

Reflections of a Late-Blooming Christian
By Nan Harrison

I have missed very few Women's Story Circle luncheons, and I have been entertained, surprised, and inspired by the stories I have heard! And, after each one, the same thought has gone through my mind: "Please don't ever let them ask me to do this, because my story is so boring!" So when Leslie called me to ask me to do this, my response wasn't positive! But she asked me to do the one thing you can't say "No" to—she said "just pray on it". So I agreed to do that, but I hung up the phone with the intention of praying that I not do this. I needed to hurry to an appointment, so I got in the car and left. I didn't get two miles down 183 before God did a preemptive strike and I suddenly knew I was going to do this! A similar sequence of events happened when I was asked to do my 4th day talk at a Cursillo Ultreya, so for those that heard that talk, you will have heard some of what I say today. It seems God is determined that I get up in front of people and talk!

I was born in 1938 in Victoria, Texas, but we moved to Honolulu before I was a year old, and we didn't move back to Texas until I was 14.. I have been told that my mother had suffered two miscarriages before she became pregnant with me and that she spent most of the nine months carrying me in bed. After I was born, my parents were told that I would be their only child. So they, especially my mother, were determined that I not grow up to be a "spoiled brat". I was well fed, had a good supply of clothes that my mother made using material and patterns of her choice, was encouraged to excel in whatever activities that were chosen for me, and was included in most of their activities. I was spanked but was never whipped or beaten. I was not abused in any way. I also do not remember getting hugged or being told "I love you". If it happened, it wasn't often. After saying my prayers at night, starting with "Now I lay me" and graduating to the Lords Prayer at an early age, I would ask my Mom to tuck my covers in "real

tight”. I loved that, I wondered as an adult why, since I don’t like that sensation now, and the only thing I can think is that it felt like a hug.

We did not openly express anger or negative feelings in our house. My folks almost never argued at all, but would go for periods of time conversing only when necessary. I was embarrassing docile and for the most part stayed out of trouble. I can remember being about 4 and walking down the street holding my Mom’s hand, looking up and asking “Am I a good little girl?” She said that I was and I was relieved. I didn’t realize until years later when I had children, that she had worked very hard to be a good parent but had missed the fun parts of it! After we became adults, she was supportive, non-interfering and always available to help. She was a doting grandmother and an excellent mother-in-law.

My mother was Episcopalian and we would go to church off and on at an Episcopal church. We didn’t really get into spiritual matters, but we obeyed the rules. In fact, during Lent we went meatless on Friday and Wednesday and on the once-a-month Communion Sunday we fasted that morning before church. I believed God cared about me and that Jesus loved me just like the song said, but my theology was kind of Santa Claus based—you know...making a list checking it twice, gonna find out who’s naughty and nice.

The first time I remember knowingly being exposed to the concept of unconditional love was when I was about 11. I was getting dressed for school on Good Friday morning, after having had the annual hot cross buns, and listening to the radio. Between, songs the announcer read from the Bible about the crucifixion. When he quoted the words “forgive them Father, for they know not what they do” I suddenly found myself sitting on the corner of my bed weeping. I was aware that Jesus had gone to the cross for us, but the enormity of his praying for those who were doing this to him

was overwhelming. I know that what I heard that morning planted a seed that a long time later would sprout and grow. We had moved from Oahu to Kauai when I was in second grade, where we stayed until we moved back to the mainland 8 years later. During the majority of that time, the school I attended had only one blue-eyed student—me! I know what it is like to be a minority! Most of my friends happened to be of Japanese ancestry, so I adjusted to their culture. You may know that May Day is “Lei Day” in Hawaii. The schools had pageants with a princess representing each island and students performing dances reflecting their ancestry. Phillipino dances, Chinese dances. Hulas. Since I couldn’t do a Virginia Reel or Square Dance by myself, I became a Japanese girl for the day. My friends taught me a dance to perform with them, lent me a kimono and one of their mothers tied the obi into the beautiful formal bow in the back. We have a snapshot of me lined up with my friends all decked out. I knew I didn’t exactly fit in but I was pretty used to being different, and at least I got to participate.

During that time, we attended a very small Episcopal mission, and I was confirmed at 12 years old. Requirements for confirmation were memorizing the Lord’s Prayer (I had already done that years before), the Ten Commandments, and the Apostle’s Creed.

By the way, when I was 9, my mother unexpectedly had a second daughter, my sister Penny, and two years later even more amazingly my sister Leslie. Obviously the doctors had been mistaken!

Unfortunately, Penny suffered with severe asthma. When they discovered that one of the many things she was allergic to was sugar cane, there was no choice but to pick up and move from Hawaii. I was elated! I liked my friends a lot, but I was excited at the prospect of being around kids that looked like me. I was really tired of being different!

My Dad got a job as a commission salesman during a recession in Tyler, Texas. We didn't have a lot of money. I started school there and discovered most of my classmates had known each other since kindergarten. Also, they considered Hawaii to be very exotic. I still was different.

However, I was invited to the Sunday night youth group at Christ Church. It was very well attended by nice kids, my Mom was pleased, since it was an Episcopal church, and I made some really good friends there. One of my friends asked me to sing in the choir. I didn't sing well, but I didn't sing loudly either, so I agreed, partly because the choir robes meant I didn't have to worry about what to wear. Then I was told about the Sunday school class for High Schoolers. The only version of the Bible we had then was the King James, which was very hard to understand for impatient teen-agers. Our teacher brought the Bible to life for us, using modern language and a sense of humor. His name was Keith Miller (yes, our Keith Miller) and that class was packed every Sunday! I look back on all that and see that my first introduction to Christian fellowship happened during those teen-age years.

I decided I wanted to be in the High School Band. The only drawback was that I had no musical training whatsoever. I had a friend that played in the percussion section, and she said she would teach me how to play snare drum. I got a pair of drum sticks, and she lent me a practice pad. I practiced all summer. I want you to know that playing the snare drum is very difficult to learn in a short time, so I wasn't good at it at all. I did get into the Band, but was relegated to playing the cymbals. Toward the end of the year I tried out to be a majorette for the following year. There were two openings, and I came in third with only two votes less than the second place winner. I also ran for Senior Class secretary, was in a runoff with another girl—she won. I was also runner-up for Band Sweetheart, which I had never considered a possibility.

What I learned from these three runner-up experiences is that it is not comforting to tell someone how good they should feel about coming so close to winning. It helps much later, but not when it happens. One consolation was that one of the girls who won a twirling office was a snare drummer so I got promoted to drummer. Just as I sang quietly in the choir, I drummed quietly too.

My parents had always planned that I would go to Rice University (actually it was then called Rice Institute). My Dad had gone there and, besides, it was a bargain financially. However, because they had relented and let me be in the band which met at the same time as a couple of science classes, I was missing some credits that Rice required. So they agreed to let me go to Tyler Jr. College and catch up. I tried out for and was accepted to join the Apache Belles drill team, which back then was a big deal. It was great. The cliquy kids had gone off to good colleges, and I was part of an admired group on campus. That did wonders for my self-confidence. I carried a lot of hours trying to catch up on credits, but it was worth it. For a while. My folks moved to Houston at the end of my first year, and I talked them into letting me live with a friend and her family. When I registered for my second year classes I signed up for a normal class load (actually fewer hours than normal since I had taken so many the year before) which wasn't going to qualify me to apply to Rice. When my folks came up to meet with my friend's parents, I showed them my schedule. Silence. I said "I guess you'd like me to go back and change this". They said that they did. I told them I wasn't going to...finally, some rebellion! I told them I wanted to be a Journalist and that Rice didn't offer a journalism major. They said goodbye, got into the car and drove back to Houston immediately. But, at least they didn't make me go with them! At the end of the year, they didn't come to my graduation.

During that second year, my boyfriend had to take a break from school to earn some more money to continue. So his good friend, Gerald, who worked nights at the local TV station, drove me after classes to where I was living. I had never been allowed to learn to drive, but he taught me to drive his 57 Chevy with standard transmission and racing clutch. I lurched down the street sometimes, but I did learn to drive! We talked a lot and he became my best friend. By the end of the year, when I was about to move back to Houston, we admitted to one another that we had fallen in love. Since I couldn't go to Rice, and no other college was an acceptable choice to my family, I was sent to Business School and then got a job as a secretary. About a year and a half after we started dating I married Gerald at St. Martins Episcopal Church in Houston. I remember how I felt waiting to walk down the aisle with my Dad. I had never been so confident about anything as I was about that. We had been best friends first. I was sure that was the ideal basis for a loving relationship.

The disagreements and arguments started almost immediately. We had spent a year and a half seeing each other for weekend visits. Those visits had begun with "Wow, I sure have missed you!", closely followed by "Wow, I'm sure going to miss you!" We never even had a spat during our courtship. We also had never, since we had been more than just friends, spent normal time together, and we weren't good at it. I had never been allowed to argue before, so I would just walk out of the room. He was very vocal and able to argue and would be infuriated by my walking out. We loved each other, but we made terrible roommates! We lived in Tyler for six months after we married, then moved to Houston when he got a job with Channel 13. We continued to have a turbulent relationship. I remember after our 5th anniversary thinking "I don't think I can blame this on being newly-weds any longer". By this time, we had two sons.

We went to church fairly regularly at St. Mark's in Bellaire. We never made any friends there and introduced ourselves to the rector almost every time we went. Our youngest son would cry in the nursery the whole time he was there, so Gerald started staying home with him, and my oldest son and I went to church. He would go to Children's chapel and then join me during the service. I still did not know anyone. I was shy and they weren't friendly.

About 8 years into the marriage I began to realize that my husband liked my best girlfriend a lot better than he liked me. I hung in there hoping it would blow over and that somehow we could make our marriage work. Then he left Channel 13 for a better position with a new station in Alvin—a long commute. He was gone a lot, but it seemed like a good career move. But the station didn't make it and he was out of work. I got a job. Things spiraled downward. He started drinking a lot, he wanted out of the marriage, (I had been right about the interest in my best friend) and the psychological and emotional abuse that had been going on for awhile, started going over the edge into some physical abuse. Then one night I got chased through the house with a shotgun. It turned out that it wasn't loaded, but that experience did the trick, especially since I knew the atmosphere in the house was toxic to my children. I asked my grandmother to live with me so that I wouldn't have to pay for after-school child care. This freed up enough money, since my husband was getting some income doing free-lance work, for him to move out.

I was the first in my neighborhood to be a divorcee. Different, again! I stopped going to church and really didn't have much spiritual life at all. Mainly I was disappointed and cynical about relationships. I was in my early thirties, had two kids and had no interest in, or expectation of marrying again. There was this really nice, cute guy at work that asked me out, Since he was younger than me and had never been married, I knew that there was no chance that this would ever lead to anything serious so I agreed to

go out with Cliff Harrison. A little over a year later, I was once again in a wedding dress (of course an off-white one this time) about to get married. In direct contrast to the smug 20-year old I had been before my first wedding, I was asking myself what I was getting myself into. “Sure he likes me now” I thought, “but how long will that last?” I was honestly afraid of throwing up in the middle of the ceremony I was so nervous. But my folks had driven in from California and his from Wyoming and there were other friend and family waiting. It was a lovely little wedding!

I remember after being married about a month being so amazed at how well it was going! In fact, after 35 years, I’m still amazed at how well it is going! I won’t go into the chain of events that led to our working in the same office, but there is no question, that God’s hand was in it. With Cliff in my life, I have learned that I can be myself, without having to live up to someone else’s criteria, and be loved. What a precious gift!

About two years after we married, we moved to Austin with my two older sons that Cliff has been a loving and patient stepfather to, and our baby boy.

We followed the familiar pattern of occasional church-going for the first several years of our marriage. We almost always went on Easter. Then our son, John, starting coming home from visiting Cliff’s talking about how much he enjoyed going to church with her. After this happened several times, we agreed that we needed to be taking John to church. We knew some friends that were going to a small Episcopal mission in Pflugerville. I asked my friend if they did that “hugging thing” and she said “no, they didn’t pass the peace at all.” So we went there for several years—Rite 1, no passing of the peace, and only a couple of ministries available. I mentioned starting a prayer list one time, and people looked at me blankly. Cliff was a LEM and I was a member of the altar guild and served three years on the Bishops committee. We knew

we needed something more, but John liked the small youth group, so we kept going. When he went to college, we decided that we should look around. We dropped by St. Matthews and picked up an information packet from the Commons. It had a whole list of ministries! So we visited, and knew immediately that this was where we belonged. On the last Sunday at our other church I mentioned to another altar guild member that we were going to transfer to St. Matthews and that a large part of our decision was because of more opportunities for ministry. She said “but that’s why I like it here. You just come on Sunday, and then you’re through for the week”.

We took the Open Door class, were reaffirmed, and participated in Alpha and a Discovery Weekend. We learned that passing the peace was a good thing! I began to realize that God didn’t just want me to behave, that God wanted a relationship with me. I realized that when I prayed, that I could add personal prayers to my usual intercessory prayers. I learned that those prayers could be specific, although the answer wasn’t always yes. I learned what being part of a loving, supportive Christian community felt like.

I tried a lot of ministries. I read and reread Paul’s list of spiritual gifts, but I had a hard time identifying mine. I didn’t think it was wisdom, or teaching, or prophesy, or tongues--none seemed to describe me. Then a passage in Romans caught my attention—rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. That felt right, because people have always had a tendency to confide in me. I took the Community of Hope training and became an LEV. Then, at one of our ECW retreats, we explored our spiritual gifts. After taking the survey, it identified my #1 gift as pastoring, the description of which sounded like listening so I felt I was on the right track.

One Sunday morning Susan Barnes said to me in passing, “We need to get together and talk about Spiritual Direction”. I said OK. Then I sat down and started wondering what she meant. I decided Susan must feel like I was off-track and need some re-direction. I had heard of spiritual direction, really didn’t know exactly what it was about, but apparently I was lacking it. We had lunch and what she presented to me was the idea of taking a three-year course called Formation in Direction, normally referred to as FIND, sponsored by the Diocese, after which one becomes a Certified Spiritual Director.

This caught me totally off-guard, and I asked her why she thought I was a candidate for this. She said, “because you are one of those people who have a sign on their forehead saying ‘you can talk to me’”. So I prayed about it. This was a time God actually was very patient and let me work through the idea. And I did feel called to do this, not knowing where it would lead, but trusting that it would turn out the way it was meant to. I submitted my application, was interviewed by a member of the FIND faculty who lives in Austin and attended, along with Sharon Lowe, a discernment retreat. We were both accepted.

The classes in the FIND program are one Saturday a month 9 months out of the year, Our first year classes were in Brenham. The last two years were in Bryan. In the first class, the first day, we took the Kiersey Seyboldt personality test. Almost everyone in the room was an “NF” which stands for Intuitive and Feeling. I was an SJ which stands for Sensing and Judging , not judgmental, judging. We were told that most people that are called to being clergy, chaplains, spiritual directors, etc. are NF’s. I asked if there was a problem that I was an SJ and the instructor kind of skirted the issue but was not terribly encouraging. I felt like maybe I should wear a big scarlet SJ on my shirt.

On top of that everyone seemed to have read books I had never read by authors I was not familiar with and knew the life stories of saints I only knew a little about. Different again! Maybe this was a mistake. But I decided that I had felt a genuine call, and that I should persevere. I read a lot in those three years and I learned a lot. I now sometimes hear an author or a book quoted that I am familiar with. I'm still behind the curve, but I've gained a lot of ground. I feel I should mention that I have now had two different spiritual directors, currently Annie Province who introduced Louise last month. Only once has one of them quoted from a book, and I had actually read that book! The fact is that the term Spiritual Direction is misleading in that it sounds like it primarily consists of assignments given by the director to an accountable directee, but usually, it's a matter of being a loving companion to someone on their spiritual journey and letting the Holy Spirit lead the way. If anyone feels they might be called to this ministry, or at least know more about it, I would love to visit with you about it as I know Susan or Sharon would.

So what insights do I feel I have gained in my close to ten years at St. Matthews and especially the last 3 1/2.? For one thing, I have learned that it's all right to be different. During the second year of FIND, an instructor ended a class by putting an icon up, actually one just like this one that Cliff gave me for Christmas this year. and asked us to gaze at it for 5 minutes and then journal any response. I confess that, at that time, I really didn't have much of a feeling for icons. I thought some of them were beautiful, and that others weren't, but I didn't get their spiritual value. However, I obediently started gazing. In just a few minutes I heard the words clearly in my heart "It's ok. I was different, too". I sat there stunned. I had never thought a lot about what it must have been like for Jesus growing up. I don't know how early he knew about his mission, but I am sure he always knew he was special. Suddenly I knew that being different was not necessarily something to avoid. It was a powerful message to me!

Secondly, I have pondered what makes it so easy to wander away from a close relationship with God. I know a lot of people talk about “the Enemy” working on us to keep us from God. I am not qualified to debate the theology of Satan’s influence or existence. But, I tend to agree with the cartoon character, Pogo, who said “we have met the enemy and he is us”! We get so wrapped up in our “stuff”. We are not necessarily selfish, but we are self-absorbed, including with worthwhile activities, good works and necessary duties. A group of us St. Matthews ladies spent a few weeks last year exploring different ways to do contemplative prayer, which helped us put aside our self-absorption and open ourselves to God. We tried a lot of things, including a little Centering Prayer, praying an icon, singing, and listening to Count Basie. One of the ladies said that riding her bicycle had become contemplative. I have a little book I recommend called “Beyond Words-15 Ways of Doing Prayer” by Kristen Johnson Ingram. There is something in here for everybody! And third, I have learned that Love is not an emotion. It is an entity. It is a proper noun. It is a living reality. It can not die, because it is God. It is around us all the time. It may sound simplistic, but I think of Love as being like radio waves. Sometimes our receivers aren’t turned on, or have been damaged, or tuned to different stations. But Jesus said “Lo, I am with you always”. This is so comforting. I now know that when I was a child, trying to earn love, that I had it all the time, I just didn’t know it yet. And when my first marriage was a failure, love was with me all the time, I just didn’t know it yet. And I know that Cliff and I have spent 35 years knowing (on most days) that love is with us, although I think we spent the early years thinking we were responsible for that Love. And the last ten years, as members of this church, I have been more and more aware of being surrounded and filled with the Love of God. A couple of years after we joined St. Matthews, we lost our business that we had owned for 20 years. That hurt! Those that we knew here, were so supportive and encouraging...it really helped. We

have made new friends through Connexions. Our Cursillo weekend was an incredible experience of such an abundance of love that there were moments when I had to remind myself that it was ok to accept it without reservation just as it was being offered without reservation. And, since Cliff fell and broke his leg in July, the people of St. Matthews have showered us with love in the form of prayer, meals, company, taking turns being on call for Cliff so I could attend my Mary Kay convention, even mowing our lawn...the list goes on and on. God's love has been and continues to be with us all the time.

I know that there is still a lot of spiritual growth ahead for me, but I also know I have come a long way. And those of you in this room have just a whole lot to do with that!
Thank you.