

Good morning. My name is Beth Ann Huffman Sikes. I'm the daughter of Chuck and Carolyn Huffman, I have two sisters, Heather and Laura, and I am very blessed to be here. I want to start with a psalm:

*For you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb
I will thank you because I am marvelously made; your works are wonderful, and I know it well.*

My Body was not hidden from you, while I was being made in secret and woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes beheld my limbs (and heart) yet unfinished in the womb; all of them were written in your book;

They were fashioned day by day, when as yet there was none of them.

Psalm 139: 12 – 15

So, basically, that sums my story up. But since we have time I guess you want details. First, a question: how many of you have been in a group or class or workshop where you are given a paper and pencil. You're told to draw a lifeline and at one end write your birth date, and subsequently down the line mark when you first knew Christ, or were born again, or joined AA or whatever. I hate those and I never complete them. The problem is this exercise assumes that our lives are linear. My life may have a few linear genes, but I've decided it's more like a Celtic knot work or interlaced border.

For me, the interlacing lines show my journey, my whole self – spiritual, mental, physical, coming from one essence and meandering separately and then winding together, crossing each other. It's where all three join that, for me, God's *thin places* are discerned.

A thin place is where the veil between this world and the other is thin. Mahatma Ghandi described it this way: *“There is an indefinable, mysterious power that pervades everything. I feel it, though I do not see it. It is this unseen power that makes itself felt and yet defies all proof, because it is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses. It transcends the senses.*

So, Shakespeare was onto something when he wrote; "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." --From *Hamlet* (I, v, 166-167)

My birth was on a Thursday night at Hermann Hospital in Houston. By the next day it was apparent that I was a 'blue baby' (an extremely blue or cyanotic baby) who wouldn't survive the next few days without major cardiac surgery. In 1956 red tape was just as slow and tangled as today. The next night a clandestine meeting occurred between my father, and the cardiologist, Dan MacNamera, Enlisting the aid of a pediatric nurse (who knew she was going to get fired for sure) I was kidnapped, incubator and all and rushed to Texas Children's Hospital via a Cadillac. There, Denton Cooley implanted a Blalock-Taussig shunt and then became my Godfather. If anyone hasn't seen [Something the Lord Made](#) please do. Not only is it a fine movie cinematically, it tells the story of Alfred Blalock and blue babies. I find it very surreal.

So, I went home. I had a mom and dad, a brother, Carl, and a black shaggy dog. All went fine for about 3 years and then Carl became sick with Aplastic Anemia. It was not so much his illness I remember as suddenly being at church --a lot--day and night, and having extended weekends with my friends and their mothers. I knew I would spend the night when somebody told me to take a bath and find pajamas.

Carl died in August of '59. My playmate was gone and I wasn't sure where. I was told 'he went to Heaven to be with God' but that wasn't a satisfactory answer. I didn't know that much about G-d or heaven but I still had his dog so that made up for being an only child by default.

The next year, my sister Heather was born. And I learned more about G-d. I remember my Grandparents, Honey and Papa, were staying with us, perhaps to help out with the baby. Honey was a mystic; someone who seemed always connected with thin places and is transcended by them. I was 4 and in bed. Honey came into tuck me in and after prayers were said she asked me if I wanted to have a gift. She laid hands on me, I closed my eyes and she began praying in tongues. I don't know how long she prayed but somewhere in those moments I felt warm and still and totally loved. She said 'O little child

of mine Pray with me. ' And I did. Afterwards Honey told me that I had prayed using Angel words, and right now, the knowledge, the gift of tongues, was only for me to know. I did notice that there were a lot more prayer groups and small groups at the house, and there it was OK to speak in tongues.

Of course, I had learned about music by now. Daddy sang songs passed down from his Dad; Honey taught me songs she sang as a flapper in an all girls ukulele band on 6th street. The folk music revival was beginning and I remember sitting on the floor watching a Peter, Paul and Mary album go round and round and I had a musical 'a-ha- moment. The song was a story! I loved stories. And not only that, but even though they were all singing the same words they weren't singing the same notes but it all went together. I had discovered harmony and I suddenly knew this is how the angels sing!

2 years later my 2nd sister, Laura was born. Shortly after, we moved to Austin for Daddy to enter the Episcopal Seminary. Physically, I did most things kids did. I took piano lessons. I played and jumped double-dutch and ran, though not very fast. When I got tired I sat out. It was the Austin Allergies that got me. I continued to go back to the hospital yearly for check-ups and tests, but other than certain medical precautions my life was fairly in the normal zone.

But oftentimes, if I were alone, I would get this wordless sense of an otherness. Perhaps I had passed by a 'place where something happened' or discerned a transcendence. Sometimes music was involved, sometimes prayer. Sometimes it was a story and my whole spirit absorbed an essence of mystery. I didn't have a name for this feeling or knew if other people had this or if it had to do with my heart condition. I finally got at least an idea that someone else knew about this at age 7. I had the measles. To pass time, Mother gave me a hardback copy of The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe. I'd never heard of this book or it's author. I absolutely devoured that book, and then realized that my strange feelings must somehow be related to Narnia. Later I learned that C.S. Lewis spent much of his life seeking Narnia, too. From then on, I've checked a lot of wardrobe closets.

Daddy became a priest and became assistant rector at St. David's Episcopal church here in Austin. Our family was very involved, but sometimes that involvement was a bit different from the norm. Like performing.

For a Lenten parish supper Daddy decided that he would play the guitar and the 3 of us girls would entertain. He had seen way too much of the Sound of Music. But we did it, and none of us really rebelled at being in front of an audience. I think it's genetic, along with Musical Turrets, which my family shares. Our singing became quite traditionally expected for as long as we were at St. David's.

During this time I began going to Laity Lodge, or rather Echo Valley when there were only 3 cabins, a ranch house, and a covered concrete slab that served as the pavilion. I learned more about G-d, prayer groups, small groups, stories, and music. For the first time my cardiac condition became an obstacle to some of the activities but it usually worked out. I couldn't hike to Blue Hole so. oh shucky darn, I guess I had to ride the horse.

In 1971 Daddy felt called to Pittsburgh, PA. I was just finishing middle school and was planning, along with all my friends since 2nd grade, to enter High school. This was not a good time for me to move. Tears and promises and hissy fits and secret plans did no good. I read Gone With The Wind the entire 3 days of road trip and barely spoke to anyone.

Mother and Dad had friends, the Liddell's, in Elwood City about 40 miles from our new residence. They had 3 sons our ages and we all got along fine. One day we visited and there was a strange girl with very long hair and big glasses. Kathleen Jones. This was a set-up and we both knew it. We circled each other like wolves and then she dropped her sketchpad. She drew horses. Really good horses. She like the same T.V. shows. She wrote stories. Maybe this will work after all. She was one of the best gifts that G-d ever gave to me.

We moved back to Austin in '73 and, as you know, came to St. Matthew's. So much of my story overlaps with St. Matthew's story. For instance, after the first Faith Alive the old EYC youth group sort of faded out. Daddy decided to create a new youth group and asked if, Charles Parker, Charlotte Cauley, and I to lead it. I guess the only criteria we needed was we were a little older than the kids, Charles and I could always do a comedy routine or skit, we knew which songs to sing, and we all knew how to run a prayer groups and small groups.

For several years we lead the group and it just got bigger. St. Matthew's hired a bono fide youth leader and the 3 of us went to college.

I went to Southwestern University in Georgetown and fell in love with theatre. It was all about story. But, in the summer of my freshman years I returned to Houston for a routine heart catherization and suffered a stroke during the test. Unfortunately, no one realized it and I was told that the symptoms exhibited like short-term memory loss, coordination and balance loss were simply adverse reactions to the contrast dye. They seemed subtle and should wear off soon. I'm still waiting. I 'm now left-handed and I don't drive. I returned to college but found that numbers and formulas and sciences seemed backwards and upside down and so my plan of entering into vet school was no longer. So, I graduated instead with a degree in theatre and English.

Kathy was done with college a year later and I convinced her to bring her horse to Texas and move in with me. I got her a job working with me at an Early Childhood Development program. Working with special needs kids also helped me understand and deal with the ramifications of the stroke.

Kathy and I were inseparable. I visited her in Wales one summer, working with her at the Amgueddfa Werin Cymry or the Welsh Folk Museum. Her job was to locate old storytellers and tape their stories. She then would translate it from Welsh to English. That's when I learned the true name for this veiled place for Wales is awash in saints and pilgrims and Celtic holy ground. Almost every story told described a thin place where something mystical or mysterious had occurred. In our treks up and down the mountains and cwms, Kathy and I both started noticing, perhaps just a glance that a thin place was

nearby. About the mountain it is said *"On this arid summit, where the winds blow hard, where no root takes hold, where distance seems infinite and heaven close, the spirit is tested and replenished ... for the pilgrim has reached a thin place, where one steps into the highest dimension of one's existence."*

So at last I now had a name for this observance started so long ago by my Grandmother.

Neither of us dated much in high school or college and so decided that if you can't get a man with a gun we would try swords. So we met a pair of swashbuckling roommates, David and Allen. She married David and in '83 I married Allen in Huffman Hall and I think it was the 1st wedding in here. But before we married I had to have another shunt implanted. It was also decided that, due to the 'fragility of my condition' pregnancy would be a really bad idea. So I had a tubal ligation. Allen was in the Navy, so as soon as we married we moved to Chicago. We enjoyed the north for a while and then it just got too cold. Fortunately, Allen was then sent to Florida. Having been married 3 years we were more than ready to start a family. But adoption procedures stalled because we were registered Texans living in Florida. It was quite frustrating. In mid Jan. of '86 visited St. Augustine, one of the oldest settlements in the U.S. It also has the Shrine of the Nursing Mother, the oldest Marion Shrine in the U.S., built by the Spanish in the 16th c. There we lit candles, said some Hail Marys and prayed about the adoption procedures.

About 5 weeks later I got the flu, or maybe a terrible case of allergies. For some reason, I walked to the store and bought the least expensive home pregnancy test. It tested positive. But it was a cheap test. I asked Allen that night if he would like to read the instructions and give his military, engineering opinion. "Well, it is a cheap test." I had another test on the base. It was also positive. "Well, we know you've had a tubal and we can get false positives so lets do a blood test." Guess what? The Navy cardiologist hit the ceiling. He immediately CHAMPUSED me out to a civilian OBGYN. Dr. Farrell was a gentle bear of a Baptist who pulled no punches about explaining the incredibly high risks taken throughout the pregnancy. He only asked us once if we had talked about 'termination'. "This is of G-d, and we are not about to outguess Him." We later learned that he was the high-risk OBGYN in three states.

Megan was due near Xmas and I started having weekly sonograms. By early September I was in the hospital on bed rest and on oxygen. By October it was evident I was in trouble and so it was decided that October 23 would be Megan's birthday. I wanted to hold out until All Saint's

Day but it fell on a Saturday and there was a big ball game. It was impossible to get a team together. All 14 “ of Megan came out weighing 2lbs 12oz. They asked me if I had a name yet? “I think we’ll call her ‘Mouse’. I haven’t a clue where that came from. But when I looked at her in the incubator I was overwhelmed with the Love of G-d in this child, and I suddenly understood Abraham and Isaac for the first time. The first story that she heard in the hospital was that story, and then TLTW and TW. We asked Dr. Farrell if he found an explanation for the pregnancy. He shrugged, and said, “we thought certainly the tubal ligation had failed or had somehow grown back together. But it’s in perfectly non-functioning order. We did find a small pinhole in the uterus and figured the egg free-floated and slipped in. He paused. “G-d truly wanted this child to be born.” Megan came home a week before Xmas and was immediately given to Mary and Joseph for the pageant.

Allen was discharged in ’87 and we moved back home to Austin and St. Matthew’s. Megan was baptized and many of you were there, and have watched her grow into a beautiful young lady. Allen worked at Tracor and I taught school and tutored. We spent Monday nights at Kathy and David’s reading stories aloud, and on Thursday nights we would fence. That routine worked fine until about ’91. It got tougher and tougher for me to do many activities. It was decided that, once again, I needed more heart surgery. A new procedure called a Fontan was advised and I flew up to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester MN to have it done. It’s usually done on children age 7 or under but Mayo was experienced with adults. I am now the oldest surviving Fontan patient.

Not only did many of you care for Allen and Megan, you were also pounding the gates of heaven with prayers the entire time. That’s why I think I went on my incredible journey. As I tell this, know that my words will be imprecise and clumsy, like a child with 8 crayons trying to explain a Monet, or the deepest ocean.

I was in ICU, sometime after surgery. Time was nonexistent and nonlinear. Next to the bed was a tape player with headphones. Inside was a tape that Heather had sent of a Valentine concert she’d performed. But it was dark, and I was traveling, fast down a long, long blackness. I was warm and calm and filled with an overwhelming peace. I saw grayness in the distance that grew larger and lighter. Suddenly, the grayness was upon me and I was through it and there

was the whitest brightness I've ever encountered. It was like going into a dark theatre and turning on all the lights at once. I was in the light and the light was in me and around me and through me as a swimmer is totally surrounded by water, in every pore. And I knew that this was truly G-d and Love and they were the same. I didn't see Jesus, or angels or anyone I knew. Then I was back. And I knew 3 things to my inner core – that the Love of G-d is Home; I am not deserving of that Love and that we are all connected in such way we cannot fathom - you, me, the soldiers in Afghanistan, ants, hawks, mountains, whales. I started weeping, and, for some reason, I put on the headphones and turned on the tape. The first song I heard was It Is Well With My Soul. Now I'm sobbing. The nurses became flustered and worried and I couldn't even speak to them. It was awhile before I could talk to anyone about this. In fact, as I tell you this I am so fully back in that memory it is tangible. The mark of a true thin place allows you to reclaim that essence of mystery, those raw feelings.

About 8 years ago, my dear Kathy was diagnosed with cancer. We fought the good fight for 2 years, and then on Nov. 8th we took her to Christopher House. David and I were the only ones with her for a while. I sat next to her, held her hand and just read psalms, over and over and over. Later, Allen came along with others, and read Evening Prayer. People came and went; most stayed. Mother and Daddy came, and gave her communion. She was having trouble breathing so we took turns sitting behind her propping her up. By this time choir rehearsal had ended and several friends came in with hymnals. We sang songs that she liked, Xmas songs, Easter songs, any song. I was holding her up when she left at 11:20. I knew she had fled and was swimming in that light. I know that we brought her to the doorway and sang and prayed her through.

One more story. Allen, Megan and I were at Galveston visiting friends. It was Sunday morning early, and I decided to have quiet swim time on the beach. I took my towel and walked the short distance to the ocean. It was dawn and, except for a few gulls, I was all alone. Instead of swimming I just sat down at the water's edge. The water lapped across and surrounded me and the great expanse of ocean flowed out before me. And again, there was that transcendent thin place, that holy ground. This time there wasn't light but water, and it wasn't Love, but Grace.

Now, I am facing a heart transplant and I know you are praying. Neither I nor the doctors really know how this will turn out. But no one knows the end of their story. Last week, in Houston one doctor looked at me and said, "We're amazed that you're here." Not only that I've survived this long but, apparently, few statistics dealing with women heart transplants even apply to me. Once I finish all the tests and medical work-ups the results will be presented to a committee who will put me on a list. Then, we wait. But my whole life has been in God's hands, waiting.

I never consciously knew a time when I internally doubted God's existence, or cast blame to the Heavens for problems, physical or other. It is what it is. I am who I am and I am part of His creation; made of the same stuff as stars. People remark to me at how brave and courageous I must be after all I've been through. My story is no less and no more than anyone else's – just a different set of obstacles. I do, however, think I've been very fortunate to read and listen and learn from encouragers my entire life. Those words have popped up to assuage me, to calm me or remind me that I'm not in control. So, like a deck of cards that everyone should always carry around I'll share from my deck of wisdom.

- I Am
- Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not to your own understanding – Prv. 3: 5-6
- Lord, Thou knowest – Honey Barlow
- You can choose your actions but you can't choose the consequences. – Carolyn Huffman
- 'Thank you' can be a profound prayer – Rev. Chuck Huffman
- Lord, meet me at the point of my greatest need. – Sam Shoemaker
- The ultimate freedom is the freedom to choose your attitude. – Viktor Frenkel
- Beginning is always a matter of choice. – Herb O' Driscoll
- If we're willing to make the journey it won't be a divine comedy unless it hurts.
– Madeleine L'engle
- Forgiveness is not automatic. – Madeleine L'engle
- When G-d calls for your attention, explanation is seldom what you get. – André Resner
- Listen to the music of what happens. – André Resner
- G-d has a bigger dream for you than you can imagine for yourself. – Oprah Winfrey
- You can't always get what you want, but if you try somehow, you just might find you get
what you need. – The Rolling Stones
- Whatever my lot, he has taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul.
– H. Spafford
- He who does not hearken to the rudder will surely hearken to the rocks.
– Estelle Carver
- If what we do is good, it is never ours. - Madeleine L'engle
- We find what we look for. – Madeleine L'engle
- Your story is a love offering; serve your story. – Tom Howard
- Whatever path you have walked, someone has walked before you and paved
The way. – Maya Angelo
- "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your
philosophy." - *Hamlet* (I, v, 166-167)
- Amazing grace, how sweet the sound... - John Newton

And finally

- The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.
– C.S. Lewis