

Seeds of GRACE

WESTINA MATTHEWS wants you to know that the smallest measure of faith can take you through your darkest night

“I fell on my knees, praying and crying, the gun still in my hands.”

The week I was to leave home for graduate school in Chicago, my mother presented me with a mustard seed, suspended in a tiny glass bulb and hanging on a gold chain. “I don’t have much to give you,” she said. “But remember this: So long as you have the faith of a single grain of mustard seed, all things are possible.” That tiny seed, as a scriptural metaphor, makes a powerful statement about how just a glimmer of faith can elevate us above what at first seems insurmountable.

That necklace rested against my hopeful heart the day I married my first husband. Ten years later, then living in northern California, I would cling to it as the marriage disintegrated under the weight of neglect, loneliness and broken promises. My husband and I had naively spoken our marital vows without fully comprehending the level of compromise, common vision and cooperation required for a union to thrive.

As our bad marriage worsened, I continued work on my doctorate in education, and in July 1980 I made plans to leave our home for the University of Chicago to defend my dissertation. The day before my scheduled trip I asked my husband if we could drive along the coast, share lunch, see a movie, simply spend time together. Without answering, he left for work the next day at 8:00 a.m., his usual time. By 2:00 the following morning he had not returned home. Despairing, crying, enraged and not entirely in my right mind, I remembered that he kept a fully loaded gun in the closet. I went to retrieve it, taking it into my shaking hands. Then I sat on the couch and waited.

At some miraculous point that night, I fell on my knees beside that couch, begging God to keep me from inflicting any harm and to just get me aboard my flight the next day. I fell asleep on my knees at the couch with the gun still in my hands. I was still in that position at 5:00 a.m., when my husband woke me up. Assuming I had contemplated suicide, he took the gun from my hands, saying that he didn’t want me to ever again think about hurting

myself. I whispered, “Thank you, Jesus,” knowing I had been saved.

But the marriage was over. I left the West Coast for the Midwest later that year with two suitcases, \$50 in my purse and my heartbreak. I ably defended my dissertation and set about living into a future girded by my steadily growing faith. What I’ve learned from divorce—from going hungry while attending graduate school, from working my way up the corporate ladder, enduring a near fatal illness and other life-changing experiences—is that challenges and difficulties forge a better person.

After my failed marriage I began putting every aspect of my life, big and small, through a sacred exercise. I learned how to draw the broad outlines of my desires, how to get quiet and listen for a divine response to my questions and dreams. I learned to literally write down and refine on paper what I desired. And God’s answer always came. I made my first list 25 years ago to launch a new career in a new city, then nine years later to find an apartment that was heaven-made just for me. Three years later I wished for a loving relationship, which grew into a nourishing second marriage.

Our wish lists, whether sent up in urgent prayer or deliberately set down on paper, shouldn’t be frivolous or so specific that they allow no room for serendipity and grace. It’s not “I want a penthouse on Park Avenue,” or “I want him to be 6 feet tall.” The real question is whether our quest for the right job, right condo, right friends, right romance is, as the Scriptures put it, “good, honest, beautiful, lovely.” Now, when I look back on the near tragedy with my ex-husband and all the other moments of turmoil and uncertainty that have sharpened my focus and strengthened my spirit, I recognize the symbolic power of that one seed of faith that my mother gave me. Just one seed—that is all the faith God asks of us. That is all God requires to get us through the storm. My sisters and brothers, it is enough. □

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