

*Deborah Holt – Testimony*

I was the second oldest of eight children, born to Mary and John (pseudonyms). My mother was born in Milwaukee, WI and my father was a first-generation Italian born in Flushing, NY. At the time he was a traveling salesman, suave, handsome, smooth-talking, and swept my mom off her feet. My father by birth was Catholic and mother Lutheran and they married young in Milwaukee where my older brother was born. The next year, I was born in Miami where my dad's mother Angelina was living at the time. We were in Florida until I was four, during which time two other siblings were born. Grandma moved to California's bay area to be near her other two sons and we followed shortly after, where the last four children in my family were born. There my father went to cooking school and began a new career.

Keeping our family of ten fed, clothed, housed, and safe seemed to be an overwhelming task for my parents, especially my father. My dad's drinking problem grew worse over time. Also he had a terrible drug addiction. Countless times the drinking and drugs would lead to violence towards my mother and several of us children. He would endanger our lives by threatening to crash the car, or blow up the house by turning the gas on. We children never knew what to expect from him. We lived in constant fear. My mother and brothers would always stand up to dad. I, on the other hand,

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would hide in the closet or under the bed. I could hear things breaking and crashing around me, people yelling and crying, and I was so afraid. We had to call the police innumerable times.

Besides this physical, emotional, and psychological violence, I endured another deeper kind of violence which cut me to my core. Beginning at the tender age of five, when one is supposed to be able to totally trust their parents to care and protect them, my father sexually violated me. I later recalled I would lie still as a statue, pretending it wasn't happening, and burying the shame and confusion deep within me. All of the violence left me always on guard, and I never allowed myself to go into a deep sleep. At this time, I remember praying this simple child's prayer because I didn't know if I would wake up the next morning:

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.

I was afraid I might die. I never knew what to expect at home – life was always out of control. This abuse continued until I went to college.

I was always very ill especially with respiratory problems. When I was seven (in the second grade), I was sick and had a vaporizer next to my bed on a little stand. Once, I tried to get up out of bed and I knocked the vaporizer on myself. The water landed on my right arm and right hip. I screamed. My mother came to help me, but she didn't know to put me under

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cold water. I remember the ambulance ride, talking to the driver as I was sitting in the front seat. I don't remember having any pain during the ambulance ride. It had only hurt when the water first spilled on me. At the hospital, they said I had third degree burns. My right arm from my elbow to my upper arm was bad, but my hip was worse. The water had burned to my hip bone and I had to have skin grafts. They cut skin from my stomach to put on my hip.

The accident happened about a month after school began and I remained in the hospital for nine months. My fondest memories were every Friday going in the wheelchair up the elevator to get ice cream, and especially having my Grandma Angelina visit me.

The hardest things in the hospital were getting shots every day for pain and infection, going in a big whirlpool tub and the nurses peeling off the dead skin, being in the wheelchair, and then having to learn how to walk again. The added violence of this burn trauma was the last straw and left me unable to speak for the next year.

Besides learning to walk again, the doctor's other goal before I left the hospital, was to regain the use of my arm. To accomplish this, they introduced me to drawing. It was hard at first to use my arm, but I soon fell in love with drawing and coloring, and it seemed to ease my pain and help me forget where I was. While drawing, I was immersed in a different world

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– one where I could forget my handicaps. Most of my drawings were of dogs and horses because I felt close to them. Horses symbolized freedom for me, an escape on something fast. Our dog became the one family member I could talk to.

I do remember feeling very ugly and thinking who could love me because I was so scarred now. But Grandma Angelina, who always seemed to be there, would reassure me that “It doesn’t matter what’s on the outside, but what’s on the inside”. Those words have remained with me since. I look back and see that she had planted seeds of faith and hope in me. I know she had a strong faith and great devotions, because I later came across many of her holy cards.

Soon after I was released from the hospital, Grandma Angelina had a heart attack and died. I was devastated. I could not even go to her funeral because my parents thought I was too young, but I wanted to say goodbye to her because she had meant so much to me and had given me hope. After the funeral, I couldn’t express my grief and buried it deep inside. This prolonged my inability to speak. Drawing became my world where I escaped my pain, and just as drawing had been my escape, it eventually helped draw me out of my silence.

Following the death of grandma, life seemed to become more difficult for my family since she had been our pillar of strength. Now with her gone,

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I could see clearly the dynamics within our family were very sick. Because of the violence, we were always being evicted and changing schools many times a year. Every time we moved, the neighborhoods kept getting worse. Soon we were the minority on the block. We were called honky and white trash, and I kept thinking back to grandma's words, "it doesn't matter what's on the outside, it's what's on the inside" and thinking why did they treat me so bad when they didn't know me on the inside. I was in constant fights and getting beaten up every day.

A glimmer of sanity and hope in my life was being enrolled in 8<sup>th</sup> grade in the Catholic school of St. Louis Bertrand. My little Italian grandma had made my mother and father promise to have us baptized Catholic, and at this time in my life they thought this school was the safest place for me. It was the only year I ever went to a Catholic school. Up until then my only recollection of going to church was when my mom got food vouchers and gifts baskets at the holidays. We never once went to church as a family, but now being in a Catholic school, we went to church as a class. What Grandma Angelina taught me years before about God came to life.

I loved the Catholic school and that there wasn't any violence there. The sisters seemed to really care and I remember thinking I wished I could be one of them. I knew I couldn't because, being in the family I was, I always felt so icky and dirty. When our class went to Mass, I so wanted to

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go up with everybody for Communion, but couldn't. I wanted Jesus so much. But since I never had First Communion, I didn't go up.

During this time in the inner city of Oakland, there was a big black woman who lived down the street. I don't remember her name, but she seemed very kind and she had "church" in her garage – pews and everything. I call it "garage church". I would go there on Sunday because I couldn't get to the Catholic church on my own. She had pictures of a black Jesus and a black Mary on her walls. She wore a red robe and she had a piano and she would sing! She would talk for what seemed like the whole day. She talked about how we should live together and not fight, so I really liked it – it was a safe place. I felt like I belonged there more than at St. Louis Bertrand's, although in my heart I still ached for Jesus in Holy Communion. I would not be able to receive Jesus until years later in college.

Towards the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade, we moved back to Milwaukee. The idea was to sneak away without dad, but he found out and came with us. Once in Milwaukee, I think my mother felt safe as we lived next door to her mother and sister's family. This safe feeling, however, was short lived. Life picked up where it left off in California.

In 11<sup>th</sup> grade, my mother divorced my father. Instead of it freeing my mother from her pain, she turned to alcohol to numb it. This initiated my father's conversion, and he seemed sincere about it. But within eight years,

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the damage done to his body due to alcohol and drug abuse left him weak. He developed lymphatic cancer, but kept it hidden from us because he felt he didn't deserve our love. Before passing away, he was repentant for the pain he had caused us.

I knew I had to study hard and go to college to break free from my family's pain and violence. I was going to become somebody - I was going to be in control. I was hoping to be a veterinarian, work in a zoo, and draw the animals that I love so much. The college I chose was the University of Minnesota at Morris and, even though I began as pre-vet, I graduated with an art degree.

During my first year at Morris, I went searching for a church and God. I had wanted it desperately all my life because I knew there had to be a God, there had to be something better than the life I left behind. I finally got the chance to learn about the Catholic faith. The campus Newman Center became like a second home to me. Through the priest, I received my First Holy Communion – my heart's desire. Soon afterwards, I was confirmed and even gave a talk at the prompting of the priest about why I wanted to be Catholic.

My future husband, whom I met in my dorm at Morris, accompanied me to the Newman Center. To me he was my knight in shining armor – deeply spiritual and very mysterious. He would carry this large suitcase across

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campus to the music hall. One day, I asked him what was in his suitcase and he responded that it was his clothes and mat to practice yoga postures and meditation. Intrigued, I asked him many questions and read some of his books. I was introduced to the concept of reincarnation. Somewhere inside of me, a light bulb went off. Now I knew why I had to suffer the abuse growing up – it was because of my past lives and karma. It wasn't God after all – it was me. This belief took the blame off of God, because God wouldn't allow children to suffer. It all made so much sense.

I thought I could be both a Catholic and one who believes in reincarnation and eastern mysticism – the best of both worlds. My enlightenment was complete!

I looked forward to my first college summer vacation. With one suitcase and my blue ten-speed, I headed home on the Amtrack. Not long after getting home, my bike was stolen from the front porch of my mother's home. She said I should tell the new landlord because he was a policeman – he could help me get it back. But he ended up stealing something from me instead.

The house my mother lived in was a duplex. When the family next door was gone, he would go through their house and come up into their attic. There was a loose board and he would come through the opening to the other side of the attic where my room was. At first, I thought he was very

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kind and fatherly (forty-something), and he asked many questions about my hopes and dreams. I began to trust this person. He told me he cared about our family, finding my bike, and fixing up our house. He asked if I would help him paint the outside of the house and I agreed. After finishing painting, he wanted to thank me by taking me out for pizza. After pizza, he said he would bring me right home, but that was a lie. He raped me instead. I had begged him to take me home, but now he didn't until morning. He took the deepest part of me which was supposed to be reserved for my future spouse. I was horrified. What would my family think of me? Another secret to keep to myself.

Later, he promised that it would never happen again. I so wanted to believe his words and trust him. After all, he was a “policeman” and policemen didn't lie and hurt people. The next week on my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, he wanted to take me out for ice cream. I was hesitant but he insisted nothing would happen. Regrettably, I was violated a second time by him. I vowed never to trust a man again. That would be my first and last summer of going home. I was too afraid I would see him again. I never told my family or anyone else. This pain I pushed deep into the recesses of my heart.

Back at college, I immersed myself in my studies, church, and eastern mysticism, never letting on what I suffered. I desired a new body, one that wasn't dirty and violated. I wanted to be pure and whole and alive inside

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again. I wanted to start over fresh. To me, reincarnation held this promise. I hadn't understood the resurrection since I had just come into the Church – I thought it was the same as reincarnation. I didn't know about the sacraments, that I could start new again, especially through Reconciliation. When I wasn't involved with these activities, I was always drawing – especially my beloved horses. There was a horse barn on campus and the priest I had known had a mare and her colt there. He was going into the army to be a chaplain and asked if I'd like his mare, Cinnamon! A childhood dream come true. I spent all my free time there learning all about horses and riding. And when we were running, I felt like I was running from my past into freedom. I was happy.

During the rest of my college career, I delved deeper into the eastern thought. I was going to be the best woman yogi there was and the best Catholic I could be – both at the same time. I never realized what a trap this would become for me.

Pete and I were married a week before I graduated. Everything we did centered around yoga. I constantly listened to yoga tapes hoping it would make me a better wife and mother, and I believed that my involvement in it would be good for our family. We had three beautiful children and went on many yoga retreats through the next fifteen years, while continuing to practice my Catholic faith. (we're now approaching 30 years of marriage).

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We even went out to the yoga international headquarters in Pennsylvania for vacation. In working towards my goal to be the best woman yogi I could be, I was excited to receive my own mantra and be initiated into the tradition by a swami. Using my drawing, I illustrated the cooking article in the headquarters' yoga magazine for four years. I even wanted to become a certified yoga instructor and open my own yoga center.

I thought that if I repeated my mantra enough times, it would hasten my healing in this life so that when I was reincarnated, I could begin that new life pure and whole. By my own strength, I thought it would lead me to freedom. I thought it was the truth and I really believed everything I read, that God had sent these swamis to help me. I was going to show Him that I could do it; I wanted Him to be proud of me. I was determined that I was not going to be born back into another abusive family.

But the pain only got worse. As our oldest daughter was reaching adolescence, it triggered memories of my own abuse, manifesting in panic attacks and flash-backs. At first, I thought the panic attacks stemmed from the rape by the policeman. But, soon I had flashbacks involving my father. I thought I was going crazy, totally out of control – I wondered if this had really happened? The pain and memories had been buried so deeply. At this point, I called a relative who knew our situation and she confirmed my worst fears that I had been sexually abused. I now know that the policeman hadn't

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taken my virginity, but my father had. Repressed memories flooded me. I was even more horrified and sickened. The panic attacks continued. Only my frenzied phone calls to a priest I knew and a hyper-busy life gave me any relief.

About this same time in 1996, a crisis happened with my mother who was incredibly ill. I didn't know how to handle everything. A friend suggested that I turn to God with total trust and let Him be my driver. She recommended praying before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament or before the Tabernacle. I felt quite embarrassed about this, though, because at the time I didn't know what the Blessed Sacrament was or even what the tabernacle was. After dropping our children off at school, I apprehensively found my way to the tabernacle. I sat there, just trying to let go, especially of the deep need for control. Without even realizing it, God was drawing me into His presence, ever so gently. I began to look forward to my time with Him and hours would sometimes pass.

A couple months later, the Blessed Mother came to me in a dream. Although at the time I didn't know anything about her, deep in my heart I knew it was Mary. She asked me to draw a picture with a rosary in it. I told her I didn't know the rosary, but She told me "you'll learn". She also told me to include the Immaculate and Sacred Hearts and gave me many other

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details. To my constant query of “what’s that?”, she continued to repeat “you’ll learn”.

The picture entitled “Mary Our Mother - The Father’s Plan” took me three months to complete. In the process of doing this heavenly work, I would bring it before the Blessed Sacrament to sketch out, asking our Lord and our Lady what else needed to be included. I came to understand the Father’s plan and that He had a plan for me. I came to know Mary’s unconditional love for me as her child and that she would not abandon me. She led me to Jesus.

When it was finished, I felt both a wave of awe due to the inspiration I received and sadness that it was over. Soon afterwards, I kept feeling that there were supposed to be more pictures, a compilation of ten depicting the Trinity and the sacraments. God was leading me in trust.

The fifth picture I drew, the one of Baptism, was the one that brought me to question my yoga beliefs. I realized I could no longer believe in reincarnation. In this picture, I understood that I was the prisoner of my past (the one carrying the ball and chain) and knew that I would have to leave it and go forward with Jesus in the new life He had for me, not the new life that reincarnation falsely promised me.

With each successive picture, God continued to heal my wounds. One brought me to healing through Jesus as the Lamb who gave His life for me.

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Another taught me that my nourishment came from above, not from eastern mysticism – that I was born again. The Eucharist picture healed my doubts that Jesus was always with me and helped me completely believe in His True Presence. I learned that God was always with me through the grace of the Holy Spirit, even though I needed to face my past, my sin, and the pain associated with it. Full understanding of forgiveness and grace transformed me from a child of darkness into a child of light. Through another picture, I understood what God had given to the Church through our priests, the grace and love flowing through the sacraments. I experienced Jesus unlocking my heart and bringing me out of the tomb of my past. The marriage picture helped me understand that God had brought us together, that marriage was a covenant assisting each other in holiness to reach heaven, and to regain trust in relationships.

After finishing these ten drawings, I felt that these should be in a book. I prayed about the cover. Our Lord's love had flowed out so abundantly and so powerfully that this became a love story for me, unlocking my heart. The Resurrection picture depicts what He had resurrected in my very being - I didn't ever have to worry, or doubt, or fear, or hide because He was alive in my heart. I thought my healing was complete.

As a gift to Jesus for Easter for all the grace He had given me, I drew the Crucifixion. He showed me that every time I had experienced abuse and

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pain, I was being crucified with Him – when I suffered, He suffered because I could see myself in His body. He let me know He had been with me during all of the abusive times. I knew now, with all my being, Jesus would have died if I had been the only person on earth. He loves me. I also believed that as He rose from the dead, I would rise from the dead, my trust and hope restored.

In my thirteenth picture, the Sword of Truth, Jesus showed me that although He had healed me, it was my turn to forgive. He pierced me with His love enabling me to break all chains, shackles, and bondage especially of unforgiveness, anger, hatred, and self-loathing. It took me three years to complete this picture, because the Lord was cutting out the last vestiges of this bondage. The sword image became my armor to go forward, no longer a prisoner of the past. He had created good out of evil. I truly knew Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

In retrospect, I thought there would only be one picture – now I'm working on the fourteenth! These pictures give testimony to my continual journey of healing and survival. They respond to the intense period of deep inner reflection, soul-searching, dreams, and most of all my prayer life at Mass and before the Blessed Sacrament. They were and continue to be my “fiat” for love of Mary, the Trinity, and the Church.

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“Amen, amen I say to you the hour is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.” John 5:25

{typed and edited by Cathy Behrens}

Reflections, April 26, 2008

[On Friday, April 25<sup>th</sup>, I was driving down the interstate in a storm and hit a patch of ice. I wove and spun and ended up in the ditch.]

I realized how fragile life is, how quickly it can be taken away, given away. My life, like that car weaving back and forth, all the pains of growing up and of all my life, never feeling in control like the car weaving back and forth, being pulled to the left and then to the right, not ever really knowing what was going to happen next, totally out of control. I see myself going into the ditch, totally helpless calling out “ help me Lord, oh Lord oh my Lord, oh my Lord”. I spin around 360 degrees landing forward, a circle, my life coming full circle. I am faced with “now what Lord?”. Only you have kept me from crashing totally. Now you’ve brought me to a full circle, 360 degrees to set me on the right path, your path, with you towing me – don’t let go. I now see how you have been with me my whole life, always protecting me.

During Holy Communion, I kept noticing all the people going up to Communion – I looked at them. I noticed the family in front of me. I

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wondered “what is their story”? What is their life? They look like such a small package, but it contains a special story. Do I take the time to listen to their story – their listra? – each is unique, a gift from God – a package ready to be unwrapped and cherished, to not keep to oneself, but to share – to give hope, to share our faith and build each other up. I’ve always been afraid to “unwrap” myself for fear of what others would say (if only others knew about me), my family, my friends, my neighbors, and people at church. My life – what a lie! I thought before that I wanted to die with this secret and never tell my family, but perhaps others are struggling and what I have inside and share can help someone. When the time is right, grace will come and I will be free.

My heart literally hurts now, because of what others will think, but I cannot live with this deep wound, holding it in my tightly wrapped box any longer. Grace calls and unwraps.

Going down the highway of life, just speeding along (not literally, well sometimes). We don’t notice how fast we’re going – we take the usual route so we don’t necessarily pay attention to the signs around us – the changes – we are so used to going on with our life – we “think” we have a destination – of our choosing – but you hit, you encounter unexpected weather – you don’t expect this as you are going down this road a thousand times – but there you are, weaving back and forth – your life going to the left and then to the right, weaving – your life, the ins and outs, the good and bad. Sometimes being dragged, sometimes of your own doing, your life out of control even though your hand is on the wheel, but you still keep weaving – now you start to spin – you are definitely out of control – my life spinning by. All of a sudden I’m in the ditch. I land with a big thud and come to an abrupt halt. I can’t go another inch. Even with all my might and no-how. I am stuck in a deep puddle of mud, grass, weeds, dirty water – the waters of baptism dirtied by sin! Stuck now in the mire, nothing to get me out except and outside source – GOD! God to the rescue. Passersby stop and call to me “are you okay? Can I help you? I’ll dial 911” – how many times did I refuse help in my life, or even cry out in life thinking “I could do it myself”. But now I’m stuck! Stuck in my own sin – the sludge of my life. God! Please help me! A tow truck comes with a hook to pull me out. I am sunk in dirty, muddy water, grass and mud covering the car – it’s hard to see out the window. It’s hard to see with the mud and muck of sin covering you. But now the tow truck is here with the hook – the hook of salvation, my God! Thank you Lord for saving me. I cannot get out of the ditch of sin, of blame,

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of procrastination, of trials, tribulations, sorrow, despair, hopelessness, without help! Help and salvation from God! Lord, hook me – never let me go. Let me be towed by You from now on. Let me surrender my life to You, to let You steer me now! I do not – I cannot – go another inch. I submit of my own strength, to you Lord. Lead me Lord! Lead me Lord! I trust in You! I trust in You! I love You.