

Testimony

The Call, or Before the Surrender

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Testimony: The Call, or Before the Surrender

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1



MESSENGER OR CRAZY MAN?

THE MORNING OF GOOD FRIDAY in April, 2001 began just like any other. I rolled over in my bed and peered myopically at the alarm clock. Satisfied that once again I'd beaten the alarm, I returned to my previous position and contemplated the ceiling as I prayed in my mind. *Good morning, God!* Without interrupting the flow of my prayer, I reached over, beat the alarming clock into submission, and continued. *I thank you for waking me up this morning...*

My prayer complete, I jumped out of bed (actually more of a sideways shuffle) and headed for the bathroom. It was a day I anticipated with glee, a day devoted to God. My only complaint: why did the day have to begin so early?

Our family had begun a tradition of attending three services on Good Friday: one at 7 a.m. featuring all women preachers, another at 12 noon in a Senior Center, and the grand-daddy of them all at 6 p.m. This last featured seven heavy-hitting preach-

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ers from the New York and New Jersey areas, accompanied by seven bumping choirs who sang earth-stirring songs (the Christian equivalent of the “Drop It Like It’s Hot” phenomena).

In the first service, we heard a rousing round of women who brought new revelation to the seven last words of Jesus on the Cross. One which stuck in my mind was delivered by Rev. Jackie McCullough, who had the word “It is Finished!” In her exposition, she posed the theory that becoming a Christian finishes our lives as sinners, but our lives in Christ have just begun. She relegated the stagnancy of many believers to stuff-and-nonsense and pointed to the fact that mustard seed faith will get you into heaven, but great faith is what gets you through here on earth.

This was followed by a song entitled, “Lord I’m Available to You.” It talked about dedicating all the gifts we receive from God back to His service, so that we can reach His people who are brokenhearted and in need of freedom from whatever vices hold them down.

I was in tears after the song and still pretty pensive as we traveled from the morning service to the noon service. Since it was located in a Senior Center, the structure of the church wasn’t as grand as the church that hosted the morning service, but where the presence of the Lord is, there is reverence.

With the high from the previous service still in full force, I sang more heartily than usual. I listened attentively to each preacher. The first preacher got my particular attention, because his sermon was geared towards encouraging the youth. As a former youth choir director and overgrown kid myself, you say the word “youth” and I’m all ears.

After his sermon, I smiled in acknowledgment (kinda that “Good word sir!” thing we do) whenever our eyes met... which

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seemed to be quite often, now that I think about it. Being used to folks staring at me, I didn't really take it on.

When it was my pastor's turn to render the word, I sang the song he'd requested: "I Believe, So Why Should I Worry or Fret?" When I resumed my seat, Minister No.1 was still nodding and smiling at me. It wasn't a lecherous look or smile, so I smiled back and then refocused my attention to the Word.



Having congratulated all the ministers and schmoozed with their wives or choir members, I made a beeline for the most important section of the room. (Nope, not the bathroom: the food table!) I was almost there when I was intercepted by Minister No.1. He shook my hand, smiled beatifically at me, and asked, "When are you going to start preaching?"

Stunned, I looked around to see if someone else had silently eased up behind me. No one else was there. *He really must be short on conversational material*, I thought, and replied, "Me? Preaching? Where'd you get that idea? That's not me, you saw what I do ... I sing, that's what I do."

Throwing up his hands in "I surrender" mode he said, "Don't get mad at me, I'm just the messenger. I'm just telling you what God told me to tell you—that's what I do."

I politely smiled, shook his hand again and hightailed it away from him. I proceeded to avoid the "crazy man" till we departed. Later that afternoon, on our break before attending the 6 p.m. Good Friday service, I told my sister and her husband about my conversation with the elderly minister. "If people don't have anything to say, they really should just be quiet," I concluded. With that grand assessment I headed upstairs to my

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apartment, congratulating myself on having nipped that nonsense in the bud.

A month later, the nagging thought occurred to me: what if he wasn't just making conversation? Again I thoroughly and ruthlessly squelched the idea. Not me! Why would God choose me? I mean, I'd been there for thirty-seven years. I think I would have felt any leanings in that direction by now. Plus, I'd heard many extraordinary and captivating testimonies of "the call." I just knew that, were I to be chosen, I would be alone—not in a crowded room where I could say that God was probably talking to my neighbor and I accidentally overheard. I expected nothing less than the Hallelujah Chorus overhead as a ray of light shone down through a fluffy white cloud, illuminating just me.

Can you say "wrong?" I received "the call" during one of the lowest periods of my life...

2



GOD'S MESSAGE AND MY RESPONSE

April 2001...

PASTOR RICKETTS WAS WHOOPING and hollering away from the pulpit, body in full motion and hands gesticulating like he was wont to do when he got to the meaty part of the sermon. For all that I can't remember the subject of the sermon, I surely do remember God's message to me. "You're fornicating... stop it... now!"

I looked around me to see if anyone else was hearing voices... nope... their eyes were focused on pastor in rapt attention. Ohhh boyyyyy.

As the week went by, I tried to shrug it off, but it seemed as though every sermon for the next three weeks was directed at me! Forget stomping on my foot, the Pastor was stepping on my

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whole leg! He preached about the body being a temple, he preached about fornication, he cited examples of officers laying up in bed the night before and coming to church the next morning, carrying on business as usual. I actually did look around the sanctuary during that sermon, wondering who he was talking about, because I just knew he wasn't talking to me ... cause I never, *ever* had sex on Saturday nights.

After another three weeks of this, I couldn't take it anymore. I spoke to my fiancé about the cessation of intercourse until our wedding in six months. You know that went over as well as Bush's election in New York and Pennsylvania, right? I mean how do you convince someone, when you're reluctant yourself, that something you've both been doing for twelve years needs to be stopped ... for six months?

Anyway, I gave it a shot. It entailed weeks of discussion back and forth. Finally, although he couldn't resist the urge to warn me that I was putting a strain on him and on our relationship, he agreed to give it a shot. Strain? Heck, we'd weathered so much in twelve years I was confident that, though those six months would be a mild to moderate annoyance, we'd be alright. I had faith enough for both of us. After all, we were doing the right thing...

Week one was a gosh-durned struggle, but with reassuring phone calls three to four times a day, we were alright. Week two, the coaxing and questioning reasserted its head. Oh don't play; you know what I'm talking about. "So, does abstinence mean that we can't take care of each other ... in other ways ... you know?" For once in that relationship, I held firm. I actually said no. Why? Although I daily endured physical symptoms of frustration, something strange was happening to me mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

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I began seeing things more clearly than I had in years. In fact, I began seeing my fiancé, myself, and our relationship with more clarity than I had in years—or perhaps more than I ever had, period. I realized that he manipulated my emotions to avoid discussions, to provoke guilt, to win arguments etc, and I had been unaware of it. Well, not unaware—I just thought he didn't realize that he was doing it. But with my newfound clarity, I realized that it was a deliberate act.

I also began to realize that I, in part, had helped to create my monster. I had begun to treat him as God, and he had taken to the roll better than any Academy Award winner ever could. So now I was taking away his God-like authority without warning, and he didn't know how to react to my new purpose or my burgeoning self-confidence.

At that point, abstaining no longer became a reluctant obedience, but a necessity. I wanted to discover what else I'd been blinded to ... unfortunately, I found out: High on the hog and confident that Dom's discontent was just a drop in the bucket, I never really noticed when Dom stopped asking. Maybe I just thought that he was dealing as well as I was. Then, with my newfound clarity, I began to notice that Dom was doing things that would deliberately anger me so that arguments would begin and he could exit the scene.

I realized that things were escalating to a breaking point. Determined to hold things together, I sucked up the strife and continued to be the peacemaker that I had always been. *Only three more months*, I told myself. But then Dom upped his game of "anger the fiancée" with really blatant, in your face, you-better-pop-your-neck-and-roll-your-eyes-at-me-or-you're-not-a-strong-black-woman antics.

I finally gave in and told Dom that I wanted to speak with him. I gave him the "it's not working out speech" and returned

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the quite ugly engagement ring. We both wept beautiful tears, hugged each other, and said the placating words that people usually say at such times: "I love you, but I guess, sometimes, love is just not enough." (What the heck is that crap, anyway?)

As I watched Dom drive away, I felt two parts relief and one part disappointment. I knew that Dom had deliberately angered me so that I would be the one to end the relationship instead of him. I couldn't help seeing that as a weak and less-than-manly thing to do. I also figured that twelve years together deserved more consideration than that.

I went into the house and quietly told my mother and daughter that the relationship had ended. They rallied around me, but being the strong black woman that I am, I pooh-poohed their pitying looks and comforting hugs, went into my bastion of solitude (the bathroom), turned on the water, and cried like a baby.

I considered it only correct when Dom called the next day, to see if I was alright. But when the phone calls continued to come in every day as though nothing had changed and all was well, I began to unravel a bit. I was angry, but being one to avoid a conflict, I simply began avoiding Dom's phone calls.

I thought it was obvious that I didn't want to speak with him, but then he began calling my mother, my daughter, my sister, my brother-in-law and then my co-workers to find out why I wasn't returning his calls. *Was the brother really that thick, or just insensitive?*

Things continued in that awkward way until I finally took a call from Dom. He had news for me that he just had to tell me in person. Filled with triumph, I thought to myself, *I knew his a** would come crawling back, but I didn't expect it this soon!* I retained that sense of confidence even as we met face to face, and with

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hopeful eyes he stuttered and mumbled his way through the message of his impending fatherhood.

Oh heyell nawww, I thought, I know this negro is not standing in front of me telling me that he's gotten someone pregnant already! Wait a minute ... this sounds like overlap to me! I oughta, I should ... nawww, going to jail over a no-account man is not really my game plan! My face impassive, not displaying a lick of the thoughts and strong emotions going through me, I said, "Is that all? Thanks for sharing." I turned and went back into my house.

Once inside, I listened for the car engine signaling his departure. Only then did I allow the anger I felt full reign. I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out. Two weeks later, via my mother, I learned that Dom was getting married to the mother of his child. Wedding plans were already in progress.

There were not enough tears that could be shed to assuage the pain I felt as the news pierced my soul like an arrow, and imbedded itself into what was left of my self-worth. It burrowed in deep and it seemed to confirm the message life had been conveying, ... "You are unlovable."

3



WHY, LORD?

June 21, 2001

TIDIED UP MY DESK, packed my bags for the day and not looking right nor left exited the office. From an obscure corner of my mind, the thought that I would not return, niggled at my consciousness, but was quickly overshadowed by the urge to get home.

On automatic pilot, I exited the building onto Third Avenue and turned left towards East 42nd Street where I would catch my train to Queens.



I sat amid the clanging of the train and the chatter of the other passengers, sinking into a self-contained cocoon of detachment. It wasn't hard. In New York no one wants to make eye contact anyway.

WHY LORD?

For the duration of the train ride, I was still, silent and focused. Turned inward, thoughts blanked as though by my sheer will I could stave off the rapidly growing disquiet within me.

Train ride over, I rushed quickly to exit first and ran down the steps to the street. Walking quickly to put as much distance between myself and the crowd as possible, I listened to my footfalls... left, right, left, right, left, right, left, right... As I listened, the rhythm took over and I chanted in time to my footfalls, "Come on, come on, you can do this, come on, come on, you can do this."

Eyes focused on my feet, I walked the eight blocks to my home. It was a ten-minute walk but it felt like forever. I wanted to get there quickly, but at the same time I dreaded my arrival. The closer I got to my destination and the sanctuary of my room, the closer I would arrive at the moment I'd feared all my adult life.

Opening the front door of my home, I quickly surveyed the hallway. Thankfully no one was in sight. I eased quietly up the stairs listening for footsteps and slid my apartment door open with my ear pricked for the slightest indication that my mom was awake. I tiptoed through the living room, entered my room, closed the door, dropped my bags, sat down on the edge of my bed, and, as my father had done before me, quietly and completely lost control of my mind.

I sat there staring at the wall, with my arms wrapped around myself as I rocked to and fro. My mouth was open in a silent scream, tears were running down my face. If you'd asked me why I was crying, I would have honestly said, "I don't know." I just want *it* to stop. *It* could have been the constant anger with which I lived. *It* could have been my continual state of loneliness, for despite having several acquaintances, I had no friends outside my family. Friendship meant that at some point

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in time, secrets would be shared—and I had too many to tell. *It could have been my feeling of abandonment. It seemed as though everyone eventually left me.*

I, who had vowed never again to be in a situation I could not control, was totally out of control. My thoughts and memories jockeyed for position, speeding up, getting louder and faster. I felt like everything inside me was disintegrating when, in the midst of it all, I heard the voice of God say, “The Call is real.”

Even in my dementia, perhaps because of it, I didn’t jump and run. I immediately proceeded to let God know, in case He’d missed it, what was going on with me. I even had the temerity to be a bit upset.

“The Call? Where were You, Lord, when I was struggling to survive? At seventeen when I woke up to find my father acting like a husband instead of a dad? When I was twenty and had to beg at the turnstile for money to get to work? Or how about when I had to make flour pap to drink and I was seven months pregnant? Or at twenty-two when someone who came highly recommended kept going when I said stop? And now, Dom left me because I was doing what You said to do? *Why? Wasn’t I good enough, Lord? Why wasn’t the love enough, Lord? What’s wrong with me Lord? Maybe if I hadn’t told him the truth about my dad? That’s not how it’s supposed to work out! Where were You Lord? “I called You, but You didn’t come... where were You? My life’s been a living hell and I can’t take anymore! I give up! It’s just ... too ... hard!”*

As if those were the magic words necessary, I suddenly felt a warmth and a peace seeping into my being and wrapping itself around my mind and heart. The clamor of my mind lifted, and as if on movie slides I viewed a kaleidoscope of my life. God showed me the moments when He’d preserved me from

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harm. The day He'd used a movie to save me from suicide. The many times something had held me back from crossing the street a split second before a car whizzed by, as my guardian angels did their job. Even my selective memory, that thing the nice clinical folk call "repressed memories"--it's a built in protective device to guard my sanity, given to me by my Creator.

The brother-in-law I'd adopted wholeheartedly and confided in, who through association showed me that there are men who get angry without raising a hand to express that anger: a gift from Him. The music that I took so much joy in, music that calmed and soothed my spirit: Him again. The many kind acts and unexpected windfalls that came my way; all Him. When contrasted with my feeling of abandonment, I felt ashamed, because I hadn't needed to call God. He'd had been there all along, wiping my brow through my migraines and participating in my life, but I was too blind to see it.

At that point I cried like I'd never cried before or since, deep, loud, ugly tears. No control, no exhibition of quiet strength, just all over the place weeping and wailing. I cried in relief, I cried in repentance, I cried because I could feel God's love and acceptance filling up and mending the corners and cracks inside me, catching even the tiniest splinters. God really hadn't abandoned me!

When I could cry no more, I surrendered my will to God's call on my life to be a minister of the gospel. Even so, I couldn't resist asking.

"But God? You know my story. I'm not worthy. I'm used goods. And I don't even like people. I'm always angry. How can you choose someone who doesn't like being around people to minister to people?"

There was no answer.

At the end of the week I was scheduled to attend a "Power of

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God" conference in New Jersey. I'd attended previous conferences and heard testimonies of astounding healings from church members, so I told myself, *Just hold on for two more days. God's got something for you at that conference. Your healing is on the way.*

4



PUTTING OUT THE GARBAGE

June 23, 2001

S APPROACHED THE DOORS of the sanctuary with a sense of expectancy. As I stepped into the conference, I was not dis-appointed. I looked around at the bright shining faces of other saints. A feeling of rightness permeated my being, and I was sure in the knowledge that no matter the road taken to get here, no matter the stops and starts along the way, all my struggles were pointing me to this very moment.

As always, I was in the midst of a screaming migraine, but I had already taken my medication and I was fortified with my dark shades. I'd resolved that if I could go to work with a migraine, I could praise God with a migraine. Even though it made me wince a time or two, I soon forgot about the decibel level of the praise and worship.

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I entered into praise and began to really glorify God. At the heart of the praise and worship, the speaker for the night, Rev. Dr. Mark Chironna, greeted the congregation and then said, "Someone in this room needs healing tonight. So this is what we're going to do. I want you to touch the person to your left and send healing down your row."

This was it! All over the sizeable sanctuary, saints were touching and agreeing. I eagerly awaited my turn to touch and be touched. The minute the person to my right touched my shoulder; the screaming migraine ceased.

The next morning I was scheduled for a music ministry class, which, as the president of the choir, I really should have attended. But somehow I found myself wandering into a classroom full of women. I don't recall the name of the class but it dealt with sexual abuse. Now, had I known that, I never would have set foot into that room, but again, I was exactly where I was supposed to be. There I learned by listening to others' stories that I wasn't alone. In fact, some stories sounded harsher than mine. I couldn't quite bring myself to tell my story. The years of silence were too ingrained in me for me to speak out just yet. But I didn't leave. I listened, cried and commiserated.

That day I learned that it wasn't my fault! It also wasn't my fault that I was such a screw-up; unable to finish most things I started, unable to easily make decisions, and suffering with poor self-image. These were all after-effects of sexual abuse. The teacher of the class also happened to be a practicing therapist as well as a Christian, so she was well equipped to give practical and spiritual advice.

I left that conference with a renewed feeling of hope. Upon my return to New York, I entered my bedroom, made a beeline for my nightstand, took out all my prescribed drugs and threw them away!

PUTTING OUT THE GARBAGE

I walked down the stairs around the front of the house and into the backyard to the outside garbage, just in case I changed my mind during the night. I also went into my bottom drawer, pulled out my considerable selection of pornographic literature and videotapes, dumped them into a garbage bag, and took another trip outside. My mother asked me why I kept going outside.

“Just putting out the garbage, Mom,” I told her.

Later that night, still filled with joy, I made one last shot at convincing God that I wasn’t the woman for the job. “I mean, no one listens to me; I’m the youngest of the family. I’ve been a Christian all my life, but I know nothing.”

Once again, there was silence.

That night when I went to bed, I dreamed that I was in a beautiful garden. Some family members were there, and everyone was dressed in white. I had on a long white gown and this gorgeous man with locks past his shoulders came over to me. He led me to stand beside a stream, and he looked me straight in the eyes and said, “The call is real, you need to answer it.” I woke up and spent my day in serious contemplation. I decided to tell my brother-in-law, who by that time, was also my pastor, about my experience and the dream. Then I posed the question.

“Don’t you think, if I were called and chosen, I would know about it? I mean, why would God have to send someone I don’t even know or trust to tell me?”

He listened quietly and did the unexpected. Instead of telling me decisively whether he thought I did or didn’t qualify for the assignment, his thoughtful reply was,

“Did you ever stop to think that maybe God has been trying to get through to you, and since He couldn’t get through internally He had to send an external messenger?”

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My pastor's response, floored me. I was now the accused instead of the accuser, the loved instead of the unloved. As I sat there in silent reflection, I finally acknowledged that I'd allowed life's knocks to eradicate my choices to love and be relational. In my fear I'd been holding others at bay, while blaming them for not loving me enough when in all reality, the only one who didn't love me – was me!

God had been trying all along to "call" me! When my internal phone read "closed-for-repairs", He didn't give up. He simply switched to messenger service to get His message through. Today I'm thankful to say, "Message received. Call answered."

~The End ... *for now*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

D.S. WHITE: active aunt, corny Christian, dutiful daughter, faithful friend, proud parent, and sassy sibling. She's always been an avid reader, now she is a voice to be read. She has lived in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, Maryland, New York and now resides in Pennsylvania. Dee welcomes feedback via her Web site: www.deeswhite.com.

