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Foreword

by Deacon Jim

Through her book *Finding God Anew*, Barbara Kudwa takes us on a walk through life. We begin with so much energy and optimism, especially as we get out of high school, experience first love, and are ready to take on challenges with gusto. Working as a minister for almost seventeen years, I've listened to people describe the emotional roller coaster they experience as the stuff of life happens.

This pattern of dreams and disillusionment happens to everybody. The "stuff" may be a money problem. It may be a marriage problem or an illness or an addiction. It may be a terrible accident or tragedy. We don't plan any of it, but for most of us, things happen that burst our bubble and send us into a crisis of self-worth that makes us question our faith and wonder where to go next. The saddest part is that people often feel alone when this stuff hits. As Barbara says in her book, we are "not the Waltons" anymore. When stuff happens, most of us don't have Mom and Dad, Grandma and Grandpa, and a boatload of extended family next door to remind us that hard times are not new and neither is finding a way out.

In *Finding God Anew*, Barbara gives us a companion along the road of life, sharing the intimate details of the bombshells that shattered many of her dreams and explaining how she found the road to peace. In this book, she narrates tales of romance and disappointment. She shares personal tragedies of shock and loss.

In *Finding God Anew*, we find experiences that we share with Barbara as well as other events that we thank God did not happen to us. Throughout, Barbara is forthright in chronicling the experiences that shaped, crushed, and restored her life, providing a window into her experiences and emotions. In describing a climactic event, a murder, and a suicide, she provides

the feeling side of what for many individuals around her is just news.

This is a book of hope. By holding nothing back in sharing her experiences, Barbara offers a window into her feelings and emotions through a life full of challenges. These challenges include jobs and marriages, natural and man-induced tragedies, and ups and downs of faith. She opens her life in a way that offers common ground as we ponder things that we have suffered. Her experiences show a way out of isolation and a path toward realizing the bright light of hope. By sharing her story, we find we are not alone. We see that we are not the first and that we are not even unusual in facing major bumps in life. This is her story, complete with the fears, challenges, and emotions of living a human life. It is her story, but we can live it with her to help us understand the challenges in our own lives.

In this story of hope, we share Barbara's road to peace and experience the partners she found along the way. We find that her path to peace included family and friends, professional counselors, and her church, including a special movement within her Catholic Church called Christ Renews His Parish. Foremost in every step of her path is her relationship with God. The amazing thing we find walking emotionally with Barbara is that most of the lifelines available to her are available to all of us. We just have to be open to and accept them.

While our faith reminds us that God offers unlimited power and mercy, scripture reminds us that we are expected to be good stewards of God's gifts and to use them. As God gives us the people and tools to move from lost to found, we need to constantly look for those gifts and say "Yes" when we see them. This is where hope turns the burdensome stuff of life into peace. In a diligent walk with God, saying "Yes" to the gifts He gives, we find that the last part of the cycle of dreams and disillusionment is joy.

It is there for us. Barbara Kudwa shows us how.

Introduction: How I Came to Write This Book

Use me, then, my Savior, for whatever purpose, and in whatever way, you may require.

Here is my poor heart, an empty vessel; fill it with your grace.

Here is my sinful and troubled soul; quicken it and refresh it with your love.

Take my heart for your abode; my mouth to spread abroad the glory of your name;

my love and my powers, for the advancement of your believing people;

and never suffer the steadfastness and confidence of my faith to abate;

so at all times I may be enabled from the heart to say, "Jesus needs me, and I am his."

"Use Me" by Dwight L. Moody

Over the past decade, I've often felt nudged to write a book. Just as quickly, I've found myself asking why followed by countless reasons why not. With so many larger tragedy stories to tell, why is my story worth sharing?

One day, while praying in silence, a light clicked on. There was a reason I'd experienced a series of tragedies, miracles, and healings. I was to glorify God and write about how He had impacted my life and answered my prayers. I was also to write about my many prayers that I thought went unanswered. My life experiences have taught me that prayers are answered "all in God's plan and time, not mine," but it took me years to understand that.

I did not know how to begin writing my story, and since I wasn't sure I wanted to make my decisions and tragedies public, I decided to turn my back on this notion. When it kept reappearing, I asked God how I was supposed to write a book when I lacked even the most basic writing experience.

God responded by putting a writer by my side during a life-changing religious retreat, but I continued to be disobedient and didn't ask for help. My fears were larger than my faith, but the Holy Spirit kept nudging me at all times of the day and night.

Finally, I took a piece of paper and wrote, "God answered my prayers. I was never left alone through all my tragedies. There's always hope. Miracles are real. The key is to keep praying and believing. The end."

Needless to say, the nudging continued. I guess God didn't appreciate my lack of detail, so I finally sat down and began to write.

After six months, I concluded the task was impossible. There was too much to say, and it was all too difficult and personal to write about. I gave up, but God did not. The next thing I knew, at a wedding reception, God placed a writing coach in my life. I decided to give the book one last try, and my coach and I worked together for several months.

Looking back, every time I came up with a reason to avoid writing my story, God came back with a reason to begin anew. Today, I know why. God wanted me aware of all the “God things,” the things or people that He sends to help, and to show me how lives intertwine. He then wanted me to come full circle by using me as an instrument to demonstrate His grace and mercy to others.

Finally, I listened to His whispers and called my new writer friend. God directed me, and at long last, I listened. After many months of very long hours, the book finally began coming together. I sent it off to be edited and thought my part was complete. To my surprise, I found the work was just beginning when both my editor and Deacon Jim challenged me.

Another month of long hours went by, and I pondered whether or not to keep moving forward. Then God sent another angel to me. After mass at a gathering, a lady came up to me and thanked me for witnessing at her retreat, explaining how it had saved her life. I was speechless and confused, but hearing these words inspired me to move forward and complete my book.

Today, I know my calling is to help others by sharing snapshots of my life that uncover the sustaining power of prayer. After decades of falling away from and returning to God, I have found daily prayer and devotions are some of the means by which I reclaim myself.

Looking back at all I have endured and at the lives of others I hold dear, I know that pain and struggle are universal. Not everyone chooses to share their stories, but everyone has a story to tell. I think some of us feel broken, and our stories hold us hostage until we learn to deal with our issues and forgive others and ourselves.

Over the years, as I have witnessed the power of prayer, my faith has deepened. I’ve never fully understood why some prayers are answered and others are not, but I have come to realize that everything occurs according to God's timetable, not mine.

Thankfully, I have experienced God’s miracles firsthand. First and foremost, I am saved. Through faith and daily meditation, God gives me hope. God is always there for me, in my spiritual warfare, in my sorrows, and in my happiness. Unconditional love is woven throughout my life, but mostly I am blessed to experience the highest kind of love from God, agape love. I

could not survive without God in my life.

This book is both a personal journey and a tribute to my parents. In the last several decades, I have experienced a great deal of trauma, and some of it has emanated from the fact that I haven't always placed God front and center in my life. Consequently, in this book of faith, I convey the devastating events in my life and chronicle how I repeatedly turned away from God but ultimately returned.

In this story, I share how I moved to a new and closer relationship with God through miracles, priests, Christian radio, and a life-changing religious retreat called Christ Renews His Parish (CRHP), which focuses on personal and parish spiritual renewal.

My goal is to help others heal from their brokenness. For that reason, after my costs and expenses, a portion of the proceeds from the sale of this book will be directed to help missions such as CRHP, Christian radio stations, and non-profit organizations helping grieving families.

Each chapter in *Finding God Anew* begins and ends with a prayer that means a lot to me. Most are from the *Catholic Prayer Book*, but some are prayers I learned over the years or made up.

That doesn't mean I was praying these prayers at the time the events in each chapter unfold. Rather, they are prayers I wish I'd prayed or prayers I pray now to celebrate my life- and soul-sustaining relationship with God. The prayer that follows conveys my life experiences.

O God my Father, my tragedies have left me broken and humble before you.

I cry out, "Why God, why?"

God replies, "Be not weak in faith for I am the Lord your God. I will use your story to strengthen & feed my flock." I continue to ask, "But God, I cannot see where to go."

God replies, "Be not weak in faith, for I am the Lord your God. I will remove your blinders and show you the way." I profess, "But God, I am weak of heart."

God replies, "Be not weak in faith, for I am the Lord your God. The Holy Spirit shall descend upon you, and your heart will overflow with my passion and desire."

I am thankful and ask, "How may I repay you, God?"

God replies, "Take up this journey. I will give you the strength, courage, and knowledge to overcome." I am confused and ask, "What journey?"

God replies, "Walk amongst my people, share your story, and a shepherd you shall be."

By Doug Kudwa

Prologue: Tragedy Strikes Again

Dear God, I am so weary of astounding heartbreaks.

*I am told you won't give me more than I can handle
and are strengthening me for your divine plan.*

Help me to accept that my life isn't falling apart, that it's falling into place.

I offer you all my pain and suffering for those most in need of your mercy.

Please put your hand tightly around mine and guide me as we walk together. Amen.

*

“God, I’m not ready for this!”

My heart broken, my spirits crushed, I ached to hold my parents in my arms and say, “I love you.”

I ached to hear their comforting reply – “I love you more” – just like God's unconditional love.

My Catholic upbringing and various life experiences taught me much, but nothing could have prepared me for shocking betrayals, shattered marriages, and the stunning death of my brother preceding two other horrific deaths in the form of a murder and suicide. Nothing could have prepared me for the community-wide and personal trauma these events would create, or the final overwhelming loss of my loving parents within six weeks of each other four years later.

The betrayals, murder, and suicide brought about nightmares, anger, and a degree of stress that exceeded my ability to cope or integrate my emotions. I felt helpless, vulnerable, and exhausted. Losing my parents reignited my overwhelming grief. Insomnia, which I had previously conquered, reentered my life.

One summer evening after losing my parents, what was left of my tanned athletic body sat slumped at the end of my parents’ wooden dock. Though a gentle breeze lifted my hair, my black cargo shorts and matching shirt reflected my mood. In a trance, I gazed at the lemon-colored ball of fire as it began to drop through the clouds and engulf the horizon with hues of red and pink. Soon, the rays of the setting sun glistened like diamonds on the tiny ripples of water heading toward me. The exquisite beauty all around me was a perfect reminder of God and of my parents’ unconditional love and tenderness.

Though watching sunrises and sunsets was a family pastime that usually calmed my soul, on this night, peace was nowhere to be found. I tried to cling to my faith and prayers, along with a life-changing retreat I'd attended that had returned hope to my life, yet once again I felt numb, disoriented, and in shock.

I still couldn't believe my parents were no longer here to guide and advise me. From them, I had learned to make a difference, love unconditionally, laugh often, and most importantly, to live knowing and experiencing God. My time on Earth was so very short compared to eternity with God. For at least the millionth time, I asked myself what my purpose was. Would I ever uncover it?

My mind was foggy, filled with questions and mired in emotions. I contemplated the spiritual road that my parents, who always led by example, had helped me travel. Could I survive without them? Would God sustain me again?

The answer, of course, was yes. I just didn't know it yet.

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console.

To be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Prayer of St. Francis

Chapter One: Not the Waltons

*Good morning, God. Every day is for you, dear God.
God so meek and mild, make me a good and obedient child.
God bless my Grandma and Grandpa, Mom and Dad,
Mary, Martha, Miriam, Joseph, John, Barbara, James, Daniel,
and all my nieces and nephews, aunts, uncles, and cousins.
Help guide us through this day. Amen.*

*

With remnants of the sandman in the corners of my eyes, my lids slowly opened to see the springs of the bunk bed above me holding my older sister Miriam.

I was seven years old. Full of energy and increasingly independent but always eager to see my dad, I awakened at five a.m. every morning to the sound of him flushing the toilet down the hall, determined to see him off before he left for his two jobs.

After quietly saying my morning prayer, I pulled off the covers and slowly rolled out of the bottom bunk so I wouldn't smack my head on the metal bars. I tiptoed across the room, making sure not to run into the other bunk bed where my two other older sisters, Mary and Martha, soundly slept.

In the room next to mine was another set of bunk beds holding my two older brothers, Joseph and John, and my two younger brothers, James and Daniel, all of whom were fast asleep.

Each bedroom was furnished with a wooden cross that we could slide open if we wanted to use the tiny container of holy water within. The crucifix hung above a single brown wooden dresser with four drawers, one per child. Each bedroom also contained a single closet and an older desk we all fought over. I was the sixth of eight children and the youngest of the four girls, so I discovered how the pecking order worked early on. This was frustrating and never seemed quite fair.

In the dark, I made my way through the den, brushing my hand along the upright spinet piano. I was told playing the piano was one of God's gifts to me. I took lessons for almost ten years.

In the early years of lessons, the hardest part was coping with my piano teacher, a

perfectionist who gently tapped my fingers with a ruler when I hit a wrong note. I started learning to play even before I could read words or before my feet could touch the foot pedals. I loved to play, but I found practicing my scales extremely boring.

From the den, I quietly walked down a narrow hallway. On one side, the door to my parents' room was closed. On the other side was the only bathroom in the house. The bathroom door was open with a nightlight shining within.

I curled up on the floor, holding my hands over the heat register, waiting for Dad to return dressed in his school bus driving clothes. Dad always told us, "Driving the bus is my recreational job."

His cheerfulness helped me imagine how much fun he must have every day.

In reality, he was working two jobs and long hours to feed and clothe his family of ten. It was impossible not to feel his love and desire to take care of his family.

My father, a big-boned man, was over six feet tall. He could appear intimidating, but he was like a teddy bear to me. He had a kind and generous heart, but none of us kids ever wanted to test him. Though I was sometimes sent to my room, I don't ever recall getting a spanking.

Dad entered the bathroom with a huge smile, his brilliant blue eyes twinkling down at me as his hands reached for mine. I quickly leaped into his arms to give him a bear hug and giggled as he tickled me. After his deep soft laugh, he whispered in my ear, "I love you." I could smell his deodorant, similar to Old Spice, as I tucked my head on his shoulder. It would be late at night before he returned from work, and I was disappointed when he put me down.

Dad, born in the 1920s on a dairy farm in a small rural area, was the son of parents who sailed on a ship to America directly from Europe. At that time, milk production was a big part of the agriculture industry. Dad's family found that their humid new climate had distinct seasonal variations and an abundance of rainfall, while the nearby tourist town was known for its beautiful lakes and sandy peninsula jutting into Lake Erie. This was wine country, and art and music were also local mainstays. My dad grew up with six siblings in a Lutheran home, and his father worked for others in addition to starting his own farm. Dad attended a public school and was very athletic; he was even named captain of his high school state championship basketball team.

Despite a promising athletic opportunity in college, after graduating from high school, Dad enlisted and served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. While overseas, he met a Catholic priest who gave him a Sacred Heart of Jesus medal that comforted him during the war.

Dad kept it in his wallet at all times throughout his life; it was one of his most prized possessions. I thought this was a wonderful testament to the impact priests can have on our lives.

When Dad returned to the states, he helped his father by working on their dairy farm. A sports recruiter who had scouted him in high school paid a visit to see if he was now interested in playing college ball, but Dad turned him down again. He had other plans. I loved seeing his eyes brighten and his face smile as he thought about his lifelong love story.

He was dating my mother, a beautiful petite brunette with an unforgettable smile who lived in the next county. She was filled with spunk and vinegar. Mom grew up with seven siblings in a Catholic home and attended Catholic school. As a child, she wanted to become a nun, and after high school, she waited tables on roller skates at an ice cream parlor. This was where Dad met her. He tried to be funny, and Mom threw a glass of water on him. Nonetheless, they soon started dating and were married about a year later, when she was nineteen and he was twenty-three. Dad loved my mom so much that he converted to Catholicism before their marriage. They were devoted to one another for the next sixty-eight years.

Dad's parents did not approve of his decision to convert, but they continued to love him unconditionally, a philosophy he and Mom extended to my siblings and me. My parents were endlessly devoted to one another, their children, grandchildren, family, and friends. Once, they even invited an out-of-town couple to stay overnight in our home after the couple accidentally smashed into our vehicle. My parents lived humbly and without fanfare, offering many quiet acts of kindness and generous giving.

Given their love for each other and their Catholic faith, it's not surprising they had eight children. When people saw all the kids spilling out of the station wagon for Sunday Mass, they would laugh and say, "Your parents are surely good Catholics, having all you children."

I always thought they had all us kids to help with the chores, and it wasn't until I was older that I understood the correlation between their faith and their large family.

My dad's first job was a partnership with his sibling as a food distributor. They kept their area supplied with snacks for almost two decades. My siblings and I thought this was cool, since we always had a supply of snacks to take to school. Growing up, we didn't have much money, but we never thought of ourselves as poor because we always had something to share.

This all changed in 1968, arguably one of our nation's most historic years. Astronauts circled the moon for the first time. Riots and demonstrations erupted as the Vietnam War and the

Civil Rights movement intensified. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated. None of those events touched us as we went about our daily routines in our small, peaceful, pleasant community. Instead, it was Dad who rocked our world in 1968.

One night, he gathered us together and said, “We’re starting a new venture – picking up garbage. You’ll all need to pitch in and help out.”

I was now nine years old, and I blurted out, “That’s gross!”

Dad laughed and said, “There’s one thing this world will never run out of, and that’s garbage.”

We all chuckled, but after a few minutes, John asked, “What will we bring for a school snack? We can’t take garbage.”

Our parents laughed even harder and told us not to worry.

The next Sunday, all eight of us followed Dad and Mom up to the altar after Mass to receive a special blessing on our new venture. Dad had experienced a vision, and with courage and faith in God, he and Mom ventured into their own waste management company.

Our family lived in the country about ten miles west of town. We owned a used truck that Dad fitted with sheets of wood to enclose the truck bed. This became his first garbage truck. On one side of the truck was the company’s name. Later, reflecting Mom and Dad’s sense of humor, they proudly added the word “Garbologist” to indicate “a degree in which one studies garbage.”

Thanks to their faith, trust, ethics, and hard work, the business became extremely successful. Dad and Mom showed us how to always obey God, and in turn, God provided for our family.

I’m not sure why I ignored this lesson until much later in life. What pride I must have had to think I could do a better job controlling my life than God could!

Our family’s large burgundy leather Bible always sat in the living room. Our parents’ faith and devotion to God was reflected in daily prayers before all meals and at bedtime, attendance at weekly Mass, and their emphasis on helping others. They showed us that being Catholic meant community, helping others, learning about the Bible, following years of traditions, and singing the psalms and songs at Mass to help us praise, pray, and proclaim God.

My siblings and I received a Catholic education at the same Catholic school my mom had attended. The cost of tuition – five hundred dollars per child – required sacrifices. Thankfully, the school blessed the larger families by making tuition free for the fourth child on.

As a child, I thought the church was beautiful and peaceful. The crucifix, the Stations of the Cross, and the gorgeous stained glass windows always captivated me. Over time, I began to understand the symbolism of the Mass. When I was younger, I sometimes attended Mass reluctantly, but when I was older, I felt a need to go in order to nourish my spirit.

Since I attended Catholic school, I had a daily relationship with God, but this was a private relationship, not something I talked about with friends on the playground. I memorized all my prayers at a very young age, but I could barely pronounce some of the words. I didn't question authority or ask "Why?", but I sometimes wished my relationship with God were deeper to compel me to always make the right decisions.

From the nuns and priests, I learned about the seven sacraments. These special occasions were signs of God's presence and channels of God's grace, and I couldn't wait to receive them. I was respectful in church, toward God, and to my teachers. I wanted my faith to be solid like my parents, obedient to God.

My initiation into the Catholic Church came when I received my first sacrament, the blessing of baptism, as an infant. I'm told I cried when the holy water was poured over my head. My mom said I was preparing my lungs to sing in the church choir someday, but my only memory is a picture.

In second grade, at the age of seven, I received my second and third sacraments, the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation along with the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist.

I learned that reconciliation, the sacrament of spiritual healing, was necessary when I distanced myself from God by committing sins. First, I had to be sincerely remorseful to God for my wrongdoing. Then I had to confess my sins to a priest, who would help counsel me and give me absolution with a penance of some sort.

Confessing my sins was scary. If I didn't tell the priest all my sins, I feared I would go to hell. If I did tell all my sins, I was afraid he'd tell my parents. Even though confessing felt awkward, in my heart I knew I was safe, because I knew the priest had made an oath not to violate any confessions. Besides, he never kept a ledger, and he was always welcoming and compassionate. Over the years, I wondered what it was like for priests to witness the amazing movement of God's grace and mercy.

For penance, I prayed whatever the priest asked me to pray. Truth be told, I always said my prayers quickly because I didn't want my peers to assume I had a lot of sins to pray about.

I learned the inspiring news that, through reconciliation, I received God's unconditional forgiveness. I also learned the tougher news – that I was called upon in turn to forgive others. The problem was, I couldn't truly forgive others until I truly felt and understood God's forgiveness. Unfortunately, I would later come to realize I hadn't learned this lesson very well.

At the same time I received the Sacrament of Reconciliation, I received the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist, or the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. I was excited to receive Jesus through Holy Communion. In my innocence, I wondered how my stomach would feel once He was inside me, but days before receiving Jesus, my focus turned to the stunning white dress and veil I would be allowed to wear. At age seven, keen to be liked and accepted by my friends, that dress made a greater impression on me than receiving the Eucharist.

From first grade through high school, I participated in religion class. In my early years, we attended Mass daily, and all the girls wore veils over their heads as a sign of respect. On the days we forgot our head coverings, we used bobby pins to attach Kleenexes to the tops of our heads. I was good-naturedly teased about this and about many other things, too.

My very first piano teacher was a nun, and my lessons took place at the convent, where the nuns lived. She was almost ninety years old, and I was always afraid she was going to have a heart attack. My parents were forty, and I thought they were old! I didn't want to be the reason my piano teacher died, so I tried to learn my lessons well.

Looking back, it's easy to recognize my pattern of wanting to please and care for others. Later, recognizing my fear of rejection and failure led to a healthier pattern that alleviated some of my stress and anxiety.

My church, school, the priests' rectory or home, and the convent all sat on the same block. When I was a child, I thought the convent looked mysterious, and my friends and I took turns guessing what it was like inside, since the outside looked old and scary.

To my surprise, when I first entered the convent, I discovered it was a beautiful home filled with love. The old wooden floors were squeaky, the walls held a beautiful cross and religious pictures, and a beautiful older baby grand piano sat near the entry. After my lessons, I would ask if there was anything I could do to help.

Not all nuns were stern and strict. Many were great teachers and very kind. I felt sorry for nuns because kids joked about them behind their backs and called them penguins, thanks to their black and white habits. This attire looked very hot and uncomfortable, just like my school

uniform.

I disliked my uniform and never understood why we girls had to wear them but not boys. I felt frumpy in my white knee-high socks and doll-collar blouse under my large and shapeless knee-length navy jumper. We wore a school uniform from grades one through twelve. Every morning, the teasing began as soon as I stepped onto the public school bus.

Meanwhile, clothes aside, I had more in common with my four brothers than my three sisters. My brothers and I played baseball, football, and basketball with neighborhood friends while my sisters made up skits, designed costumes, and put on plays for family and friends.

We did a lot of chores, the girls working inside and the boys outside our home. Mom handled the business bookkeeping while the boys helped pick up the garbage. Before garbage bags were utilized, they shoveled it in and out of the truck at the landfills. They also mowed the lawn, including several acres of flat land, then up and down two steep terraces that ended along the highway. Our small one-story yellow home, with an attached two-car garage, sat on top of the second terrace. This meant there was plenty of room for our German shepherd to play.

The only vacations we took were car trips to visit relatives or to the lake for family picnics. When I was a toddler, my parents invested in a small lakefront piece of property less than an hour away from town. They didn't build a home on it until after I was out of high school. Growing up, we had to prime the old water well to hand pump out the water, and we learned to enjoy life's simple pleasures such as campfires, roasting s'mores, and watching the sun go down. Mom always loved sunsets – she called them God's signature at the end of the day.

I did have a close relationship with my brothers and sisters, in part because our parents showed us by example that family comes first. I felt very blessed by God's choice of my family.

*Lord Jesus Christ, I praise and thank you for my parents and my brothers and sisters,
whom you have given me to cherish. Surround them with your tender, loving care,
teach them to love and serve one another in true affection, and to look to you in all their needs.*

I place them all in your care, knowing that your love for them is greater than my own.

*Keep us close to one another in this life and conduct us at the last
to our true and heavenly home. Blessed be God forever. Amen.*

Chapter Two: A Twister, A Miracle, and Gratitude to God

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.

*God bless my mom and dad, my brothers and sisters, grandmas and grandpas,
aunts, uncles, cousins, and everybody. Amen.*

*

The clock chimed nine o'clock, telling me it was time for bed. It was springtime, and I was ten years old. I couldn't wait for tomorrow to taste my mom's carrot cake, baked in celebration of my dad's forty-fifth birthday. Growing up, I loved to help blow out the candles.

Most of my siblings and I were fast asleep by the time the eleven o'clock news came on. We had inherited a television that brought in two major networks and allowed us to watch a few of our shows in color. It was so exciting to see the NBC peacock unfold his colorful tail feathers, indicating that the next program would be broadcast "in living color."

The clock struck eleven, and the news began. The windows and front screen door were open to let in fresh air, but tonight, papers started gusting around the living room and a whistling noise entered the house. Martha began closing windows while Miriam fought with the front screen door, trying to pull it shut. Mom headed to the south side of the house to close the windows in our bedrooms.

Dad was sitting in his chair in the living room when he heard the weather forecaster say the National Weather Service was issuing a severe weather warning, with high winds and heavy rainstorms in our area. Then he heard, "A tornado has been spotted. If you are in the affected area, you should seek safe shelter immediately. This is not a test. This is an alert. Take shelter immediately until further notice..."

The classic "BEEP, BEEP, BEEP" noise filled the room as Dad yelled, "Run!"

At that moment, my sister Miriam saw the ceiling start to crack. She let go of the door and dashed toward the bedrooms. Mom dove on top of Martha in the hallway to protect her in case anything fell from the ceiling.

I awoke to a gigantic boom and thought something had exploded. I heard my sisters screaming and my parents yelling, "Is everyone all right?"

Confused and frightened, I ran to my mother, and we huddled together. The hallway light was working, but it was pitch dark outside and eerily silent. Not a single sound came from inside or outside our home.

Firmly, Dad said, “Everyone stay put, and I’ll be right back.”

I was frightened, and I wanted to jump into my dad’s arms just like I did each morning before he left for work.

It seemed like an eternity before Dad slowly stepped back into the room. Dazed, he softly told us, “A tornado hit our home.”

He walked over to Mom and took her in his arms. “The roof is ripped off our house,” he told us. “There’s a lot of debris in the downstairs entryway. If we’d run in that direction, there’s a good chance we would have been hurt. Nothing that we’ve lost means anything,” he emphasized. “We have each other.”

He paused for a second, swallowing his emotions, before adding, “We have a miracle. There’s one post standing near the kitchen – the one that holds the telephone. Unbelievably, it still works. I called the police, and help is on the way. We all need to say a prayer of thanksgiving to God.” Through tears, Dad softly led us in the Lord’s Prayer.

By the end of the prayer, we could hear sirens outside. Because of all the loose wires, my dad told us to stay put. Once we were escorted outside, we were astonished to see the destruction the tornado had wrought. The policeman told us he thought the terrace in front of our home had directed the tornado just far enough up the hill that it hadn’t flattened our home.

Our neighbors had heard the sirens and come over to help. The police officers warned us that a rainstorm was coming, so the men started to carry as much furniture as they could to shelter so it wouldn’t be ruined. Mom was crying with gratitude at the outpouring of help. After a while, she started laughing and said, “Well, I guess I finally get the new kitchen I always wanted.”

Just as the rain began pouring down, our next-door neighbors showed us unconditional love by saying, “Your family can stay in our home as long as you need to.”

They had a cottage they could move into while we lived at their main home. Our family attended the same Catholic school as their kids, and they told us we could wear any of their kids’ uniforms and clothes that fit.

The next day, a picture of our home appeared on the front page of the newspaper. Going

to school in my neighbor's clothes made me feel awkward, as did the pitying stares of my fellow fourth graders. Some couldn't believe a tornado had hit our home and that I was still around to talk about it.

Going to sleep at night was no longer easy. I now understood why our dog always started shaking when he heard loud noises. Someone told me that a thunderstorm happens when people up in heaven are bowling and throw strikes. To this day, I still jump at the crack of thunder, though I'm slowly learning to appreciate God's beauty in thunder and lightning.

Months passed before our home was ready to live in again. In the meantime, the ten of us had a roof over our heads, thanks to our generous neighbors. A bond formed between our families during those weeks, and in hindsight, it was easy to recognize God at work through their selfless actions. As time went by, I saw that God had kept me safe throughout my days an endless number of times.

Passing on the generosity they had been shown, my parents soon decided to host an exchange student named Abel who was about the same age as my two older brothers. He attempted to play football and fit in with his new surroundings, but after four months, he was so homesick that he asked to go back to Europe. Before he left, to show his appreciation, he presented us with a new cuckoo clock to replace the clock on our living room wall.

The actions of my neighbors and parents taught me that we are to be generous to one another and that the Lord gives us prayer as an unfailing means of salvation and holiness. Meanwhile, the tornado taught me not to take life for granted. As I thought of the odds of a tornado hitting our home, I wondered what other strange events might be headed our way.

Dear God,

I go about my daily life and take so much for granted.

*I want to thank you for good health, a loving home,
sufficient food, and warm clothing.*

Thank you for my loving family and for making me.

Thank you for choosing such wonderful parents to bring me up knowing you.

Thank you for generous neighbors who follow your words: do unto others as you would unto me.

I have so much to be thankful for. I am truly blessed. Thank you, Dear God. Amen.

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