

## **A CHILD SHALL LEAD**

### **Memoir Musings**

**by Janet Chester Bly**

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**A young spring sun pushed** through the clouds to drain snow into trickles and icy puddles. Not a day for sensible people to slosh outside and muddy their shoes. I studied an urgent to-do list instead. But my four-year-old granddaughter, Miranda, begged to hike to the bridge.

So we trekked down the road toward the northern Idaho state park. Not a quick hike either. We stopped to read signs and guess what made the prints in the end of winter drifts. We picked up treasures and litter, egg-shaped stones and pop cans. When we reached the bridge we stood for a moment and gazed at Canada geese honking overhead in V-shaped formation, pointed toward some persistent goal. I grabbed Miranda's hand and turned to go back home.

"But, Grandma," she said, "look at all the trails on the other side."

I let go of the list inside my pocket as Miranda led us down a narrow, winding path, over boulders, and around fallen timbers. Then, she stopped. "Look, an F-stick."

She picked up a small limb with two horizontal bends. A few steps later, "An I-stick," she claimed. "Oh, Grandma, this forest has letters in it. Let's find all the words and make a story."

I didn't have time to investigate fantasy stories. My few precious days off from work I had over-crammed closets to attack, phone calls to make, projects to plan. But Miranda wanted to dance in the woods.

Seconds to decide. A moment of meaning in the balance. Should I do chores or play games? I considered that age four becomes fourteen all too soon, so I stuffed my inner protests with the crumpled up list and gathered woody alphabet bits. Then we sat very still on a log surrounded by primroses and buttercups. An osprey glided above the lake like a gull. Diving talons first, he pulled up a fish, then shook like a dog in midair. A squirrel chattered at a companion as he scurried up and down a ponderosa. A logging truck braked on a far-away road. Miranda thought she could detect a snore from the sleeping trees sprawled on the forest floor.

I told Miranda about some of the stories beneath the surface—why the ponderosas grow here and how old they are; about Chief Joseph and the fight for his people, the Nez Perce tribe; about the loggers and the mill that long ago made our small village into a full-fledged town; about the fearsome fires and flu epidemic that tested the city's survival. I determined to find out more to tell her later. And I wondered what a young girl will become who wants to make stories from twig shapes.

I often struggle to discern the priority between projects and people, my tasks to do and my relationships, on any given day. That's because the seed of the adult was in my childhood. And the child still hunkers down in the adult, clamoring to be set free.

I realized at an early age I needed to prove myself, to have a good reason to intrude in my parents' lives. My fifteen-year-old mother had married on a whim because her army boyfriend got orders to head for war. He left behind a pregnant wife who had hoped to finish high school, not raise a child alone. By the time my father returned home from the battles in central Europe, the horrors of war—even though we won, even if it was just—had landmined his faith. He had large, empty spaces between his drives to get the next drink. I thought of him as my detached, far-away father. Mom had five kids within ten years, her own childhood cut way too short. At twelve years old, she left Illinois with her mother on what she thought was a vacation to California. She never saw her father again. She felt this bitter, empty hole in her memory.

We lived in a flat-roofed house on Rinaldi Street that my dad built. It had a long cement driveway that he poured himself. That's how we kids learned to skate. In junior high, when my parents divorced, I met boys at the skating rink, boys who later went to war and never returned.

Starved for attention and meaning, I tried to find a few spotlights—through singing and acting in plays. Mom attended some of these events, without comment.

Meanwhile, Grandma Frances warned me, "Don't let any boy touch you, girl," as she flipped on hours of 50s TV evangelists. Grandma Marie chided me not to marry before I completed my education, with a glance at my mother, on welfare, GED barely in hand. I stayed single until the end of my freshman year in college.

Four years later, I hung clothes on the line in the backyard of our small central California farmhouse. Storm clouds brewed overhead. One of those sun ray circles sprayed through—I call them "glory holes"—like a halo on the wheat fields. This display coincided with a long season of my seeking answers to life's mysteries. It stirred up a spiritual longing. Now that we had two babies, I realized I didn't know how to do marriage or be a parent. I loved my husband, but found marriage the ultimate invasion of privacy. I loved my sons, but felt inept in being their guide and teacher.

It was the 1960s. My perception of safe and secure unraveled with the shock of three assassinations: President John Kennedy, his brother, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. How could I protect my own children in a random, violent world? How could I help them understand how to cope in such a society?

A natural phenomenon like a glory hole can be explained by probing the structure of the sky and the elements of the atmosphere. I understood enough of the science to realize this was no miracle happening. The force of sunlight forged through the mix of gases and particles in the air produces fiery fantasies and global light shows. But the scene jarred me to ask aloud for the first time: "Is there a God? If so, what is he like? Would he care to befriend a person like me?" Or was he a distant divine who could care less about one lone woman's quest?

I pursued knowledge of God's existence, beyond my reasonable doubt. The display that day turned me around as a young wife and mother. I resolved to gain insight into the meaning behind the event. I desired to find wisdom from a power beyond my own. I found a glimpse of his shadow. I saw the creator's fingerprints still fresh on the DNA, his tracks on the molten lava flows, his signature on a rosebud, his voice in a storm. I discovered his marks dug in the planet's clay and his signature in a book. My search culminated in a gift Bible I found at the bottom of a barrel full of high school annuals. In time I believed that a baby born in an eastern manger grew up to be my savior. I connected with a heavenly Father who claimed me as his child forever, who got up close and personal, who promised wisdom higher than mine. I learned about the sweep of his righteous plan to redeem our war-torn earth. And I wondered what ideas for me formed in the mind of this God who created me.

Encouraged by a new and growing spiritual relationship, I reached out to my father with a letter. He didn't write back, but I tried to keep contact whenever I could.

In 1974 my husband graduated from seminary to pastor his first church. He had found an avenue of mission for his energies. That same June I quit my full-time job. As I drove home in my orange Dodge pickup, the windows down, nearly drowned in a perfume sea of spicy citrus breezes through the orange groves of California, I wondered what God might want me to do.

I asked my husband. "I need you and the church needs you," he encouraged. But I wanted a more specific job description.

My talents are ordinary, but I've learned to strive to find the best way to use them, to improve what I've got, to enlarge their capacity. Now I searched for a project to engage my mind and capture my will, but also grow out of who I am and where I've been.

In the midst of my quest, some friends placed a brochure in my hand advertising a writers' conference. They thought of me because of my column in the church newsletter. In high school, I created skits for talent shows, wrote some lovelorn songs, won several speech contests, and got good grades in English and Literature classes. As a wife and mother, I scribbled hundreds of melancholy pages in an unlined journal. All this provided fodder to get started in a writing course.

Finding great satisfaction in the creation of words that communicate to secret places in the heart, I tried to connect with my mother this way. The very first book I wrote was only for her—a booklet of poems, essays, and stories that related to her interests. What she wrote back to me changed our relationship: "This is a thank-you note for your birthday gift. But it is oh, so much more than that. The book is precious, and I shall treasure it the rest of my days. I was deeply moved by it. I doubt that I can express the many things it denotes. This little book has more than your writing ability in it. You wrapped up a little piece of you and sent it to me—there's no greater gift. The time you must have spent and only nice memories. I know we seem to be traveling different paths—sometimes I feel not a part of you at all, but the fault (if there be one) is mine, for you always try. Meaning no disrespect to the Lord, I would tell the world: this is my daughter in whom I am well-pleased."

My mother once told me, "I used to believe like you," as we strolled in my stepfather's walnut orchard and discussed the perplexity of the cancer cells that invaded her.

Jesus said to his disciples who aspired to accomplish great things, "Unless you return to square one and start over like children, you're not even going to get a look at the kingdom, let alone get in."<sup>1</sup>

There's a big difference between being childish and possessing a childlike heart and attitude. Childish is immature behavior such as pouts, tantrums, and a selfish lack of sharing. To be childlike infers endearing traits as when I put away arrogant pride, become teachable, long for innocence again, and have the courage to practice trust.

A child sees twinkles in the night sky and wonders if they're diamonds. I say, "Stars don't twinkle. The effect of the earth's atmosphere on the star's light only gives that impression."

A child's excited that a storm's coming. I stew about ruined plans.

A child wants to play. I want to win.

A child sees the alphabet in butterfly wings and twigs in the forest. I want words scratched straight on a blackboard or printed in a book.

The child wants adventures, never boredom. I crave safety and quiet, security and peace. But my childhood needs and dreams keep trying to break out.

'Ah, Sovereign LORD,' I [Jeremiah] said, 'I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.' But the LORD said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a child."<sup>2</sup>

Even children's faults can indicate future strengths. Signs of adult ambitions are often displayed in childish behavior. Like the child who leaped and ran through the house and all over the neighborhood who became a long-jump record holder. I've known tattletales who were future seekers

of truth and justice, by using journalism as a tool to expose wrongdoing. Finicky eaters convert to gourmet chefs. The downtrodden grow up as advocates for children, to make a better place for them.

The kid in us can heal us. As Pascal said, "Wisdom sends us to childhood."<sup>3</sup> A friend invited me to attend counseling sessions with her as she delved into her past to try to understand her present pain. She wanted to be free, to be whole, to give of herself more fully to the needs of others. One day her counselor remarked, "You never had a real childhood. Find the child in you and play."

On the way home we pulled off our shoes and waded barefoot in a park fountain. A few days later we camped out in my backyard under a full moon, sleeping bags sprawled on the deck, and threw ice cubes and popcorn at a curious skunk who idled close by. The next morning, we fingerpainted landscapes, made mudpie butterflies, hugged trees, and lay on a grassy knoll and rolled down the hill.

The curious neighbor across the road sauntered our way. "What are you doing?" she asked. "I'm growing up again," my friend replied.

I made a pilgrimage to my father's grave. I had passed the turnoff several times before, but couldn't make myself stop. Unresolved issues produced panic about standing by that site. I didn't know him well enough. He certainly didn't know me. Who was I to say a final goodbye to a man who never let me in? But I finally went—with the combat journal my stepmother gave me after he died. "He read all your books," she said. "Now you can read his." She kept his medals.

I came as an adult, but I listened to the boy who went to war. My father communicated something important to him, for the first time. Crossing the Atlantic away from his homeland, destination unknown. On the road from Simmerath to Kesternich and into the "Bloody Triangle." Pillboxes camouflaged as cottages. Cities bombed to rubble. Ink-black nights over mine covered roads. Fields waist deep in snow, steep mountains, swollen and icy streams, barbed wire and enemy ambushes. Snow-lined foxholes. One hundred thirty days of continuous combat began December 9, 1944, in the dense Hurtgen Forest, one of the bloodiest battlegrounds of the war. He listed names of those he knew killed in action, with more than a few asterisks by the ones he called friends. A faded black and white baby photo stuck to the fold of the pages. It was me.

"Jamais trop tard," says the slogan on the 311<sup>th</sup> Infantry heading. I entered inside one piece of my father's experience and tried to interpret his response to life. I was in no hurry. I warmed to these fragments of him. Perhaps it's never too late to finally learn to love.

And it's never too late to complete a longtime goal. At the age of forty six, I received a Bachelor of Science degree with a 3.88 g.p.a. It would have made Grandma Marie real proud.

I still have woods to explore. Not just any woods, but deep, dark woods. They have to be enchanted, with thick clouds of mist swirling like angels through the talking trees. I've got stories to read—not just any story, but ones full of magical places, winsome characters, and that make me laugh and cry. I've got swings to soar in—the swish of the wind, the swelling dip of flying through the air over trees and rooftops into forever. But I also must tramp some battlefields and conquer the army of invading ghosts.

That day in the forest with Miranda I thought of a book idea, about getting into wonder to explore the tales that still need to be told, the stories that feed the imagination and model courage. Stories stir me to focus on people, as well as stir me to a cause. I know the statistics that more than six million Jews died in Nazi concentration camps. The mere numbers glaze the perception. However, until I read young Anne Frank's diary, I never mourned the individual victims.

Though I cannot stem the social tide that wars against the family, I'm determined to build a spiritual house, for the sake of my children and grandchildren. I want them to have what I didn't—a stable family, a mom and dad "knit together by strong ties of love."<sup>4</sup> My husband and I have endured battles, a few of them like suicide terrorist attacks. We've survived because our foundation's poured with faith and forgiveness. The walls ring with kindness and laughter. We've remodeled with years of experiences, decades of fertile stories, our shared heritage as a gift to each other. We're headed in the

same direction. We've poured a long driveway that stretches out to other couples, so that God, through us, might ease some mess of misery.

Fastened to this end keeps us from sidetracks.

Years later I asked Miranda if she remembered that day in the forest. "No," she said, so I try to repeat the sequence of events, so she'll recall the kid between her mind's fragments. Before the stories are swept away, dispersed by the aimless wind. Before her heart gallops away. "Find something important to do and someone to love," I tell her. "That creates the best ending. And keep your hand outstretched to whatever's over the next bridge."

The distance between marveling at letter-shaped branches in the woods to catching glimpses of a divine design for the scope of humankind takes a few childlike steps of faith. I dare to believe we're all swept up in it. We can leave footprints in our own forests. We can hear the narratives of other travelers from the depths of our valleys or the summit of mountaintops and know we're meant to be. That's the power of purpose—to feel fully alive.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 18:4, *THE MESSAGE*

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 1:6-7, *NIV*

<sup>3</sup> Pascal, Blaise, *Pensees*, 1670, Part IV, 271.

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 2:2b, *NLT*

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