

My Journey from Fear and Pain to Hope and Joy

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Edited draft of a talk given in Orem East Stake R.S. Conference in January 2005

Finding Hope

I grew up on a little farm in Idaho and have many fond memories of my childhood. I was the third child of very hard-working parents. I found pleasure in pleasing my parents and I loved to be praised. I went to great lengths to earn the praise of my teachers and peers as well as my parents. I needed to be the best and I felt rewarded for my efforts in those early tender years. But as I grew older and learned more about the gospel and all the commandments I had to follow, I gradually became more and more fearful that I wasn't going to be able to measure up to God's expectations. I began imagining myself approaching the doors of the Celestial Kingdom, and then just as I started up the steps, the doors would close right in front of me.

My teenage life was filled with dramatic highs and deep lows. I did well in school, but I never felt I was quite good enough. There were times when I felt pretty good about myself and thought there might be hope for me. But there were many more times when I sank to the depths of despair, especially when I had done something that I knew was wrong, and yet I had liked it! I just knew those doors were going to slam in my face and I was going to be miserable forever!

During my college years I faithfully attended institute and my despair increased as we covered the prophecies of the last days in our course of study. Terrible things were coming and I knew I was too weak to deserve the Lord's protection. After I turned 21, I served a two year mission but I never felt like I was a really great missionary. I tired hard to make everyone think I was, but in my heart I knew the truth. The year following my mission included a rocky courtship, and in August of 1972, I married a kind and confident young man. He inspired me and I was hopeful that he would be able to fix all my problems.

The next nine years brought six beautiful children into our lives. Although their needs created a much more stressful world for me, I loved those children more than I had ever dreamed possible, and the greatest desire of my heart was for us all to be together forever. However, as my children grew and the influences of the world filtered into our home, I was often overcome with fear that I was not going to be able to get them all to the Celestial Kingdom. Some of the choices they made scared me, and certainly many of the things going on in the world scared me. Would I ever be able to do all that was required?

Through the years my husband and I filled many callings in the church. There were times when I sensed I was letting family things slide so I could get my church work done, but I always told myself I just needed to get better organized and then I could do it all. We had family prayer and scripture time consistently, but I usually lived in crisis and often found myself yelling at my children when things got too hectic for me to handle. I worried that my neighbors would hear me yelling and think I was a terrible mother. At night I prayed that God would forgive me for yelling at my children and I would promise Him that I would do better the next day - and then the next night I was once again asking him to forgive me for yelling at my children! I felt guilty most of the time and wondered what chance there really was for someone as weak as I was to get us all qualified to be an eternal family.

By the time our oldest son, David, was sixteen we were in the midst of serious struggles. Sometimes we still had positive interactions, but life with him was pretty intense. His open,

talkative nature of younger years had gradually been replaced with a tight lip and strong resistance to almost anything we wanted him to do. He missed a lot of school and had friends that were very secretive. One day when his friends were out in front waiting for him, he came to me and nervously said something like, "Mom, I want to tell you this before you hear it from somebody else. I am gay. I've known it for a long time. My friends are all gay, and I want you to know because I don't want to have to hide it from you anymore." He then went out the door, leaving me in a total twilight zone.

I simply could not wrap my mind around what he had said. As it began to sink in, I started thinking, "What am I going to do? I can't tell anybody. We have got to move away and not let anyone know where we are going. We won't be able to tell anyone we are Mormons. I've failed the church, I've failed my family, I'm not even worthy to be a member of the church because I have a gay son." I couldn't pray. I wanted to, but I couldn't figure out any words to say. I wished I could die.

I had had some dark days before that time, but at that moment my world became totally black. All I did was cry. I could hardly function. I kept asking myself what I had done wrong. "How had I let this beautiful little boy's life turn into this tragedy? Maybe if I hadn't been so cross, maybe if I hadn't been so busy with my church callings, maybe if we hadn't let him get a job, maybe if I had listened more, maybe if I had been more understanding of his fears." The questions and self-accusations never ended.

The Lord didn't abandon me during this time, but I could rarely let go of my pain long enough to reach out to Him and let Him comfort me. In the following days and weeks I often tried to pray, but I couldn't feel any connection with God. Sometimes I'd try to read the scriptures but they didn't seem to have any answers for me. Every night my tears would flood my pillow. The words to one of my favorite primary songs often flowed through my mind as I wept: "Heavenly Father, are you really there, and do you hear and answer every child's prayer?" Sometimes I was able to feel a fleeting moment of comfort as the song continued: "Pray. He is there. Speak. He is listening. You are his child. His love now surrounds you." But the tears and the questions never stopped.

My grieving continued for a long time. I don't know exactly how long it was, but it seemed forever. I didn't keep a journal at all during this time because my life was just too black. I didn't want anything about this on paper because it seemed it would then be unchangeable. Somehow I thought maybe it would go away if it weren't written down.

Trying to keep everything a secret made me feel very lonely and isolated, but I was too ashamed of my failure to allow anyone to share my burden. Besides, I was afraid people would hate or persecute my son if they knew. I was exhausted physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. I talked with my husband as much as he could tolerate, and though he was willing to hold me as I wept, he didn't have any answers either. It was a difficult time for both of us.

Finally I knew I had to talk with someone or I was going to shrivel up inside. I first made an appointment with our family doctor who was also a stake president. I thought maybe it would help if I could understand homosexuality from a medical perspective. My doctor had few answers, but he was kind and understanding, and he gave me some thought provoking counsel. After my visit to him I called one of my sisters who lived in a different state and told her what was happening to our family. She was wonderfully supportive. I also told my walking partner

who was a very trusted friend. It was comforting to have them cry with me and share the pain, but every time I discussed it I felt like I was betraying my son.

During this same time, we learned that a young man in our stake was having a kidney transplant and that his mother was the most likely donor. One day I was talking on the phone with my walking partner about how hard this surgery is on the donor. I commented on how his mother was making a huge sacrifice for him, especially considering all the younger children she had to care for. My friend seemed a little surprised by my words and said, "Sure it would be hard, but I'd do it for my kid and you'd do it for yours." Without thinking I said, "I'd do it for any of my kids except David."

Suddenly I felt frozen in time. I was stunned by my own words. They echoed through my mind again and again. As I struggled to find words to end the phone conversation, new words came into my mind, "In the last days the hearts of the mothers will turn cold." I fell to my knees in tears of anguish and cried aloud, "Heavenly Father, I can't be the fulfillment of that prophecy*! Please help me! Have I actually allowed myself to become a 'cold-hearted' mother?"

It is true that we were going through an overwhelming amount of conflict with David. He stayed up very late at night and usually slept in long after school had started, he constantly used foul language, he seemed to delight in making life miserable for our younger children, he ignored his chores, and he generally disrupted family life in every way he could. But to hear myself say that I would let him die even though it was within my power to give him life was deeply shocking to me. As I wept those bitter tears, I was finally ready for the Lord to teach me. At last I had come to him with a broken heart and a contrite spirit - with ears to hear and eyes to see.

Words came quickly to my mind, "You are not a cold-hearted mother." I wanted to jump up and shout at that joyful revelation! But the spirit had only begun the lesson. Other words quickly followed. "You are just hurt. But think how much more your son is hurting. You have friends and family and loved ones to support you. He has no one to turn to. He has been rejected by his family, by his church, by everyone he has known all his life."

I started thinking about his circumstances and a deep sadness came over me, only this time the sadness was for him. My heart was totally changed, and I asked, "Heavenly Father, what can I do? I don't understand anything about homosexuality! How can I be a good mother for this child?" Very clearly the spirit said to me, "You do not have to understand. You just have to love."

My sadness quickly changed to excitement. "Well, I can do that! I can love!" I had loved a lot of troubled kids over the years - children of my friends, my own nieces and nephews, as well as kids I had worked with in scouting and young women. I knew I could love. And so with that precious gift from the Lord, I began to love my son.

Our relationship changed completely. Not only was I able to love my son, I was able to love everyone he brought home with him - kids with purple hair, earrings, nose rings, all sorts of body piercing, spiked leather jackets, chains, black lipstick - you name it. I loved them all. I put my arms around them - always figuratively and often literally - and gave them as much love as I could. I knew they were hurting too, even though most of them didn't even know it because they had built strong, protective walls around their hearts. I began to thank Heavenly Father in my prayers every day for his mercy, and for helping me change my destructive patterns - for helping me truly love my son.

As the next months passed, my life was generally much better, but there were still ups and downs. One day I was sitting alone at my kitchen table. I started thinking about my son, and for some reason, this thought got stuck in my mind: "I can never be truly happy because all of my children will never be married in the temple." Suddenly I was drowning in a pool of despair. The thought continued relentlessly, "I'm never going to be happy. I'm never going to be happy. I'm never going to be happy." A feeling of complete hopelessness engulfed me, and in that moment all my progress seemed swept away forever. The weight of my misery pressed down and threatened to consume me, but suddenly something deep inside me snapped. I jumped out of that chair and shouted, "Oh yah! I can't live if I can't be happy! I am just going to have to be happy no matter what!"

What a freeing experience! What a marvelous gift from God! He alone could snatch me from such depths of despair and grant me a new view of life. He taught me in my very core that I could be happy when my children weren't doing the things I wanted them to do. I even learned that I could be happy when my husband didn't do what I wanted him to do! I suddenly realized that my happiness was in my own hands, and I chose to be happy! I never looked back. It wasn't long before several of my friends commented that they noticed a change in my spirit.

Maintaining a Brightness of Hope

Our home life took on a more peaceful flow. My relationships with our other children improved as I chose to be happy -- no matter what! I knew this change was a gift from God and I tried to study the scriptures regularly to show my gratitude. For my birthday I had my husband buy me the new quad with the topical guide so I could really get into them. I was determined to be more faithful and attentive to the scriptures. In the process I had some great moments with the scriptures, but I'd go in spurts. I couldn't seem to make myself study them every day for extended periods of time. I knew I was still missing the "feasting daily" and the "immersing" that I wanted to experience.

Finally that gift came into my life about five years ago when my sister called me and said, "I have found this book. It has changed my life. You have got to get it and tell me what you think." (The book, by Colleen Harrison, is a twelve step program based on the teachings of The Book of Mormon, and is titled He Did Deliver Me from Bondage. It is available at www.windhavenpublishing.com.) Although I had never heard of it, the church had been using this book in its addiction recovery program for several years. It has a lengthy introduction followed by twelve chapters. Before each chapter is a list of seven scriptures, along with a question pertaining to each one. To follow the program you have to read one scripture each day, read the corresponding question, and then take at least ten or fifteen minutes to ponder and write. You simply write whatever comes into your mind - whatever you feel when you ponder that scripture and question.

Within a few days, I was completely hooked. I often spent hours doing the assignments and would complete a chapter in a day or two instead of taking the full week. I would wake up before my alarm went off and hurry to start my personal scripture time so I could have every possible moment to study before my daily tasks demanded my attention. I started studying in the office instead of at the kitchen table or in the living room. That way I could shut the door and be alone with God. I started praying out loud because it helped me focus better. It was good that I was alone because my family would have thought I had lost my mind if they had seen me. Sometimes I would pick up the scriptures and just stroke the columns of words, or lift them to

my cheek and rest my face on the open pages. I loved those joyful words so much. I couldn't get enough. I was overwhelmed by the love I felt. Heavenly Father opened my heart and my mind. Finally I was hungering and thirsting, and feasting upon His words. This was what I had been missing! My heart was constantly filled with gratitude.

As I approached the end of the book I was afraid I wouldn't be able to keep the same intensity when I studied on my own because I didn't have the author's questions to ponder. But I soon learned I didn't have to worry. The scriptures have become my personal "love notes from God" and I hunger to read and reread them, each time trying to better grasp his messages to me. My life has become much, much more peaceful. I will probably always have my intense personality, but I will also always have my love notes to fall back on.

I want to share a couple of examples of scriptures that have become very precious and personal to me. First, 2 Nephi 4:16-20.

*16 Behold, my soul **delighteth** in the things of the Lord; and my heart pondereth continually upon the things which I have seen and heard.*

*17 Nevertheless, notwithstanding the great goodness of the Lord, in showing me his great and marvelous works, my heart exclaimeth: **O wretched [wo]man that I am!** (liken them unto yourselves, remember) Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities.*

18 I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me.

*19 And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins; **nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted.***

20 My God hath been my support; he hath led me through mine afflictions

I can't begin to express how significant this scripture has become in my life. When something distresses me my husband has been known to look at me and say, "Wretched woman day, huh?" I do have "wretched woman" days now and then, but I know who I trust. And when I have a dark day, and when I have a time of depression, I know "it came to pass", it did not "come to stay". I don't fear like I used to. I know how to turn to the Lord. I can't "make" Him come and change my heart as fast as I might like Him to, but I am willing to wait on Him. I know I can trust Him. He has proven Himself again and again and I know He is there for me. I trust that He knows what is best for me.

Another scripture that I have come to love is Matthew 11:28-30. The Savior says, "*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take **my** yoke upon you [not the yoke of the world, not the yoke of Satan] and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.*" [That's a promise!] Then he says, "*For **my** yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*" There is so much to ponder in that scriptural invitation. I have spent hours pondering and writing on different occasions and have learned a lot about myself and about the love of the Savior. Last week as I was thinking about it, I got stuck on the words "my burden". I never really quite liked the word "burden" in there because "burden" sounds quite negative to me, so I decided to do a little research into the Greek origin of the word. I learned that the word it was translated from could also be translated as "my task" or "my service". It's kind of interesting to ponder that possibility, isn't it? This scripture – this pleading invitation to come to Christ – is such a treasure to me. It has become one of my favorite "love notes from

God". If you haven't discovered the personal application of this scripture yet, ponder it. It is so lovely.

I want to conclude by returning to David. He was living in New York City when the World Trade Center was attacked in September of 2001. He had been struggling with some health issues and after the attack his business declined to practically nothing. He called and asked if he could come home for a little while before relocating in another area. I had concerns about what "a little while" might mean, but the spirit undeniably confirmed our decision to welcome him back into our home. That "little while" has extended to almost three and a half years so far, but it is truly a gift to have him in our home. Many positive things have resulted from this change in our lives and we clearly see God's hand in it. It reminds me constantly of who I am, and it helps me further define what I personally believe.

While David was in New York he embraced the Buddhist path and worked hard to develop his spirituality. However, coming home was a very emotional and stressful experience for him. Our views and beliefs were often very different. Many times he would push me and try to get me to argue with him. A few times he got frustrated and asked me why I wouldn't express my opinion on a certain issue. I usually told him I was still thinking about it but just wasn't ready to respond yet. He is a very verbal person and we spent a lot of time talking. Several months after he came home we were in the midst of an intense discussion when he suddenly paused and just looked at me for awhile. Finally he said, "Mom, you practice your religion differently now." Perhaps that is the greatest compliment I have ever received in my life.

I cannot begin to describe the joy I have found in this journey. I would not change it. I am so grateful for the things the Lord has taught me so that I can practice my religion in a more Christ-like way. I've learned I can live in peace and joy as I honor my children's agency and put my trust in The Savior. Of course I don't always do that perfectly, but I have learned to seek His guidance in dealing with what life offers me rather than trying to impose my will on life. I don't fear the future like I used to. I accept the fact that I don't have control over my children's choices, but I no longer worry about those celestial doors. I spend wonderful time pondering the scriptures. I earnestly pray for my children and often express my love to them. I have sincerely apologized to them for my misguided behavior as a young mother. I continue to apologize when I become aware that I have offended someone. I'm on the path. I know the Lord loves me. I know He wants me - and all of His children - to return to Him. He has prepared the way. Right now my task is to walk through life diligently seeking the companionship of His Spirit and the guidance he has promised as I face the challenges of this very day - this very moment.

I know I am not the only one who has trials. We all experience difficult challenges as we journey through life. As we face them, Satan tries to cover our eyes with the dark glasses of despair in an effort to alter our perception of truth. I humbly testify that The Savior is there to remove those dark glasses so that we can clearly see, and so that we can have a wonderful brightness of hope. I love the gospel with all my heart, and I love Our Precious Savior. I pray that we can each face our challenges with trust in Him, with a brightness of hope, and with joy in our hearts.

(I shared this poem in my original talk. I heard it on an audio tape which I had borrowed from the city library years earlier. The poem seemed to describe all to well the way I approached my problems. I wrote it down and posted it by my computer as a reminder to "let go and let God". I

have not been able to identify the author although I have searched for it. If anyone can help me with that I would be grateful for the information.)

A thought to ponder:

No misery, no joy!

Know misery, know joy!

(After I gave my talk my husband gave me this thought. It says so much in so few words! I added it to my transcript thinking it might provide hope for someone who is feeling misery.)