

In Retrospect

An Excerpt from *God Will Teach Me to Fly* by Joannetta Hendel

Weeks preceding Benjamin's death, there was a "knowing." I can't describe it in any other way. I simply "knew" I was to write a book. In fact, I felt the pull so strongly I began making notes for one—a book on mothering, that was what I knew. But that was not the book I was destined to write. Instead the Lord would claim the next ten years of my life to tell a story He wanted to tell. It started slowly at first. A few scribbled notes on the back of a paper napkin. Stephanie's innocent ramblings in the early weeks after her brother's death reverberated through our household like shots fired from a pistol. Profound pearls of ageless wisdom disguised as childish prattle pulled cords in my heart and stuck to my soul. Through the fog of overwhelming grief and shock, a clear voice prompted, "This is important. Write it down." There were a few words here, a few words there, but they grew.

As the months passed, odd notations on bits and pieces of scrap paper gave way to daily journals—volume after volume neatly stacked in the bottom drawer of my filing cabinet. These copious entries bear silent witness to a transformation of untold force and magnitude—death, divorce, and abuse—each untidy package reframed and neatly bound into victory.

I fancied myself a writer in those days, and yet the words that poured out of me after Benjamin's death were different than any words I'd ever written. The writing took on a totally new look and feel. The words were no longer flat on the page, but possessed volume and dimension—were somehow alive and independent of me. It wasn't even that I chose to write. I simply could not keep from doing it.

Sometimes I wrote fervently for weeks on end and then long periods of time might go by when I could not write in manuscript form at all—because I was living the drama, rather than recounting it. Later, when perspective finally caught up with experience, I could go back, identify the fragments, and piece them together.

My initial covenant with this story took me only as far as the funeral. In the beginning, I was not writing to inform or inspire; I was writing merely to survive. Some months later I renegotiated a new contract with myself that took us up through the first anniversary of Benjamin's death. It was at that time I first envisioned the birth of a book and began actively searching for a happy ending. Later I was forced to extend the time-frame to encompass the birth of our fifth child, at which point I was sure we would all be living "happily ever after." Continually seeking a suitable conclusion, the projections were pushed back time and time again.

Months passed. Years passed. Day after day, I wrote. But instead of resolving, the chaos thickened. Ghosts surfaced from other eras, and dark sides of myself I could barely tolerate made premiere appearances to rattle my cage. Some transitions were so fraught with horror and disbelief, I doubted I could ever move them from experience to the printed page. Doubts crept in—why am I doing this? Fears beat a path to my door—what will this mean for me and my family? Periods of rebellion and outrage overtook me—why was I seduced into writing a “death and dying” book and then presented with this holocaust?

Finally I screamed to God, “When am I ever going to live the end of this story?” One sunny August day as I walked out of a Sunday morning church service, I realized I finally had.

There had been an ominous feel to the weeks before Benjamin's death, a queasiness in my gut that could not be stilled. I often retreated to solitude where I could sit alone, the Bible propped open before me. I was looking for something—anything—that would speak to the strangeness I felt in my heart. It was during one of those quiet times that a particular passage jumped out and attached itself to me. “This sickness is not to end in death: rather it is for God's glory, that through it the Son of God may be glorified.” When Benjamin died, I felt nothing but rage and contempt for the voice that had come so clearly to me through the Gospel of John. “If this sickness is not to end in death, then why did he die?” I screamed.

It can take a lot of living to catch up with the purposes of God. Now a decade later, my insights have been supernaturally quickened, a higher truth revealed. I now realize the “sickness” referred to in the Biblical text went far beyond Benjamin's breathing problems. It symbolized a spiritual infirmity that infiltrated our entire household and seeped beyond its walls. My life had to culminate in crisis because it's not my nature to heed the gentler nudges. All I was and all I knew had to be systematically wrecked before it could be rebuilt. A vague sense of “mission” seemed to follow me the moment I lay pen to paper, yet the bigger picture was continually hidden from view. Repeatedly crying out to God, I demanded to know, “What is this for?” But no clear answers were given. I was simply required to record the journey—nothing more and nothing less. Only when the entire passage was complete was the veil lifted and the higher plan revealed.

This story is not about death, although death is a pivotal element. This story is not about recovery, although recovery is a trademark of its glory. This story is about an impossible journey—and about a God who provided safe passage.

I fell asleep one Friday night and woke to find my two-year-old son lying dead beside me. Nothing would ever be the same again—it was not intended to be. The circumstances were planned, the timing divinely orchestrated, this vessel prepared and poised with pen in hand. When all was clearly in place, God laid his hand squarely on my life, and proceeded to pour out the script.