

## MORNING HAS BROKEN

### PART I – HELEN FOSTER

I come from a family of journalists – my mother wrote articles for *Parents* magazine, and my dad was the City Editor of our major newspaper in Phoenix, Arizona, *The Arizona Republic*. When I was in college and would call on my dad to help me edit my papers, he often would read my paper over and tell me, “Helen, first rule in journalism: don’t bury the lead.” So this morning, I won’t bury the lead. My story today is to share with you my journey – through some very frightening, uncertain, and difficult times – that out of a great deal of pain and loss, I found some gifts, some life lessons, that came from the suffering. The greatest gift was the biggest life-changer of all: it gave me the gift of finding my way to a relationship with God – to an earnest, intentional relationship.

My story starts in 1992, when a storm hit Ed and me, a storm that seemed to come out of nowhere. I was diagnosed with a rare form of lymphoma – specifically, Lennert’s Peripheral T-Cell Non Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. Our doctor, Dr. Sandra Horning at Stanford Medical Center, informed us at our first appointment that my type of lymphoma was not only rare, it was difficult to treat, and it had a poor prognosis. Out of 4 stages, I was stage 3.

I began my chemotherapy regimen in November 1992; at one of my checkups at Stanford in the spring of 1993, Dr. Horning advised us that if my chemotherapy regimen did not bring me into remission and if I did have to ultimately undergo a bone marrow transplant, a transplant also might not be curative for my type of lymphoma. That was the toughest news of all to hear. Searching for answers, Ed and I began researching all the top cancer centers in the country, in search of a cure for my type of lymphoma. We flew to the University of Nebraska to visit their bone marrow transplantation center for a second medical opinion. We drove to the City of Hope Cancer Center for a third medical opinion. But it seemed that no matter where we turned, we were getting very difficult news, none of it good, and we were feeling out of control.

In 1993, after eight months of two different chemotherapy regimens, both of which failed to bring me into remission, Dr. Horning advised Ed and me that it was necessary for me to move forward and undergo a bone marrow transplant at Stanford Hospital in order to

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save my life. In 1995, fifteen months after my transplant, I relapsed, and then in 1998 I relapsed again. Relapsing after a transplant was very troubling, as at that time, there were no treatment options left after a transplant. It was a very frightening and overwhelming time for Ed and me. The clouds were getting more and more ominous.

During those years, my utmost concern was for our daughters, Emily and Allison, who when this journey began in 1992 were four and two years old. As a mother, I had a lifetime of dreams and plans for them; there was so much I wanted to do with them. It was incomprehensible that I might not be there to help them grow up, be there to watch them graduate from high school and college, and be there for all the other milestones in their lives. I was also very worried about Ed – I knew this was a huge burden to place on his shoulders – and I was very scared and worried myself.

My anxiety at times was overwhelming to me. I often would wake up at two or three in the morning, thrashing around in the bed, with my heart pounding out of my chest, and invariably (I'm not proud of this) I would wake Ed up. As illogical as it may sound, what we did to bring down my anxiety made perfect sense at the time to us: we would put on our robes, take the baby monitor with us, and head outside our front door, where we would walk up and down the sidewalk in front of our house, talking, taking comfort with being together, reassuring each other that we would somehow get through this. What greatly helped me to endure and persevere through those years was having Ed as my husband, who never gave up, and who was always steady, always positive and encouraging, helping me to stay strong and try to overcome my fear.

Well, fear is a strong motivator, and it took me down some paths, ones I thought I would never take, in an effort to find a solution to our problem – this pesky problem of trying to stay alive. I was pretty much willing to consider anything in hopes of finding a cure. For example: one Saturday night, I found myself on the stage of a Benny Hinn healing service at the Long Beach Convention Center. This might appear to be a solitary, desperate step on my part, without your knowing the backstory that I was already attending noon healing services every Thursday at St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church; additionally, two elders from the Mormon church had already laid hands on me, and I was an applicant for an experimental antineoplaston therapy trial in Houston, Texas. My fear and anxiety had definitely taken me to the “cast a wide net” approach of hoping

and praying that something had to work. But as the months passed, trying to overcome my anxiety and fear, what I did find were two key things that were pivotal in helping me to recapture my spiritual faith and my emotional stability.

A turning point in my finding emotional stability was through the guidance I received from a therapist by the name of Lynnette Wilhardt. Lynnette specializes in counseling clients who are dealing with cancer, and she was also the leader of my Tuesday night Hoag Hospital Cancer Support Group. Lynnette's counseling was a godsend to me. In 1995, when I relapsed after my transplant, I went through a pretty dark time; even though I had been told that the transplant might not be curative, I still had such high hopes. I prayed every single day that the transplant would cure me, and so did our huge family, our faith family, our network of wonderful, supportive friends, our neighbors, my cancer support group – everyone. I felt that I had let everyone down, that I had failed to achieve the one thing: a cure that we all so desperately wanted.

During that time, as a mom with two little girls I loved so dearly, I worked hard to try to compartmentalize my worrying and my sadness and “be in the moment” for them. I felt strongly that Emily and Ally deserved to have a mom who was cheerful, loving, and provided a happy home, but I had to keep suppressing feelings of despair and anxiety. My weekly meetings with Lynnette were a tremendous help. As Lynnette and I discussed ways to stay “present” with Emmy and Ally and also reduce the stress I was feeling, it became clear pretty quickly that our family schedule was way, way too full. At this point, in 1995, we were not attending church regularly every Sunday as a family; four soccer practices a week, homework, and two soccer games that ate up most of Saturday too often left us too tired at the end of the week to get up on Sundays for church. Lynnette's advice? Take a year off soccer, let Saturdays be our day to sleep in as a family, recharge, and have some downtime together. Then, going to church on Sundays would take its rightful place in our lives as an “A” priority.

Lynnette also shared with me her experience with counseling children who had a parent that was seriously ill. Many of the children who weathered the storm of cancer in their families were the kids who had developed a belief, a faith, in God. Their faith was a source of comfort to them, a safe harbor. By attending Sunday School, they forged a relationship with Sunday School teachers who cared about them and helped them in developing their own internal moral compass.

It became eminently clear to Ed and me that we needed to ditch Saturday soccer for a year, hit the “reset” button, and start attending church as a family every Sunday. On looking back, I’m so grateful for those years of all the wonderful Sunday School teachers in Emily and Ally’s lives.

My second area of comfort – a bit of a reprieve from the storm – was the spiritual support I received from Ed’s mother, Faye. Faye’s incredibly strong faith in God was a gift that I leaned on. Her faith was unwavering. I greatly admired Faye’s faith – she was one of those people who had a radiance about her. The best way I could describe her to you is that she had a spirit about her that is similar to Kathy Kipp – a joyful, contagious, radiant spirit. I had been raised in a UCC church, the First Congregational Church in Phoenix, Arizona, and I believed in God, but my relationship with God at that time? It was, unfortunately, pretty shallow. In 1992, when this all hit us, my prayer life was sporadic, with no sense of order to it. I knew that when I needed God, he was there, but at this point in my life, when I did pray, it felt a lot more like begging and pleading, rather than praying, and I felt overwhelming anxiety and fear. I turned to Faye for her help – I needed her spiritual guidance.

What Faye gave me was, in many ways, her version of Prayer 101. She suggested that as part of my prayer time, I include scriptures that spoke to me, that would give me hope. One of the scriptures I chose was Philippians 4, verse 13: *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”* It became a prayer of hope for me, and one I would say many, many times through the years. Another scripture that comforted me was Philippians 4, verses 6-7: *“Be anxious about nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ.”* Over time, I found that my morning prayer time was helping me to begin my day with a sense of peace. For the first time in my life, I was working on an intentional relationship with God – taking time to check in, to pray, and to listen. My prayer time had an order, it helped me feel more hopeful, and it provided a ritual that comforted me.

As my faith grew, so did my desire to gain a deeper understanding of the Bible. I found, however, that when I was reading the Bible, I always had a list of questions when I was finished that I simply could not answer on my own. At times I found some of the scriptures really confusing. I needed and wanted to join a Bible study.

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That was in 2003, and I have been in a weekly Bible study here at our church for thirteen years now. I am so grateful for the spiritual growth I have gained in reading different books in the Bible with the women in my Wednesday morning Bible study – a group of women that I have learned from, gained insights from, and grown to care about. I have been humbled by the strength, the courage, and the deep faith I have seen from these women who have also dealt with difficult issues in their lives, and hear how their faith and trust in God is helping them face their challenges. They inspire me.

At this point, you might be wondering, given my medical history, how is it that I am standing in front of you today? Sometimes, as I am sure you have all found, your prayers might be answered, but in a different way than you had expected. During the years after I relapsed, in an effort to save my life, Ed and I continued to talk to my oncologists at City of Hope and Stanford, urging them to find treatment plans for me, even if the plans were unorthodox and unproven ones. They were wonderful doctors to me. In my first relapse in 1995 and after my second relapse in 1998, both Dr. Horning at Stanford and Dr. Parker at City of Hope devised “outside the box” treatment plans for me, which, while they were unproven and somewhat risky at the time, are ones that we believe have resulted in my still being here today. I’m still not completely out of the woods, but I am very optimistic about the future, as there are new, cutting-edge treatment options available for me now that were not available in the 1990s.

With God’s grace, I have been able to see Emily and Allison graduate from high school, then college, and establish careers that they are both flourishing in. In October of 2015, our daughter Emily and her husband, Brian, were married in this church, the same church Ed and I were married in. This past December, Ed and I celebrated our 30th wedding anniversary. I have a deep sense of gratitude and joy for the life that I have been given. My relationship with God has given me a greater sense of purpose, of peace, of wanting to give back. The hope and faith and gratitude and joy I feel for God’s grace, His love, and His steadfastness for me always keep me looking up, reaching up, for His light.

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### PART II – ED FOSTER

Oddly enough, I have been more positively influenced by what I initially thought were the big negative events in my life than I would have ever expected. When the phone call, lab report, report card, conversation, or letter brings news of the dark clouds forming, I shift quickly to my damage-control mode. How can I fix it, make it better, excise it from my own or my loved one's life? I self-appoint me, without considering that if I truly was in control of everything that happens, I wouldn't be in this situation in the first place.

I guess the reason it has taken me so long to understand that I need to look outside myself, for God's plan first, is because I have always functioned better, more comfortably, in an analytical world – believing that the answer to any question can be reached objectively by taking logical steps. I value people or systems that work within this type of framework. I can derive satisfaction from simple things – putting the trash out on Wednesday night and knowing that it will be picked up on Thursday morning, or Friday morning at the latest if there was a holiday earlier in the week.

I have found that the people I work best with are logical, consistent, and thorough. Whenever I am asked to assume, abbreviate, or take a leap of faith, a red flag goes up. My nature is to want to know more than less, tie down the facts, identify all the details, and then resolve the problem. Over the years, what I have found is that this approach, which has served me well in my personal and business life, brings tremendous challenges to my spiritual life.

One of the basic tenets of any religion is belief through faith. For Christians, followers are unable to read anything that Jesus wrote. Evangelical author Philip Yancey noted that, "Even the four men who wrote the Gospels omitted much that would interest modern readers, skipping over nine-tenths of his life. Since none devotes a word to physical description, we know nothing about Jesus' shape or stature or eye color. Details of his family life are so scant that scholars still debate whether or not he had brothers and sisters." No portrait exists; no tape recording; no eyewitnesses to interview. Everything that we are told that Jesus said, taught, and did has been written by a third party, translated by many others, and passed down over 2,000 years. Given this set of facts, if I was considering a business commitment instead of a spiritual one, I would pass. Too much of a leap – not enough certainty. The next deal will be better-documented, more uniform, more conventional. So for many years, spiritually, I did pass.

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My mother was the most giving, actualized Christian I have ever known. She laid the foundation for me to build a Christian life, and I chose to be involved but uncommitted. During my youth, I attended Sunday School and church. I had too many unanswered questions and not enough verifiable facts. In high school, while struggling with these issues, I would think to myself that if I had created the universe, the world would be a different place. There would be more order and reason. Specific commandments would be given, and I would be more concerned about my followers following the commandments to live a good life than with them worrying about whether or not I existed. I would have made myself and my word verifiable and the steps to a “life ever after” clearly marked. Most of all I would have created a level playing field where opportunity and fairness are assumed.

But in fact, the world I was experiencing could not have been more dissimilar. Nothing brought this home more for me than in my sophomore year in college when I attended the funeral service of the ten-year-old son of my mother’s uncle in Riverside, California. Her uncle, Earl Crawford, a pastor, officiated over the service of his son and three other young boys who had all perished when they accidentally detonated munitions discovered in a field behind their home. Evidently, unbeknownst to the parents, the field had been used for explosives training during World War II and the bomb had lain idle, undiscovered for over twenty-five years until these four boys came upon it. The question “Why?” resonated throughout the church. Such a loss. Nobody to blame. No good answers.

Although Earl Crawford’s personal grief and loss were evident, his faith was steadfast and unshaken. During the service I was impressed with him stating that like the rest of us in attendance, he did not know “Why?” He could not give any possible reason why this tragedy had happened, and could only receive comfort from his belief that Christ did have a plan and these four boys were part of it. At the time, I was impressed with his inner strength, faith, and commitment, but the sadness and senselessness of the tragedy left me questioning God and diminished my faith.

During the years that followed, I sat on the spiritual fence. Having accepted Jesus as my lord and savior, having asked Christ for forgiveness for my sins, I felt I had achieved the requirements of being a Christian – while at the same time I was in control of my day-to-day decisions, be it my destiny here on earth. Of course, I worked to follow

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the commandments and the Golden Rule, but I had not surrendered myself to God. I felt I had reached the perfect balance. My decisions and actions could control, guide, and direct my life on earth. After death, my spiritual life would be controlled, guided, and directed by my Heavenly Father.

Surrendering your life to God – establishing and maintaining faith in God’s work – has been difficult for followers since the beginning of time. Sometimes I am discouraged by the silence of God. When my prayers receive no response, I have been tempted to give up hope and reduce my commitment. Today it gives me hope to know that Jesus seemed willing to work with whatever tiny glimmer of faith came to light. I especially appreciate the accounts of how Jesus treated the Apostles after they questioned and doubted him. It gives me strength when I am weak.

Nothing required more strength and prayer than when Helen was diagnosed with lymphoma in 1992. As you have heard, our daughters Emily and Allison were four and two. I had dealt with difficult news before, but nothing that had cast a shadow so large and dark. The prognosis for Helen’s longevity was very dim. I so admired her strength, perseverance, and positive attitude. Nobody could have fought harder or have had a greater will to survive for our family. But even though I had taken control by tying down all the facts, identifying all the details, getting the best medical care, and taking the most logical steps, in November of 1993 two failed chemotherapy regimens left us with no other option but to proceed with a bone marrow transplant.

During Helen’s six weeks of preparation and treatment at Stanford, I spent many hours alone – in transit to visit Helen and in my room at nights. My sadness and emptiness were overwhelming. I was no longer in control over that which mattered most. Strangely enough, it was a revelation to me. Not having the answers, not knowing the path, led me to the inescapable conclusion: I was not master of my own destiny, and if some other entity was, I needed to acknowledge it.

Surrendering my life to Christ has not been a final act but the beginning of a journey. The path at times has been hard to find, the direction difficult to locate. Every step does not make sense; every prayer does not end in dialogue. And in times of weakness or fading faith, when my nature to control and verify kicks in, I have prayed for Christ to Show Me A Sign – to send a miracle to our home. And in the



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most unusual, unexpected way, during these stormy events, Christ has sent me a miracle. My faith has grown not from the tangible, concrete, or verifiable. It has grown through weakness, grief, and desperation. And reflecting on how, as a parent, I help my children, Christ's timing with me makes perfect sense. What better time for my Heavenly Father to step in and extend a guiding light to this child but in my hours of need. Thankfully, our path is illuminated. We do not walk alone.