse, and God protected Jenny and me that night. However, God had much work ahead of Him with His daughter. God tried to throw me a life ring, but I avoided His maneuver.

I had a resident assistant on my floor during my second year of college. She was a lovely and energetic girl who led a Bible study during the week in her room. When asked to attend church services and groups, I ran in the other direction. I fought against everything God tried to put in my life to help me. “Hey, Lolita,” she would say as I walked by her door. “You know

I have Bible Study in my room tonight."

"Thank you," I would tell her, "But I have plans tonight."

"Okay, Lolita," she would say, "maybe next time."

"Ummm, sure," I would nervously say.

"My door is always open," she would yell as I moved on.

She did ask me to come to her room to talk one night. As I walked in the door, she had some Christian music playing, and I noticed her Bible on her table.

I have been tricked into a Bible study.

We sat down on the small couch.

"Lolita, I sense that you have had a troubled life, and you are searching for something," she said.

How does she know this?

"My life is okay," I unconfidently said.

"Lolita, I just wanted you to know that God loves you, and He will love you through whatever you are going through," she said.

She took my hand, prayed for me, and hugged me.

She said, "Remember, I am here if you need to talk."

God continued to place people in my life to remind me that He was watching over me.

One night in my dorm room, my world came crashing down. I left a note for a friend and took a handful of pills. I was rushed to the hospital, had my stomach pumped, and was put in touch with a therapist. Therapy only works if the person receiving the treatment is open to it. In the African American community, therapy was not seen as a positive method of dealing with problems. We believe you prayed, and God took care of it all. God has the power to take

care of anything and everything. He strategically placed people in the mental health field to assist His people. He did this for me, but I was not ready or willing to hear anything from a therapist or God. Ultimately, I had to leave college due to poor performance and personal issues. It would be years before God placed me in a position to continue and finish my education. Sometimes goals and dreams change, as do the desires of one's heart, and mine had to change.

Chapter 8: The Desires of the Heart

*“Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart”
(Psalm 37:4).*

The desires of my heart seem like such a tall tale for my life. In the fall of 1986, at 19, I discovered that my father knew where I was my whole life. His mother's aunt lived next door to my grandmother's sister, who took me to church. One evening my aunt and grandmother asked me to visit my aunt's home. When I walked into my aunt's living room, the lady from “next door,” Ms. Agnes, was sitting on her screened-in front porch with an older gentleman I did not know.

“Lolita, my aunt, started, “Do you know who this is?” as she pointed to Ms. Agnes.

“Yes, ma’am, that is Ms. Agnes,” I answered.

“This is your Aunt Agnes. This is your father’s mother’s sister,” said my Auntie.

I just sat there with my mouth wide open.

“What you talking about, Auntie?”

“And this is your uncle Richard, Aunt Agnes's brother,” she said.

At this point, I am still in shock at this news. I don't hear anything about my father's side of the family for 19 years, and then they are suddenly front and center. They were from my father's family, who lived in Louisville, Kentucky. I later discovered that my father's mother had been coming to Detroit from Louisville for years and watched me grow up. In an attempt to get to know my father’s side of the family, I decided to leave Detroit and move to Louisville. This decision was the best one I have ever made.

Life in Louisville

When I arrived in Louisville, I met a family that looked like me. I found out I had

another brother and two sisters. I was met with hugs and "We were wondering when you were coming," and I was wondering,

Why didn't you come to see me?

I wish I could say this was a happy reunion, but there were problems. My sisters and I never developed a sisterly relationship, but I love them with all my heart and hope to establish a real relationship someday. But you see, God did not bring me to Louisville to see my family. He had other plans in mind.

***“And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”
(Phi 4:19, ESV).***

It is strange how God will put the most unlikely people in your life at the time when you need them the most. The following summer, I started adjusting to my dysfunctional little life in Louisville. I developed a close relationship with my brother, Leroy. I also bonded with my aunt Patricia and her kids, Marc and Antwone. We all lived in my grandmother's home and got along beautifully. They were the reasons that I felt wanted and loved in Louisville. My Aunt and I had long talks about life; she always gave me excellent advice. They were my lifeline, especially when other family members were not so kind, and we all remained close. The enemy will use people without knowledge to knock you off your God-given path. I had an aunt who felt I was wrong to say “no” to her children when they asked something of me. One time she became angry and pulled a butcher knife on me. I had never been so upset and scared in all my life! I ran into the house, hoping to retaliate. Thankfully, my grandmother stopped me because if I had gone back outside, my life would have never been the same.

Eventually, I did forgive my aunt and moved on with my life, but this was the first time I learned that everyone in your family is not always applauding and cheering for your success. My father was a successful businessman who owned three beauty salons in town. When I

finally met my father, he said,

"LeeLee, we can't change the past. All we can do is work on the future."

I was so happy when he gave me a job in one of his shops. I was more than ready to do that to establish a relationship with my father finally. The enemy put up every roadblock imaginable. Instead of my father being remorseful for never trying to see me, he blamed my grandmother. He came up with multiple excuses for why he never came for me. I would never allow anyone to interfere with my relationship with my child. We never really got along, and he always found some reason to "lay me off" from work. No matter how hard I wanted our relationship to work, I don't think he could break free from his past.

***"The LORD'S loving kindness indeed never cease,
For His compassions never fail."
(Lamentations 3:22, NASB).***

God was preparing to intervene on my behalf. I was a strong and very independent young lady and decided it was time for me to find a "real" job outside of my father's shops. I started checking at the unemployment office. I was in that office at least three times a week. An employee spoke to me every time I came into the office. This day she pulled me aside.

"I see you come in here a few times a week for a month now."

"Yes, ma'am, I am trying to find a full-time job," I explained.

Since there was no online job posting, she reached into her desk drawer and pulled out this index card.

"I have not put this job out on the board. You go to this address and tell them we sent you."

She gave me the card for a temporary position at the Veteran Administration. The interim position turned into a permanent position. I have been in government service for over 25 years. God was truly working through these obstacles in my life.

I met my future husband in the winter of 1988, the day after New Year's. He was a Private in the U.S. Army named Michael Law. We met at the Fort Knox Enlisted Club on a whim because my cousin was dating his roommate. I stayed the night at my cousin's house. She wanted me to go to the Enlisted Club, but I did not want to go.

"I do not feel like going. I don't like going to any club," I said.

"Girl, they have some fine men there, and they are all in the military," She excitedly told me.

I was from Michigan, and we did not have military bases near us, so I was unaware that military men were such a "hot" commodity.

Sigh

And my boyfriend J is stationed there and has a single roommate. My eyes roll to the back of my head because I am uninterested. I had always said I never wanted to be married and would die with my maiden name on my tombstone.

God had other plans and a good sense of humor.

"My mother will not let me drive her car because I don't have my driver's license, but she will let me go if you drive if you go," she pleaded. "Fine, I will go," as I caved into her pleading. "You will have fun. Now let's go get ready," she said. So, we get ready to leave for the club. My aunt's car was a beige, large Cutlass. But it got us to where we wanted to go, or so I thought.

The drive to Fort Knox is about 40 minutes away. We get to this little town outside Fort Knox called Mauldragh. In their town of Mauldragh, a gigantic hill separates Mauldragh from Fort Knox. This hill is all rocks, dirt, and trees, and no houses were along the road then. We drive halfway up this hill. My aunt's car breaks down as we pull to the side of the road. Since this was the world before cell phones, we had to wait for a vehicle to stop.

"Girl," I said. "Did this car just stop on this hill?"

I can't believe this; I knew I should have stayed home!

We wait on the side of the road for about an hour and a half before someone stops and gives us a ride to Fort Knox.

"J will give us a ride home when we get there," she said.

We finally arrived at the Enlisted Club, and they were closing in 30 minutes. I danced with some random guy and took a seat at the bar. My cousin and her boyfriend walked over to me with his roommate, Michael Law. He was so handsome with dark chocolate skin and the biggest smile.

My cousins did the introductions.

"LeeLee, this is Law, J's roommate. Law, this is my cousin LeeLee. She is from Detroit."

Those enlisted typically respond to each other by their last names. He shook my hand and said with a strange but familiar accent he said, "Oh, you are from the big city,"

I love his smile!

"Yes, I am," I said proudly. I can tell from your accent that you are not from Kentucky.

He laughed, "I am from Queens, NY."

"I knew it," I said excitedly.

"What do you know about New York."

I know a little about New York, I said with a slight smile.

"My Aunt Katie is from Brooklyn"

He just smiled.

My cousin told J about what happened to her mom's car and that we needed a ride home.

"My car is in the shop, he said."

Michael piped up. "I can give you a ride home."

"All the way to Indiana," I asked.

“How will you get home then.”

He had a point.

We accepted his ride home, and J rode with him. My cousin and I climbed into the back seat, it is covered in books and paper.

“Excuse my car,” he said.

"I am taking correspondence courses."

Cute and smart. Okay, Lord.

My cousin and I teased him on the way back to Indiana about his car, but we eventually fall asleep in the back seat. When we got to my aunt's house, my cousin invited them both into the house. She and J went into another room, and Michael and I sat on the couch and talked for hours. We had so much in common and agreed to see each other the following weekend. Well, we saw each other every weekend after that for three months.

I remember talking to my grandmother (my father's mother) about Michael. She had not liked anyone I dated before Michael, but she loved Michael. My whole family loved Michael, and I think they loved him more than me; I would joke with them. He just fit right in with the family like he was supposed to be there. He would come down on Saturday, and Grandmama would let him stay overnight on the couch. She would have Sunday dinner, and not only would she make his plate, but she would also give him a plate to take home.

“I know when you get back to the barracks and the chow hall is closed, that’s it!”

“No more food,” she said.

Michael visited one Saturday, and my grandmother called me into her sitting room.

“LeeLee, I like Michael.”

“I know you do, grandmama,” I agreed.

“I think he is the one you are going to marry,” she said.

“Grandmama don’t say that so loud he will hear you,” trying to shush her.

“LeeLee, I know what I know, and he is the one.”

“Okay, Grandmama,” I gave in.

My grandmother was not overly religious, but I know she had a relationship with the Lord, and I am sure they had a good laugh about Michael and me. Michael and I fell in love and were married three months later by a minister in my grandmother’s home. It was a small ceremony with our family and Michael’s best man. My brother gave me away because my father did not attend; he never met Michael until months after we were married.

Later that August, I became pregnant with our first daughter, whom we named ShaRonda. She was the light of our lives. My sassy grandmother was diagnosed with leukemia, and I did not tell her I was pregnant. When we went to the hospital to see her, she knew. I was having a rough pregnancy, and she looked at me, and Michael and she said,
"You all think I am stupid."

We tried to look shocked. “What do you mean, grandmama,” I said.

She said, “I know LeeLee is pregnant, but she and the baby are going to be all right.”

That connection.

My grandmother went home the be with the Lord shortly after our visit. But somehow, I know that she met her great-granddaughter.

Married Life

Michael and I were so young when we married, and we had some struggles; but for the most part, we were very happy. We loved each other and settled into married life. Our first home was Fort Knox, KY. We lived in this cute one-bedroom apartment right outside Fort Knox. We

wanted to move into base housing, but we were put on the waiting list.

Meanwhile, getting used to life as a married couple was not easy, but we managed, and I loved being married. It was a blessing to know you have someone who will always be in your corner. You support each other through the good and the bad. We are supposed to work things out instead of giving up. We wanted to break our family's pattern of marriage dysfunction. So, we molded our marriage on the successful marriages in our families. Uncle Walker, Aunt Lucy, Uncle Homer, Auntie Perk, Uncle Billy, and Aunt Vickie all had long successful marriages with one thing in common. They put God in the center of not only their marriages but the center of their lives.

We were elated when I found out I was pregnant with our first daughter, but I had some complications, and my doctor placed me in a high-risk category. I was working at the Louisville VA, and the trip was almost an hour each way and sometimes much longer with traffic. My doctor did not want me to make the trip daily due to my high-risk status. With my aunt's consent, we decided that I would stay with her; Michael would move back into the barracks, and he would stay with us on the weekends. We would both be close to our jobs as we waited to move up on the post-housing list. My aunt Claudette was another one of my God-sent angels. She took such excellent care of me during my stay with her. It was a God-sent to us. I was severely anemic during this pregnancy and had to take several iron pills to elevate my iron levels.

“LeeLee, I know how I can get you off all those iron pills,” she told me.

She said, “Do you like liver?”

“Yes, I love liver.”

“Well, I am going to cook liver and onions every week, and when you go back to the doctor, your iron levels will be normal.”

I don't know about this, but I will try anything.

I ate liver and onions twice a week. Once at my aunt's home and again at the VA. During my next doctor's appointment, the doctor checked my iron levels, and my iron was almost within normal range, and I went from six iron pills a day to one. He told me to keep up the excellent work but scale back to one daily pill. So, of course, I ate my aunt's liver and onions!

Our first baby, a healthy girl, was born in late March, right after Easter, and we could not be happier. This life I was living was probably my first taste of normalcy. I decided I would be the best mother and wife I could be. God had blessed me with a good and faithful man who loved me. We vowed that we would always be together to raise our daughter.

We were determined to break the bondage of divorce that plagued both our parents. We took our vows of "Until death do us part" very seriously, and now that we had a child, this was even more important. What I did not know was that in the future, this statement would test my faith and shake my world to its core. Sometimes the desires of our hearts don't match up with God's plans for our lives. Sometimes we have to learn to readjust to operate in the detours of our lives. I remember the story of Job from the Bible, and I was getting ready to walk in his shoes. We were about to come up against some significant detours and roadblocks on this faith journey.

Lord, have mercy on my little family.

Chapter 9: Seven-Year Detour: Faith Tested

*“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”
(James 1:2-3).*

The War in The Gulf

We left Fort Knox, and our little family of three was excitingly headed to Germany. But our plans were changed by the Gulf War. The Army packed our house for our first official move as a military family. We were going to Bamberg, Germany. Michael was traveling ahead of Ronda and me to secure housing, and we would stay with my grandmother.

However, when he arrived, he was told he was headed to the conflict. Ronda and I settled into a routine at my grandmother's home, and I sat on pins and needles. Ronda developed a close relationship with my grandmother while we were there. I depended on prayer and my family as the war started. It was the first time a conflict was televised in real-time. I was clued to the television in my grandmother's living room as CNN delivered the start of the war. My grandmother was headed up to her bedroom as the bombing started.

“Don’t fight y’all,” my grandmother pleaded. But it was too late.

“Mama, they have already started.”

Lord, please protect Michael and all our service men and women.

I was moved to tears along with everyone else in America as Whitney Houston sang the National Anthem at the start of the Superbowl. I remember there was so much pride in our country during this time. Way before the electronic revolution Michael and I depended on letters to keep in touch. Most of his letters were upbeat and encouraging because he did not want me to worry. I included pictures of Ronda and me whenever I could get them taken and developed. (Yes, way before smartphones.)

My grandmother and I did not see eye to eye during my stay, and I loved her, but Ronda

and I needed our own space again. We were arguing a lot, and I did not know what Ronda to see either of us in a bad light. I prayed for a way out. I made some calls to Fort Knox and Ronda, and I headed back to Kentucky.

*“So do not fear, for I am with you.
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you.”
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
(Isaiah 41:10, NIV).*

When God makes a way, He makes a way, and I was about to experience how the military takes care of its own. Ronda and I went by Greyhound Bus to Fort Knox, which had its on-bus station mostly for recruits. When we arrived, we were picked up at the station by someone from ACS (Army Community Services) and taken to temporary housing until we could get accommodation on the post. Two weeks later, we had housing and our household goods. We did not have our vehicle, but we did. I do not need one.

When the Gulf War started, the military bases rallied around the families left behind and provided many services to help. ACS was critical in providing transportation, financial, and emotional support to spouses and family members during this time. I was so impressed by their efforts I started volunteering to help. Ronda was able to spend time with other kids, and I was able to spend time with adults helping my community. I was responsible for creating and distributing baby bundles to new mothers, assisting spouses at the commissary, and riding in the transportation van to assist the families. There was a need because many new mothers were alone due to the deployment.

During one of our runs to the commissary with a spouse, I was saddened by her circumstance. As I was helping her to check out, I realized that she did not know to write a check or what was in her account. When I returned this information to my supervisor, she

immediately started a new program to assist spouses with basic financial needs. I enjoyed my time at Fort Knox's ACS program. ACS had done so much for me and Ronda, I felt it was my duty to give back. This time I spent serving the military community was just the beginning of a lifetime of service.

When the Gulf War was over, Michael was allowed to return to the States because Bamberg was closing, and he received orders to Fort Carson, Colorado. We spent about four years at Fort Carson, where we made some close family-like connections that I still have today. My aunt, who took me to church, always talked to me about finding a church home. We found the right church home at New Ministry and started serving in different ministries. I sang in the choir and worked with the children, and he was in the men's ministry and served as an usher. Life was good, and I thought I was finally finding my way back to God. We spent almost five wonderful years in Colorado; however, the enemy was still busy and constantly testing our faith.

Pastor Gloom, the pastor of our church at New Ministry, made my family his target. Later, we discovered that he had his own set of issues that spilled onto his congregation. Living Waters Church employed me as their secretary. Pastor Gloom called to ask me to do something I thought was unethical, if not morally wrong.

"Lolita, I need you to get me the names, phone numbers, and addresses of the deacons and trustees of the church."

I told him, "I cannot give you that information due to the Privacy Act. I could lose my job, and it would be wrong." He sighed heavily.

"You will not get into trouble; I need that information to help Pastor Friend."

"Sir, you will need to find that information another way because I cannot help you." I pleaded.

Pastor Gloom was friends with the Pastor Friend of Living Waters Church. He was experiencing some difficulties with his congregation. When I told him I would not help him, he treated my family like we were gum on the bottom of his shoe. He would go out of his way not to speak to us and ignore us on many occasions. Thank God Michael was selected for recruiter school a few months later, and we left Fort Carson. This experience was my first experience of “church hurt,” and it would take me away from the church for the next seven years.

The Frozen Blessing

We spent three years in Batavia, New York, from 1996 to 1999, at an Army recruiting station. Growing up in Michigan, I had never seen so much snow. We were affected by something the meteorologist dubbed the "Lake Effect Snow Machine." According to the National Weather Service, "Lake Effect snow occurs when cold air, often originating from Canada, moves across the open waters of the Great Lakes. As the cold air passes over the unfrozen and relatively warm waters of the Great Lakes, warmth and moisture are transferred into the lowest portion of the atmosphere. The air rises, clouds form and grow into narrow band that produces 2 to 3 inches of snow per hour or more" (US Department of Commerce, 2018). One weekend, we had 24 inches of snowfall in 24 hours, which set a record that has since been broken several times over the years.

Thanksgiving of 1997, we decided we wanted to be with our family. Usually, I would cook, and we would have a house full of people over for the day. We spent this Thanksgiving holiday with my grandmother at her home, and Michael's mom flew in to celebrate with us. We had so much delicious food to eat. My grandma's famous sweet potato pie, turkey, ham, roast, mac & cheese, collard greens, chitterlings, cornbread, and my Aunt Katies renowned chocolate

cake. We ate well and visited with family and friends. It was one of the last holidays that we would spend at my grandmother's home.

When we traveled to Michigan from Upstate New York, we always drove through Canada, and it shaved about four hours off of a nine-hour trip. On the news, we saw a storm headed to Michigan, so Michael decided that we should leave a day early to beat the storm. They were only expecting rain. We did not know God was preparing to work a great miracle in our little family's life.

We did not consider that Canada tended to be colder—God's Grace.

After we prayed for the trip, we set out on the road in our Ford Bronco II and crossed into Canada. We were having a great trip listening to Stevie Wonder CDs, and I was reading as I would typically do on a long drive. As we were driving along, I started to notice that the rain was freezing on the window.

"Michael, do you see this," I asked.

"Yes, it's a little colder here," he explained.

We drive for another hour or so, and the roads start to freeze. There are three lanes on this highway. The left lane we were traveling in was covered in ice, and in the far-right lane, I could see the tire track grooves in the ice. As we continued to travel down the road, our truck fishtailed a couple of times on the icy road, and my anxiety started to kick into high gear.

"Michael, you need to get in the right lane; there are grooves in the ice," I said nervously.

Finally, he says,

"Okay, let me get around this truck."

But this was no ordinary truck. A huge white 18-wheeler semi-truck was next to us in the middle lane. I started ringing my hands as he tried to get ahead of this truck. As he slightly increased his

speed, the truck began to fishtail again. As he attempted to regain control, the truck started to turn toward the right side of the road. As I looked up out of the passenger side front window, we were so close all I could see was the front grill of the semi and the man in the cab wearing a white baseball cap. The next thing I knew, the truck started flipping across the highway.

"Jesus, Jesus, Jesus," were the only words I could say.

We flipped about three times and landed on the right side perfectly on the embankment facing traffic.

On this crowded icy highway, the lane that we were trying to make it to, the lane that had grooves in the ice, the lane that was filled with cars, was miraculously empty when we flipped and crossed it.

I sat still for a few seconds, thinking I must be dead. The cold, moist air hit my face, and I realized the windows were all broken. I heard Ronda crying in the back seat, and the only thing I could think about was getting to my baby.

"Lita, wait," Michael yelled.

"Mommy," Ronda cried.

He thought there was a ditch below the embankment and was trying to prevent me from falling.

"Mommy"

I had to get to my baby.

When I opened the door, I stepped out without thinking, and my feet hit the frozen grass of the embankment. I tried to yank open the back door, but it was stuck. I must have been fueled with adrenaline because the door flung open with the next pull. I grabbed Ronda and hugged my baby so tight.

All I could say was, "Thank you, Jesus, Thank you, Jesus," repeatedly.

I looked her over, and she only had a small cut on her head where something must have hit her from the truck flipping.

“Are you okay, baby?” I asked.

"Yes, my head hurts, Mommy," she said in her tiny little voice.

A few seconds later, a couple pulled up behind us.

More angels. I was about to find out about God's divine protection.

This couple got out of their car and rushed over to us. They took Ronda and me to their car as the police and emergency vehicles pulled up. I looked back at our vehicle as we walked back towards the car. All the windows were broken out except for the front windshield, and all our luggage and belongings were strewn across the road. I embraced the warmth of their car, holding my baby, rocking back and forth, weeping.

“Thank you, Jesus, thank you, Jesus, Thank You, JESUS.”

Our angel got into the car with us. After a few moments, she asked,

“Are you a believer?”

“Yes, I am.” I quickly said.

“Can I pray for you,” she asked.

“Please,” through the tears.

As she prayed for us, I felt a peace come over me.

Thank you, Jesus.

***“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”
(Philippians 4:7).***

As she started talking to us, I realized God's grace protected us on that freezing, cold Friday afternoon.

She began. “We were behind you for a couple of miles, and we saw your truck fishtail a couple

of times, and I started praying for you.”

Thank you.

She went on.

“When we saw your truck turn in front of the semi-truck, we thought you were gone, and it was over.”

God's Mercy

“But the next thing we know, you were rolling across the highway and landed on the embankment, and I just praised God,” she said.

God's Grace

My family should not be here today. The devil meant to take us out on that freezing November afternoon on a highway in Canada. Thank you, Jesus; God had other plans. Our only explanation was that as we turned in front of the semi-truck, we kept turning narrowly, missing the truck. Our flipping across the road saved us from being t-boned by the semi-truck. God's protection kept us safely inside our truck, and no vehicle hit us as we flipped! There were no lives lost on the highway that day. The police said that if the semi-truck had collided with us, none of us would have survived. We finally returned home and walked away from that accident with minor cuts and bruises.

While in Batavia, NY, we had our second daughter, Morgan. In February of 1999, Michael received orders again. This time we headed to Baumholder, Germany. We were finally headed back to Germany, where we spent the next three years. In Germany, God used my neighbor, Jenny, to do some reseeded in my life. Jenny loved the Lord, and whenever we talked, she would mention how much God loved me. I was present at her baptism when she gave her life to the Lord. That was the first time I had been in a church in several years. The

seed she planted was being cultivated and watered by the Lord. I believe my heart started to soften.

Our time in Germany strengthened me as a wife and mother and the four of us as a family, and I inadvertently was reintroduced to Christ. It was always the four of us against the world. Military life forces you to make family wherever you go. The saying is, "Home is where the Army sends you." There has never been a more accurate statement. Through our military career, God had strategically placed people in areas of my life when I needed them the most. He had never failed me and never forsaken me.

In September 2000, my grandmother was called home to be with the Lord at 89. She was finally going to be reunited with her daughter and her husband. We flew from Germany back to the States to bury her. We were met by Michael's mother, Hattie, and his father, Skipp, who came from New York to support us. I was at my home church, where it all started with my family. I was asked to sing at her service, and the current Pastor of New Harmony, my choir director when I was young, mentioned how my spiritual life had come full circle. When I sang at her funeral, it was the first time Michael or anyone in my family had heard me sing a solo. It was also the first time I felt this gentle tug from the Lord.

I hear you, Lord, but my God saw me.

In the winter of 2002, tragedy struck our family again, and God called Momma Hattie home. She lost her battle with breast cancer, and we returned to the once again States, this time to bury Michael's mom. This time we were headed to New York. In August of 2002, my family and I left Germany and headed to Kansas, where I currently live. Michael was upset because he would be working in a job outside of his field as a tanker. I learned that God always has a reason for everything He does, and this move was no different.

Life In the Land of Oz

We settled into life in the Midwest. Ronda was 14 and in the 8th grade, while Morgan was four and starting preschool. Michael started to like his job. He traveled a lot, but we made it work. I started working at a hospital and met Dawn, with whom I had an instant connection. She and her family became our family. Dawn was attending the Gospel service at the Chapel on Fort Leavenworth, and she invited me to church. I turned her down several times, but I did attend a Black History program where the dance ministry she was a part of would be dancing. I met many people from the community I am still friends with today; they are more like family. More seeds were planted along this dark road.

God was indeed up to something.

A year later, Dawn and her family left Fort Leavenworth. During another talk with my aunt, she asked me again if we had found a church. We have had this conversation many times over the years.

“Hey, my sweet niece,” she would always start.

“Have you and Michael found a church home for you and the girls?”

I always answered, "No, ma'am, I am not ready."

She finally told me, "Lolita, you have to stop putting your faith in man and put your faith in God."

Here we go again.

“I know you were hurt, but you must trust God and forgive those who hurt you. You are only hurting yourself. Those people will keep on living and forget all about you,” she said.

She was right.

But Jesus said, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

(Matthew 19:14).

Ronda, my oldest daughter, had some friends who attended the Gospel service, and we were friends with all of their parents.

She said, "Mom, you have been discussing attending church. We should go to the Gospel service because you already know a lot of people."

So, on a Sunday in 2003, while Michael was on a trip for work, the girls and I went to our first service at CPGS (Collective Protestant Gospel Service), and we have never looked back. They have become my family away from family. I loved the Gospel service, and once again, my family and I attended, got involved, and served in the church. We finally had a real church family. This church was a Spirit-filled, praying family of God. I started feeling like I had found what I had been missing.

However, there was always this void.

In 2004, I rededicated my life to Christ during a women's weekend at our Sunday service. During that service, I let go of many things that kept me in bondage. But this was only the beginning. During a women's retreat a few years later, I encountered Jesus. We had to spend some time alone during our morning devotional time. Sitting in the retreat center chapel, I told God how angry I was at Him for the terrible things that happened in my life. I did not understand why He did not stop the people that hurt me because I was helpless to do so myself.

At that moment, I asked for His forgiveness and forgave myself.

At that moment, my heart was filled with Christ's love for me. It was always there.

At that moment, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that God loved me.

It was at that moment that the great void was filled.

I was ready to move forward with my life.

In 2010, I knew I wanted to return to school for my undergraduate degree. I always remember how my cousins inspired me toward higher education. I enrolled at the local community college while I prayed for God to guide me in the right direction. One day I received a postcard in the mail. A young man on the front of the card was holding up his Bible, with a caption that said, "*This is my textbook.*" It was a postcard for Regent University. I contacted Regent and began my seven-year quest toward my bachelor's degree. I earned my BA in Biblical and Theological Studies. My daughters made fun of me by telling everyone that I was getting a degree in Jesus. My time at Regent was one of the most rewarding times of my life. I loved being in school, learning more about the Scriptures, the church, and their history. It was very fulfilling.

Medical Blessing

In 2012, we saw God work miracles in our oldest daughter's life. Ronda was a collegiate athlete attending school in Oklahoma. She suffered a knee injury that required surgery. The surgery was successful, and Ronda was on the road to recovery. One morning, a week after her operation, I was sitting in my supervisor's office when Ronda called her. She informed me that Ronda was crying and that I needed to go home. When I arrived home, Ronda was having difficulty breathing. She has a history of asthma. I called her surgeon and described her symptoms. The doctor said she could have PE (Pulmonary Embolism).

I did not know the meaning of PE.

He said that we needed to get her to the ER. She was hooked up to monitors in the ER, and her oxygen level was at 19! I called her dad and informed him of her status, and we headed to the hospital. This transition was not easy for Ronda. She was so out of breath that she only could

take a few steps, and then she had to rest. It took 30 mins to get out of the house to the car. I finally got her to the emergency room and proceeded to get her checked in. I told the receptionist that the Dr was expecting us and that she could have a possible PE.

I still did not realize the meaning of PE.

But she seemed so nonchalant about my statement, took her information, and told us to sit in the waiting area.

Ronda's condition must not be that serious.

We sat and waited. Ronda was called about 15 mins later into a little room, and her vitals were taken and sent back out of the waiting room.

After thought: She could have a PE, but her oxygen level was not taken with her vitals.

After another 15 to 20 mins, she was finally called to be taken to an examination room. The nurse hooked her to all these machines to monitor her heart rate, blood pressure, and pulse oximeter to measure her oxygen level. Everything looked normal until I looked at her oxygen level. Ronda's oxygen reading was hovering around 19-20%, far below the norm of 100%. I looked at the machine and looked at the nurse, and she just nodded.

Lord, please be with my daughter.

When her dad arrived, the doctors sent her for a chest CT. The results came back shortly after they brought her back to the room. After numerous tests, they told us. She had a Pulmonary Embolism or blood clot in each of her lungs.

That's what PE meant.

They transferred her to another hospital with a cardiac care unit. I rode along with her in the ambulance, and Michael left to pick up our youngest daughter and would meet us at the next hospital. We get her checked in, and as she gets settled in her room, Michael arrives with

Morgan and two of Ronda's friends. Besides the fact that she couldn't breathe well, she seemed perfectly normal. We were laughing and talking. The nurse comes in and says,

"We are moving your daughter to ICU."

"Excuse me," I responded.

"The Doctor would like to move her to ICU for overnight observation." She explained.

We are all very quiet, and it seems the light heartiness was snatched out of the room. So, they move Ronda to ICU, and she is again hooked up to frightening-sounding machines. We immediately invoked our praying church family to pray for Ronda. The attending physician arrived and said he wanted to speak frankly with us.

"Your daughter has multiple blood clots in each lung."

My eyes start to water.

"She was a ticking time bomb, and if you had not gotten her to the ER, she would have had anywhere between two hours and two days to live."

My heart sank, and I found it hard to swallow. Everyone else in the room had a look of bewilderment on their faces. Ronda just had a blank stare.

Jesus, I can't lose my baby!

He said, "If one of the clots had burst, she could have died right on the spot, and there was nothing we could have done for her."

We praise God that night for Ronda's life. We did not know how close we were to losing her. We spent about seven days in the hospital while they ran test after test, trying to figure out where these blood clots came from. The clots broke loose from the larger good clot from her knee surgery and raced up to her lungs. About a month later, one of our dear friends lost their daughter to a Pulmonary Embolism.

I did not see it then, but I know God was protecting our family just as he had done so many years before on that icy road in Canada. My education and life experiences were all a huge setup. Remember that moment during the women's retreat? Everything that I have done up to this point, the people in my life, and my experiences have prepared me and giving me strength for the next challenge in my life. I wish I could say that this was the end of my faith journey, and from then on, I lived happily ever after. But not so fast; my life was preparing to be turned upside down, and I was unprepared for it.

Chapter 10: The Deep Darkness

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; For You are with me.
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."
(Psalms 23:4, NKJV).*

“Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing, Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before” (Poe, 2012, p2). For 29 years, we lived a beautiful life. We never moved again, and Michael retired from the military in October 2007. I became the Youth Leader and Drama Ministry Leader at the Gospel service. Those years I spent with Ms. Perryman were finally paying off because I had a flair for writing and directing plays. Michael had a great job, and he led the Men's Ministry. Ronda was working with me in the youth ministry, and Morgan was now a senior in high school. We purchased our first home. I was on my way to finishing my degree, and we were settling into retirement. I did not know it, but darkness was looming again, and it was right around the corner. I was headed for a head-on collision, and my world would never be the same. However, God still traveled this road beside me and ahead of me. He was working it all out on my behalf.

In March of 2016, Michael had a persistent cough. He was sent for testing, and a chest X-ray showed a spot on his right lung. We were sent to a pulmonologist for a bronchoscopy. We were laughing and talking when the doctor came in with the results. He started rattling off the results.

“It did not take me long to perform the procedure.”

“There is a tumor on your right lung.”

My heart sank to the depth in the pit of the darkness.

“I am going to refer you to an oncologist. When are you available?”

Speechless; this is not my life.

“I have an upcoming business trip where I will be out of town for the next two weeks,” he told the doctor.

“Mr. Law, you really need to make this appointment a priority,” he said.

A few days later, we were sitting in the oncologist's office.

“You have a very aggressive form of Stage 4 non-small-cell lung cancer, with a growing tumor in his right lung.”

I can't breathe.

He continued, and I tried to pay attention, but my mind was reeling.

“What does this mean?”

What are we going to do?

Lord, I can't lose him.

He wanted to start treatment immediately. We left his office and returned to the car, and I broke down. Michael touched my hand.

“We are going to be okay,” he comforted me.

“Remember, God is always in control.”

We decided that we would tell the girls right away. He put them at ease when we told the girls and reassured us that God was in control, and we should not worry. We enlisted the prayers of our faith-based community, family, and friends. Our military connections led us to have people worldwide lifting us in prayer. Michael was the most positive regarding his diagnosis and encouraged us daily. He wrote a post for Facebook and a letter to our friends and family called the "Ground Truth." It was written to let our family and friends know what was happening with his diagnosis and treatment plan. He believed in being intentional and upfront about his health condition. He did not want any rumors spreading, and he also did not want anyone asking the

girls any questions about his health. He always said that God was in control, and he had total faith in God and his plans for his life. We never panicked or worried because he did not panic, fear, or complain. We went on and tried to live as normally as possible.

Life in the Normal

In May 2016, I had three more classes to finish my degree, but I took a break to care for Michael. He shared with me that God showed him in a dream that we were sitting on the porch, watching our grandchildren play in the yard. So that led me to believe we would have a long life together, so I did not worry about cancer. We still had a high expectation for God to heal and deliver Michael from cancer.

But the light was growing dim, and the darkness was lurking.

We were trying to keep things moving forward as normally as possible during this time. Our youngest, Morgan, was preparing for graduation from high school and was headed to Pittsburg State University in Kansas. Family members were coming to town and preparing for a graduation celebration. Michael fell ill and was hospitalized days before graduation. He had fluid in his lungs and was diagnosed with pneumonia and a collapsed right lung.

“Mr. Law, you are very ill, and you need to prepare so that you will not make your daughter's graduation,” the medical team informed us.

A very determined Michael said, “I will be released and make my baby's graduation.”

"Sir, you have a temperature of 102.6, and we cannot release you until your temperature reaches normal ranges," the nurse told him.

“I don't care what you all say. I will be going to my daughter's graduation.”

Our church family joined us as we prayed. We continued our preparations from the hospital,

and I always stayed with him when he was admitted. Our family arrived while he was in the hospital, but he kept telling the doctors he was going home. My father-in-love, Pop Skipp, and my best friend Sharron sent me home to finish preparing for graduation. Morgan was unhappy because she thought her dad might miss her graduation.

God did not disappoint! On the morning of graduation, as we gathered for breakfast, I got a call from Michael. They were releasing him! I secretly told Pop because we wanted to surprise the family. We informed the family that Pop had to go to the hospital to drop off something for Michael. We all made our way to the stadium for graduation, and there was no Pop or Michael. The graduates started the procession into the stadium, and the program began. Pop and Michael pulled up and walked into the stadium. Everyone was joyfully crying at the sight of Michael walking into the stands!

Morgan was still unaware that her dad had made it to her graduation and saw her walk across the stage. We surprised her and positioned him as the graduates were leaving the stadium. When she finally saw him, she had the biggest smile as she embraced her dad. He said, "I told you I would be here."

We will never forget how God answered our praying community. God knew how much precious time we had left, and He wanted Michel to participate as much as possible. Later that summer, we headed to Pitt to drop Morgan off at school as a family. Ronda and I decided we wanted to do something to honor Michael's battle with lung cancer. The Lung Cancer Research Foundation sponsored a walk/run to raise awareness and money for lung cancer research. We created Team Law and Order to participate in the walk. During our first walk, we raised a lot of money for lung cancer research, and Michael was able to attend the first walk. We had no idea what was coming, but he sat proudly as we walked in his honor.

The Dark Shadows

During the fall of 2016, our family made two trips to see Morgan at school. She was a marching band member, and God blessed Michael so he could attend her Family Weekend and Homecoming to see her on the big field. That last trip to homecoming weekend took its toll on Michael, and he became ill. When we came home, he was admitted again to the hospital because he had trouble breathing. I remember talking to Pop Skipp, updating him on Michael's progress.

“Lita, Do I need to come to Kansas?”

“Pop, you need to come and see your son,” I told him.

Pop arrived the morning before Michael was admitted to the hospital for the last time. There was a morning not too long before the night of his final admission to the hospital; I was preparing to go to work. Michael had started to telework. I looked downstairs, where his office was set up, and asked him how he was doing. He looked up at me with sad eyes, and he said, "I am so tired."

“I know. Do you need me to stay home today?” I asked

He quietly said, "Yes."

I called and told my supervisor I would not be in for the day. I was his primary caregiver, and I was happy to do so. Not out of duty but out of love. When I came downstairs with his breakfast, he looked up at me and said,

“I don’t deserve you.”

I told him, "You deserve so much more than this." I kissed him.

“I love you,” I told him.

He said, “You know I love my LeeLee.”

That was the last time I heard him say he loved me as the darkness consumed me.

Michael fought hard and courageously for six months after his diagnosis. On October 15, 2016, he was admitted to ICU. Due to his collapsed lung, CT scans could not see the tumor or its growth during our routine visits. The tumor had covered his bronchial airways, and he could no longer breathe without a machine. They kept him sedated because of the pain. For ten days, Pop Skipp and I took turns staying at the hospital, and we never left him alone. I once told him he was having a Job experience, but I was Job, and I thought I was losing everything.

After many tests and meetings with my father-in-law, my daughters, doctors, hospice, and chaplains, we decided to remove him from life support and pray for a miracle. This decision we agonized about, but we were assured by the medical staff that there was nothing else they could do. We left our lives in the hands of the Lord and prayed for a miracle.

On a brisk Tuesday afternoon on October 25, I assembled all our close family and friends at his bedside as I said goodbye to the central part of my heart. He had a prayer cloth draped across his chest with the names of God. The medical staff would come and carefully work around that prayer cloth. That afternoon he was surrounded by those who loved us. We sang his favorite songs and laughed as we struggled with some of the words. We read scriptures, prayed, and worshiped. We still hoped for a miracle, but it seemed like it was God's will to bring him home.

The ICU was very cold all the time. During the night, I would sleep with my coat on and warm blankets from the nurses. That afternoon there were about 20 people in the room. Most days, we had many visitors, and the nursing staff was always gracious to allow us to exceed capacity. However, that morning, God truly controlled everything, including our environment. On that afternoon, we experienced an absolute miracle. From the time we

started praying, singing, and reading scripture, that room was so warm and cozy.

We worshipped for about an hour before we signaled the hospice nurse to remove the respirator. Morgan and Ronda did not want to be in the room, but at the last moment, Ronda came back into his room. Michael seemed to breathe on his own at first; then, he started to struggle. I wanted to yell at them to put him back on the machine, but I knew it was time for me to let him go, and this is what I saw play out in my spirit.

Jesus entered the room when we started our worship. When we genuinely worship, there is always a shift in the atmosphere, and when Jesus entered, the room was warm. As Michael struggled to breathe, the Lord told him it was time. He stood on the threshold between going with the Lord and staying with us. He looked back at us, backed at Jesus, and did not know what to do.

I laid my head on his chest as I told him,

“I love you and am so proud of you.”

“You fought long and hard, and it is okay for you to let go.”

“We will be fine. It's time.”

In the next few moments, he let go, took the hand of Jesus, and went home.

The moment Michael's heart stopped; all the warmth left the room. However, the presence of the Lord was still with us all. It is an experience that most of us in that room will never forget.

Heaven is real, and Michael and many of our loved ones were celebrating the day he returned home. From that moment, even though I knew I had to let him go, we would never be the same. I guess I had lived up to our vows of death do us part, but my heart was shattered into a million pieces. I was once again launched deep into the darkness.

This time I was fighting for my life. I was dwelling in a deep dark bottomless pit and did not know if I would survive.

The Day Time Stood Still

The clock screamed 2:19,
when the sun-soaked sky met the crisp air
like a hot apple pie cooling on a winter windowsill
on the day that time stood still as
my heart ran from my body
as it crashed to the ground
as it disintegrated from the earth
as it left a hollow shell empty
lost love to the dark shadows
with our girls in tow
eyes leaking the saltiness of bittersweetness
as they watch this life of goodness
as it slithers away
like a snake to the shade
escaping this world into the next
next
to the Creator
as we are left behind
to make a courageous stand
as you inherit your new body,
never forgotten in our hearts
forever
in your NY Giant color mansion perfectly healed,
far from the day, that time stood still.

Chapter 11: Finding My Way Out of The Valley of Darkness

*"In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."
(John 1:4-5).*

After all the services, ceremonies, and words of sympathy, my family and friends returned to their lives; I had to learn how to put my life and heart back together. Depression finally found its way into my life. All our plans, dreams, and hopes were gone instantly! I felt as if God had not honored my prayers. I was devastated and grieving over the person I truly loved. I was once again angry with God! How could he betray me again? How could he give me this life and then pull the rug from under my life? During this dark time, I smiled and had coherent conversations. People thought I was fine, but I was not. Family and friends would ask:

"How are you doing?"

I replied, "I am doing well," I smiled, but I was not.

I was grieving the loss of the person I was supposed to spend the rest of my life with. How could I have been fine? I had some signs of depression but was very good at hiding them. I was restless, tired, felt hopeless, and had thoughts of suicide. Everyone thought I was fine! I seemed strong and resilient, but I was screaming and dying on the inside! I could have easily become another suicide case, and people would have said,

"She seemed so together and doing so well."

No one knew the real pain and turmoil I felt! I went about everyday life, just surviving. I have always told the teens in my youth group that they could get through any adversity, no matter how hard it was because God was still with them! I was going through the biggest fight of my life, and I could not heed my words!

I was FAKE!

I was a Fraud!

I was a Hypocrite!

I was angry at God, Michael, myself, and the world. How could he leave me like this? How could God allow me to suffer after all I have been through? I felt I deserve happiness ever after. I felt as if my prayers were hitting a brick wall and the devil was screaming in my head every waking moment. My head was so clouded with anger, grief, and pain that I could not hear from God, and I could barely hear myself. The darkness was consuming me, and I knew I needed to get out as soon as possible, or I would drown in the darkness forever.

Desperation, Prayer, Therapy & Living in the Darkness

One night I prayed and cried out to God,

“I can’t do this anymore!”

I wanted to end this pain, but God grabbed hold of me. I had many questions.

“God, I am angry at you because you ruined my life!”

“Why me, God? What did I do to deserve this pain?” I pleaded.

“What am I supposed to do now?”

The darkness consumed me. I was not in the valley of the shadow of death because if you look up from the valley, you will see the light. In the pit of desperation and despair, there is nothing but you and evil in the darkness. I was furious, sad, disappointed, depressed, and scared. It was hard for me to see God. I knew He was there, and I still deeply loved Him, but I was in pain.

One night, I sat at my dining room table surrounded by pills and alcohol because I was done with his world. The enemy kept speaking doubt and uncertainty into my life. He told me,

“You are useless.”

“God does not love you.”

“Look at what He did to you.”

“You will never survive.”

“You are nothing.”

“Give up!”

All LIES!

Before I could reach for the pills and alcohol, God found His way into my shattered heart, and in the quietness, He whispered,

“Lolita, I love you, and I am here.”

“I am not done with your life, and you have work to do.”

“I have great things planned for you. Your journey is not complete.”

“It is NOT your time.”

“Don’t give up.”

As always, He NEVER left me in every adversity, roadblock, or detour in my life; He was always there. He was by my side, in the darkness of the pit, in my pain, counteracting the enemy’s voice. God was there with His hand outstretched for me to take it. While contemplating taking my life, I saw the babies I gave birth to; I saw all my church babies and the people who love me, and I knew I had a choice to make!

I took a huge step.

I went to the medical center the next day and checked the boxes:

“I am feeling depressed.”

“I am having thoughts of suicide.”

I was immediately sent to the clinical social worker I saw until I found a therapist. I prayed for

GOD to send me a Christian therapist who strongly believed in Him. I had many questions. I was furious, sad, disappointed, and depressed. It was tough for me to hear God, but I knew He was still there. My faith is essential to me, so I knew I needed a therapist I could learn to trust, who was like-minded and had a similar belief system. I knew that God was the source and power of my strength, but the grief and pain in my mind were not allowing me to connect.

It is as if you know your cell phone is dying and must find a charger for your brand. However, you cannot use any charger; you must find the correct charger for your phone, or it will not work. I had difficulty dealing with my struggles because I was plugging into grief, pain, and misery instead of being connected to God. Not to mention I had an enemy that did not care about me but hated me with every ounce of his being! The only way off this road of darkness was to reconnect to the source of my strength.

When I first sat down with my therapist, she said, "Tell me what has been going on." Well, we get out the tissues, and I start talking. There was something different when I started talking with her. When I finished talking, she said, "Lolita, the first thing I want to tell you is that God loves you, and He is always with you, and you are worthy."

I knew she was the right therapist for me. She has given me the necessary tools to fight depression. She is a wealth of information and prays with and for me. During one of our sessions, I shared with her some of the Facebook posts I was writing. I told her that other people said my post inspired them and that I should keep writing. She gave me information to start my blog, and this is where I developed my love of writing. I write to help other people who could be suffering from grief or depression. I believe that the desire to write was always there, but God awakened it as a gift for my healing and to help others. Almost seven years later, it is like talking

to an old friend once a month. She is helping me reevaluate my life and navigate the new life I am now living. I had to come to grips with what my life looks like now, regardless of what I expected.

Prayer Lifelines

Prayer has been a huge part of my spiritual journey. I know that I am a product of many prayers over the years. I have been on our women's ministry prayer line, and we even had a special day dedicated to praying for Michael's health. Honestly, I did not feel much like praying following his death. However, our good friend and a special brother of Michael's started a prayer line and texted me to join them in prayer. I did have to utter a word but just listened and received so many spirit-filled words of prayer and genuine love. We met five days a week, and my girls and I were mentioned by name day after day by people all over the country. Those prayers and his daily nuggets helped me through some of the roughest times of my life. It gave me the strength to keep going; those brothers and sisters are like family. "The only place to be in a storm is in the middle of God's will. You never know how is watching how you are weathering your storm," he said one morning.

His words inspired me to be a better Christian sister, mother, friend, and representative of Christ.

In January 2017, I re-enrolled in school to complete my degree, but I dropped the class. It was still difficult for me to move forward. In February, I received a call from my guidance counselor, who reminded me that I only needed three classes to graduate. I prayed for the Lord to help me complete what we started. It was Michael's goal that we all receive our college degrees. I did not want to disappoint him or myself. I prayed and asked God for strength. On May 6, 2017, 33 years later, from when I left college, I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Biblical and

Theological Studies. I had come full circle, and God was with me through the darkest moments of my life. I thank God every day that he never gave up on me nor took his hands off of my life. My Pop Skipp (with two pp's), as he always said when he introduced himself, would tell me, "Lita do not close your heat off. Michael would want you to be happy."

Pop, I am not ready to even think about anyone else right now," I told him.

He said, "I love you and want you to be happy. So just be prepared for it."

I could not hear what he had to say.

Ronda, Morgan, and I were learning to live again. We were learning that we are resilient survivors. Through the grace of God, I am accomplishing many goals as I am learning who I am outside of being a wife and a mother. I needed to know who Lolita was to Lolita and the world. I had to learn my purpose in this phase of my life and do things that brought me joy and happiness.

On April 15, 2018, I was given the opportunity to join my dream Sorority, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. I, along with my 13-line sisters, was initiated into our illustrious sorority. It was one of the highlights of this new phase of my life. I am a living, walking testimony, and If I can do this hard thing and survive, so can you. This chapter of my life was coming to a close, and I was finally ready for a new chapter.

In the Depth of Darkness

In the Depth of Darkness, will I ever find rest?
Like the mighty Oak Tree in the forest, its roots dig deep sorrowfully.
In this bottomless void where the enemy lays its evil head.
He is a cold, calculating soul of heartlessness.

In this bottomless murky pit lives the aching heart of distress.
I gave him admission into my soul.
hazardous contemplations ravaged my heart, body, and mind.
A meaningless life that measly verses and lyrics can never express.

Hostile and aggressive thoughts revolve around me.
Like the clanking of cymbals, Satan's boisterous voice criticized every move
as he muffled God's still, small voice.
My mind, driven on an extensive journey, next stop, insanity.

Hydrocodone, Tylenol, and even Zyrtec are desperately displayed on the table.
Snuggled next to glasses of Moscato and Jack.
Heartbroken, hopeless, sad life-fighting final ditch efforts.
Twilight in obscurity is the madness he enables.

Like the deserted child, lost at the park, hopeless.
I am invisible, missing in the depths of the shadows of death.
My own mind abducts me.
In the depth of the darkness,
will I ever find rest?

Chapter 12: Chapter Two

"Love is patient, Love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. Love never fails,"
(1 Corinthians 13:4-8 NIV).

Love never fails. Once my heart started mending, I was able to love again. We were at choir rehearsal, and one of my brothers at church asked me about dating about a year after my late husband passed.

"Lo, do you think you are ready to date," He asked.

I looked at him and said, "No way, not me!"

"Well, you know Michael would want you to be happy."

"I am not ready," I told him.

"And besides, if God wanted me to have someone else, he will put that person right in front of me," I proudly said.

He just laughed and said,

"Okay, Lo"

One day when God prepared my heart and mind, I opened my eyes, and there stood Samuel Moore.

Sam likes to be called "Sam the Weatherman" because when he was in the Air Force was a meteorologist, and he served as the post-meteorologist at Fort Leavenworth. Sam and I attend the same church service; he has known my family for a few years. I have a strong connection to Sam because he has seen me at my worst and never judged me. He was part of our family that was there the day Michael transitioned. He has always been the perfect gentleman.

One day I needed to drop my car off at the car dealership. I texted him to see if he was

available, and he said he would be right over. We had some small take in his car on the way back to my house, but something was there.

“Thank you for taking time out of your busy day to help me,” I told him.

“Anytime,” he said.

“And if you needed anything, he was just a phone call away.” I did not know then that those words would improve my life.

In February 2018, we started conversing frequently back and forth through text messages. I would notice him looking and smiling at me from the other end of the pew at church or other gatherings. I was also looking at him for me to notice that he was looking at me. It was clear he was not going to ask me out, and I needed to make my move. So, at the end of May, I decided to take matters into my own hands and sent him a text,

“I have something to ask you.”

He immediately called me back.

“Hey, how are you doing,” I asked.

“I am fine, thank you for asking,” he replied.

“You wanted to ask me something?”

Ahh, straight to the point.

“Yes, I do,” I said nervously.

“First,” I started.

“Are you seeing anyone?”

He quickly responded, “No, I am not”

YES!

“Do you want to hang out sometimes?”

Hang out sometimes? What are we 12?

But he responded, “Yes.”

We made plans to go out on July 6th, and he planned our first date. We went out to dinner, and he knew I was a huge Marvel fan, so we saw *Antman and the Wasp*. We have been dating ever since our first date in 2018. We even made it through a global pandemic together.

I have found love in a very handsome Christian man who loves me for me, with all my challenges. We have the most intellectual conversations yet amusing, and I love listening to all the humorous stories he tells me about his past, childhood, and time in the Air Force. Sam is supportive of my dreams, and he supports all of my many events. He is sensitive to me and my daughters’ grief and encourages us to visit the cemetery and keep Michael's legacy alive. He loves, encourages, challenges me to be my best, and we take excellent care of each other.

A Colossal Heart

Sam is the reason I am attending Liberty. I was thinking about pursuing a master's program. I started to look at different schools, but I needed to figure out what type of program I wanted to explore. When I started my blog as part of my healing and therapy, I discovered I had developed a passion for writing. I knew God wanted me to help people who had been dealing with their grief and depression. I have received many comments about how my journey has helped them with their concerns. God led me to Liberty University, which had the perfect program. I enrolled in the MA in Professional Writing program, and a year and a half later, I am working towards my second MA in Creative Writing.

He is always the best-sounding board whenever I have gotten discouraged or upset during the process.

"You can do anything you put your mind to," he would tell me.

When I am frustrated, he will give me a huge hug and say,

"Give it all to me. I can take it all."

During the course work of this program, in November 2021, we lost Pop Skipp. He was my heart and the father I never had. He has shown me so much love and treated me like his daughter instead of his daughter-in-law. Before Pop Skipp passed, he gave Sam and me his blessings. He said,

“Lita, I just want you to be happy. You do deserve happiness.”

That was all I needed. I know Sam will continue to be a big part of my future. We love each other and become each other's best friends. God foresaw our futures and ensured we found each other at the right place and time. In this 2nd chapter of my life, I am discovering many things I like about myself and looking forward to God's plans for Sam and me. The chapter is still being written, and I am enjoying the process.

My Chapter Two

He is an alluring soul, My Chapter Two.
He is pleasing to the eyes with caramel skin, soft whiskers for ruggedness,
He floated into my life after my mind gave way to a breakthrough.

He gave me blissful, peaceful Love and helped me to find strength.
Caught unaware, God-given, LOVE
Like gale-force winds, Love blew in with hurricane strength.

A heart blown, fragmented million sections,
No longer dwelling in the encased place,
But Love by My Chapter Two, drowning in affection.

Joy, unspeakable, unearned grace, like looking down into an angel's face.
Unmerited from He who sits on high,
Agape love is shown to me,
Soaring above sorrow's former airspace.
My heart is in harmony with Chapter Two.

Chapter 13: Conclusion: Epilogue

*"He will wipe every tear from their eyes.
There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain,
for the old order of things has passed away."
(Revelation 21:4, NIV).*

God Never Fails

Has God worked things out for me according to his purpose? Of course, He has, without any shadow of a doubt. Even though my life is not perfect, and I can be sad at times, I know my life is also very blessed. In my sadness, glimmers of light always illumined my path, like my Aunt and Uncle, who introduced me to the Lord, and RA, who always reminded me about her Bible study. Many areas of my faith journey were marked with much suffering and pain. However, I know that God has and will always be walking with me, and without Him, I would be a lost soul on the road to destruction.

Even during the most challenging times, God always knew what was best for me and kept me on the right path. The enemy would have loved to keep me miserable, depressed, and in darkness! However, God has made me STRONGER amid my adversities and challenges. He counteracted anything that the enemy tried to throw at me!

Affirming Words

I have stated earlier that God has placed many angels in my path throughout my life. He still puts people in my life to uplift and encourage me, and I pray that I do the same for them. They are more than my friends or sorors. They are my sisters. However, three sisters continuously pour into my life and my spirit. My sister, sorority sister, and spiritual mentor Laura Coaxum always seemed to know when I was in despair, always told me,

"Stay close." Meaning stays close to God. She is also a great encourager. She texted me one day, Michael, during one of our many hospitals stays.

“You are holding up like a formidable warrior and an unrelenting champion for your husband. I know he gets the strength to carry on from you and your example. Continue to inspire. You are in a storm; you and Mike are in a storm of life. I know it feels hard, cold, and tough where Michael is, but keep trusting, believing, and having that unwavering faith in God to carry you through.”

Praise God, the amazing thing about storms is that they do not last forever, and we can navigate through them if we stay close to God.

My sister and spiritual mentor, Elaine Belardo, was going through the most challenging time in her life and always had time to encourage me. She sent me a text shortly after Michael passed.

*“We have to go through, and it is painful. He is with us.
We have to go through, and we are paralyzed; HE is with us.
We had to go through it, and we were afraid HE was with us.
We don't go through it alone, and everything we need to say our God can handle.”*

Praise God! I was never alone at any point in my life. No matter how bad it got, He was always by my side, protecting, comforting, and bringing me peace.

Sharon Williams is my best friend, sister, and sorority sister, who has been by my side every step of the way, even though we are miles apart. One day I had a major meltdown at church, and She told me,

“It all right to grieve and stay in the moment for as long as you can. Then praise God for His grace and mercy. Your heavenly Father and Michael need you to live each day to the fullest because God has given it to you as a gift. You are to flourish and let your light shine for the rest of the world knows you are a testament to his glory.”

I owe God my life; without Him, I am absolutely nothing!

Lastly, Laticia “Action” Jackson, a motivational speaker, fitness Olympian, and Air Force Veteran, gave me some excellent advice during the 2023 Women's History Month Program. She

is also one of my sorority sisters who founded N-Powered Coaching Academy. She said, “Turn your pain into power, purpose, and profit.” She encouraged us to tell our story.

“There is no power in silence,” she told us.

We must ACT:

“Acknowledge the pain.”

“Confront our pain and truth.”

“Take charge of our lives” (Jackson, 2023).

Her words of encouragement and affirmation confirmed the path God has me traveling on. It was like a head-on collision with my purpose.

My Purpose

What is my purpose? Six years ago, I was so blinded and struck with grief, depression, and thoughts of suicide that the only purpose I could see in my life was death. God saved my life from me. He breathed new meaning and a future into my life and gave me a reason to live, survive, and thrive. When he dragged me kicking and screaming out of the pit of despair where I lived, I promised the Lord that I would be bold and courageous enough to tell my story/testimony whenever I was asked or given an opportunity.

My desire and purpose are to help other widows, widowers, men, women, and children survive grief and depression. I want to use what God has gifted me to give back and help others live better while helping lower and prevent suicide in my community. I want them to see the purpose in their lives and their importance to our society. I need them to understand that we need them.

Where I Am Today

Today, I am an accomplished writer. I have written and directed my first play for my

church. I am one step away from having a dual master's degree in professional and creative Writing. I am writing to myself to heal and wholeness. I am busy serving in multiple community organizations, including my sorority. I was surprised by being asked to serve as the director of *Today's Widow Woman of Color Magazine*. It is a role where I never saw myself, but I am up for the challenge and welcome the experience. I am also actively working on my spiritual memoir, which I hope to publish one day.

My daughters and I are thriving and are constantly learning who is outside of dealing with grief and depression. The woman I am today has learned much about life, death, and survival. She is no longer the same abused, knocked down, beaten up, discarded, and rejected girl, teen, young adult, or woman. I am no longer running from life. I am embracing the life I have been given. I want to use my experience to show other women that there is life after death. Grief and depression are a process, but I want to encourage others to move along with me as I move along.

Throughout my journey, God has carried me through every dark valley and somber bump in the road, but, He has also rejoiced for those breaking moments of victory. During those victory moments, I found hope, purpose, and the shimmer of sunshine He provided during the dark times. I focused on Him, who continues guiding me from tragedy to triumph. This time, I am finding my way out of the darkness for good.

I am not surviving,

I am thriving.

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