

Saved for a Purpose

A Story of Healing, Acceptance and Faith

By Sheryl Anne Lehman

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CHAPTER ONE ~ Granddad

The room was dark and silent until suddenly with a strong and clear voice I called out, "Granddad!"

My mother slept on a folding bed in my hospital room. She sat up, startled to hear a voice from my once mute body. Her heart raced as she stumbled over to my side and whispered, "Sheryl, did you say something?"

I must have relapsed into the silence of my own world. I was later told that I was not conscious for four weeks.

I had been in a coma since the accident. Twenty-four days had passed since that July afternoon.

July 13, 1976 was a normal day. The dishwasher needed to be unloaded; my little sister, Nancy wanted to go shopping, and I planned to practice my french horn before my lesson at three-thirty.

Nobody could have been prepared for what would happen later that day.

Nancy needed a new swimsuit for her planned trip to Mexico with our dad. Dad, a top executive at a pharmaceutical company, would often travel abroad to do business. This time he would drive and could take a family member with him.

My older sister Suzan and I had summer jobs. Yet our mother began to devise a plan. "Maybe we could all go if Sheryl and Suzan could get time off work . . ."

Mom's eyes brightened. "We could use the Triple A books. I think I still have the motel numbers in my planner."

Her novice travel agent role in our family had started nine years earlier. My oldest sibling, Mike, was the first to see the routine.

Mom would get out maps and contact the chamber of commerce in many cities along the route. Whenever we saw her surrounded by AAA books and pictures, we knew it was vacation time.

I still remember for one of our camping ventures she had received information on donkey rides into the Grand Canyon to coincide with a visit to the museum at Hoover Dam.

The questions she asked now seemed unimportant to a sixteen year old who had a license in her purse and friends to hang out with.

"I've already made plans," I said as I pulled open the top rack of glasses. Then, with my usual indecisiveness I said, "I don't know; maybe I'll see if I can change something."

Suzan came down the hall as she was leaving to take care of getting her car insured. She reached for the front door and said, "I can't afford to take off work. If you guys plan to go, at least you could leave me a note." With that, the door closed and she was gone.

I continued with the dishes, but I felt uneasy about the trip and I told Mom. I did not know why I felt any apprehension. To her it sounded like a made up excuse and it became the last straw while she encountered obstacle after obstacle.

“Well, I guess nobody wants to go!” she exclaimed.

Mom seemed hurt, and I did not know what to do. I have always been a people pleaser to a fault. I hated to watch people argue on talk shows. I would often have tears when I heard disagreements. This time was no different.

I am not sure why I ran to my room and started to cry that day, nor do I remember whether or not I finished the dishes. What I do remember is that something did not seem right. Could this have been a premonition?

Soon there was a knock on the door followed by, “Nancy and I are going to run some errands, do you want to come?”

“No, I need to practice before my lesson.”

“We’ll be back in time to let you use the car. Bye-bye, Honey.” My mother’s voice sounded lighter. Had she given up the idea of travel already?

Still, my uneasy feeling persisted.

My practice time went well that day. I had a beautiful silver horn that had an extra key for particular notes. My sound was quite good for a kid. My private teacher Mr. Talley had said that my embouchure was strong, but I needed work on using my diaphragm. I would show improvement when I saw him at my lesson.

I had just finished my last exercise when Suzan came home. When she entered the front door, she carried a root beer float from a local ice cream store.

I had practiced my horn for one hour so I was pretty parched. I saw the drink and asked, “Where’s mine?”

I asked the question although I did not realize the impact of the answer. At times, events occur that we may never understand.

CHAPTER TWO ~ A Root Beer Float

My sister Suzan was the family’s connection with the theatre. She was one that could make a person laugh in the midst of strife. I thought she could make the guards at Buckingham Palace break down crying or crack up with laughter.

Sue had always been one to share anything and everything she had with others. She would give encouragement to people when needed. She included me in Bible studies and prayer groups with friends even on our European high school band trip two years earlier.

“Hey, we should go up to the roof.” One of Suzan’s classmates thought the flat top building in Paris, France looked inviting. We had traveled to Europe with our high school band. Ninety eight students, ten chaperones, five teaching staff members and the tour guides had made their way on an airplane, traveling sixteen hours overseas in order to represent the high school.

“Okay,” she agreed. “Come on, Sheryl, let’s go check it out.” I was like one of her friends.

So I was not surprised when she commented that I would be able to take her car the three miles to purchase a root beer float myself. As a beginning driver I would be able to take Suzan’s newly acquired car on my own. It was a green Karmann Ghia that she had insured that morning.

I declined at first, but after a few minutes I jumped at the opportunity. Sue tossed me the keys, and I was off.

The frozen dairy treats establishment was a popular hang out on hot summer days. Many people that I knew would be there. With me in my big sister’s new Karmann Ghia, I would be noticed.

Two popular boys from school had just finished ordering as I drove up. They stood by their bikes. “Hey, Marty, you guys need a ride?” I asked, even though I knew they would turn down the offer. Perhaps it was to show off what I was driving, or maybe I just wanted a chance to talk with them. In any case, they declined, and I proceeded on my way.

There were many accounts of that day. To me it remains a blur. One witness said I waited to pull out onto the highway until the light changed, and it was clear to go. Others say a cement truck obstructed my view so that I did not see the oncoming pick-up truck. This, along with the fact that I was not used to driving a car with a stick shift, were excuses given to explain what happened next.

I had always insisted that people wear their seatbelts. That never changed. However, I was unable to fasten the belt in this car. What, or who, kept me from fastening it on that day?

CHAPTER THREE ~ The Accident

Tires screeched. The car stalled in the street right in the path of an oncoming truck. Witnesses say they saw me move to the other side of the car. Some believe God’s angels picked me up to move me. The white pick-up hit the car broadside, and I ended up on the passenger side floor.

I cannot really understand how I would have had time or wits to move. Especially in a car with a stick shift, which would make moving nearly impossible.

However, as far as the angels levitating me, I remain unsure. Nothing is impossible with God. Some say I moved in those split seconds so my conclusion leans to the angels.

The reports read an attendant from the nearby gas station ran over to take a look. When he saw me on the floor surrounded by broken glass, he said he thought I was dead until he touched my eyelid and it twitched. He ran back yelling for someone to call an ambulance.

I was told, months later what transpired that day. My ordeal turned into days, weeks, and then months.

The ice cream clerk behind the counter knew who I was so she could call my house.

Suzan picked up the phone, “Hello?”

The voice on the other end spoke fast, “Uhm . . . your sister has been in an accident and ... I think she bumped her head.”

“Ok, I’ll be right there.”

Suzan automatically called our dad. “Sheryl’s been in an accident and Mom’s not home.”

“Ok, I’ll meet you at the emergency room.”

She agreed without even stopping to realize what she said. Sue told me that she really believed that I had bumped my head and was too worried to tell her. She said that she thought I was crying so I couldn’t call. This would have been a normal assumption with my teary outbreaks.

She had no car, so she went to our grandmother’s attached apartment. “Could you give me a ride to pick up Sheryl? She bumped her head and I need to go get her and the car.”

“Let me get my keys.” She looked for her purse.

As Suzan and our grandmother left the house and turned onto the highway, a line of traffic came to a stop. "I'll just get out here and jog up there." Suzan was frustrated with what she thought was a rush hour back-up. "Thanks for the ride, we'll be home shortly."

She arrived out of breath to the site of the accident; there was a police cruiser and another emergency vehicle on the scene. A crowd of people gathered outside the ice cream store, and an approaching fire truck sounded in the air.

She told me that she felt an eerie silence as she walked toward the car. "We're asking everyone to please stay back, young lady," a police officer instructed.

"That's my car." Her voice was shaky. "That's my sister."

She also said that a bystander saw her and suggested that she sit down which she rejected, twice. Then, of course, she sat.

She sat and watched as the paramedics used the 'jaws of life' to cut the crumpled car from around me. She helplessly watched her car that was smashed in on one side and cut into on the other. Was she even coherent enough to realize what was happening, or was she in a state of shock?

"We would like for you to ride with us, if you would want to." One of the paramedics looked at Suzan. He motioned for her to come and Suzan got into the ambulance with me. She told me later about the paramedics that were with us.

The man that drove was a young man, perhaps in his twenties; while the man in the back was in his late forties with salt and pepper hair. The older of the two held me in place.

Suzan said she saw my eyes flutter; my shoulders were crushed, a gash on my knee, and could not do anything about them. She watched as my leg flopped and dangled off the stretcher.

"Uhm . . . her leg. . . ." she said.

The paramedic reached over and hoisted it back to the original location. Suzan squirmed in the seat she rode in, feeling helpless.

"I need to take care of this. Lord; show me what to do."

Suzan watched as the man with salt and pepper hair swabbed my face with a gauze pad. Then, under her breath, she prayed, "Let her live, God."

Dad was already at the hospital when the ambulance pulled in.

"I am Dr. William Hendershot, her father. Where should I go?"

"Wait here, Dr. Hendershot," said the ER nurse. "You will be called as soon as they are done prepping her for treatment."

Thoughts of my mother's distress kept weighing heavily on his mind.

"God, help me cope," he prayed. "Where is she?"

Dad described the wait to me later.

Another man was seated in the waiting area. He was bent over with his head in his hands. A young woman held a crying infant. Her attempts to soothe the child proved futile.

"Dr. Hendershot." The nurse approached him and spoke. "The doctors feel that the injury to her head is so severe that the best treatment for your daughter would be to transfer her to the South Bend hospital which specializes in TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury). We need you to sign this form." She already had the clipboard and pen ready for him. "Will you be riding with them?"

"Absolutely" Dad handed Suzan his car keys. "Try to call your mother again," he instructed, looking concerned. "Drive carefully, and I'll meet you over there."

Doors flew open in the hall as a stretcher was guided toward the exit. A team of paramedics stood on either side. Straps securely held my unconscious body as I was rushed to the emergency transport once again.

“You can ride in the front,” the driver directed my father. “Tim will be with your daughter in back while we travel.” We pulled out onto the road, sirens blaring.

The driver radioed the intensive care unit in South Bend to have a neurologist available on arrival.

My dad still tells me of his ride in the ambulance.

“Move!” His anger was directed at the traffic which seemed to be unaware of the approaching siren. The intensity in his voice made the driver uneasy.

“Calm down,” he was told.

At the approaching intersection, the traffic clogged the road.

“They do not hear us,” Dad murmured out of frustration. Again, he was told to calm down. Dad’s usually calm, confident manor was replaced by anxiety. This made time move in slow motion, as in the desperation of a dream.

The ambulance traveled familiar roads to the hospital, but Dad did not seem to notice.

“I never imagined that one day I would be going under these conditions and at this speed.” Dad confessed.

Did Suzan get through to Barbara (mom)? He wondered.

Our Grandmother’s apartment door, which was connected to our family room, stood open as she paced back and forth nervously. Mamaw, our pet name for our grandmother, had taken the call from Suzan. She wrung her hands in panic. *What will I tell Barbara and Nancy if I don’t remember the name of the hospital?*

Mamaw stepped over to the window and pushed the curtain to the side.

CHAPTER FOUR ~ Mom hears the News

My little sister, Nancy is the epitome of excellence. She is extremely talented and very smart.

People comment about the years in school that I lost, but my thoughts are of Nancy, a child in grade school who had temporarily lost the attention of her parents and the bond with one of her sisters.

I imagine that she would have gone to summer school fun with the whole situation weighing heavily on her mind. Nancy was intense and worked hard her whole school experience to become the valedictorian of her class.

I was five when Nancy was born. The two of us shared a bedroom until I was fourteen. When we were younger, we would toss our dolls and stuffed animals back and forth across the room to pretend they were “visiting” each other’s homes, our beds. In the earliest years, Dad sang songs like “Edelweiss”, “Old Man River” and “The Lord’s Prayer” to us before we went to sleep. As the years went by, we would talk to each other before drifting off, until books and the hip radio station became priorities.

As Mom and Nancy returned from their errands, they saw Mamaw in her frustration and confusion.

“Sheryl has been in an accident and they took her to South Bend!” Mamaw tried to remember the name of the hospital.

Mom was frantic as she went to the phone book yellow pages. She made some calls and jumped back in the car. Leaving Nancy with Mamaw, she drove the forty-five minutes to the hospital.

Mom told me a hedge of protection must have been around her, the car, and everyone that she came in contact with as she drove. She needed to get to her child as fast as she could. She was almost hoping to get pulled over so she could get a police escort. She didn't.

"Where is the emergency room?" Mom gasped and before anyone could answer, she spotted the sign on the wall sporting a huge E.R.

Her eyes met Dad's when she rounded the corner.

"I rode in the ambulance from Elkhart." Dad's voice was steady. "She is still unconscious."

"What happened?"

"The medical team told me a truck hit her broadside." Dad proceeded to tell her that I had been driving Suzan's car and that I ended up on the passenger side floor, that the driver's side was smashed in, and that I was still alive, praise God.

"Where is my Sheri Anne?" Her eyes darted from door to door. "I need to find Sheryl."

Mom knew that she was frantic, with the added intensity of panic in her voice. She remembers that a triage nurse came to her and said, "You will have to calm down before you can go in."

Mom looked at her, and with great determination, held her hands out in front of the nurse. "I – am – calm," she proclaimed in a voice almost unrecognizable.

An E.R. nurse took Mom and Dad back to the room where I was being treated. Mom smoothed her fingers over my limp hand. Her focus was on my closed eyes.

They were told that my neck had almost been broken. The part of my neck called the Cervical Spine was bent in the opposite direction. I had been that close to paralysis or even death at the age of sixteen.

Mom stood holding my hand until the ER team requested that she return to the waiting room.

Meanwhile, Dad had asked Suzan to call home to tell Mamaw what was happening. "Tell Nancy that I'll be home tonight. I don't think they will let her up here. I'll keep you posted," Suzan concluded.

Dad said that he and Mom went out to the waiting area. He described the room to me later when I asked. He told me it was cream colored and about thirty feet by sixteen feet. He remembered it with such detail as he related the story to me.

He said that he went to the large window on the east wall as he prayed. "I can accept full recovery, eventually accept death, but I need help dealing with the in-between. Father, I need your help."

Mom stayed awake all night. She prayed and worried about me, of course, but she was also thinking about her youngest child. She was so thankful that Mamaw was there for Nancy. She also mentioned later how proud she was of the dependability that Suzan showed.

Eventually my Mom's brain began to shut down. The ordeal she found herself in seemed unreal. The days and nights began to run together as her mind was in continuous confusion.

Mom took short naps on the waiting room couch while visitors came and went. One day, she opened her eyes to see her sister Dottie and niece Jenny seated on the couch across the room.

“When did you get here?” Mom whispered.

“Just a little while ago, Barbara, I am so sorry. Is there anything I can do?” Dottie asked.

“Pray, just pray.” She shuffled in her seat. “Thank you for coming.”

Aunt Dottie stood up and gave her a hug. “I don’t think I was supposed to bring Jenny in here so I had better leave, but may I see Sheri before we go?”

Jenny was too young to go back into the ICU, but Mom and Dottie went to my bed.

The monitors from the other sections in the intensive care unit seemed to be timed in a rhythmic pattern with my own. Suddenly, one of the other monitors went to the alarm mode and the ER staff immediately responded.

Mom and Dottie slipped out of the area and returned to Dad and Jenny seated on the couch.

“Could you bring me some yarn?” Mom asked Dottie. “I need something to do while I wait.”

“Oh sure, and do you want a crochet hook or knitting needles?”

“Either.” She paused. “Both.” Then Mom shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Aunt Dottie smiled. “I’ll bring both, and a few different colors of yarn.”

The elevator doors opened and she and Jenny were gone.

During these days, Mom recalls Dad and she were both in private thought and prayer times. Each person would be sitting in the waiting room, standing by a window or in one of the hallways.

She told me, “Your friends were there almost constantly. We would talk occasionally and hug to console and encourage each other.” Then she added “I needed some yarn and crochet hook so I could do something with my hands. I couldn’t concentrate on reading except some in the Bible. I sat in the same spot on the first end of the couch by a little table and lamp. I always wanted that same spot as there was some comfort in routine.”

CHAPTER FIVE ~ The Best of Care

Dr. P, a neurologist, was a knowledgeable doctor, one of the best around. The South Bend hospital specialized in head injuries. Thus, Dr P would see me. There were also other specialists assigned for me including Dr D, an orthopedic surgeon, and a physical therapy unit which handled patients with head traumas. You could say that I had the best of care, physically.

Emotionally, I had my family, friends, doctors, nurses, and especially my God with me constantly. Even though I was unconscious, some part of me must have felt their presence.

Two of my best friends, Becky and David were the ones who had ridden in the driver’s education car with me nine months earlier. They came to the hospital almost every day.

“I am so grateful - and a little surprised - that your parents let you come.” Mom told them. “Were the roads busy?” She worried about the new drivers.

“We needed to be here,” David said. Then he looked at Becky, “Our moms knew that, right?”

“Oh, sure,” Becky agreed. “Sheryl is one of my best friends.”

The waiting room was full of teenagers. The idea that they were not invincible was becoming clear to them. Every day, fellow students, teachers, neighbors, friends of my family, and pastors came.

Sometimes, I think back to what my friends and family must have been thinking. At any point, our lives can be changed in an instant. Our own lives and every person in our life, suddenly, uniquely changed. For this reason, I believe God is our only consistent reality.

Suzan told me they would talk to me hoping that the sounds of familiar voices would bring me to consciousness. While they talked, they stared at my fingers or toes to see if they moved in a gesture of recognition. She told me that she stared so hard that she couldn't tell if my toes were actually moving or if she was imagining it out of desperation.

My condition did not change as the ICU nurses relaxed the visitation rules to let my friends stay. My mother told me she was holding my hand while her fingers traced the veins on the back of it. It was at this time that she noticed the ‘H’ shape that the veins formed and she made a point of mentioning this to my dad, and later to me. It represented a monogram of my last name, Hendershot.

Dad remembers when the E.R. nurse opened a drawer on the side of my hospital bed to reveal a fresh light blue pad to reduce the fever. She looked at one of the other nurses currently attending me. “Could you help me, please?”

Mom told me later that it was just like a dance they had rehearsed several times. Their swift movements worked in synch.

My flailing legs were uncontrollable. A doctor had explained this as a muscle spasm brought on by brain and spinal cord injury. This caused my movements to act in the wild manor that they were. My feet developed huge calluses which are still there.

The doctors had determined that my shoulders could not be put into the figure-eight strap yet because of the spasticity of my movements. Both clavicles had been broken in the crash.

One of the nurses observed my parent's calmness and took my mother aside. “Sit down, Mrs. Hendershot,” she directed and in a matter of fact manner, looking her in the eyes, she said, “You know, Sheryl could die.”

“You're right.” Tears welled up in Mom's eyes causing a lump in her throat. “I need to act calm, or they won't let me in with her.” Then she was able to let out, in a whisper, “This isn't real.”

With that, the young attendant hugged her and walked away.

Dad's trip to Mexico was postponed and his workload was ignored while his attention was split into three parts. He needed to be the stabilizing comfort for Mom and my siblings, but he had to focus on immediate needs. He realized one of his children could die.

The connection with God that my folks displayed was an example to others. It was also ‘the only way to stay alert’ in the ER, as my mother put it.

My parents have told me, and still tell me things now of my recovery and the wait. They remember little details that help me to connect with who I was and who I have become.

Fourteen days later when Dr. P. entered the waiting room, he looked around for my parents. He had what seemed to be a shocked yet pleased look on his face. Locating my waiting clan, he exclaimed that my condition was improving.

“Not an enormous amount, but significantly; enough to move her out of ICU and into a room.” He paused. “I cannot confirm that she will regain consciousness, and if she does, we cannot be sure the amount of recall she will have.”

He continued to tell my parents about my condition, but the thought of a memory loss hounded them. Would she awaken? How far would she come back to normal? Will she know who we are?

CHAPTER SIX ~ A Teacher’s Care

My sister, Suzan, had two jobs, so her visits had to be timed just right. I found out later that Suzan was working my shift at the theatre to keep my job available for me.

She told me that on one occasion, when she left my room to go to work, she had fainted. As she reached the elevator, she had collapsed. The pressures and intensity of my situation, along with the heat on that day in July, overtook her physically.

She told me that a nearby nurse came with smelling salts to revive her. She didn’t want to alarm Mom and Dad, nor anyone else in the room. Therefore, she went to work without telling anyone.

The nurse later told my parents. Mom said they needed to trust that Suzan would be ok, and called that night to confirm it.

My friend, Becky tells me that same day, when she had come to see me, she was standing by my bed on my right side, while my mom stood across from her on the other side. She started feeling woozy and started to step out for a bit.

The next thing she knew, she was waking up on the floor by my bed. She said she was afraid that she had disconnected some of the wires and hoses connected to me.

When Suzan arrived home that evening, Nancy told her the plans her fifth-grade teacher was making. “Mrs. Noaker is taking me to a nice restaurant and then to the mall on Friday.” Nancy’s eyes glowed with excitement.

A teacher can mean many things to a student. This teacher went above and beyond my sister’s requirements. Her friendship and compassion are something that will never be forgotten.

Yes, a teacher can mean many things. One teacher has special meaning to me. The one of which I speak was my band director, Mr. Joseph M. Beickman. He was someone that had meant a great deal to our family through the years. He was part of the reason that I played the French horn. The things he taught like loyalty, dedication, discipline, determination, love, and respect for the music found a way to our hearts.

My brother, Mike could play the piano, every brass and percussion instrument in the band, and a few of the woodwinds. He chose to play trombone in the symphony and marching bands. He developed a skill that Mr. Beickman admired, which inspired me.

Mike is five years older than I and has always been my ‘hero’. He was living in another city at the time of the accident.

My band director came to visit me in the hospital, after about four weeks. Before he left, he bent down and gave me a kiss on the forehead. To my regret, I was unable to continue playing my French horn after my accident. I will always have the memories of my musical connections. I feel blessed to have had the gift of music in my life.

CHAPTER SEVEN ~ Prayer

Prayer~ I believe the single most important treatment for my recovery is also one of the most important things in my life now. There were many whose names I may never know, that offered up prayer on my behalf.

I was told a group of my friends would gather in the chapel or a corner of the waiting room to pray. They would ask God's hands be on the doctors and nurses in regards to my treatment. Some prayed for my family. Still others prayed for the people who daily traveled back and forth.

The pastor at our conservative Methodist Church had a special service for people to come forward, kneel, and offer up healing prayers for me. The wall in my hospital room was plastered with 'get well' cards. The return addresses were from different parts of the country. Most of them affirmed prayers for me.

I was now in a room on the eighth floor. The doctors frequently commented on my improvement, but it was the spirited atmosphere that emanated from my room and all my visitors that impressed them the most.

Suzan's boyfriend at that time was a CB enthusiast. He studied the many call numbers and their meanings. He had taught me what '10-100' meant to truckers as they talked over the airways. This message of needing to go to the bathroom would come in handy later in my recovery.

As I was coming out of my coma, I reacted out of instinct and pulled out my urinary catheter three times. The nurses said it would be too dangerous to insert it again as I could be damaging myself. Something else needed to be done and I needed a 10-100 frequently.

CHAPTER EIGHT ~ Gifts

There was a TV in my room. My parents wanted to have anything familiar in my surroundings.

"Don't they get the news station that we normally watch?" Dad asked.

"I thought that we should have this one on." Mom said. "The host used to be on a show that Sheryl watched. She might hear it."

"Oh, that's a good idea. This show is fine."

My mom knew I also liked Elizabeth Montgomery in Bewitched, a show that had magic and comedy. So whenever she could have it playing, she would. Otherwise, I don't think they had the television on at all.

The result of having Bewitched on was interesting. In my experiences in and out of a coma, I recognized the program and put myself as a character in the show. The only parts of my body that I could move voluntarily were my fingers. I tried twitching them in an effort to get out of the situation that I was in, much like the TV show's character did. My head was incoherent so I did not know where I was or why I couldn't move.

What I do know is that the finger twitching did not work.

I have always loved sailboats, at least looking at sailboats. Living in the mid-west made my seaworthy aspirations only a dream. I had pictures at home of sunsets over the water, storms at sea, and calm streams, all with sailboats. People would think of me when they saw something with water, lighthouses, or sailboats. Many times, I was given a picture or statue of the same.

Understandably, many of my friends brought me nautical things. David, my classmate and friend, painted a picture of a small sailing craft for me, and Mamaw finished a latch-hook rug that I had started a month earlier. It depicted a sailboat with beautiful colors.

One gift that I was given, had nothing to do with water, yet it became a gift that gave me comfort. Cindy was a friend with unique connections. Her mother worked with the treatment and skill development of disabled individuals in Elkhart County. Her sister was one of the clients.

Cindy brought me a stuffed chipmunk I later named Chippy. I don't know what made this chipmunk special. Maybe it was because it was from Cindy, but I think it was due to my mental immaturity. I know that later in my life, when someone mistakenly took it, I was devastated. My juvenile behavior did not match my chronological age. At that time in my development, Chippy was a needed friend. It was later returned.

The gifts I received in the hospital would become a comfort to me along with the many cards and well wishes.

CHAPTER NINE ~ Vocalizing

I called out for my Granddad, yet I was still in my coma. Mamaw's husband had died two years earlier. I often wonder if I had been in the spiritual world with him. Had God given me a moment to be comforted by my Grandfather while in my coma? Had I gone to heaven to be with him for a short time? Why did I call out for him and why do I remember it so well? These are questions I may never have answered.

I know that as my coma began to break, I clearly called out Granddad's name; I remember it. Yet, when the physical therapist started with me, I couldn't speak. I couldn't make a sound.

The doctors and nurses told my family that my rate of improvement would climb, and then hit a plateau, before it would grow once again.

I was in and out of consciousness for the next two weeks. Barb, the therapist was beginning a relationship with me of value to last the rest of my life. She was a tall, thin woman with beautiful long auburn hair. She laughed often and her breath smelled of spearmint gum and cigarette smoke. The encouragement from Barb felt like a gift from God that therapists were given to bless others.

Barb taught me a sign using my tongue to indicate yes or no. I could stick out my tongue, so it was up for yes, down for no. The movements helped me to communicate with others. I wonder if it also strengthened the muscles in my tongue to help when and if I could talk.

Relearning things was a constant trial. I needed to relearn how to walk, talk, go to the bathroom and drink from a glass. I needed to remember when to say things and when not to. I was sixteen, but I was redeveloping my life skills as a two year old.

"Hi Sheryl," Mom's voice was familiar and comforting when she came over to my side. "You have some visitors."

I smiled as my little sister came in my room followed by Mamaw. I looked at Nancy and she looked at me. She must have seen that I knew who she was because she took a small picture out of the book she was holding.

"I brought a picture of Mitzi (our dog). She misses you." Nancy grinned. "We've been sleeping in the family room on the pull-out couch."

The rest of the conversation was lost to me as I felt myself drifting off, once again. Months later, Nancy told me that she didn't realize that I phased out. I had still been smiling while she held my hand.

I'm not sure when Nancy and Mamaw left to go home. Dad talked to me the next day, he wrote messages to ask me questions regarding their visit.

"Is Nancy here?"

"Was she here yesterday?"

"Was Mamaw with Nancy?"

I responded with the correct answers using a movement of my tongue and eyes. My parents and physical therapist worked with me through the next week. Every day attempts were made to help me reclaim my voice. In another several days, I began to move my lips.

I made a slight sound that can be described as a murmur. At this, Dad tried to get me to say Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious. It was only a whisper, but I said it.

Suzan made her normal between-jobs visit to the hospital. She hadn't heard that I was vocalizing at all so it took her off guard when she entered my room. Dad said "Come here, Sheryl has something that she wants to say to you."

She came closer; looking a bit puzzled, and put her ear down by my face. I whispered "super-cali-fragilistic-expialadocious".

In shock, she began to laugh.

"What was that?"

I took a couple deep breaths. My voice was stuttered and shaky, but again I was able to whisper "S-s-s-u p-p-p er c-c-ca-a-all-a . . ."

I would hit the plateaus, as was forewarned, and some would last for years. But when the slightest improvement came, it seemed like I would feel it happening.

After some time, I was able to sit up and draw on paper. I also played tic-tac-toe, although I had difficulty holding a pen. My dad would write simple questions on a sheet of paper. 'Is Mommy in the room?' and 'Do you like liver?' were two of the questions he asked that would get a response. Others that came to visit would also write.

Sterling was one of my friends that had studied Spanish in school with me. We passed notes back and forth in class as we developed the character of a Spaniard named Sidney. One time, when Sterling came to visit, he brought our drawing of 'Sidney'. I did not continue studying the language in school as Sterling did, but I did keep 'Sidney'.

Each morning my mother would open the window shades, say, "Isn't it a beautiful day" (even if it was raining), and come to my bedside telling me that God saved me for a purpose.

My parents needed to raise me, twice. As I developed from embryo stage, once again, they taught me of Jesus' love for us. I believe that God did not cause my accident, but He allowed it to happen. Why and for what reason I may never know.

I feel God cares for everything in my life and I am here to give Him the Glory.

CHAPTER TEN ~ Physical Therapy

A scheduled time was set up for me to go to the Physical Therapy Department (PT). Daily, an attendant would come to my room and, with the help of nurses, transfer me to a portable bed. I was taken in an elevator.

In the PT room, a man nicknamed Sacky was a constant humorous tension reliever. Barb and Sacky, along with four other therapists worked with patients continuously. Each one seemed to have their role to play in the department.

The orthopedic specialist had prescribed the figure-8 strap to be fitted to my body in a vain attempt to hold my shoulders back. The strap would loop one shoulder, circle my waist, and loop the other shoulder, in a continuous figure eight. It was very uncomfortable and left me with a red rash near both arm pits.

On my first several visits, I was transferred from my portable bed over to a large metal bed, known as a tilt table. They laid me on it, with my toes touching a kind of shelf, and Barb would tilt it a specific degree each day in order to help my feet flatten out. The stiff ballerina point of my toes gradually began to flatten.

Sometimes I would become dizzy and nauseous. I would then be leveled and transferred back to my room.

I thoroughly enjoyed my growth in PT. It was hard work, but there were others going through equally difficult experiences. The staff in the PT dept. was a consistent help.

Weeks went by before I was able to use the parallel bars. I would be in my wheelchair placed at the end of the bars, as I would grab hold of these waist high bars, Barb would hold a special belt fastened around me and I stood. I took a few steps and wanted to sit down. Barb would be an encouragement to keep me going. When I finally reached the other end, someone had moved the wheelchair so that I could rest. I had been walking on the balls of my feet by that time.

In several days, Barb gave me a walker to try. She again would be right beside me, holding on to a belt, as others kept encouraging me. "Heel-toe, heel-toe" they would say to instruct me to walk more flat footed. Sometimes the instruction came from Sacky, sometimes my dad, and occasionally from another patient. They were all welcomed voices of encouragement.

One or both of my parents would be with me. We met many new friends that were also patients in PT. Some were in worse shape than I was in and some in better. We all tried hard and we all encouraged each other. I think this is the miracle of 'head trauma physical therapy'.

Everyone had their issues, some had no memories and others had swelling around their face. Many couldn't concentrate on what they were doing. Mom and Dad became friends with some patient's loved ones. They were their counterparts in the PT dept. waiting room.

I was improving at a slow pace, but steadily. I was prepared for my own climb, but I was not ready for the letter that I found when I returned to my room.

CHAPTER ELEVEN ~ Grandma

Each day more letters and cards were received either at the hospital or my home. David and/or Becky would bring cards from school and Suzan brought mail to us between jobs. Nancy stayed home, doing her normal summer reading. Mike, who is ten years older than she, even made it over to visit with his littlest sister.

This time it was Dad who, after work, brought the mail. I had gotten a letter from his mother in South Carolina. Grandma Hendershot rarely wrote. It was a blessing because she wrote just to me. A neighbor who had attended Grandpa's church, was a man we called Uncle Andrew, although he was really no relation. My Grandpa, a Nazarene minister, spent his last preaching years in South Carolina in the sixties.

'Uncle Andrew' and his wife were good neighbors to Grandpa and Grandma. He had been someone that would help with the church maintenance. My grandpa prayed with Andrew whenever he needed help. Together, my dad's parents showed Christian love to others in life.

She opened with one of her endearing nicknames;

My Dear Sqweegicom,

Your dad tells me that you are getting better. I'm so happy to hear it. I've been praying for you.

When I fed the dogs yesterday, the little one was acting funny. But when I got closer I sure saw why. His little nose was covered with porcupine quills. It was quite a sight to see. Uncle Andrew had to straddle the dog to pull out each quill. I gave him some ointment after he was finished. I don't think that dog will go after another porcupine for quite some time.

I better go now, I am not feeling very good these days. -

I love you - Grandma H.

I could imagine her laughter as she told the story of the dogs. She laughed and joked a lot.

The letter from Grandma was the last one that she would send to anyone. February 14, 1977 God brought her home to Heaven. She had suffered a heart attack. My dad was able to visit her in a Nashville hospital en route to a business meeting in Washington, DC. Later that day she passed away.

Fifty-one days after my accident, I was released from the hospital. I was to return once a week for PT. This would last for several months to a year. All the cards were taken from the walls. The models and pictures of sailboats were packed away to take home. My parents enlisted a friend of ours to paint a beautiful picture of a sailboat for the nurse's station as a reminder of our months together.

I had been a patient in this hospital for nearly two months. On July 13, I was admitted totally unconscious. I had been at the mercy of my own limitations as I was transformed into a disabled body. I had the mentality of a child ten years younger than my chronological age. Mom thought of what the doctors had told her of my recovery. She was ready for the improvement followed by a leveling off. Everyone was sure that I would continue to grow and learn, but where would the plateaus come to an end? How much would I change from my current condition?

Suzan recalled that the drive home from the hospital was unique. I was so excited to be going home, but the minute I had to get into the car and close the door, a real battle began. It was the kind of battle that psychologists often look for in someone's mind as they analyze. She thought that I had an intense fear in my face. I sat in the back seat behind the driver and rolled down the window to make it feel less like I was trapped. Suzan watched, she said, from the other side of the back seat.

I would begin the next step in my recovery. What would I do without the constant attention of the nurses?

CHAPTER TWELVE ~ Tie a Yellow Ribbon

As I returned home, the trees in our yard had yellow ribbons covering them. There was a banner draped across the front of our house, welcoming me home. My friends all came with excitement and happiness.

I constantly needed my walker, even around the house. My equilibrium was completely off. Someone needed to keep an eye on me whenever I moved. I would call out for someone to help me to the bathroom frequently.

Courteously, Mamaw would knock on the door between our houses before entering. We would simply call out for her to come in, and she would enter. On one occasion, I was seated on the couch in our family room when she knocked.

My walker was not nearby, so, instead of calling in my stuttered voice to ‘c-c-come i-i-i-in’, I slowly stood and walked by myself toward the door, unaided. After several minutes, I reached my destination and turned the knob. The look on Mamaw’s face combined with the pride of my accomplishment was like a movie climax, which was punctuated with the inaudible applause from Heaven.

School started and my parents had arranged for me to have a tutor come to our home. This enabled me to stay in the class of `78. A teacher from my school, volunteered to come to my house and give me a simplified lesson plan. I was able to stay up with a modified geometry course that took two years to finish with a lower than average grade.

The second semester began and I started attending school. I still had my walker, but my balance was improving. I was let out of each class early to avoid the crowd in the hallway. The patience and compassion displayed by the teachers in my junior and senior years was incredible. The office staff was especially cooperative to my needs.

I had worked in the guidance office, running errands, stapling papers, and general busy work before my accident in both junior and senior high. I was able to continue in that area after I returned.

“I’m glad you’re here today, Sheryl.” Shane Swiesberger smiled as she placed a stack of papers on the table. “Could you sort these for Mr. H.?”

Mrs. Swiesberger was the secretary in that office for years. She taught me ways to deal with people in a compassionate yet professional way.

“Take this pass to the Biology Lab, wait for Mr. Larimer to finish the demo, and hand it to him.”

“What if he doesn’t stop talking?”

“Quietly walk in and set it on his desk, so he sees you do it, and leave without disturbing the class.”

My work in the office had started in Jr. High and continued in the Hi School. Before my accident, my swiftness in delivering items to teachers was unobtrusive. Now, however, my interruption of a class would include my walker and scuffing my feet.

Mr. H. was one of the guidance counselors at the school. As I think back on the job at hand, I don’t believe he needed me to sort those papers. I was asked to do this task to not focus on my limitations.

I, however, took it to heart and did the best job that I could. This reaction has been a Godsend for me in my life.

My visits to the physical therapy unit in South Bend dwindled. I saw Barb, Sacky, and the others for the last time as my development leveled off. Barb had taught me ways to use my walker when needed and how to keep myself from falling without it.

I had visits with Mr. N., a speech pathologist to help in my stuttering. My voice had returned full force, but I had trouble getting my thoughts out verbally. Mr. N. helped me emotionally as well. I was able to talk with him, and he listened patiently.

I received a letter from a fellow patient, years later. He, like I, still worked at development.

I had trouble with some stairways and all escalators. My head would feel as though I was spinning as I got off elevators. Barb's encouragement echoed in my mind as I faced each endeavor. I would hear her laughter and her words. "You can do it . . . heel ~ toe . . . heel ~ toe."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN ~ Outcast

At this point in my life, I was still undergoing maturity development and my friends, too, were dealing with life.

I was living and growing as a grade school child, living in a high school teenager's body. The body that I lived in was developing skills that should have already formed (i.e. when it was appropriate to talk or laugh or cry. I have a 'lazy' foot that scuffs the floor if I don't consciously lift it. My equilibrium was off so I needed a walker. I still fall too easily.

I don't think I understood the impact of the way I was maturing physically or emotionally.

Sometimes I think that God gave me naïveté so I wouldn't see what was happening. Could it be that my friends were going through the same?

At age sixteen, it is a hard time to confront a near death experience of a close friend. Many of my classmates were seeing my limitations.

I wrote a letter trying to remember the fun that we had while saying that I wanted to do those things again. This was difficult, physically, as my hand kept falling asleep while writing. I asked my mom and dad to copy it for me so I could send it to my buddies. The note was misinterpreted and things were not the same.

Becky told me, years later, that she had thought I was mad and did not want to be treated any differently or special. I was not the friend she had become best friends with, which made relating to me more of a chore.

Something happened that caused me to feel ignored. Suddenly, I was a stranger in the hallways, with a handicap.

At home, I continued to slowly improve, but I felt I was an outcast from school activities. I don't remember going to after school sports as I had before. I found out later that our class basketball team had been an all-star team. I was unaware of this because I only went to school the first half of the day, went to my job at the mall for three or four hours, then went home and fell asleep.

Very few of my friends would ever call me just to talk. I had been a telephone socialite in life before, but now . . .

"Has anyone called?" Mom would ask.

"Not yet today." I said. "I didn't see Becky before I left for work, but David came to the store after school." I looked to my stack of books as a reminder of the homework that would be due soon and mumbled that David didn't stay long at all.

I never realized how hard it would be to quit playing my French horn, even though the quality would never have been duplicated. I think, now, that it was like losing another friend.

I talked to Mr. Beickman, my band director, in his office about dropping out of band. I explained that it 'hurt' to play, physically and emotionally. I could see in his eyes that he was disappointed in me. My heart ached. He had been a French horn player himself. Didn't he understand that I was disappointed too? I felt as if I was a quitter.

I now realize that everything that happens affects everything else. The people we meet, the relationships that develop in our lives, and the emotions we share are all directly due to the choices we make.

God's encouragement is present and available as we stay focused on Him. "Don't give up" God says. "I am right here for you and I love you."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN ~ David

It was late summer 1994. Our church had a picnic planned at a local public park. The day was warm and sunny. Different groups of people were enjoying the day. I remember that it was during a time of leisure after lunch, I had chosen to go for a walk.

"The tower!" I thought to myself. In the center of the recreational area was an open tower with enough room at the top for what I had surmised to be a quiet time to reflect.

It was a beautiful day as I looked around from my perch fifty feet in the air. I looked down toward the bench on ground level and thought I recognized someone seated.

"Reebs!" A nickname that I gave Becky in eighth grade was uniquely recognizable.

"Sherg!" She said, retorting with another nickname from the past. Our paths had not crossed since high school. Would she want to talk to me?

Becky tells me now, that she saw me negotiating the stares making my way down to see her. She was watching me with confused feelings attacking her. A question haunted her in the way an ethical scenario taunts the minds of philosophy experts. Should she tell me the news? Would she be a friend if she didn't? Would I be receptive if she did?

When I reached ground level, I approached her. Becky did not appear to hold a grudge at all. Our parting friendship had been a traumatic time for me; one that I tried to repress. I was pleased that we could share laughter and small talk. I still had trouble with balance and getting my words clear, but she seemed understanding.

We had informed each other when our daughters were born ten years earlier and our sons about four years after that, but our communication was not consistent.

"So, did you hear about David?" She asked.

"What now?" I laughed.

"He has AIDS."

Silence and shock covered my body. I was stunned and Becky must have seen it in my attitude change. She confirmed what she had said by repeating it.

"Yeah, he was diagnosed positive for HIV. He lives in San Diego, California."

The rest of our conversation is lost to my memory.

I went home to find David's phone number, but I couldn't remember if I had it. What would I say anyway? My mind was full of questions, but none were the right ones to ask.

When I finally located the number, I also found the words.

"David, hi, this is Sherg." I used my nickname, "What's going on with you today?"

"I'm fine," He said. "And yourself?"

"I'm okay." I paused to confront reality. "Uhhh . . . but David, I heard something."

"Go on."

I asked him, and he confirmed it. We talked for an hour, reminiscing about the past. We discussed the weather in California and how it differed from Indiana's climate. We talked of these insignificant, safe subjects, but I never asked him how he contracted the disease. My position was not to judge his lifestyle, but rather to show him God's love and mine in facing his condition and its looming threat.

I made plans to call him the next week and continued to call him each week for two years.

"A new employee started at work today. He seems like a really nice kid" My description of people I worked with was usually based on the way they treated others.

"Is this going to be another one of your projects?" David had been used to my way with people. I often tried to understand their point of view.

We talked about work and my family and sometimes would sit without talking, as we had done in Junior High. Just knowing that the other one was there was comforting and common for our conversations. The calls were made each week with the knowledge of my understanding husband.

David came back home to Indiana for a final visit. Becky and I made plans to see him. She lived an hour drive south, but planned to pick me up and go together. When she turned into the driveway, I came out to the car. "I just called Fatheringham before you got here." I used another one of our familiar nicknames for David. "He said his mom is going to be gone for a while so we have the house to ourselves."

"So, you want to party?" Becky joked.

We drove the forty-five minutes to his parent's house to meet with him. We laughed and exchanged humorous quips the whole way, both unsure of what we would face when we arrived. The two of us knew humor to be a great tension reliever. That was our way of relating in situations.

Our visit was short, but valuable. Becky brought a camera, which I will always be grateful for. The pictures we took will forever be for our memory of the day.

Becky was not able to come with me when I returned the next day.

"Ready to go?" I asked David when I arrived at his parent's house. He walked over to the passenger side.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Just around." David was used to my indecisiveness. He opened the door and saw a container marked with his name on it in the seat.

"What's in the bag?" he asked.

I smiled and reached in to pull it out. It was the picture of the sailboat that he had painted for me when I was in the hospital.

"I wanted to have you sign it." I explained. He didn't want to so I played the 'guilt trip card' saying, "Well, I guess you can next time you're home."

I am not sure what made me say it like that, but I think he and I both knew that he wouldn't be coming home again. Was it a nice way to put it? – I think not. Did he sign it? – Yes.

David went home to California and the phone calls resumed. Several months went by before we talked about God's love. Oh, I had mentioned it before, but this time, he had questions.

"He loves you, no matter what you do." I continued to share with David. He asked me if that was it, and he talked with me more about Jesus Christ.

I said, “David, things happen. People change and the world changes and sometimes it feels like the bottom drops out of your life, but God does not change. He knows what you are going through and He loves you.”

David thanked me and asked what he needed to do. I didn’t want to turn him away, so I prayed a simple prayer that I had heard in my daughter’s church play.

At that moment, a long time friend asked Jesus into his heart and life. The Holy Spirit led me in this prayer with David, and I will forever give God the glory for letting it happen.

When I got off the phone, my inner self felt so encouraged that I called Becky to let her know what had happened. David was losing his sight and couldn’t read so Becky sent him an audio recording of the New Testament.

In March, 1996, I made my usual weekly call. David’s dad answered.

“Oh, hi” I said. I didn’t know that they were in California. “Is David there?”

He paused, “Dave passed away on Tuesday.”

I knew that he had been getting weaker. Our phone conversations had been shorter the past few weeks. I also knew he would die, but I was still shocked.

After a long pause I was able to say my condolences and he told me that David appreciated my calls. I never heard of any funeral for him and my contacts were immediately discontinued.

Becky and I still send e-mails on occasion. Our own lives have moved on, but we will not forget our Jr. High School trio. We experienced times shared as Sherg, Reeb & Fatheringham.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN ~ The Purpose

I became a volunteer in a local hospital, in the physical therapy department. I was to go to patient’s rooms and transport them to PT. At times I would help prepare a sitz bath with the additives prescribed. Often I encouraged patients as they did exercises on the mats or walked the parallel bars.

It has been over thirty years since that day in July, and I am still showing signs of plateau ~ improvement ~ plateau, just as the nurses from the hospital suggested to my parents. My clavicles healed overlapped which makes me appear to have no shoulders. I continue to have some balance issues and my short-term memory fails at times. I was diagnosed with a chemical imbalance as a result of my head injury, thus I take an antidepressant.

In 1981 I met a man that had come in to the restaurant where I worked. He was very cute, in my opinion, and looked like he prayed before he ate. I will always remember that this was what God used to attract me to him. We were married in 1983.

My computer screen flashes that I have a message. I am facing an entry left by a distraught mother. This notification is one of the messages I receive regularly by e-mail. I have been visiting people via computer as they share their hospital stay. The families that I visit share information with me during hospitalizations, cancer treatments, surgery and recovery, an accident or injury ~ thanks to the venue of the “CaringBridge” website.

I feel blessed to have this connection with people, because everyone needs a visit and a prayer. I want to share my story of encouragement with others to show the love that God gives.

We have been blessed with two children, a son-in-law, and three grandchildren. I tell my granddaughter to thank God for the blessings we have. She looks around and begins to pray.

“Thank you, God, for the trees. Thank you, God, for the sky . . .”

Everyone has a function in this life, as for me; I was saved for a purpose. It is for this purpose that I write.

To God Be the Glory!

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