



Crossings Reflection #10¹

“I Wouldn’t Take Nothing For My Journey Now”



—Lela Mixon, Office of Career Services
April 12, 2007

“I wouldn’t take nothing for my journey now,
I’ve got to make it to Heaven somehow.
Though the devil tempts and tries to turn me around.
He’s offered everything that’s got a name
All the wealth I want and worldly fame,
But if I could, still
I wouldn’t take nothing for my journey now.”

—Lyrics by Charles Goodman and Jimmie Davis

Prologue

When I was asked to participate and “share my story,” I was hesitant at first because I felt unworthy. I figured there were others with inspirational stories, people who were holier or more spiritual than I. But now I am so happy that I said “yes,” for I have been given a gift through this process of reflection. I really appreciate the invitation because this opportunity has challenged me

to think about how I have grown from my experiences and how I have grown in my faith.

When I think about my journey with God and my faith, there are milestones that stand out for me. There are significant turning points: (1) my childhood, when I was first introduced to Christianity, when I accepted Christ, and when I learned spiritual disciplines; (2) my father’s death in 1985 when I turned my back on God; (3) learning about the scientific bell curve in the early 1990s when I discovered miracles and rediscovered God; (4) being married in 1993 and discovering what it feels like to be truly loved; (5) becoming a mom for the first time in 1994 and discovering what it feels like to truly love; (6) seeing the *Passion of the Christ* movie in 2004 when I realized the essence and intensity of love in action and the depth of my own sin; and (7) the countless times where I have received inspiration and have heard God speak to me through songs, movies, conversations, and books. I have found that the more I let God speak to me through my experiences and my relationships, the more I grow from only practicing spiritual disciplines to seeing God in everyday situations and learning how to apply the fruits of the Spirit and my spiritual gifts in those everyday situations.

My church childhood

The childhood I remember most is my ‘church’ childhood. My parents weren’t always people of strong faith and religious practice, but for the majority of my childhood, they were. Did many of you attend the MLK Day celebration where Jearlyn Steele spoke of her

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childhood? She, like me, grew up in a Pentecostal faith tradition in Gary, Ind.

A typical weekly schedule included Sunday school at 9 a.m., morning worship at 11, YPWW (Young People Willing Workers), a Bible study for young adults and teens, at 6 p.m., followed by Sunday evening worship at 8. On Tuesday and Friday nights, Bible study and worship were scheduled at 7 p.m. We usually had choir rehearsal on Wednesday night and Thursday night was set aside for PURITY (which stands for purity, unity, righteousness, intelligence, truthfulness for youth), a character-building and Bible study for teenagers at 6 p.m. Sunshine Band, a character-building and Bible study for children and preteens, was scheduled on Saturday at 11 a.m. If your family was fortunate enough to have teens and children—like my family of eight children—you often had the opportunity to attend both of these Bible studies in a week.

The only time that weekly schedule varied was when we had even more church services, like inserting a special Sunday afternoon worship at 3:00 or attending a revival every night of the week. We studied and recited scriptures like graduate students of theology. We read from the King James Bible (KJV) translation. And that old English would trip up the less studied, but I took pride (which I know is an imperfection) in the fact that when I was called on to read aloud, I did so eloquently. So, I was asked to read aloud, often. And because I was often called on, I practiced frequently. Thus, I became very familiar with scripture. It is a part of me and you will hear me reference Biblical scriptures in my talk today.

Learning and reciting scripture pleased my father because he was a minister in our church. And, as the practice was in our church, when a minister preached, he would ask an audience member to read the referenced scripture aloud. As I grew older, I often thought about this practice and came to these conclusions: this was done to make sure church members brought their Bibles with them and to make sure they were familiar with them (practicing a spiritual discipline); also, we read aloud for those who could not read because there were always some illiterate people in the congregation and they needed to hear and understand the scripture as well.

Believe it or not, I enjoyed my childhood. Church provided a safe environment in which to grow. It was limiting, but it was safe. There was a brief period in middle school when I resisted and complained about going to church so much. But by high school, I became

resigned that this was my life and I completed my chores and academics around our church schedule.

I had a very innocent perception of faith and God. It was simple: God saved those who sought him. He healed those who asked. Period. Our church congregation was made up of people from all walks of life. It included those who “grew up in the church” (that means that they did not have many opportunities to sin while growing up). There were also professionals, educators, nurses, etc. And then there were those who were “saved from a path leading to death and destruction” or who were “saved from a burning hell” (when you heard that, you knew that they lived a “worldly life” and did a lot of bad things). But that last group of people was the group our church sought the hardest to evangelize. That was the population many others would cross the street to avoid. However, our evangelists saw past their addictions, their filth, and their smells and saw someone worth witnessing to; they saw God’s creation. That impressed me.

I was baptized at age 12—the “age of understanding”—but I had professed my belief in God many years before. I knew I would go onto college, just like I knew I would marry a preacher. (You see, I had fallen secretly in love with Jason J. His father was a charismatic evangelist who led a revival at our church annually.) I was going to attend college and then marry a minister. That was my plan . . . until I got crazy mad at God.

My father’s death and my turning away from God

My father died from colon cancer when he was just 51 years old, the first semester of my senior year in high school, when I was seventeen. His death was a complete shock to me, even though he lived with and fought cancer for two years. I can only imagine that you are wondering how I was caught so off guard with his death? Well, I will try to explain it, but I think unless you lived my existence, you still may not understand.

When my father was diagnosed with cancer, my attitude was so cavalier. I just knew he would be completely healed and it would be a wonderful testimony. You see, there was already an example of a teenage boy from our membership who had cancer. He was, as the older folks would say, “at death’s door” very quickly. He had suffered for just a short time. The doctors said he was in his final days when he weighed only 80 pounds and he was too weak to receive any more treatments.

So, the saints prayed and prayed and prayed. Miraculously, without explanation, he began to gain weight. When they tested his blood, his red blood count was improving. When the doctors screened him, he was cancer free. To this day when I return home for a visit, I ask about him. He is alive and well. I will never forget his name: Eric.

Another reason I was so confident in my father's healing is before my dad became a Christian and a minister, he was one of those people who was "saved from the fiery pit of hell." He was one of those people many would cross the street to avoid. I don't know much about his life of addiction except for what he would share in his testimonies at church and the answers I got from my mom when I later found the courage to ask her about his life. What I do know is this: he had some powerful and multiple addictions and when he made the decision to accept Christ, he never used drugs again. Period. To me, that alone was a powerful example of healing.

So, when my dad was diagnosed with cancer, my prayer to God was simple, "Heal him, just like you healed Eric. Amen." He was in and out of the hospital for treatment for two years. Anyone who has lived with a chemo patient knows there are times when they are just sick and weak. I expected that, so when that happened to my dad, my optimism was not deterred. Through it all, I didn't give his illness much thought until the time my dad was in the hospital longer than any other time before. You see, during his previous stays in the hospital, my mom wouldn't let us visit him because he would "be home soon" or he was "just in for treatment." But this time was different. One evening after school, my mom said "your dad wants to see you all." I was surprised that she would take all of us to the hospital (because it was not easy transporting eight children transported anywhere, especially in the world before mini-vans), but I thought they must want to make a happy announcement and they wanted us all to be there for it.

When I walked into the hospital room, I knew immediately that my dad was dying. I tried to cover up my shock, but I know I failed to do so. He turned his head to me and held out his hand for me to come closer. I held my composure in the hospital room and at home until everyone was asleep that night and then I let God have it. I was so angry. I decided then that I wouldn't serve a God who would let a minister, a father of eight children, die. I wouldn't serve a God who wouldn't answer a simple prayer. I have found that anger is very powerful and can be a strong motivation for people. However, I also think that it is dangerous when

we hold on to it and let it guide us. James 1:20 says "a man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires."

Well, I let my anger guide me. I let it grow inside of me. And I kept my anger a secret. After all, we still attended church several times a week. I still went to PURITY (I didn't have a choice) and recited scriptures and sang songs, but I could feel my heart growing harder and I begin to secretly question proclamations and sermons shared from the pulpit. I began to pull away from God. It was my senior year and I had to write my senior thesis. I decided to research and discover other theories of thoughts and faiths. I didn't know what my topic would be, but I knew I couldn't let my mother discover that I questioned my faith.

During my research, I stumbled upon a quote by Karl Marx that stated "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." That resonated with me and I decided I would not allow religious beliefs to cloud my mind ever again. I would not helplessly pray and hope for a difference. That whole "turn the other cheek" junk was the philosophy of people who lacked courage, who lacked fight, people who were oppressed. Well, I had fight and I had courage (or so I thought) and I was on a mission to discover truth. I would not seek refuge in or be sedated by religion; I would discover truth in a logical way. I would discover it through science, I pompously thought. I would look only at facts and no longer seek hope. As I look back, I realize that I had begun a journey on a very dark road.

As an aside, I camouflaged my research of the agnostic belief by stating that I was researching communism, Karl Marx, and capitalism. My senior topic was "The Theory of Capitalism was Antiquated" where I compared the merits of communism and capitalism. I got an A+.

Studying science and returning to God

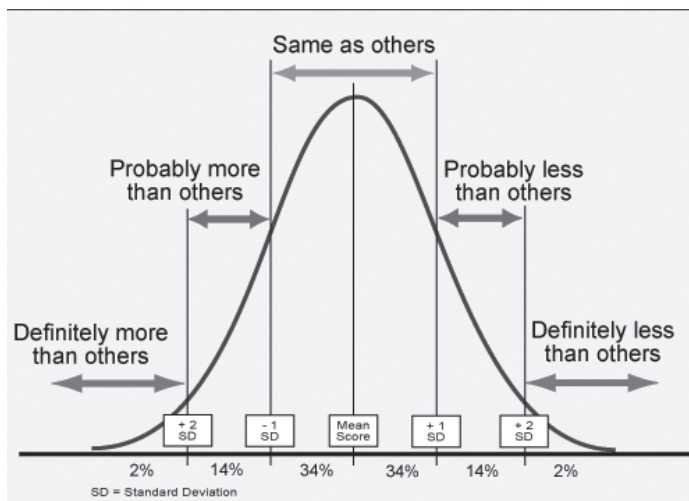
This leads me to my next milestone: the bell curve. Are there any psychology or science majors in the audience? Are there any professors? If so, I apologize if I don't adequately "teach" the understanding of this subject, but I am just merely trying to make a point and share my impression of this model.

Many of you are probably familiar with this symbol of science. I have seen this symbol used a lot when referencing intelligence, norms, averages, standard deviations, etc. I don't want to get too technical with this explanation, but this was significant to me.

By the time I was introduced to the bell curve, I really enjoyed science. I enjoyed learning and reciting facts (very similar to learning and reciting scriptures). I would go home and amaze my family with my knowledge (or so I thought). I loved quoting studies and theories and throwing them around like it was infallible fact. Well, one day, all of that stopped.

I believe I was in a statistics class and we were looking at a bell curve with standard deviations and discussing probabilities and applying theories to this model. Everyone has heard of theories, right? They are statements used to describe behavior or phenomena that are supported by multiple experiments that have rendered the same results. Most of us assume theories represent the truth.

What I found out is that these results are not absolute and infallible, but have a margin of error that is built into how results are reported. So, if results have a margin of error (this is called probability) of less than .05, then that is very favorable in science. That's a good experiment. Even more so, when experiments are completed with a probability of less than .01, then theories are stated with even more confidence. So, the smaller the measurement is for the probability of error (or the further a measurement is in the corners of the curve), the better the results are considered (see picture).



Well, as we discussed probabilities that day, I had a nagging question in the back of my mind. Measurements of .01 and .05 are not without error. So, how do we get to the absolute truth? How do I get to the indisputable truth? As I reflect on that day, I know that professor was not happy that he had such an inquisitive student in his class. After many questions and explanations, he finally told me what he believed and his innocent statement put me on a road of healing. He first stated that a margin of error is allowed in scientific experiments and it simply indicates what scientists have

yet to discover. He said it represents what they can not explain, yet. It is the unknown. But then, he off-handedly said, "I believe it is where miracles occur." This professor went on to explain that it is very similar to a conversation one may have with a doctor and the doctor says that he can not explain why a patient is getting better or that their healing is a "medical mystery."

I was stunned because he did not know how that resonated with me. I thought back to my father's and Eric's fights with cancer. My father died and Eric lived. Immediately the scripture from I Corinthians 13 came to my mind, "For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears" (NIV) or "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (KJV). I had always understood that passage of scripture to mean that one day the answers to "why did this happen?" and the answers to the debates about creation vs. evolution and nurture vs. nature would all be revealed. During this time on earth, God allows humans to discover only so much. Further down in that same Biblical chapter it proclaims that I don't need to know the "why" and the "what" to exist, to live, or to love. I don't need to have a complete understanding or be able to explain everything. I just need to have faith in God, to have hope in life and to love others.

It was at that time that I realized that science can be a religion, that I was making it my religion. By that I mean there are those who believe in scientist theory alone have hope and have faith in an "unknown" just like mainstream faith traditions. I also realized that life and all of its challenges was not going to be explained clearly through science. So, I decided that if I was going to have hope and faith, I was going to hope and have faith in the triumph of Good over Evil; I was going to believe that love covers a multitude of failures; and I was going to hope that I have something more to live for than just the next struggle in this life.

So, I slowly and cautiously began to rebuild my relationship with God. I worked on forgiving Him for not healing my father. I had lost a significant innocence when my father died. So, my relationship with God was different. One way it was different was I actually began to have a relationship. I talked to Him, rather than commanding Him. I began to study the Bible rather than just reading it and memorizing it. My growth wasn't by any means linear, but it was headed in the right direction.

Learning about love through marriage

My next milestone was getting married. And after 13 years, marriage is teaching me (yes, still) how to receive love. I am learning how to humble myself to receive my husband's generous sacrifice to show me that he loves me and not to resist this love because I don't want to "owe" him or others. God speaks to my heart regularly and says "Lela, if you can not receive his love, then how can you fully receive and understand the gravity of MY love for you?" Romans 5:8 says "but God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." So, before I was even deserving of love, before I was even aware of my faults and the need to seek forgiveness, God loved me enough to sacrifice his Son. That is a love that can not be repaid, just accepted.

Learning about love through motherhood

When I became a mom, I finally learned what it was like to love someone instantly, completely, passionately, and without hesitation. This feeling is overwhelming. I think everyone has different experiences that help them get to this level of knowing love and showing love, shamelessly. And if you can get to that level without sacrificing your 24-inch waist (among other things), I strongly encourage you to explore them first.

Having a marriage and a family has taught me a lot about what love looks like. It looks like forgiveness, and patience, and kindness, and undeserved—completely undeserved—sacrifice. If you are married, have been married, have been in a committed relationship, are a parent, or have been a parent, then you understand what I am saying. Love is about not giving up on someone when logic and fatigue says otherwise. In chapter five in the letter to the Ephesians, Paul talks about how marriage is an excellent analogy for God's relationship with Christians. We mess up, we move away from Him at times, we sass Him (okay, I have) and yet He is waiting to welcome us, to love on us, to give us another chance to walk on this spiritual journey with Him.

And because forgiveness is a big part of demonstrating love, I was still on this journey of forgiving God for allowing my father to die. It was nine years later (I know, a long time), but it was the birth of my daughter that finally helped me to really heal. And you know what else helped? The Disney movie, *The Lion King*. It was released June 1994, the same month and year my daughter was born. If you haven't seen it, do so. It is an excellent animated story about a father who is taken too soon by "Evil" and a confused son

leaves his homeland and his traditions only to discover "Truth" much later and then returns. I know I just put a deep spin on the movie, but it is actually a very good film. Go see it!

God's model for love

Another significant milestone on my spiritual journey was seeing Mel Gibson's version of the Passion story. I honestly only went to see the movie for two reasons: I wanted to support a Christian film in the theatres and because Mel Gibson is one of the hottest men I know. He starred in one of my favorite movies of all times, *Braveheart*. (If you haven't seen it, rent it, too). I love *Braveheart* so much that I was going to name my first son, William Wallace Mixon, after Mel's character in that movie. However, my husband figured out why I loved that name so much and he said "heck no." So, my son is named William (after my husband, not Mel) Colin Mixon. But, I digress.

Anyway, I was only going to see the Passion film because of Mel. I assumed I wouldn't be too emotional because I sorta knew the storyline, no surprises. I read the story a hundred times, you know? And I was doing okay until they got the scene where Christ was whipped. After the beating went on for some time, I begin to think to myself "Yeah, I know some people whom he took that lick for." But the beating continued and I begin to feel uncomfortable. I didn't understand why Mel directed this scene to be so long. Then I rationalized, well, if it really did happen like that, then it wasn't because of my sins. You see, I was one of those people who "grew up in the church," so I didn't have a lot of sins to forgive (or so I thought).

And during that scene, God spoke to my heart and said "Lela if it were only for you, this beating would have been necessary. I would have done this for you because you are worth it." So, of course, I sobbed. I mean, I got into "ugly crying." But afterward, it made me think: if Jesus was modeling love and I was worth His sacrifice, then I am suppose to copy that sacrificial love and let someone else know that they are worth that sacrifice. John 15:13 says "Greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life (offer a sacrifice) for his friends."

That was an awesome realization for me and one that I, shamefully, fail to accomplish often. Even when I attempt the action, I feel like I am inadequate in my results. Nonetheless, from time to time, I summon the courage and humility to try, yet again.

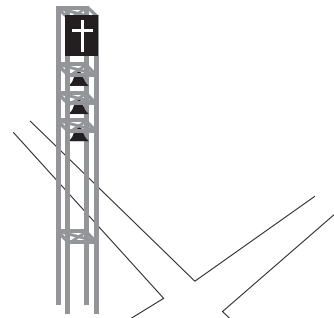
*God speaks to me through books, movies,
and relationships, too*

I have already given examples of when I felt God speaking to my heart through relationships and through movies. I have also been inspired through books. One of my favorite authors is Maya Angelou. She is a writer, poet, and speaker. As a matter of fact, she spoke at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton. Maya Angelou has written a book that is an accumulation of short stories, personal reflections, and inspirational passages. Believe it or not, the title of the book is *Wouldn't Take Nothing for my Journey Now*. There is a passage that I would like to share because I think it summarizes my thoughts and my internal struggle when I speak about showing love:

I cannot separate what I conceive as Spirit from my concept of God. Thus, I believe that God is Spirit. While I know myself as a creation of God, I am also obligated to realize and remember that everyone else and everything else are also God's creation. This is particularly difficult for me when my mind falls upon the cruel person, the batterer, and the bigot. I would like to think that the mean-spirited were created by another force . . . But since I believe that God created all things, I am not only constrained to know that the oppressor is a child of God, but also obliged to try to treat him or her as a child of God.

When I think about the experiences from my life that I have chosen to share, I can only think that I have chosen to do so because I hope that I am able to encourage someone. Maybe you are a person who is struggling with your own faith because of real disappointments, real hurts in your life, and no one seems to understand the depth of your wounds. They think that you should be "over it by now". You may think, "You know what, this faith thing, this religious thing...it is not worth it". You may think that your faith is not doing you a bit of good. Well, I decided to share my experiences and thoughts because if you are thinking that way, my hope is that you reconsider. I have realized that through all of the pain that I have experienced (and I realize there is more to come), I have only found comfort, peace and endurance when I began, again, to have hope. And my hope is in Christ and because of that realization, I wouldn't take nothing for my journey now.

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The Crossings Project

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