

If we could bow our heads in prayer...

Gracious father – thank you for bringing these women here today to share and be close to you. You have said that where two or more of us gathers together in your name, you will be with us. Thank you. Amen.

### **“God’s Mysterious Ways”**

I picked this title because of the magazine Guidepost – there is an article called “Gods Mysterious Ways” that I read immediately when I receive the magazine each month... readers write in about miracles and coincidences that only God could fashion... I read each story amazed and always wonder God – can you do something like that in my life? – then I realize that he does every day...

I was born in a small rural town in the middle of Michigan to two high school sweethearts. My parents met in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and were married shortly after high school. The career my Dad started in at 17 years old, Construction and Brick-Laying, was the same one that sent him to retirement at 40 years old due to a bad back and worn-out knees. My mom cleaned houses until the kids came and to say the least – we struggled. I learned at an early age that my parents loved ME but couldn’t give me everything I asked for – Thank God I say to that, at this point in my life. My childhood consisted of fishing with my Dad, camping, dogs, cats, and lots of family time – My Mom was one of 6 children and my Dad one of 5 and everyone lived within a 20 mile radius of my home. This story would not be accurate if I didn’t start out by saying that my Mom, Betty Gay, has been the most influential person in my life. She is the most selfless and giving woman I’ve ever known and she is extremely faithful. Ask anyone that knows her and they’ll tell you the same.

My little brother, Matt, came along when I was almost two and little did we know at the time that he would change our lives indefinitely. Shortly after his toddler years began my parents noticed delays and behaviors that were not characteristic of kids his age... The doctors were sure that he was fine and it wasn’t until he started having seizures did the medical community pay attention to my parents concerns. Turns out he had a stroke in utero – they believe right before birth. The next decade was spent figuring out the medicines Matt would need and discovering the hurdles that families of special needs children must overcome. I was resentful at times, but kept to myself – I knew that my parents couldn’t possibly like being at the hospital all the time nor did they enjoy the countless meetings with teachers and behavior specialists they had to have. I was a well-mannered, well-behaved kid regardless of all that was happening in my young life – I had good friends, parents that loved me, and excellent health. My brother is now 25, he lives with my parents and functions

on a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade level. He's funny, polite and wonderfully unique and kind hearted. I am ashamed for my behavior as a child towards him... but through my brother God would bring some of my life's work to fruition later in my life...

At this point I should mention the skeleton in the closet, My Dad – the man that took me fishing, came to my basketball games, and helped me with my science projects. He was a body-builder, a phenomenal artist and an all around fun Dad, not to mention an amazing cook. He loved my Mom, but there was something that just wasn't right and it wasn't until I left for college that I realized the term Alcoholic appropriately labeled my Dad. At this point my resentments and detest for him flared but my desire to have a daddy and be loved and accepted by him always messed my mind up. Yes, I was the oldest child – so in my younger years not many people noticed that my mothering skills were the result of behavior I learned from living in that home. I was doing laundry, picking up beer and jack daniel's bottles, plus taking care of my little brother before I even entered middle school. It was what it was – it was my life. I learned that lying was important to protect my family, that judging myself without mercy was the right thing to do and among other unhealthy aspects of living I was bred to be super responsible and serious. Of course I didn't know any of this at the time. I went through two years, in middle school, where my ultimate goal was to commit suicide. Surely, I thought, whatever is wrong in my family has to do with me... I am not pretty enough, my Dad drinks a lot, my Mom cries a lot and my brother is sick all the time... who the heck is this God character and where the hell is he!?

I was born into a Catholic family. My grandparents on my Mom's side were very strict and I was the oldest grandchild on both sides, so it was very important that I do everything right. I made a big oopsie in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade when I refused to go through confirmation in the catholic church... If I couldn't possibly believe that Jesus was born and there was no sex involved then I was not going to join the catholic church! Ironically – my middle name is Mary! Against the protest and “Oh My God what has the world come to” comments – I stood my ground and my parents supported me in my decision to quit catechism class. I went through High School aimlessly - I often found myself drunk... in a rural farm town there is not much else to do except drink and go cow-tipping then crash in your friends barn... One thing was certain – I was getting the heck out of dodge as soon as I graduated. I was going to make something of myself – not like anyone here in this small town, I thought. I was determined to get a degree in engineering, go to law school, be a millionaire and pay

for my parents to retire in the Bahamas. I was in complete control of my life... and NO-ONE, not even God was going to stop me... or so I thought.

I had excellent grades – I was in the top 10% of my graduating class and I was a leader in high school. I played sports and I did everything right. In order to make something of myself and make everyone proud, especially my Dad, I knew I'd have to think big in order to make it big. I applied to the University of Michigan and was... denied acceptance! I marched down to Ann Arbor and demanded to speak with admissions counselor that denied me my dream. I did speak with him and he said there was nothing he could do because my SAT scores were not high enough. I begged and pleaded and he told me to take the ACT's and let him know when the results were in. I followed his directions and much to my disappointment, these scores were not any better – he said no again – but I was determined... I called his office every day for I don't know how long and promised him I would do whatever it took to be successful... he said he couldn't let me in, but that his wife was a Professor at the U and she read my essays and said I was hopeful... He ended up admitting me and so my time at the University of Michigan began in the fall of 1997.

I joined a sorority, where I met some of the dearest friends I know today, and I began the long hard trek through college. My parents had not come into any money – so I had to work 20 hours a week while in school just to make ends meet. I have to also mention here that this was my first exposure to the religions, ethnicities and money that was found in the world. I thought “I am not in Kansas anymore...”. I was put on academic probation my first semester – it wasn't that I was partying too much, just that Meridian High School had not prepared me for this University. I squeaked through my second semester and had the feeling that maybe I wasn't the “engineering type”. I was led to take a course in Architecture – my grandfather was a self-taught architect and he designed and built houses with his own two hands for the better part of his life, until his death when I was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. It was sort of in my genes – I guess you could say. I was President of the art club in high school and I was always very creative. I decided to apply to the College of Architecture and Urban Planning and I was accepted. My first semester in the Architecture program and I knew that I was where I belonged and my grades improved drastically. Although my personal life suffered as other architecture students know – I sometimes spent 72 hours at Studio in a row, sleeping under my desk and eating candy to stay alive... I learned a lot about myself and my work ethic during this time.

I dated a lot in college and no one was ever perfect enough. I remember being desperate for a man – desperate for love and I searched high and low for it. God had really no part in my life at this time, although I claimed vehemently to be a catholic – only because I didn't know anything other than this – I didn't even really know what it meant to be a Christian because I didn't know who Jesus was... My perception of people that did know Jesus were students that were a part of campus crusades and they seemed to be such crazy freaks - - - I would rather be known as the fun, sorority girl than the Christian prude!

Prior to my senior year I had my first eye-opening experience with God. A friend of a friend I knew was Jewish, but was well versed in many religions and he practiced regular meditation and contemplation. I could tell there was something different about him. He led me to a book called "Conversations with God" by Neale Donald Walsch. I read the book and discovered answers to many of the questions that were sitting in my subconscious but still, I knew nothing about turning my life and my will over to God. I read the book through in one night and then on the flight home the next weekend, from Virginia where I had an internship to my parents home in Michigan, I found myself reading it again on the plane. I was sitting by a young African American women... we were about halfway through our flight and had only exchanged a brief hello upon sitting down, I was reading a really profound part of the book and she was listening to her CD player... then I felt a tap on my arm – she said to me quietly "I really think you need to listen to this..." She proceeded to hand me the headphones and she pressed play. She played a line from the song that she wanted me to hear... here are the words sung by he talented artist, India Arie:

"Im not the average girl from your video  
And I aint built like a supermodel  
But, I learned to love myself unconditionally  
Because I am a queen  
Im not the average girl from your video  
My worth is not determined by the price of my clothes  
No matter what Im wearing I will always be india arie  
When I look in the mirror the only one there is me  
Every freckle on my face is where its supposed to be  
And I know our creator didnt make no mistakes on me  
My feet, my thighs, my lips, my eyes; Im lovin what I see"

The essence of these words – that God loved me as I was, because he made me this way – were the same words that I had been reading in my “Conversations with God” book when she tapped me on the arm. I had goose bumps... At that moment I felt God in all his mystery and glory... and I was ready to serve him but my actions continued to prove that I needed to have control of my life. I returned from Virginia to Michigan for my Senior year, I knew that going right into law school was not an option so I needed to get a “resume-building” job! I heard about a program called Teach For America. The organization’s mission is to enlist the nation's most promising future leaders in the movement to eliminate educational inequality. TFA accomplishes this by building a diverse, highly selective national corps of outstanding recent college graduates—of all academic majors and career interests—who commit two years to teach in urban and rural public schools in our nation's lowest-income communities. I thought about Matt, my brother – how he’d been marginalized and treated within the system. I remembered how my rural education had not prepared me for Michigan’s rigor and I decided to apply. I had no idea what I was getting myself into... At the time there were 18 sites to choose from and rank. I ranked my cities and put Houston as #17 and Detroit as #18. I was accepted into the program – except there was just one thing - - - I was placed in Houston – practically my last choice! This moment was another eye-opener - I really had to make a leap of faith here. I had a boyfriend in Virginia that I was planning to marry (although deep down God (and my mother) said it wasn’t right...) and all of the sites I wanted on the east and west coast were no longer an option. It was Houston or nothing. I was a sobbing, crying mess when I called my Mom to give her the news... then I heard a small, peaceful voice from a place that I had never heard from (or made the conscious decision to listen to) that said “Houston is where you belong – go and do not fear.” My tears seemed to suddenly halt and I said “ok” – I signed those commitment papers, broke up with my boyfriend and moved myself down to Texas. That was 5 years ago.

I got to Texas, as quickly as I could, and in three short weeks was taught how to teach. I, of course, didn’t really learn how to do anything except how to survive Texas in the August heat! My training was in a Kindergarten classroom, which didn’t really prepare me for my High School placement (although 5 year olds and 16 year olds sometimes act the same way...). I was placed in the 5<sup>th</sup> Ward in Houston – and if you’re not familiar with this area it is an extremely impoverished and highly volatile area. I was placed at a high school where there were daily

weapon checks, drug busts, lots of pregnant teenagers and many, many children that needed to be loved. People ask if I was scared – and I was, but only for a minute... I knew that being scared would get me no-where with these kids, so I turned that emotion off. I taught Math to 9, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders in a special education setting. All I really knew how to do was love them – and as one of my mentors says – this was only on my better days... so that’s what I did every day that I was at that school, to the best of my ability. Believe me, when you go home every day crying because of the challenges and pain you witness on a daily basis, your flesh doesn’t ever want to get out of bed... but the mission of Teach For America is to relentlessly pursue educational equality, so I taught them the knowledge that I was supposed to, and they did learn and grow according to state standards – but the most important thing I learned at Jefferson Davis High School was that Jesus lived in that building. A place where so much hurting and struggle takes place was also the place that my heart and soul were ripped open and exposed to raw, simple and life changing love. My first students changed my life and because I still hear from some of them – I know that I changed some of their lives. The tears that I shed daily helped me to release the selfishness and self-centeredness that I had been operating around for my entire life. Through this blessed intervention that God worked, I was forced through a tumultuous two years of pain and growth that ultimately started me on my journey to healing.

During my years at Jefferson Davis, my Assistant Principal, Mr. Victor Okoli (a large man, with a thick accent, originally from Ghana) would invite me into his office early in the morning – he would lay hands on me and pray for me and my students... I had never felt power like that before in my life. I now know that the Holy Spirit was at work. Mr. Okoli was an angel for me during that entire journey...

It was in my first year as a Corps Member that I did something crazy, something wild, something so daring – I bought my first bible! Recently I had been praying to God, thanking him and loving him for who I was discovering He really was – a kind, loving, patient (very patient) God. One prayer that I had every night was “Please bring me my soulmate...” I pleaded with God – asking for my husband to come into my life. I really felt like I was ready to commit and love one person. Well, all I kept hearing was “Jessica, pray and focus on Me!” – I did just that. I began a nightly and morning devotional – I studied the bible for the first time in my life and I began seeing God everywhere I looked. Then one day a friend suggested that I try the on-

line dating service that she was using... so I put my profile up on lavalife.com and viola I attracted some major pieces of work!

My first 3 dates were awful and I was about to give up... until I was sent a message by a native Texas that lived in Austin... Our first e-mail exchange was real and full of love and excitement... One of the first questions I asked him in e-mail was “Are you religious” and he replied “No – but I am very spiritual” – and my heart smiled and leapt at this. I decided not to pursue him though because I thought a long distance relationship would NEVER work – I’d been there and done that. God had His own plan though and five months later I got a little nudge from inside to e-mail that Austin boy and from that day on we were hooked. We e-mailed, talked on the phone and finally agreed that we HAD to meet – so one day after work, Wednesday October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2003 we met in Brenham, Texas for our first date. My roommate requested that I call her when I first met him to give her his license plate number, just in case... but it turns out that all was well. Funny side note though – I was wearing high heels that night but had thrown flip-flops in the car – Thank God I did – because Mr. David Lyon was a few inches shorter than his profile stated and well maybe I was a few pounds heavier... ☺

We ended up eating and talking the night away – the restaurant kicked us out and we stood by our cars for another hour talking... We hugged and went on our way – back to Austin and back to Houston... I had mixed feelings, I felt something very powerful but was scared, until I arrived home and David called me to make sure that I got home safely and to tell me that he had a wonderful time with me. I knew that he was the answer to my prayer... Two weeks later I traveled to Austin for my 24<sup>th</sup> birthday and we had our first date here in Austin, at the Oasis out on Lake Travis... at sunset, up on the highest terrace David gave me a birthday present – probably the most meaningful gift I’ve ever received – a tiny silver crucifix on a silver chain. The symbolism of this went much deeper than I possibly understood at the time... Both God and David’s love for me shined through at that moment. Well, I called my Mom that same weekend and said this is the man I’m going to marry! Every weekend after that for 7 months straight we traveled back and forth, three hours here and three hours back, between Austin and Houston to be with one another. I moved to Austin after my commitment with Teach For America was over - the internet proved to be successful and I was happily joined with a wonderful man.

I got a job with an amazing school on Austin's east side "KIPP – which stands for Knowledge is Power Program" – a charter school system with 52 schools across the country. 90 percent of KIPP students are African American or Hispanic/Latino, and more than 80 percent of KIPP students are eligible for the federal free and reduced-price meals program. I must tip my hat to the students (and staff) that attend and work at a KIPP school – they are in school 7:30 – 5:00 every day, two Saturday's a month and three weeks in the summer - - they work hard, they play nice, they don't make excuses and they learn that there are no shortcuts in life. I was director of Special Education and Student Services for two years at KIPP – but also taught Science, Math and learned a slew of life lessons. Here today is a dear friend that I worked with in my second year at KIPP – Marisa Wall... At one point after I left KIPP, when I was in a very dark place, Marisa called me one evening and told me that God had worked through me to bring her closer to Jesus and she was grateful. I was amazed and thankful that God would use little old me for this important purpose. Her words helped to bring me out of my dark place

In my second year at KIPP some miraculous and devastating things happened. One – David and I got engaged and Two – my Dad, after 5 years of sobriety started using and abusing substances again. I jumped on the wedding planning band wagon hoping that it would occupy my thoughts, emotions, feelings, etc... until it was all over. Through this year, my Mom kept most stories and her pain away from me... she didn't tell me what was really going on because she wanted me to enjoy the ride of being engaged. I went home one time early in our engagement in 2005 and saw with my own eyes the horror that played in my home. The man that I feared and hated and yet loved with all of my heart and soul was very sick... very, very sick. His drinking and behavior was the most painful thing I'd ever witnessed in my life – worse was the fact that I had to leave my Mom and brother to fend for themselves (as if I could somehow protect them...). His cruel words, hate for himself and delusional thinking played over and over and over again in my mind – day and night, at work and at play. I decided to research the disease and really learn about what I could do and couldn't do... well much to my disappointment I found there was nothing I could do. My controlling false self struggled with that and I decided that path wouldn't do... so I let him and his disease control me. I lived with the pain and hurt and kept running through how I could help him, change him, fix him.

The wedding came – my Dad got drunk during the rehearsal dinner and I felt myself getting angry and resentful... Probably the most difficult conversation I've ever had to have was asking my Dad if on the day of my wedding he could refrain from drinking until after my dance with him. In retrospect I know how extremely difficult this must have been, being he is an addicted man. I told him that I wanted to remember him on this very important day as I did as a child – my strong, loving, and healthy Daddy. The thing is, I know he is still these things – they are just buried underneath his pain and I must accept the fact that it's not his time for healing. I've come to discover, the hard way, that God doesn't work on my time-line! His speech to the wedding guests was actually cut short because he had picked out a song and secretly asked the DJ to play it – he asked me to dance to “I Loved Her First” by Heartland. If you have not heard this song, I highly recommend you listen to it. There was not a dry eye in the house as my Dad danced with me and shared, through the song, how much he loved and cherished me.

I did join Al-Anon after coming back from our honeymoon in Maui, Hawaii and it was a breath of fresh air... but only for a moment because I did not allow myself to truly embrace the steps. It wasn't until about 3 months ago that I had another in-my-face God moment. I was at the book store reading about alcoholism and books on being the adult child of an alcoholic... I read and read and read and nothing struck me, then I picked up “Adult Children of Alcoholics by Dr. Janet Woititz... Her book stated a list of qualifiers and as I read through them my eyes filled with tears as I read...” Adult Children of Alcoholics guess at what normal behavior is... they have difficulty following a project through from beginning to end... they lie (or exaggerate) when it would be just as easy to tell the truth... they judge themselves without mercy... they have difficulty having fun... they are super responsible... as I read through the 13 behaviors I matched 12 of them to a T – as I read further I felt like I was reading my own life and that somehow this crazy, controlling, manipulative, hurt soul that I had been claiming as my own was really not mine and that my true self was somewhere inside. I bought the book and after leaving felt like a two ton truck had been lifted off of my shoulders. I did not feel guilty or resentful or angry... I felt free and I was ready to do the work and I was SO thankful that God had opened my heart and my eyes once again. Over the last year, my relationship with God has kicked into high gear because I have made it a point to open myself to him and I am coming to the slow realization that this world is not about me. Thank God for ya'll's sake!

Also, in this time I have had the great pleasure and honor of being invited into Keith and Andrea Miller's home to learn more about leading a Christ-centered life. I have learned so much from them and the people in our small group. People like my Mom, Pat Naeve, Andrea Wells-Miller, my Dream Group girls, and dear friends, like Celia Sanchez, Marisa Wall and Caitlin Harrison have taught me how to love.... They weren't showing me knowingly – but through their words and their actions and their pure love of God, I have had the opportunity to grow closer to my maker. And here I am today, nobody of great influence or power but you have all made my story important and I am thankful to you for that. My husband, David, (who warned that he might come today dressed in a wig and dress) has been a source of unconditional love, forgiveness and friendship. He is a great man of faith and will be a wonderful father someday, I hope, very soon. Most importantly, I would like to thank my God and my Father above for never giving up on me even though I gave up on him more times that I can count... Thanks to the Father who loves me for who I am - my feet, my thighs, my lips, my eyes – Lord, I am loving what I see.

Thanks Be To God.

Amen