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The Sampler

Unable are the Loved to die
For Love is Immortality,
Nay, it is Deity—
Unable they that Love—to die
For Love transforms Vitality into Divinity.

—EMILY DICKINSON

When I was young, I very much wanted to please my mother. I was always asking her, “Mama, will you be proud of me if I become a librarian?” “Mama, will you be proud of me if I become a cowgirl?”

She would always answer, “Yes, I will always be proud of you, honey.”

When I reached my early teens, I still sought my mother’s approval. One day when I asked her if she would be proud of me if I became a performer, she asked, “Shelley, do you really want to know what would make me proud of you?”

“Yes, I do,” I said.

She looked into my eyes and in a most loving way said, “If you become a responsible and caring adult who contributes to rather than takes from the world, I will be very proud of you no matter what you choose to do, and I will know that I have done well as your mother.”

Some years later, my mother made a sampler that she framed and displayed in our home. After she died of cancer in 1982, I inherited her wonderfully creative piece with its life-changing message:

What we are is
God’s gift to us.
What we become is
our gift to God.

The sampler now hangs in my office as a reminder of how I learned who I really am and how I wish to live in light of that knowledge. It reminds me of God’s gift to me and of the gift I want to return to Him. It is the inspiration for this book.

For some years, clients and friends had been encouraging me to write about the experiences that inspired my faith and shaped my therapeutic principles. For most of my adult life, however, I had imposed a paralyzing nemesis upon myself regarding my writing abilities. In fact, I developed performance skills for speaking engagements

so I could run from writing. I thought that writing down my thoughts would reveal my “stupidity” to others.

How was it possible to have such inaccurate, self-defeating thoughts? I had been a professional actor and singer in the United States and abroad. I had worked as a public safety officer, a certified firefighter, emergency technician II, and commercial fisherwoman. I had earned a physician’s assistant degree in family medicine and taught basic medicine to rural indigenous Alaskans. Yet my life experiences also included childhood sexual molestation, psychological abuse, debilitating allergies, and autoimmune illness. My self-perception grew from those experiences, not from my accomplishments, and for years I thought of myself as inferior—helpless, unintelligent, and ugly. These negative thoughts resulted in chronic illness, seven major surgeries, divorce, and an irreversible decision not to have children.

No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.

—ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

I had to learn that “what we become” is the result of our thoughts, words, and actions, as well as our willingness to strive toward excellence regardless of the discouragement

we encounter on life's journey or the transgressions we commit along the way. When I learned that, I was finally ready to break through my self-imposed writing block and begin to share the experiences that have provided me with opportunities to learn how the mind, faith, and prayer can promote optimum healing, love, and life.

Through God's grace and forgiveness, I now write to you as a victor, not a victim. With gratitude and humility, I share my healing triumph. I pray that *The Sampler* will support the healing of your mind, body, and spirit so that *you too* may live a victor's life.

P a r t O n e



Choosing Life



A Matter of Life and Death

*God so loved the world that he gave
his one and only Son,
that whoever believes in him shall not
perish but have eternal life.*

JOHN 3:16

On the day we are born, our bodies begin to move toward death. Unless we deliberately choose life, our spirits will do the same. When God sent His Son to die in our place, He provided us with a way to choose living over dying. Yet even when we have chosen Christ, and even though we know we will live forever with Him, many of us think in ways that reflect a dying spirit, one that keeps us from enjoying the fullness of life Christ has promised us.

That was once true for me. For many years, my negative, fearful thinking created “death to my spirit.” It took

a near-death experience and the subsequent challenges of neck surgery and cancer for me to realize that I was focused on dying instead of on living.

He not busy being born is busy dying.

—BOB DYLAN

DYING WHILE LIVING

On April 3, 1998, my colon ruptured. The contents of my intestines spilled into my abdominal cavity, and I bled internally for over four hours before I arrived at the emergency room of Cottage Grove Hospital. By then, my veins had collapsed. I had no measurable blood pressure.

I was dying.

No more pain. At last, no more pain. The movements of those around me slowed and became meaningless. Their loud, frantic voices faded away to unintelligible murmurs. My body seemed to float upward, and an indescribable sense of peace filled my entire being.

"It's okay. All is right," I said, though my lips did not move and no one could hear me. Unafraid, I let go. *Beautiful.*

Suddenly I was startled by a mild shock, followed by a soft, warm pressure in the palm of my left hand, the

only place I felt any sensation. I squeezed lightly.

What is this?

I realized that I was gripping the index and middle fingers of my husband's right hand. I felt his palm and thumb curl around my hand and hold it tightly. I didn't want to leave that serene place, but Ken's loving touch was pulling me back. My body became heavier.

Without my willing them to, my eyes opened, and I caught Ken's penetrating glance across my body at Terry Kendrick, the ER physician. Terry's hands trembled as he tried to insert an IV into the vein just below my collarbone, dangerously close to my lung.

All of the sudden I desperately wanted to keep living. I wanted to continue sharing life with the man whose life force was beckoning me to stay. Ken's abiding faith and love had already helped me heal from earlier health challenges, and we shared a powerful and mutual willingness to grow in our relationship.

God, this can't be the end yet. Please, I want to stay. Ken, can you hear me? Keep holding on to me. I want to stay here with you.

I wanted to encourage and calm Terry, but again my lips would not move. Ken is a doctor and had often worked in this ER. On some level, I knew that now all he could do was pray that Terry would succeed in pulling me back.

Suddenly, energy filled my lungs, allowing me to

whisper, “It’s okay everyone. We can all relax now. Everything will be all right. We remember everything we learned in our medical training. We can do this. Trust in God.”

Terry’s hands steadied, and moments later a searing pain ripped through my insides, sucking words and breath out of my mouth. The central line was in, and my body was responding to the lifesaving fluids. The indescribable, overwhelming pain returned. I was definitely back.

I began to writhe and moan, “Oh, dear God, the pain. Will someone please give me something for the pain? Dear heavenly Father, help me through this! Ken?”

An ambulance rushed me the twenty-five miles to Sacred Heart Medical Center in Eugene. After six hours of surgery, as I awakened from the general anesthetic, the surgeon leaned down and whispered in my ear, “You now have a colostomy, Shelley. We’ve removed a portion of your lower colon. The surgery went well. If we can control this infection, you’ll be out of the hospital in about ten days. Six weeks from now I’ll reverse the procedure and reconnect your colon.”

Through the grace of God, the prayers of family and friends, and a vigorous rehabilitation program, I rapidly recovered. Four weeks after my colon ruptured, I comfortably stood upright on stage and sang a solo with my beloved singing group of eleven years, the Eugene Vocal Arts Ensemble. Of all the wonderful and loving com-

ments the members of this talented group made to me, my favorite remains, “Shelley is back—as a semi-colon!”

Two years later, I had surgery to fuse three vertebrae in my neck. During that procedure, the surgeons discovered metastatic thyroid cancer. Six weeks later, they removed my thyroid and the lymph glands in my neck. After surgery I had radioactive isotope treatments and took large amounts of thyroid hormone to suppress the growth of the remaining seven tumors.

My near-death experience, neck surgery, and treatment for cancer brought me to a turning point in my life. For too long I had focused on dying while living. Now I would focus on living while dying.

The phrase “being born” is used for beginning to be something different from what one was before, while “dying” means ceasing to be the same.

— OVID

LIVING WHILE DYING

In my journey toward healing, as a maturing Christian I found solace in entering into a new covenant with God—one that promises His grace and forgiveness. It took me many years to understand and accept these notions. *Could*

years of being harmed and harming others really be undone by a simple act of faith?

The answer is not that the harm can be undone, but that harm can be both redeemed and redeeming. Forgiving and being forgiven have been essential parts of my journey to healing.

Do I have regrets? Yes, some. I still regret that some of my poor choices harmed others. I have made amends with those willing to receive apologies. Most have forgiven me, though not all. However, I no longer have any regrets about the harm done to me. With time, I came to understand that my experiences were not punishments, but challenging parts of God's personal training program for me. Just as a runner must clear the hurdles to win a race, I had to meet those challenges to be able to write to you as a victor, not as a victim.

The healing process, which meant substantially less time with clients, was a wonderful blessing, for it gave me the time I needed to finish this book. Meanwhile, I have enjoyed the most healthful and energetic time in my life. When I started writing, I still had seven cancerous tumors. Eighteen months later, a full-body radioisotope scan revealed that all signs of them had disappeared. And, although there are other aspects of my health that may lead some to say I am not cured, the fact that I feel and look so well convinces me that, regardless of my physical state, I am healed.

Since you are reading this book, I expect that you also have a desire to live while you're dying—to discover your God-given gifts and become a gift worthy of returning to Him. Right now the fulfillment of these aspirations may feel far away, just as the finish line must seem to a runner at the starting block. No matter. Every journey has a beginning, and we reach the end by taking the first step and then continuing to move in the right direction. As we begin the therapeutic journey to healing, I ask you take the first step—I ask you to make a commitment to change.

*The journey of a thousand miles
must begin with a single step.*

—L A O - T Z U