

Searching for Visions Anew

No one likes to be put through the fire. Growing pains hurt, and the reshaping and remolding of our spirits does not always feel good as it is being done. At times we go through painful circumstances that our heavenly Father has allowed in order to prune us, that in the end we might bear greater fruit (John 15:1-8). For it's the painful experiences God uses to grow us spiritually, emotionally, sometimes even physically. And it's the tough times we've gone through that He uses to provide ministry to others if we allow Him. (I Corinthians 1:3-4) But when we're facing the fire, it can be so hard to remember that and to look for the blessings. It's those dark times that we need to experience as Keeping Our Eyes on Jesus moments.

My favorite story in the *Bible* is the story of Peter, who was so eager to prove his faith by jumping out of the boat in the midst of the storm to walk to Jesus (Matthew 14:22-33). As long as Peter kept his eyes on the Jesus, he was able to walk on top of the difficulties. It was when he took his eyes off Jesus and started looking at the threatening circumstances (the wind and the stormy waves) that his faith faltered and he began to sink.

Peter's experience reminds me of a vision minister and well-known author Merlin Carothers was given. One of the prevalent themes Carothers studies and writes upon is the effect of praising God in all circumstances. At a healing service Merlin Carothers attended, he was allowed to experience a vision in which he saw a beautiful summer day filled with light. Overhead, he saw a black cloud which was so thick he could see nothing beyond it. There was a ladder extending from the ground into the black cloud and a crowd of hundreds had gathered to take their turn at climbing the ladder. They had heard that above this cloud there was something more beautiful than any eye had ever seen and that whoever could climb above the cloud would experience a joy unlike anything they'd ever experienced before. Person after person climbed eagerly till they reached the edge of the blackness, but soon after they disappeared into the cloud, they would come careening wildly down the ladder, scattering people in all directions. They shared that when they got into the blackness, they lost their sense of direction.

Finally it was Merlin Carothers' turn to climb the ladder, and as he approached the blackness, he found himself in an intense struggle to keep from sliding back down the ladder as so many others had done. Many times he felt ready to give up, but step by step he continued to climb until suddenly he found himself in a place of intense brightness and beauty. He discovered that as long as he looked into the brightness, he could walk on top of the black cloud. It was only when he looked down to examine the nature of the black cloud that he started to sink.

He asked what this vision meant and was given to understand that the sunshine below the cloud was the joy that most Christians live in and believe is the norm. The ladder was the ladder of praising God which the Christians were at first eager to try out. It was easy to praise God when things were going well. But when the Christians began to face difficulties that they did not understand, they became confused and could not hang on. As they began to slide and fall back, they injured others along the way who had been watching their example.

Those people who made it through the difficult times and who were able to continue praising and trusting God along the way were able to walk on top of their difficulties and live in a beautiful place of peace and joy unlike anything they'd ever known. The key to their success was their ability to keep their eyes off their problems and on Jesus. (Merlin Carothers *Prison to Praise* 98-99)

One of my favorite scriptures is Isaiah 26:3: Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee, because he trusteth in Thee.

The greatest life lessons God yearns for us to learn is to love and trust Him, in good times and in bad. He promises us that when we trust Him enough to give thanks in all things (I Thessalonians 5:16-18) and to be anxious for nothing, but submit our prayer requests to Him in thanksgiving (Philippians 4:4-7), that His peace which surpasses all understanding will be ours (Philippians 4:8). It is easy to praise Him and be thankful when everything is going our way, but it becomes so much harder to do when we face trials that we don't understand, and God seems very far away.

In March of 2009, I was on top of the world. I had my son Caden reading at a 5th grade level though he was only in kindergarten. I had a set of girlfriends at church to hang with for the first time in years. I was the co-director of our congregation's women's retreat, I was deeply involved in creating a new Sunday School class on negative thinking and depression and the way we can restructure our thought patterns to help us grow in faith, in joy, and in peace. Life was fulfilling. I was following my passions and I knew God would use the things I was doing to touch people's lives and make a difference. I began to earnestly pray that God would use me to minister to others, to grow my ministry to a whole new level.

About a week before our Women's Retreat, I was watching Evangelist Minister Joyce Meyer on television. She was talking about how we don't get great testimonies without going through tests first. My two new girlfriends from church, Nola and Glenda, were both going through really tough times at the moment, and as I looked at their lives, I felt a little guilty that my life was going so well. I kept wondering when the next test was coming for me. Joyce Meyer had me energized and excited. I was ready for the challenge, or so I thought. How was I to know that in less than a week my entire world would turn upside down?

Our Women's Retreat was March 27 – 29th. My husband Lee dropped me off that Friday, and I noticed that he didn't hug me good bye. Odd, I thought, but I was so psyched to join in the fun with the ladies that I dismissed it. The retreat left me on an absolute spiritual high, and I couldn't wait to share my experiences. We'd had one session of Praise Time where Cindy Ford, our Praise Leader had led us in a medley of popular secular songs which had been Christianized as was done in the movie *Sister Act*. The ladies had eaten that up. They danced and giggled and sang their hearts out, letting their hair down. I wanted to recreate that experience the next year. Our themes for the past three years, I had felt, had been too serious. I wanted to liven up the retreat and have a little fun. So I was trying to think of a way we create an entire retreat around those peppy popular secular songs which had Christianized. Then the theme hit me: *Sisters Act*. It was a way to bond us all together as sisters, to use those fun songs, to explore the Christian ways and the sisterly ways we need to act. The ideas just flowed. I was soooo jazzed at the potential. The 2009 retreat had ended not even 12 hours before and I already had a huge portion of the 2010 retreat developing.

Twenty-four hours later, my whole world imploded in upon me. That night, March 30th, my husband went out for a walk at ten o'clock. He'd never done this before in our 12 year marriage, but the week before he'd taken two late night walks. He claimed he was preparing by walking to get in shape to run. It seemed very odd that he decided to do these walks late at night when he'd always worked out in the daytime before. But I dismissed it. I told him not to be long, because it was late, I was tired, and I wanted to go to bed. I couldn't sleep until he was in bed with me. Eleven o'clock came and went, and I began to panic. It was dark. What if he'd been hit by a car and was lying in a ditch somewhere hurt or dead? Filled with fear, I began praying and I went out in search of him. I met him on the road, deep in a conversation on his cell phone. He didn't

see me at first, and when he did, he told the other person, “Gotta go” and hung up abruptly. I knew instantly that he was talking to someone he should not be. He confessed. It was another woman. He’d reconnected with her on Facebook. She was an old classmate from high school. He was in love with her – and he wanted a divorce. The world that I had known shattered at that moment, and I was thrown into the greatest test of my life.

This was a path I never wanted to travel, but God’s hand has been evident all the same. Two weeks after my world was thrown into chaos, a friend from church told me about Margot Swann and Visions Anew and how they were having a Divorce Boot Camp two days from then. To be honest, I didn’t really want to go. At that point, I felt so incredibly overwhelmed by it all, but God provided a way for someone to watch my kids and a way for me to get there, and so I went. At that Boot Camp I found out about the Visions Anew Retreat in June. Now, I didn’t even plan to be in Georgia by then. I was going to pack up and move to Missouri where a good portion of my family lives. But when I heard about the resources available to me if I would sign up for the weekend in June, I had to stay. Two free hours with an attorney provided thanks to Visions Anew and I’d have more than made up for my Divorce School Weekend registration, and that was just ONE of the services offered.

I had been reluctant to go to the Boot Camp in April, but I couldn’t wait to get to the Retreat Weekend in June. I needed to connect, to meet new friends, to find people who actually understood what I was going through. And my prayer over and over as I got to that weekend was, “Dear God, please help me to be a blessing to someone else at that weekend.” That attitude in and of itself showed how far I had come.

You see, two years earlier my Atlanta North Community of Christ congregation began having women’s retreats. And to be honest, I really didn’t want to go. I am a very shy person by nature, very insecure, and I felt out of place. I don’t make friends easily, because I’m such a reserved person. I was born with Cerebral Palsy and I was never popular in school because I couldn’t play sports. As a result of my CP, I had extremely tight muscles which caused me to have an awkward, ugly, lurching walk. In turn, I had a very low self-esteem and a big lack of self-confidence.

The first night of that Women’s Retreat back in 2007, the director had us ladies do an exercise where there was a beautifully lit pathway that led to a cross. We were each given a rock to represent our burdens, and as the music “I Surrender All” was played, we were to approach the cross and lay our burdens down. At first, I thought, “Oh, this will be easy. We’ll just all get in a line and go up to the cross and lay the burdens down.” Well, the process didn’t work that way. The women were to come up one at a time and lay their burdens down. And not until the previous woman was seated, was the next to come up.

“I can’t do that!” my mind screamed in a panic. “If I go up, they’ll all be staring at my stupid, ugly walk.” I stared at the rock. “So, Pet Rock, what shall we name you? Cuz you’re gonna be with me for a long time.” One by one each woman went up and placed her burden down. I could feel the Retreat Director’s eyes boring into me as I was the only one left who had not put her burden down. Finally, I went up and put the rock at the foot of the cross, but I had not laid ANYTHING down. Inside, I was *seething*. “God, why did You make me this way? Why did I have to have this stupid, ugly walk? Why couldn’t I have been given a bouncy, bubbly personality like Jennifer or Karen (two of the other ladies there)?” I felt so lonely, so angry, so disconnected.

The next night Karen led a journaling experience. The question she posed was, “If God sees you differently than the world sees you, how does He see you?” We were instructed to journal a letter from God to us, answering that question. That exercise changed my life. The letter I found God sharing with me was one in which He chastised me. I was reminded that I had His fingerprints all over me, that He had lovingly and with very deliberate care created me to be exactly who I was. I was given to understand that I had certain gifts: maybe I wasn’t the life of the party like Jennifer and Karen. But what He’d given me was that I was a good listener and that I was good with people one on one. That was a gift. Moreover, I was reminded that I had been given a gift of writing and encouraging people through my writing, and that the women who were there at the retreat needed my gift. They were hurting; they needed encouraging which I had the ability to do through my writing. I was given to understand that the reason I didn’t have friends wasn’t because people were shunning me because of my awkward walk. It was because I was putting up a wall of fear, listening to the enemy’s lies about my unworthiness. The Father of Love had not placed in me that spirit of fear, but one of love, and if I wanted friends, the answer was that I needed to give of myself to others from the gifts and talents I had been given.

That altering of my perception of myself changed everything. By that July, I was the one organizing and leading the women’s events for our congregation. And by September I’d created a new Sisters In Christ class where we all met once a week to share our prayer concerns and to discuss devotionals I felt led to write. The women’s ministry at Atlanta North really took off. Now, two years later in 2009, I served as the co-director of the entire women’s retreat. What a difference from that shy, scared girl who thought she didn’t fit in and had nothing to offer in 2007. So I came to the Visions Anew Retreat in June 2009 with a new prayer: “God, please use me to bless someone else at this retreat.”

The Visions Anew Retreat was a beautiful experience. I, who once had been so closed off and uptight, found it so easy to open up and share with the women at Visions Anew, because we were all in the same boat. No one knew anyone, so there were no cliques already established and we were all going through similar painful experiences. We all had our own story to share, and no one’s story had more value than another’s.

I pretty much sailed through the Visions Anew weekend with more happiness and peace and laughter than tears . . . until we came to the Candle Ceremony on Saturday night. A big candle had been lit and we were invited to take a little candle and light it from the big one as the song “I’m Letting You Go” played in the background. The big candle was to represent the Unity Candle we had once upon a time lit with our husbands during our marriage ceremonies. The little candle was to represent the freeing of ourselves from those unions – freeing ourselves to become a single selfhood again. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t light my disunity candle.

You see, my history with my husband has been, well, fiery, and as I sat watching the flames and listening to the words of the song playing, “I’m letting you go. I’m saying good bye,” my mind was flooded with memories – memories of our first date, memories of our wedding – good memories.

I was taken back in time to our first official date – May 10, 1994. We’d chosen to go to a restaurant called The Panda Garden. We were nervous, because this was one of the first times the two of us had been alone together. For a year, we’d hung out as friends in a group, but one on one was a different story. I’d had such a crush on Lee Peck for over a year, but I hadn’t had the guts to ask him to go do anything -- until I found out he wouldn’t be returning to the University of Kansas after he received his Master’s degree that summer. I had planned to spend that summer at my brother’s home near Columbia, Missouri. So here we were in May and I had nothing to lose.

I was leaving. So I asked Lee to go do something before I left for the summer, since he wouldn't be returning in the fall.

We found ourselves in that nervous, first date stage going to the restaurant. As we approached the restaurant, we had been talking about family Thanksgivings and how when our families got together, they would sit around and sing. I'd told Lee about my family singers as we walked from the car to the restaurant, and he told me about his family singers after we were seated at our table.

Now, the waiter had seated us at a table directly past this man who was in a blue suit. The man's suit wasn't a business suit; it was more like an entertainer's suit. As Lee shared about his family singers, this man got up from his table and came to ours, pronouncing in a gravelly voice, "Your family's not as good of singers as I am. I am the best singer in Lawrence, Kansas. Here's my card." And he flipped his card down on our table. "I do weddings, bar mitzvahs, funerals," he continued. And then he went back to his table.

The set up of the room was such that I was seated in the booth with my back to "the best singer in Lawrence, Kansas," but Lee was sitting facing him, where the man could see every one of Lee's expressions. I began to laugh quietly, but poor Lee had to keep a straight face. The man, whose name we learned by looking at his card, John G. Andrews, apparently hadn't had opportunity to practice elegant dining manners. I could hear him smacking, snorting, and gulping noisily as he dug into his meal. The waiter stopped by his table to ask him how he was enjoying his food. "Oh, very good. Very good," he growled and snorted greedily. I couldn't help but giggle at the sounds, but fortunately, I was able to keep my laughter noiseless. With this character watching him, Lee had much to do to keep from cracking up at this display of boorishness.

When it came time to order dinner, I ordered something normal like Beef Chow Mein or Beef Lo Mein, while Lee ordered "The Volcano". "What's the Volcano?" I asked. "I don't know," responded Lee, "but it says they prepare it before your very eyes." I watched as a sizzling array of food was brought to another table. It looked pretty impressive. "Maybe it's like that," I suggested.

When Lee's platter came out, it didn't look particularly special. It wasn't sizzling or anything. It just sat there. Then the waiter stepped forward, took a lighter and proceeded to set Lee's food on fire. Now we were supposed to be awed by this display, but I had no time to ooo and awww at the food on fire. For what the waiter had not realized as he set Lee's plate of food on fire was that he had accidentally set Lee's cloth napkin on a table cloth on fire, too. I was in such horrified shock I couldn't even speak as I watched the flames leaping into the air. I merely pointed helplessly.

Lee, on the other hand, looked at the waiter calmly and said politely, as though it was the most normal every day occurrence. "Excuse me, sir, but my napkin's on fire." The waiter grabbed the napkin and beat it on the table until the fire was out. "Sometimes," he explained, "when we set the villages on fire, we get the villagers, too."

After the excitement died down, Lee began to ask me about my plans for the summer. I told him how I planned to go live with my brother. "You don't want to do that," he said. "Yes, I do. I adore my brother." I insisted. He kept pressing why I shouldn't go. What he says happened next, I honestly have no recollection of to this day. Lee says that he gathered up his courage and said, "If you'll stay in Lawrence, I'm yours for the summer." I never heard that. He says when he made this declaration, I stared at him, blinked, and then went on as though he never said it. Here

the man worked up his courage and made this bold statement when he knew John G. Andrews, “the best singer in Lawrence, Kansas” was listening in to every word – and I never heard it. I finally asked, “Well, if I did stay in Lawrence for the summer, would we do stuff together once in a while?” “You silly girl!” he responded, exasperated. “Yes, we would be going out.”

It was the most bizarre date I had ever been on. And so the hearts of these two villagers were set afire with the napkin, and thus began the relationship that eventually brought us to the altar.

Two years later we married in the little church at Guilford, Missouri in which I was raised. As it came time to light the unity candle, we both stepped forward and joined our separate candles into one. As I stepped back, and raised my single candle toward my lips to blow it out, signifying that I was no longer single, I forgot my veil. Whoosh! In an instant my veil was afire, and I was puffing my cheeks and blowing for all I was worth to put the fire out. I laughed pretty much through the rest of the wedding ceremony. I’d wanted something unusual to happen at the wedding, because who ever remembers weddings if they go off flawlessly? It’s the ones that have mishaps that are remembered and recounted for years to come. Now I had my story, and it was like we’d come full circle with fire on the first date to fire at the wedding.

So now, twelve years later, as I was being invited to let go and embrace my singleness through the use of fire and a disunity candle, I just couldn’t do it. It was too sad to remember those good times and to let it go. And so I stayed in my seat. I could not light that candle and let go of the couplehood. I could not celebrate being single again, especially when it involved fire.

But that experience took me into a deeper examination of my faith. I realized that by lighting that candle, what I could have been saying was that, “God, it’s You and me together. I’m tying myself to You and trusting You to love me and take care of me and my future.” And I realized what lighting that candle had come to be about was not just letting go of my husband, but letting go of my own will, and putting my trust in God’s will for me.

And how many of us struggle with letting go of our own will and submitting to the will of God? Hannah W. Smith shares the following story:

A Christian who was in a great deal of trouble was recounting to another Christian the various efforts he had made to find deliverance, and concluded by saying, “But it has all been in vain, and there is literally nothing left for me to do now but to trust the Lord.

“Alas!” exclaimed his friend in a tone of the deepest commiseration, as though no greater risk were possible—“Alas! Has it come to *that*?”

Hannah Smith continues, “[I]t really would seem as if God’s children were more afraid of His will than of anything else in life . . . A great many Christians seem practically to think that all their Father in heaven wants is a chance to make them miserable and to take away all their blessings; and they imagine, poor souls, that if they hold on to things in their own will, they can hinder Him from doing this.” (*The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life* 25).

I know I, for one, do have a hard time letting go and truly praying and meaning “Thy Will Be Done.” Those are some of the hardest words for me to pray when a situation in which I am deeply invested is on the line, because what if His will does not match mine?

My will would be for my marriage to be saved, for the other woman to leave the picture, and for my husband to want to come back and make our marriage work. And it’s been such a hard

struggle to realize that that apparently is not going to happen. To light that candle would have been admitting that dream has died.

But one thing I am learning is that this path I have never wanted to travel is opening opportunities for me and blessings that I never would have experienced. I'm growing and having chances to pursue dreams that never would have been opened to me in my safe little world where my husband took care of me.

I was too emotionally distraught by the thought of lighting a disunity candle to really listen to the words of the song that night. But I've found the courage since to listen to the words, and there's an amazing message in them we all need to hear:

I'm letting you go.
I'm saying goodbye.
I don't want to be
Angry anymore.

I'm letting you go.
I'm setting you free.
My soul has found
Precious release.

I'm letting you go,
So I can let me go too.
Cuz I want to fly
Free like a bird
But this anger and pain
Is keeping me in chains.

So I'm letting you go.
I'm saying goodbye.
I found the Love
That has dried my eyes.

I'm letting you go.
I'm setting you free
So I can finally
Be free.

I want my heart beat to be mercy
To be like the heart beat of God
To open the door of mercy for me,
So now I open mercy's door for you.
And let you go.

I'm letting you go
So I can let me go, too,
Cuz I want to fly
Free like a bird.
But this anger and pain
Is keeping me in chains.

So I'm letting you go.
 Set you free.
 So I can finally
 Be free.

It's a message of forgiveness, so that we can be free to fly – to soar to new heights. And I look at those words, and yes, they apply to my husband and my need to forgive. And yes, they apply to the fact that I need to let go of the dream so that I can be free to soar into a new and better dream for me. But I look at those words, and as a Christian, I could be singing them to God.

Part of the reason I couldn't light that disunity candle is because I'm scared to be on my own, and I'm angry at the broken dream, and why didn't God, who doesn't want divorce, fix it for me? But we're told in Isaiah 55:8-9:

For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
 Neither are your ways My ways, declares the Lord.
 As the heavens are higher than the earth,
 So are My ways higher than your ways,
 And My thoughts than your thoughts.

And we're assured in Jeremiah 29:11:

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord.
 Plans to prosper you and not to harm you,
 Plans to give you hope and a future.

Furthermore, we're promised in Isaiah 55:11 that the word that goes out from our Lord's mouth will not return to Him empty, but it will accomplish what He desires and that it will achieve His purposes. And if I look at all those scriptures together, plus my personal favorite, Romans 8:28:

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, who are called according to His purpose

then I have to conclude that God has a plan for me in all of this turmoil and disappointment, even when it might not be what I would like to have happened, and I have to conclude that He will bring ministry and blessings through this time. My job is to be open to wherever He leads me and to stop fighting to have my will. I need to let go so that I can be set free, "cuz I want to fly free like a bird."

My dearest dream is to bring ministry to hurting souls through my gift of words, to help enlighten, empower, and encourage hurting women. And if this divorce is what it takes, if it takes one final experience with fire, to set not only my husband free, but to free me to join my yoke to God and cling to Him as my husband through this time, then maybe it is time to light my candle – not to go backward and live in the past, but to move forward – joining my new candle with God's – that as one, His light might shine through me.