

Orphans and Heirs and the Providence of God



I have heard dozens of personal testimonies over the years, and what I love about them is that in addition to getting to know someone better, they have the power to affect someone's eternity. Testimonies are also your own personal miracle, and when the enemy plants doubts in our minds, we have only to remember that every born again believer throughout history has their story too-- that "great cloud of witnesses" spoken of in Hebrews 11. And so we want to make sure that our testimony clearly communicates His fingerprint in our lives, and what He *continues* to do for us and in us.

That's what I want to do here, because oftentimes I hear testimonies that become bogged down with lists of sins that were committed, reducing the work of Christ to almost footnote status at the end. But the sin we commit today is every bit as grievous to the Lord as those we committed prior to salvation; even more so, because what we did in the flesh we were ignorant of. What we do after salvation we should be very conscious of. Secondly, throughout every moment of the process of surrendering, the Lord was right there, guiding our steps. It's really all about Him.

Out of curiosity, I looked up the New Testament Greek word for "Testimony", and the word is "Martyr-e-o" - or, to give a good report. We get our word "martyr" from this Greek word, and there is no greater testimony than that of a committed believer who is willing to give their life for their beliefs.

So with all that in mind, I am going to give enough of my story so you can get to know me a bit, but what I want to emphasize is all the ways I've seen God's hand, because every testimony is really just a series of divinely orchestrated moments, which in my case, go back a few generations.

My great grandmother Catherine on my mom's side, who lived on a farm in Northeast Wisconsin, lost a young daughter to illness back in 1893, her only little girl. She was only 3. She was devastated as you can imagine. But I am going to say, and this might surprise some of you, that *if that had not happened, I would not be here speaking to you today.*

Back in 1890, a baby girl named Magdalena was born to a young couple living in New York City. Her immigrant parents were, like most young parents at the time, living hand to mouth, both working hard to carve out a new life in the overcrowded and under-regulated city that New York was in those days. In the late 19th century our nation in general, and the East coast more specifically, was being swept away in a flood of cultural, economic, and technological changes as we moved from a society built on manual labor centered around farming and construction, to one dominated by industry and machine manufacture.

Inventions designed to make our lives easier were springing up at record pace. Things like the sewing machine, the telephone, the washing machine, moving pictures, the light bulb, cameras, internal combustion engines, and a host of other things we take for granted were expanding employment opportunities exponentially for those who lived in cities large enough to build mills and mass-produce products. The end of the 19th, and the entire 20th century was one of great changes in lifestyle and perspective, as I'm sure we all comprehend to one degree or another regardless of which generation we were born into.

Sad to say, little Magdalena did not find the world very welcoming, and instead of growing up in a loving stable home with her own birth family, she soon became part of a growing social problem in New York. One particularly tragic by-product of this new social and economic order was a generation of children who were considered property. An increase in problems such as alcoholism and its destructive effect on the family order, unregulated hours in factories by both mothers and fathers, and a lack of really any extended family among immigrants resulted in minors being left to fend for themselves on the streets, resorting to begging, joining street gangs, and - often at the

tender age of 5 - selling things like matches and sometimes stolen items in order to survive. Basically, they were tossed aside for apparently more pressing priorities than parenthood. Law enforcement was at its wit's end as to how to deal with so many unprotected and deserted children.

Unfortunately, the children were the casualties of this chaos, and many were abandoned or given away. Due to this situation, my grandmother, who was born in NY and was an unwanted 3 year old, was just one of many who was placed in one of a two large orphanages, or childrens' homes, that sprang up to attempt to keep these children off the streets. One was Catholic, the other Protestant. They couldn't possibly care for them all, so she and nearly 300,000 others were put on trains and sent to the Midwest in search of a new families.

I would wager that the majority of Americans have ever heard about this fascinating part of our collective history, but there are probably now millions of Midwesterners who are where they are because of this early version of a foster care system, as imperfect as it was. They were called "Orphan Trains", and they ran, remarkably, from 1854-1929.

So, Magdalena, who probably had no other siblings, was one of those chosen to be a part of this great migration west, to get on one such train in 1893 in search of a family to adopt her. Knowing no one, with probably only a change of clothes to carry, and with no destination or guarantee, the one they called Lena faced a very frightening situation indeed.

Once the trains set out, the placement process into a family was casual at best. Handbills and posters were distributed ahead of time in a community on the train's route. Once in a while, a church would be contacted as to the arrival schedule so as to give families who might consider adopting a child to be there at the appointed time.

As a train would pull into town, youngsters were cleaned up and paraded in front of potential families. One can only imagine the confusion and humiliation these kids suffered upon inspection, and often rejection, by potential parents who may be looking more on the outward instead of the inward. And some of these kids, having not been parented at all, were pretty

ill-mannered and undisciplined, a self-defeating situation for those too immature to understand what was really at stake.

Results of the effort were mixed: many were placed into loving homes with every advantage and right, fully adopted as sons and daughters. Some were placed into farm families and literally indentured as laborers, never adopted.

Never able to inherit, they remained under the law, so to speak, for their entire lives, living with a stigma that many chose to never discuss or disclose to any successive generations. Some rebelled against their placement and became unruly or ran away; others simply endured and never entertained self-pity. Some found their place in society, whether it be politics or the work world; others never quite recovered from this rocky start in life. But they all had something in common; they were never allowed to communicate with their past and were forced into circumstances that had the power to make or break their lives.

Even at the tender age of three, Magdalena may have sensed that her life was in a state of flux; that she was not in control of any decisions made for her. Children were told that if they were sent out, they were to cut all ties to their origin, whether name or identity, even if that meant never seeing any siblings or birth parents again.

How long would her state of being unwanted and unclaimed last? Would there come a day when her status would change, would she ever have an identity or a people of her own? Only when one who had the authority to claim her, to adopt her, to give her a name and an inheritance would there be a change in her status as one under the bondage of the laws of the land.

Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, ² but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. ³ Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. ⁴ But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, “Abba, Father!” ⁷ Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ.

Galatians 4:1-6

Although little is known about Lena's trip West or how many stops along the way her train made, it IS known that at one point, perhaps when she was most weary of that endless ride, she got off at a scheduled stop, probably in Chicago, and walked up to a young couple, looked at the man and said, 'Daddy!' as if by that proclamation it became so. That bold little girl got her wish, because "Daddy" he became to her.

She had come to the end of the line, and had no where to look but up.

Now, his wife, my great-grandmother Catherine, happened to be the very one who had just lost her only daughter, making the moment simply providential, because *if they had not adopted her on the spot, I would not be here speaking to you today.*

Grandma Lena, renamed Helen by her new family, eventually had 14 children of her own - one of which was my mother who married my father in 1949. Seven years and 2 sons later, my mom suffered a miscarriage. They had always wanted a daughter, and even though mom was 40, they thought they would give it one more try. I was that daughter. *Without that miscarriage, I would not be here speaking to you today.*

And I want to add here, having known my Grandmother for the first 18 years of my life, I can absolutely see this taking place just as I was told by family historians.

My dad worked for Marathon Corporation/American Can Co. as a food packaging designer for the growing frozen food industry. He designed, basically invented, the TV dinner carton eventually used by Swanson. He never patented it, and if he had he would have been a wealthy man. But he was a company man, and in 1956, that company relocated my family to Oswego, NY and that is where I was born. The plant closed unexpectedly 7 years later so my family, who moved with four people, returned to Wisconsin

with five people in 1963, when I was 5. *But without that plant closure, I would not be here speaking to you today.*

Then when I was around 10, I was at a family picnic north of here, and while casually standing around a swimming pool, a cousin came up behind me and gave me a shove into the deep end. I could not swim, and found myself on the bottom of the pool, no air in my lungs, helpless but oddly peaceful. I cried out in my heart to the God I heard about in church, saying, "I had hoped to live much longer than 10 years, but if this is it, I will see you soon." My first real prayer. I asked Him to spare my life, and within seconds my hands found the ladder up to poolside, I climbed out and just laid there in the hot sun, knees knocking, head spinning with relief and some what ifs, that I now know the answer to my life today: *If God had not answered me in my distress, I would not be speaking to you today.*

You see, I was Catholic, and I took it seriously - and my parents thought it best for us kids to spend 12 years in the Catholic school system, pretty much raised by nuns with all that entails, most of it not very pleasant from every September to May in the 60s. We really lived for the summers in between those years, and it's true, life as a kid for me and my friends was everything you would think it was, in that relatively innocent era. We had a lot of fun, we spent our time outdoors from 7 AM till they called for us, our pop songs were clean and upbeat, and I believed that Ward and June Cleaver were real.

My family moved across town in 1970 which was somewhat traumatic for me as I was just entering Jr. High and had to start over with new friends, leaving my old ones behind. I think that was the beginning of a search for a more grown up truth amidst the emotional ups and downs of teenage girlhood in the 70s. Life was predictable, until it wasn't.

I need to interject here that by both design *and* on purpose, I never indulged in any of the rebellion of my peers; I have never been drunk, smoked a cigarette, took drugs, or slept around. Something inside me told me that if I did that, I was mortgaging some precious, uncharted part of my future - who I was and who I was meant to be - and I simply could not do it. I paid a price

for it in being alone, but I knew there was more to life than all that temporal rebellion. I had a fear of God, I loved God in my youthful way. This God had preserved my life as we met in that pool - but I did not have a saving faith. God had a specific day of accountability for me set in the future. Besides, there were more divine appointments to come.

After High School I had had enough of the school routine and just wanted to do something with minimal pressure that did not include 4 more years of textbooks. They pushed us pretty hard in that Catholic school, we received an excellent education.

But my dad had pressured me too, and despite his disappointment that I did not want to attend college, he insisted I had to do *something* productive and made sure I went job hunting right away. I did have some solid, consistent office skills. But instead of office work, I decided to enroll in the local Cosmetology school downtown for a year of “beauty school”. My student loan was \$800, and all in all, I loved the work. It pulled me out of my shell. But what was really significant is that it was at that school the Lord really started dealing with me. I never saw any of this coming, trust me.

After living in my own little bubble, I met a real mix of people at the school of mostly 18 year old girls, some more lost than others. One student, Jan, was a vocal born again believer, and let me tell you I had never met one of those. What exactly did she mean when she said that I wasn’t saved??

I had behaved myself all my life, and here she is saying it’s not enough to get into heaven. She treated me like a perfect heathen and that was new to me - and it made me a bit defensive, trying to come up with an answer for everything she threw at me. She could give an answer for the hope in her - but I was just making it up as I went because I had no knowledge of God’s Word, only tradition.

What I did not know is that I was what you would call a “Pharisee” – with my own form of religion based on my own righteousness, the god of my denomination, and a hefty side order of pride for how I had chosen to live my life. I just couldn’t get on the “sinner” badge bandwagon because I knew all too well what others my age were indulging in. But I had made the classic

and fatal religious mistake of comparing myself to other sinners instead of a perfect God. To convince me that my sin was the same as anyone else's, that would take some serious chiseling and that's where my internal war was headquartered.

Four of us gals at the school would have these crazy circular theological discussions that I still remember well; Jan with her "you must be born again" mantra and me with my Catholic defense mechanisms. There was another gal there, a local pastor's daughter who was laying low because she was not doing what *her* dad wanted her to do with her post high school years, so she was in rebel mode and as such, didn't say much because her testimony had no real teeth at the moment; and one other gal, Becky, who was listening hard to everything the fireball Christian had to say, which I was not aware of at the time because she had just lost her mom to cancer and had her own saga to work through. What a group we were.

If you wanted to give us names, they would have been *Lost Girl*, *Found Girl*, *Running Girl*, and *Seeking Girl*.

This went on for a year, after which I graduated and hit the job hunt trail, feeling utterly empty but adulthood was settling into my bones, along with a deep sense of futility. There had to be more for me than living with my parents and trying to get a career going. One day out of the blue, a few years later actually, I called up Seeker Girl, and asked if she wanted to see a movie. It was New Years' Day 1980 and we were both bored to death with life at 21. Imagine that. I don't remember the content of the movie because we spent the evening talking about getting an apartment and having our lives REALLY begin. And that's just what we did, and two months later on my 22nd birthday, we had found a place, and I moved out of my parents house, and in with Seeker Girl.

Little did I know, by then she was no longer seeking, and I wasn't real thrilled with what she had found.

What I didn't know at the time of the move is that she had started taking guitar lessons from one of those "born again" types - and he was not only born again, he was a preacher of such things, and after he made sure he

witnessed to her and led her to Christ, true misery kicked in for me. I found out far too late that I was now to be living with one of those crazy Christians who desired I would be saved from something. At the time, this pastor was not one of my favorite people either, because after she got saved and I was living with her I was instantly and constantly bombarded by bible study tapes, Christian music, Christian-ese, Christian radio, all of which I despised, along with those happy shiny Christian faces she was hanging out with 7 days a week. I was alone again, with lots of time to think about the Christian I thought I was.

With a full scale internal war going on, I nearly drove myself crazy and became very depressed. The war for my soul was raging and did not abate for one minute for an entire year. She and I quietly retreated into our corners and I became withdrawn, trying to give the impression I was moving on with my life. I was not. The Lord kept dealing with me, even through things like the death of John Lennon, because people who loom that large in the culture should live forever, right? My youth ended with an audible thud at that point, in case there was any question. What a reality check.

That Fall, out of sheer boredom, my roommate who was busy helping to set up a Christian coffeehouse (which made me think it was surely a cult trying to lure in the unsuspected in the heart of town) invited me to check out this new place on opening night. What in the world is a Christian Coffeehouse? I had nothing else to do, so I agreed to go hear a band called Dayspring. As I sat there, I realized that all they sang about was Jesus. I thought, with all the zillion things a person can sing about, why is every song about Jesus? Why were they so happy? They were talented, to be sure. This mystified me no end. I expected mediocrity, but they were really good.

Again the Lord continued to woo me, showing me my real heart. Between that and seeing something genuinely different in all those people I met from a little church across town, my heart began to soften.

The Lord was drawing me and wooing me and it was His love in motion. Utterly broken, on a cold and clear night in early 1981, I prayed a simple

prayer of surrender before falling into the most peaceful sleep I had had in a year. I wanted what they had, period. I soon found out that everyone in a sweet little church across town had been praying for me to be miserable, so I was cornered. I woke up the next day a completely new person, the change was so profound and radical it startled even me. I was NEW. In every way.

And ---- if that preacher had not taught guitar to *Seeker Girl*, and led her to Jesus, and opened up the coffeehouse, *I would not be speaking to you today.*

By my birthday of 1981, I had my first bible and I started attending that same fledgling church in town of 25 of the most joy-filled believers you can imagine. After attending a denominational church my entire life, I was a bit hesitant to find out exactly what went on there. As a Catholic we were told we might get struck by lightning if we even entered a Protestant church. But after wrestling with that too, I figured, what do I have to lose?

Turns out, the day I mustered up all my courage to finally go to their evening bible study, there was a Christian band scheduled to play and give their testimony. The band? Dayspring. All they sang about was Jesus...and this time I got it! God knew just what I needed, He set that up, 5 months after the coffeehouse encounter.

I met my husband at that Café that Summer, we were married in 1982, and our daughter Holly was born in 1983 so I had several learning curves going on at once. Raising her was such a joy, and she grew up and married Thomas and they had Ethan, and God has redeemed 3 generations since Lena – all adopted according to the promise of eternal life by the grace of God. No greater joy, my children walking in truth.

As much as I changed radically overnight, and as much as we rejoice in all the junk He takes from us early on, as we continue on year upon year, He gets to the bedrock, the hard wired stuff in us later that often requires deeper surrender and a greater thirst for and knowledge of truth. Our testimony never ends.

And even though I don't have one of those sin-filled rebellious testimonies, I *am* a testimony to the biblical truth that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Besides, a pharisee wrote most of the New Testament, and he calls himself the chiefest of sinners. I can relate to that more and more as the years go by.

So, as the Lord continues to do amazing things in my life. I began to study the bible inductively, was passionate about Bible prophecy from day 1, which resulting in a lot of writing and speaking opportunities. And I had no idea that in my old age God would use all that in hosting a radio program, truly one of the greatest blessings. Remember, I said early on that I never saw any of this coming. I have the mind of Christ, but God's ways are still far above mine.

So that's my story and I'm sticking with it. The Lord has done marvelous things and I am the least worthy of any of it. Praise God. I have been adopted, and I have a mighty bright future, an inheritance that will never fade away.