

A Life Just Like Mine

Dr. Donna D. Kincheloe

A
Life
Just Like
Mine

HOW GOD & NURSING
TURNED PAST PAIN
INTO PRESENT PEACE



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How God and Nursing Turned Past Pain into Present Peace


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For all who chose to love me.

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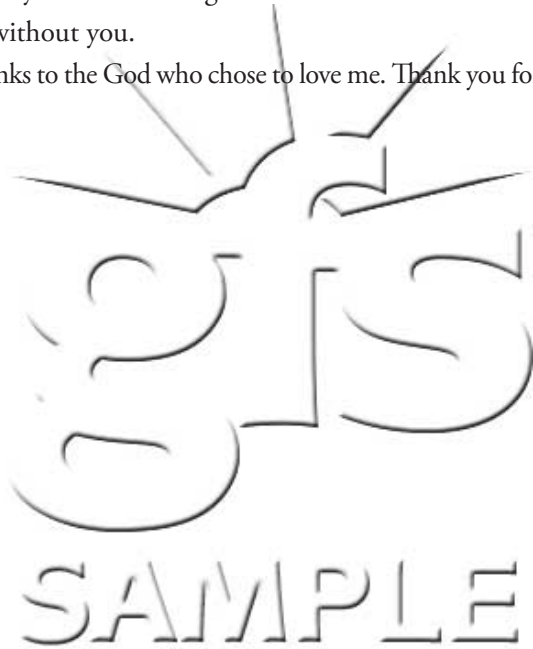
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Chapter 1:

No Voice, No Choice

“**Y**oung lady, compose yourself,” ordered the gruff, white-haired judge glaring down at me from his wooden perch. Perhaps wearing long, dark robes, pounding a desk with a wooden mallet, and years of standing in judgment of others removes all compassion from the heart. Then again, who has compassion to spare for a terrified twelve-year-old girl crying uncontrollably on the witness stand?

Compose yourself? This had to be some kind of legal terminology, for I had never heard that word before. Even if I had known the meaning, his demand was totally irrational. If this man with so much education, social status, and legal power had a brain in his head or a child of his own, he might have considered the view from the witness box. The title “Your Honor” should only be applied to humans with supernatural abilities: exceptional sensitivity, eagle eyes and keen hearing. Through broken-hearted sobs, I looked at that judge. Why couldn’t he hear that screaming voice inside my head?

“This isn’t right. This shouldn’t be. This is so wrong.”

Dad’s attorney approached and began to bark out embarrassing questions. “On such and such a day, at such and such a time, you were seen

by your brother in the living room of your home sitting on the couch beside a guy. He had his arm around you. Is this true? How old are you? Have you ever been kissed? How old was this man you were with?" His badgering ended with this accusatory implication: ". . . and where was your mother?"

Unbelievable. A first kiss, a first hug, on trial because I left some clothes at Dad's house? My mother and the boy's mother were having coffee in the kitchen, something friends often do. Did that really matter to anyone? It didn't seem like it should.

As if on cue, Dad jumped to his feet and shouted, "She's going to be a whore, just like her mother." Wildly waving his arms and pointing his finger at me, he screamed over and over again, "She's going to be a whore."

What a lovely prophecy to proclaim over me to a room full of people.

I never said a word, only sobbed. What else could I do? I was ushered out of the courtroom to the hallway to begin a lengthy course in the art of self-composure. Dumb and numb, like a lamb led to slaughter, I had no choice, no voice. I had no hand to hold, no shoulder to lean on, no one to dry my tears, and no one to pick up the pieces of a shattered heart.

Prior to the custody hearing, my parents had separated, not to anyone's surprise. I lived with Mom, which meant a steady diet of stewed anger towards Dad. Forced visitation with Dad meant hearing vivid, nasty stories about Mom. Dad didn't want me or my little sister. He simply didn't want Mom to have us. He wanted—and kept—my brother. At one point, Dad drove me through a trailer court and pointed out a blue-trimmed white trailer. A foster family lived there.

"Don't you think you would love it here? I can't afford to take care of you girls and these people can give you a great home. What do you think, honey?"

I didn't know what to think. It was like when I had jumped off the rope swing and slipped on the roots hiding under the leaf pile and broken

my arm when I was five. I screamed, scared and hurting, my wrist dangling limp. I had no idea what had happened. I just knew something didn't feel right. People I don't know giving me a home? Dad's plan didn't feel right either.

On another visit, Dad broke a hundred-dollar bill to buy me something that cost five dollars and said, "Can't you see how much I love you now?" A five-dollar bill or a rusty trailer is not found in Webster's when you look up "love."

The outcome of the custody hearing gave my maternal grandparents custody, and that same night we left my favorite rental house forever. We threw our stuff into suitcases and tossed them into the trunk of the green Karmann Ghia. Then Mom and I made the trip over the rivers and through the woods to Grandmother's house.

Mom raked the gears and angrily cursed at the clutch. The car jerked violently uphill, stalling several times. There was no need for embarrassment. I would no longer live on this street.

During the two-hour trip, Mom explained the rationale behind her choice. "You have to understand one thing," she said. "No one is ever going to tell me what to do. No one judge has any right to tell me who I will see and who I won't. That judge gave me an ultimatum. I could keep you girls if I stop seeing Rip. You need to understand. You are going to live with your grandparents because no one is going to run my life. No one tells me what to do."

Rip. What an appropriate name for the one who tore my family to shreds! Memories can get lost over time, yet some sit in storage in the warehouse of our minds. They wait for us to rewind and review them in living color, with real emotion and exact dialog. Tragic life scenes can be a bit entertaining from a distance, like an angry redhead with a lead foot speeding around the crooked roads through the hills and valleys of Pennsylvania in the darkness, on her way to drop off her children, who have less value to her than her lover.

Why did she speed? Why did she drive all night? The next morning was the first day of Junior High. I faked sleep, leaning my weary head against the passenger window. My tear buckets were depleted, but my thoughts overflowed. Goodbye, life—ballet, tap, baton, friends, brother, dog. No time to say goodbye. Perhaps they'll miss me? Maybe no one will notice or care. They'll think I've died. I have.



Chapter 2:

Major Moves, Minor Memories

Moving means leaving things and people you love behind. Some you never see again. We moved four times in a two-year period, while I was in the sixth and seventh grades. Each move felt like we were searching for a home away from home.

The first move was the hardest for my siblings and me. Our home, for those first eleven years before the divorce, had been Daddy's pride and joy. White, red, and deep purple petunias lined the front walk of the white-painted concrete block ranch style home. It had three bedrooms, and featured an open floor plan with huge plate glass windows in the living room and dining room that filled our home with light on sunny days. Around the bar in the kitchen, we spent time doing homework while either Dad or Mom cooked.

Mature trees, perfect for climbing, surrounded the swing set. A neighborhood with gobs of kids of every age gave our childhood the best jumpstart for life. Oh, how we loved the outdoors. Woods nestled up to our back yard, and Dad had created a basketball court in a rear corner of the property. He had also purchased the neighboring field from Mrs. Winslow, the widow next door, where we played baseball, kickball,

or badminton. Like Spanky and the Little Rascals, our life was full of friends, fun and adventure.

We lived close to the construction of Interstate 79 in Meadville, Pennsylvania. Smooth new roads, not yet open to traffic, became a new playground for our neighborhood clan. My brother Terry was two or three years older than I, and he was always full of fun and adventure. Even though my sister Patti was five years younger than I, she was fearless and eager to do anything the big kids did.

We rode our bikes for miles on the newly paved interstate. Sometimes Lady, our liver and white springer spaniel, came along to swim in the creek beneath the overpass. Once in the water, she paddled like an Olympian. Afterward, she would trudge up the embankment, shake like a wild thing, and run up to us long enough to get pats of love. Then she would jump back in the creek and do it all over again. She loved it, and we all loved her.

Supper always felt like an intrusion in our playing time. After we ate, we helped with dishes and then rushed back outside. We poked holes in jar lids and scrambled around the yard catching bugs with bulbs in their little butts, and voila! We had an electrified mason jar for free. When darkness fell, we armed ourselves with flashlights to enjoy another adventurous challenge. We would sweep the ground with our flashlights as if they were spotlights and, quick as a robin, pounce on any big, juicy nightcrawler we found for Daddy to go fishing. Those were the days BD—Before Divorce.

Dad and Mom worked separate shifts. Dad worked evenings at Talon Zipper factory and Mom worked nights at the Viscose plant. She slept during the day while we were in school and sometimes took another nap before her eleven o'clock shift.

Mom chauffeured us kids to dance, swimming, and guitar lessons during the week. Dad helped on the weekends. Saturday mornings, Patti and I marched up the steep staircase of the dance studio where we both

hoped our dreams would come true. For as long as I could remember, all I had ever wanted to be was a dancer.

Our circle of friends grew as recitals and parades were added to our schedule. Mom sewed our costumes full of sequins and netting and worked with other mothers on how to construct headbands and tutus.

Whatever shortcomings she might have had, Mom had a talent for sewing and knitting. If she had her hands on a pattern for anything, perfection reigned every time. Blessed with the ability to decipher the most difficult crochet, knitting or sewing patterns, Mom thrived on the challenge of creating something. Before our birthdays, she set up the sewing machine on the dining room table and the next morning, Barbie, Ken, Midge, and Skipper all had custom made wardrobes for every season. Mom was a whiz. We knew if Mom made anything, it would be a one-of-a-kind creation that would last forever. I guess that was why the divorce was so hard for us to understand.

Marriage doesn't come with a pattern, recipe, or guidebook. I wish it didn't come with challenges either, but it does. Mom was miserable and needed something more.

A solution came when she persuaded Dad to go dancing with several couples from her workplace. When Dad agreed, our home dynamic changed. Couples took turns going to each other's homes to whirl the blender full of crème de menthe and crème de cacao into some green concoction called a Grasshopper. They shared babysitters and grouped us kids at one home or another while drinking or dining out replaced our private family movie night. Before, we had loved spending Sunday nights sprawled out on the living room floor snuggled in blankets and pillows, eating popcorn Daddy made for us. Our Sunday night family tradition had meant tuning in to the Wonderful World of Disney. Now on Sundays a neighbor would come and babysit us. Family time somehow got lost. We kids looked hard but never did find it.

Fights between Mom and Dad became a common occurrence. Anger grew and criticism flew. Because she was obsessed with TV soap operas, Mom set her sleep schedule so that she would not miss *Days of Our Lives*. We could have stocked several libraries with copies of *True Love* magazines. When Dad was working, Mom could lie down on the floor or couch for hours, bawling to LPs of Eddie Arnold love songs and Ray Price singing “For the Good Times.”

Like a record Mom had a flip side. Her A-side was fun, but her B-side was trouble. I think someone mentioned the term “rage-a-holic,” and my brother and I knew its meaning all too well. Being on the receiving end of redheaded rage sometimes left claw marks down my back, but the soul scars hurt more. At least they were invisible, and no one ever saw the scary side of Mom but us.

I’ll never forget the time Patti and Terry were playing ball in the living room, which was a big no-no. The ball accidentally struck Mom’s favorite tall, orange-flecked pitcher, scattering glass fragments like dead soldiers all over the black and white linoleum tile floor. When Mom came through the front door with an armload of groceries, I somehow ended up on the martyr chopping block. Terry announced convincingly, “Donna did it.”

Ignoring my pleas of innocence, Mom jerked my arm, threw down the groceries, pushed and pulled me into the kitchen and whipped away at me. She bared her teeth, thrusting out her lower jaw with a wild-eyed evil glare, and words saturated with swearing accompanied the beating. My siblings confessed long after the whipping ceased, but no one can take back a beating. No one can erase that moment or memory.

Change kept happening as new terms and phrases became a part of our life: separation, custody, hearings, child support, and infidelity. We learned that a trial separation period meant Dad had to go. He moved out to a tiny apartment with only a hot plate upon which to cook. During his weekend visitation, he took us to church. At the end of the service, we

would all troop down to the altar to pray. Daddy begged God to heal his marriage and save his family. I never saw him so ripped up. Faith in God was always important to my dad. He taught the adult Sunday School class, sang special music with his smooth tenor voice, and loved to read his Bible.

One night while Mom and we three kids were still living in our house, my uncle came to convince her not to leave Dad. They were up all night fighting and crying. Words were muffled. Strange phrases that I didn't understand hit my ears. He kept saying, "Stay for the kids. If I can, so can you." He couldn't convince her.

During all this fighting, uncertainty, and change, something happened to me. I got sick. Doctors put me in a private isolation room in the hospital to be sure that whatever I had wasn't contagious. No one knew what was wrong for days. They prodded me with slick gloves in private places with no warning, stuck needles in my arms and sucked out blood like Barnabas Collins in *Dark Shadows* (my brother and I used to run home from the bus stop every afternoon to watch that vampire show together).

People couldn't come to visit me without putting on disposable plastic gowns and gloves. My food was served on disposable paper plates using plastic silverware. I felt like a leper. No one touched me. I felt like whatever was wrong could kill me and all those around me.

I was scared and, like always, I wasn't hungry. For years the neighborhood kids nicknamed me after a skinny fashion model, Twiggy. I didn't like to eat. Mom often yelled at me, "There are starving kids in Biafra." I would say, "Get their addresses and we can mail them my food."

Daddy went to great lengths to cheer me up. About a week into my hospital stay, he and Terry brought Lady to the hospital parking lot. I called out to her from my fourth-floor hospital window. She jumped up and down and turned in circles trying to find me. She pulled frantically on the leash, whimpering and confused. I wished I could have flown

out my window. I needed to bury my face in her fluffy, soft curls, rub her belly and brush her. She remained out of my reach. I watched the station wagon pull away and knew no matter what, I had to get well and go home.

Delores, one of Mom's closest friends, stepped up to the plate after I was discharged with the embarrassing diagnosis of malnutrition. A marvelous cook, she offered to help me get stronger in a stress-free, more stable environment. Recuperation with Delores, her husband Rip, and her daughter Diann seemed a good idea at first.

Diann was an only child who loved her dad and the family's black and white bulldogs. She also could down two liters of soda like crazy. We became quick friends, rode motor bikes, slept together every night and shared secrets. Best of all, we walked to church every Sunday. None of the adults in this new living situation ever went to church, so it was just us two girls.

During this time, Daddy, Terry, and Patti Marie still lived at home, until one afternoon Mom and Delores kidnapped Patti when she got off the bus. Helpless, Dad stood in the driveway with a dishcloth over his shoulder, and watched the two women push Patti into the car. Totally ignoring the little girl's cries for her dad, they took off.

About one week after my hospitalization, what I thought to be a temporary situation turned into the first of many moves. An attic bedroom was made for Mom and Patti. A brown thing hung from the ceiling. Rip had been a boxer and explained it was a speed bag. Tying mitts on us, he tried to teach us how to use it. He kept up an exercise and weightlifting routine daily, along with smoking several packs of cigarettes. He always prided himself on never drinking a beer before three o'clock. After three, however, those empty cans piled up.

Lady even lived with us for a little while, in a cage in the garage with Rip's four Brittany spaniels. She couldn't live in the house because bulldogs took precedence over spaniels.

During the month we lived with Rip and Delores, Diann was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes, what we now call type 1 diabetes. She had to take insulin shots and eat differently. Her mom took to the diet, medication, and care regimen with gusto. Diann fell apart. I felt so sorry for her. She tested her urine with a dip stick several times a day and had to be careful with food. When you are a teenager, it's hard to accept a physical problem connected with a bunch of complications that can ruin your health.

Diabetes happens, you don't choose it. Divorce happens, and kids usually don't choose that either. I know Diann and I wouldn't have chosen these life-changing memories of loss. When a marriage train derails, all passengers experience the jolt. Diann and I did.

As we were lying in the sun, lathered in oil and laughing and talking one Sunday afternoon, we overheard something children could never want to hear. The word "divorce" got our attention. Rip, Delores, and Mom were fighting and yelling obscenities at each other. Rip got in Delores's face and laid out his case. "I don't love you anymore. I love her. I want a divorce and that's final. There's nothing more to say. Our marriage is over." We watched the whole backyard scene; it was like a soap opera with nasty language.

Wow! Dad's stories might have been true after all. Mom and Rip had a thing going on, like the song, "Me and Mrs. Jones" by Billy Paul. Without a doubt, another move was imminent. So was another loss. I never saw Delores, Diann, or Lady again.

Our second move away from home was a quick fix getaway in the form of a trailer. Patti and I didn't have many of our toys or clothes, because they were still at our old home. For kids who loved to be outside, it was hard to be surrounded by concrete, few trees, and no lightning bugs or nightcrawlers. But Mom seemed content and loved to say, "There's a place for everything and everything is in its place."

My role changed from big sister to an armed guard. If Dad stopped by to see us and bring us candy, I'd grab Patti, push her inside, and lock

the door. Then we talked through the screen. Patti cried, “He’s my daddy.” Afraid of the wrath of Mom, I became an enemy in the eyes of my sister, a true no-win situation for me.

After we spent six months living with the stigma of being called trailer trash, a rental house on Oak Street became available. Move number three was the best move of all. That house held great memories for me. It had been the home of one of my best friends from dance class, Jill. I can’t count how many times I spent the night there. I loved her mom; she was good to us.

Jill and I had a great deal in common. We loved dance and, like me, her parents were going through a nasty divorce. Jill was a tall, long haired, redhead and a crazy good acrobat. I think instead of joints, God gave her springs.

She and her mother moved to a townhouse while her dad created an upstairs efficiency apartment with a separate entranceway. He then rented the downstairs to Mom, Patti, and me. We actually stayed put for an entire year.

I made friends, rode the bus to school, and even got my first babysitting job for a family with three kids up the street. Our rental house had a front and back yard with mature trees. I loved to read on the porch off the bedroom. Finally, I felt we had settled in. Patti and I spent lots of time together. One major joy for me was when Mom allowed me to walk back and forth to dance class alone. During Crawford County Fair preparation, I must have walked miles, for we practiced several times a day in the summer. I never minded. I was happy.

Dad and Terry still lived at home, but my memories aren’t clear. I don’t remember going there often. I did miss Lady. She was still at Rip’s house.

Mom might have known that, because she surprised Patti and me with puppies: Honeybee and Mitzie Lee, two miniature black and white bulldogs. Rip loved to play with them when he came to see Mom. Since

he and Mom worked nights together at the plant, he stopped by for coffee in the mornings before we got on the school bus.

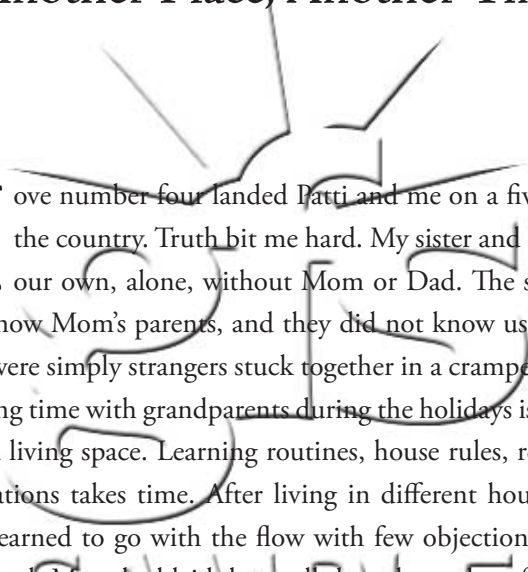
As the custody hearing date moved up on the calendar, strange parental behaviors showed up too. Daddy appeared shamelessly and frequently on the neighbor's porch directly across the street and sat in a lawn chair, watching us through binoculars. Mom told us to ignore him, not to wave or make a fuss. It seemed so odd for Dad to be on a stranger's porch. I wondered what he told those people. I wondered what they thought of my mom and Patti and me. When someone peeps at you like a "Peeping Tom", it is embarrassing. I think it's more embarrassing when "Tom" is spelled D-A-D.

After our day in court, my fourth and furthest move meant leaving more than ever behind: so many people and things I would never see again, so many people I never even had the opportunity to tell "Good-bye, I'm leaving; here's my address; please write me." Never again would I dress in my black leotard and pink tights and wear my satin pointe shoes or tap shoes. Never again would I dance.

Once, while I was visiting my grandparents when I was nine, their dog, Betsy, had chewed up and ruined my favorite book, *To Dance, To Dream*. I tried to salvage my book, but I had to throw it away. As hard as it is, sometimes dreams have to go, too.

Chapter 3:

Another Place, Another Time



Move number four landed Patti and me on a five-acre plot in the country. Truth bit me hard. My sister and I would be on our own, alone, without Mom or Dad. The scary part was we didn't know Mom's parents, and they did not know us. Like a foster family, we were simply strangers stuck together in a cramped little house.

Spending time with grandparents during the holidays is not the same as sharing a living space. Learning routines, house rules, responsibilities and expectations takes time. After living in different households, Patti and I had learned to go with the flow with few objections. No matter where we lived, Mom had laid down all the rules and we followed every one of them. But now, she gladly handed all responsibility, decision-making, and correction over to her parents.

Once again, we faced the unknown. Patti and I had to start a new life on a strange bus filled with kids we didn't know and jump off at a new school with new rules, while Mom happily drove two hours home to Rip and freedom.

On our first day of school, Grandpa pounded on our wooden bedroom door, opened it, snapped on the blinding overhead light, and

announced, “Girls get up; you have to catch the bus. Come and eat breakfast. Hurry up. Don’t dillydally.” Resurrection by ceiling light and verbal thunder was a totally different alarm system that became routine. I grew to hate the daily rude awakening.

Another thing I missed was a good night’s sleep. We got up early since we now lived over an hour away from school. There’s nothing like waiting for the school bus in the dark, but I’m sure the yellow flashing lights helped the driver see us and stop.

Nudging Patti, I crawled out of bed, smoothed the log cabin quilt and rushed to the bathroom. Oh, it was so small and so strange. The left side of the bathroom was all appliance: white porcelain tub, sink, and toilet. All of the sinks I had used before possessed a single faucet, but in this sink, there were two. They took sides on the basin, and like some marriages they stood separate, running purely cold or hot.

As I glanced up at my own horrific image in the rust-speckled medicine cabinet mirror, I wondered how eyelids could be so puffy. Who on earth had drawn dark half-moons under my eyes? Only vampires flaunt blood red eyes. I hoped the kids didn’t think I was a vampire. “Tattletale” is a perfect name for eyes and faces. No one can hide sadness, sleeplessness, loneliness, and the fear of being unacceptable and friendless. If only warm water and Ivory soap could magically transform my weary face...Enough.

Gently shaking Patti’s shoulders, I said, “Sleepyhead, get up. We have to eat and get to school.”

“Okay, I’m up already.” Sifting through the suitcase on the floor, she picked out a favorite outfit and headed for the bathroom. I asked, “Do you know what day this is?”

Turning up her nose, she scowled. “I’m not stupid. It’s the first day of school.”

“Well, it happens to be September 8, 1970, which means you are eight years old, and this is your birthday. Happy Birthday, little sister.”

“Well, if this is my birthday, all I want is to go home. I don’t want to live here. I don’t want to go to a new school. I want to go home.”

Patti Marie always knew exactly what she wanted and never held emotions in check. Her brown hair curled like a living Shirley Temple doll—a very spoiled, spicy, sassy doll whose mischievous smile opened the door marked, “Cutie, whatever you want you get.” Today’s behavior was totally normal. She stomped down the hall, and I wished I could make that birthday wish happen somehow for both of us.

Using the antique mirror in the bedroom, I slapped on makeup and wondered what else had taken place yesterday in the courtroom. Bad behavior from both parties obliterated character witness testimonies. Mom had told me the judge made a different kind of plea. “Is there anyone here who would take these two girls and raise them?”

My maternal grandparents, the Cowans, accepted the challenge, with Dad required to pay twenty-five dollars per month in child support. At first, the rules and regulations handed down by the judge seemed harsh. We soon found out Grandma’s rules were even more severe, with consequences that scorched everyone.

Gram bossed Grandpa unashamedly, and if a college of manipulation existed, she would have graduated with multiple honors. Our dysfunctional family dynamic provided Gram with a new obsession—controlling Rip.

If Rip came with Mom for visitation, Gram would shake her right pointer finger one-fourth of an inch from his nose, deftly stiffen it like the beak of a pileated woodpecker, and tap on his breast bone fifty times while singing the same old song to the tune of righteousness. “Don’t think for a minute you will be sleeping together in my house. You’re living in sin. Why buy a cow when you can get the milk for free? If she’s good enough to sleep with, she’s good enough to marry.” If he heard that once, he heard it a thousand times. We all did.

Other restrictions included absolutely no alcohol, smoking or bad language in Gram's house. Drinking and smoking was always a no-no, even for my uncle. When he came to visit, which was not often, cold beer lay ready in the cooler of the Suburban. He drank and smoked in the driveway.

Rip loved cigarettes, beer, and creative renditions of cuss words. I never understood why a person would want to corrupt an innocent, meaningful word like "fantastic" by pulling apart its syllables and folding in a nasty four-letter word.

Cuss words seemed to be essential supports for conversation between Mom and Dad. I always cut Dad slack because he had served in World War II. Mom kind of followed Rip's lead and nasty language tagged along. Even now, all these years later, I cringe when I think of the words they used.

Dad and Mom could never visit at the same time, which created stress during holidays. Before the divorce, we kids had always loved the anticipation of gifts, good food and time together. Those days were gone. An actual holiday date lost all meaning. A new disappointment arrived, and I named the newbie, "holiday stretch out." Holiday celebrations happened when our parents weren't working, and instead of one holiday we had to have three. Sometimes the stretch was over a week or two, which seemed to be an abnormal way to celebrate. Christmas left us empty every year.

Mom loved Christmas, and we had always put up a huge tree in the living room decorated with lights, balls, teardrops, and tinsel. At Gram's a table-top imposter replaced a cherished real tree from the woods. Sustaining a fresh cut tree for multiple visitations required too much work. Gram reiterated repeatedly how needles turn brown and fall, the limbs bow down, and the tree dries and dies. My response: "But Gram, the smell of a real tree in the house makes Christmas." Sharing my feelings never moved her an inch. I began to dread holidays and despise happy memories.

At the old house, when we had lived together as a family, we always sang carols and danced to Christmas music. We slathered scissors with butter and cut mint, cinnamon, and wild flavors of hard tack candy into pieces and flopped them into bags of powdered sugar. We made the best chocolate fudge ever with chunks of walnuts. Mom made divinity candy to die for and cookie press cookies with red hots and silver balls. My favorite cookies were gingersnaps and Russian tea cakes, which we all sampled hot from the oven with a big glass of cold milk. Mom stuffed dates with icing and made peanut brittle that melted in your mouth. We packed tins with our confections and gifted them to teachers, neighbors, and friends in the old neighborhood. Once upon a time, I loved Christmas.

Now we lived in another time.

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Chapter 4:

Life's Pantry

The saying, “You don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone” became reality for Patti and me, and maybe even for our grandparents. I doubt couples in their sixties scribble “raising our daughter’s two girls” on their dream list of things to do before retirement. Weeding, planting, snapping, peeling, freezing, preparing food, and doing dishes (so many dishes...) doesn’t make it to the top ten of kids’ lists either.

If work and play were kids on a teeter-totter, balance could never happen at Gram’s house. Work outweighed play daily for Patti and me, but I believe sacrifices of displacement create a life imbalance for everyone.

Grandpa worked as a mechanic at the Ford garage. He got up before the sun, ate breakfast, grabbed his sturdy silver lunch box, and drove forty-five minutes to and from work. He was never late, and he was never sick. Gram gave up her job cooking and baking at the county home to don a stay-at-home Super-Grandma cape.

Priorities changed. Patti Marie and I found ourselves in the awkward presence of people obsessed with food. Our grandparents’ need to

stockpile, prepare, and share food probably resulted from growing up during the depression. The downstairs cabinet pantry shelves Grandpa built held pints and quarts of canned vegetables and fruits of every kind. Every Friday night our family went to town, and like people stocking a restaurant, we bought food—lots of it.

Our first stop was always the grocery store. There was no such thing as buying one can of fruit or a couple cans of pumpkin. If it was on sale, Grandpa bought cases. As we traveled down country roads to the meat house, I watched the black Angus cattle milling about on the hillside. I wondered if the farmer's kids named the cows. If so, who would we be eating next month?

Our next stop required speeding down narrow dirt or gravel roads to an old farmhouse out in nowhere-land to get churned butter and eggs. What a different way to spend a Friday night! We got back home after dark, unpacked the car, packaged the meats, and filled the freezers.

We lived on five acres. Each spring we designed about three acres with vegetables, fruits, and flower gardens. Gram loved dahlias. Imagine perfect, vibrant flowers of striking colors wearing shades of purple, orange, yellow, pink, red, and white, imitating three-inch pompoms or layers of stars the size of dinner plates. These tender perennials were stored in heavy milk crates under the house in the winter to protect them from the severe cold. In the spring, because I was small, I had the pleasure of jumping through the rectangular foundation hole to grab and hand out the sleeping beauties. Just like people, dahlia tubers need support as they grow, so we would dig a hole and bury a stake beside the tuber, so when storms rain down, stalks wouldn't break and heads wouldn't "hang down, Tom Dooley."

Several varieties of plum and apple trees bloomed on my grandparents' property, giving Grandpa pitching pleasure. He loved to throw a piece of ripe fruit to anyone at any time. In the fall, I pretended to be the queen of the fallen apple. I would climb and gently shake the apple

tree limbs as I imagined apples singing, "Please release me let me go." Once on the ground, I transformed into a servant child, picking up the fallen fruit. Once my basket was filled, I headed to the kitchen to wash, core, and skin the apples. It was lots of work for lots of lasting pleasure. Nothing comes close to fresh apple pie, homemade apple sauce, or apple butter on a cold winter evening.

Laundry became an all-day affair in the musty basement. We began the day by positioning the big white monster of a wringer washer tub near the drain in the basement floor, plugging it into the electrical outlet in the ceiling turning on its red garden-like hoses of hot and cold water, adding detergent, and cautiously taking position. Multiple trips down the basement steps with armloads of clothes, sheets, quilts, rugs, and rags, stole the day away. Color-sorted piles on the gray concrete floor patiently waited to be grabbed up, baptized, and agitated. We would wash, rinse, squeeze and toss things into clothes baskets and once again do step aerobics, running up the storm cellar steps to the clothesline outside.

Wringer washer orientation included tragic stories of deformed arms, hands or boobs getting caught in rollers. Gram was at risk for the latter; she had a forty-four-inch bust that Grandpa proudly adored, as he called her his "little Dolly Parton."

This weekly laundry process gave clothes a smell no softener has ever captured. Sunshine and "fersh" air (Gram's pronunciation). Snow and ice never halted cleanliness, and I gained the art of folding freeze-dried sheets and underclothes. It was quite a crunchy, finger-numbing experience hanging clothes up wet and taking them down stiff.

One Christmas, Grandpa bought an electric washer and a dryer, hooked it up in the basement, put a great big red bow on the dryer, and told Gram she never needed another Christmas gift. Every year, that red bow appeared on the dryer as a reminder of the gift that keeps on giving.

Every week, people showed up to Gram's tiny kitchen to enjoy home-made feasts of rolls, cookies, pies, or a huge meal. Curiosity grabbed me

and I asked one day, “Gram, why do we work so hard to can, freeze and stockpile food, then cook like dogs and feed people all the time?”

“That’s just what we do,” she told me.

When a person does something extremely well, people give praise. Gram cooked like a renowned country chef. She loved to feed people. More than anything, she loved the praise. She had a habit of politely asking, “Would you like another helping?” If the person declined, she filled a spoon of veggies, meat, or potatoes, slapped it on the person’s plate and said, “Of course, you do.” We called it “force feeding.”

Patti Marie and I often wished we used paper plates more often to lighten our workload. Gram christened us with the daily chore of washing and drying dishes at suppertime and when company came.

After feeding the crowd, we cleared the dining room table, which was really in the living room. We then pushed the table up against the wall and window to make room for people to sit on the couches and chairs. We felt like fish in a fishbowl, as privacy evaded us while we scrubbed every dish, pot and pan and then put away leftovers. Patti and I couldn’t talk without listening ears.

When the kitchen was spotless, our next duty was like sitting in a prison. If we wanted to go out to play, go to our bedroom to read a book, or if it was a school night and we wanted to go to bed, Gram denied our wishes. She forced us to sit quietly in the living room listening to the grownups’ chatter. If we begged to go to bed, Gram’s evil eye screamed as she faked a meek smile and sweetly said, “Girls, we’ve got company.”

One evening, Bill and Thelma, neighbors from down the road, came for supper and Gram dished out the gravy, meat, and vegetables. My job was to carry everything to the table down the open passageway from the kitchen to the living room. The last dish was Gram’s famous hand-whipped mashed potatoes dotted with “cow-butter” (Patti’s name for the deep yellow rounds of churned butter she refused to eat once she knew it came from cows. We never told her about milk). Gram handed me the

heavy mountain of spuds sprinkled with pepper and perfectly positioned parsley sprigs, heaped three inches higher than the china bowl. “Now, whatever you do,” she warned me, “don’t you dare drop this.”

Whoosh! The bowl crashed to the floor. Potatoes, butter, pepper and parsley redecorated everything within spattering distance. Mashed taters flew into the living room, spreading smooth spuds in a six-inch landing strip on Gram’s beloved olive-green wall-to-wall carpet.

Devastated, I tried to explain. “Oh no, I swear the bowl never touched my hands.”

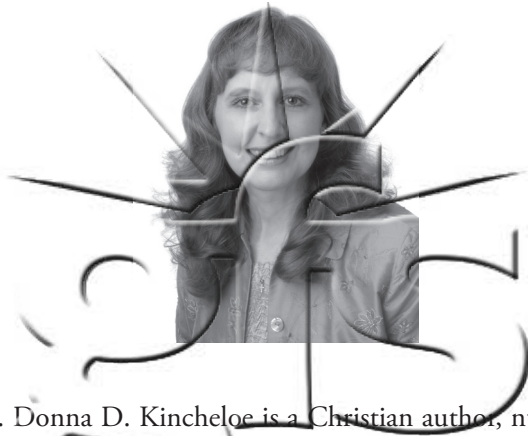
Gram’s evil eye, clutched jaw and visage of total disgust transformed the hostess into a four-foot, eleven-inch angry demon while I scurried to clean up the mess. Everyone at the table saw Gram reaching into the cabinet above the stove for a box of Hungry Jack instant potatoes to save the day. The hostess never returned to the table, but the demon did. I tried hard to regain composure as I sobbed and sniffed in shame, head down to avoid Gram’s glare.

A strange sound caused me to glance at Bill. He was trying hard to stifle snorts and laughter while he watched Gram shoot me with an eye-gun loaded with bullets of disgust. Chuckling, he announced, “Kiddo, if dropping a bowl of mashed potatoes is the worst thing you ever do in life, I think you’re gonna make it.”

Gram smirked, smiled, then laughed, and everyone relaxed and joined in.

I wondered if Gram was mad that I dropped the potatoes or embarrassed that the neighbors knew Hungry Jack lived in our cabinet. Some memories carry, strengthen, and help a wounded, embarrassed klutz. Circumstances often allow us opportunities to share these meaningful life lessons. A healthy perspective and laughter can serve people well when they make a big mess.

About the Author



Dr. Donna D. Kincheloe is a Christian author, nurse educator, and speaker who uses the power of storytelling to help people consider new perspectives by weaving hope into their life circumstances. For forty-four years, Dr. Donna worked as a bedside nurse educator, researcher, and mentor. She contributed to a statistically significant spiritual care research project, published in the *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, and is the author of *I Never Walk the Halls Alone*. Dr. Donna is the mother of one adult son. She resides with her supportive, fun-loving husband Allen Dale in Evansville, Indiana.