**PREFACE**

When I was first instructed on writing a Spiritual Autobiography (Roman Catholic tradition), we were to include Scripture verses which were especially useful for us during that particular time period of our lives or verses which spoke to us upon reflection on that time period throughout the writing process. I used the Confraternity Version of the Bible. This noteworthy version was initially translated in 1941 by Catholic scholars and sponsored by the Episcopal Committee of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. Their goal was to make the new version more readable. The translation of the New Testament was a revision of the Challoner-Rheims Version written back in mid 1700’s. Confraternity versions completed in the late 1950’s are currently hard to obtain. One of its benefits, I believe, is that it contains most of the books of the Apocrypha. I hold my Confraternity version close to my heart and have used it extensively the last 50 years. The Scripture verses herein are from this wonderful version. The Bible itself continues to be a treasury of divine revelation.

**SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

On July 11, 1957, Edward Louis Goss and Justine Josephine Zielinski were

married in a small chapel on the hills of a little village in France. They were both native Poles coming together after each enduring a brutal experience through World War II. Together, they hoped for a better future for themselves and their eventual family. Edward and Justine immigrated to America with dreams for a better life. They eventually settled in the city of Chicago, in the Humboldt Park area, which had many Poles in the neighborhood. Not long after, on August 29, 1958, their first child Alice Justine was born. Justine had significant delivery complications and both mother and child received last rites.

I spent the first three and a half months at St. Mary's hospital, having surgery for a mass at the base of the left side of my head. During recovery, I had an anaphylaxis shock episode because of allergy to the formula. I was baptized in the hospital and shortly before my first Christmas, my family had a church service, which included several family members who traveled from Ohio.

My memories of my early childhood were positive ones. Just after my third

birthday, my sister Lucy Mary was born. Until our adolescence, we became constant companions. We lived a simple and happy life. My father went to college and worked full time, while my mother took care of the family. She prepared wonderful ethnic meals and sewed most of our clothes. My mother also had a strong faith, which she credited to her father's influence and instruction. We were taught prayers and the rosary at an early age. I always admired her strength during stressful times.

My mother shared many stories of her growing up years. As a teenager, she was sent to Russian gulags (work camps) during the war. Most of the family endured the three-week journey on cattle cars to Siberia. There, work in the forests was long and difficult for Justine, who was eleven, and endured it to provide for meager food rations for her mother and younger brother Casimir. In 1942, General Anders army provided aid for the Polish POWS after a one-time amnesty agreement from Stalin. They were given freedom and thousands traveled through Russia towards the Caspian Sea, headed for what is now Iran. The expatriates were sent to British colonies in eastern Africa, New Zealand, and even Mexico. It became important for these refugees to preserve their culture, language, and faith of a people without a country to call “home.”

My mother, her younger brother, and their aging mother were taken to eastern Africa. As refugees, they received aid from the British and American Red Cross. They were fed, clothed, and trained as soldiers. It was crucial to build hospitals, churches, and schools in the jungles of Africa. Justine survived malaria four times in addition to an episode of tuberculosis. My mother had been through a lot and leaned on her strong faith to get through it all. It is a story of survival against the ravages of disease, brutal human torture, and the tenacity of the human spirit.

Justine made sure that her children were raised Catholic. We attended St. Fidelis Catholic School in Humboldt Park and went to mass on Sundays as well as Holy days. We were required to work hard in school and make all our sacraments. In addition, we grew up speaking Polish and went to "Polish school" on Saturdays. There we learned culturally significant dances, customs, and written language. I marched in the Polish Constitution Day parade in May, which continues after its 126-year tradition.

I was a very shy child and had a hard time making close friends. During my

early school years, I struggled to learn English. Our family spoke Polish at home, and we were also taught French since my mom lived in France for five years after the war. I especially had a hard time with reading. It was discovered, however not until fourth grade, that it was mainly due to very poor eyesight. I was also frequently sick and had terrible allergies.

My mother's love of her faith and church also had a strong influence on me. Most of the time, I looked forward to going to church. St. Fidelis looked like a cathedral with high ceilings, gorgeous, intricate, stained glass, beautiful marble floor, and altar. The sights, sounds, and smells of church brought about an intense sense of peace and comfort as I sat there in wonder and amazement of it all. I felt accepted and loved.

When I was in third grade, my father's brother Mitchell came to the U.S. He lived with us for a while, and then eventually moved into the apartment downstairs. He spent lots of time doing fun things with Lucy and I, including reading children's books he brought from Poland, He even taught me how to ride a two-wheel bike. My uncle Mitchell also attended our church regularly and sang in the church choir. I loved to listen to him sing church hymns and often tried to sing along. On occasion, he let me go with him to choir rehearsals and join in the group. That same year my brother Edward John was born, and our family was complete.

In sixth grade, I had an incredibly special teacher (Catholic nun) who gave each of us the Holy Bible. I was so excited to receive this gift! We used it in class, but I was determined to read the entire book. I worked at trying to understand the Holy Scriptures and their meaning to me as an adolescent. Little did I know at the time, that this book would be continually used throughout my life. We not only used it during our services, but I was passionate about reading it since the sixth grade.

By the end of seventh grade, we had to move from the city to the suburbs.

Humboldt Park was a rapidly changing area and many of our neighbors had already left.

We moved from our apartment to our first house in Park Ridge. I was to attend public School to finish eighth grade. Our family joined Mary, Seat of Wisdom Church. It was a wonderful church. I felt the same sense of peace and comfort as I did in our old parish.

At the new school, it was hard not feeling like I fit in. Everyone had his or her set of friends and I was the "new kid on the block." I was teased and bullied often. In addition, I struggled to do well when it came to schoolwork.

During my high school years, I joined a local Christian youth group. We had weekly bible study, sang modern Christian songs, and had many social activities including team sports. I started making new friends and that built my confidence. I frequently turned to the Bible for words of comfort and direction in my life. We had prayer groups before school, and I was fortunate to lead a small group. It was reassuring during those teen years having our own network of support friends.

(2Timothy3:15-17) For from thy infancy thou hast known the Sacred Writings,

which are able to instruct thee unto salvation by the faith which is in Christ Jesus. All

scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproving, for correcting, for instructing in justice; that the man of God may be perfect, equipped for every good

work.

Somehow, throughout those high school years, I built up my confidence and self

esteem. Even schoolwork came easier and I started excelling. During the high school years, my father had a hard time coping with the stress of his own life. He had never really recovered from the war, exhibiting signs of PTSD, but back then no one really talked about it. When Dad was in his teens, someone had told him how important it was to fight for his country, so he lied about his age, making himself older than he really was (14) in order to be drafted. He dealt with the post-traumatic stress and depression by drinking. As the years went on his drinking got out of control. He distanced himself from the family and was emotionally unavailable for his children. On occasion, he would have outbursts, yelling at people who were not there. He kept a rifle at home and used it mostly at the wild animals in the neighborhood. I was scared when he pulled out the loaded rifle and carried it around the house. He demanded perfection from his children, and it was difficult for us to live up to his expectations.

When it came time for college, I had always wanted to go into the medical field.

I was optimistic about medical school, but my high school counselor told me since I was not a straight A student, I should pursue nursing. Even though I went through some disappointment, the care-taking role fit me well. I stayed close to home and attended Lutheran General Hospital, School of Nursing. I continued to go to church regularly and joined a Bible study group with other student nurses. It was a great bonding time. We were an encouragement to each other, and our prayer time helped with the challenges and stress of our grueling schedules.

(2Corinthians1: 3-5) Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the

Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our afflictions, that

we also may be able to comfort those who are in any distress by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so also through Christ does our comfort abound.

It was while in nursing school when I finally understood all the prescription bottles in Dad's medicine cabinet. In it were high doses of Thorazine and other medications used for schizophrenia. It was then I discerned the trips to the locked ward with mom along with the reasons for electro-shock therapy. Dad's hospitalizations were more frequent as I became older. Mom never wanted to talk about it. She always told my family it was for depression.

After graduation, I began my first "real" job at Loyola University Medical Center. Two strong Christian women, who worked the same shift as I did, became my very good friends. I became a parishioner of Mary, Seat of Wisdom Church, joined the choir, and was on the Council of Catholic Women. Father Ron Kalas was now Pastor, and his homilies really spoke to many people, including me. My two close friends went on to do missionary work, one in Sierra Leone, Africa and the other in Saudi Arabia. They encouraged me to think about doing the same.

Life was going well. My father, who had gone through recovery programs

before, received help for his alcoholism and was successful this time. He wanted to make things better. You would think that I had it all, but deep inside I felt like something was still missing from my life. I really wanted to have a child.

Sometime between high school and the end of college, I figured out that being married the traditional route would not work for me. It was now the mid-eighties and in-vitro fertilization had been available for about seven years. The costs were coming down and although I could figure out the logistics, I felt like I needed the support from my mother. I wanted my child to have the love, encouragement, and connection with his/her grandparents, aunt, and uncle.

I remember the conversation vividly like it was just yesterday. My mother was both angry and upset. I was told that if I did not have children using the "traditional" route of marriage first, I would be disowned from the family, and she would no longer call me her daughter. It was extremely disheartening and left me no alternatives.

I realize now in hindsight, I overlooked many "warning flags" regarding dating one of the new men I met while out dancing with a woman friend. Over the first few months, he exhibited episodes of bi-polar behavior. His mother confirmed that, in addition to a learning disorder. Continuing this relationship was probably not a good idea. We were not compatible in some ways and he had a very bad temper. Nevertheless, I wanted so badly for things to work. I was willing to do whatever it took to stay together. I needed so much to be wanted that I would do about anything, even if it meant sacrificing who I was. A year from the day we met, we were married.

(John 5: 39-40) You search the Scriptures, because in them you think you have life everlasting. And it is they that bear witness to me, yet you are not willing to come to me that you may have life.

On Nov. 27, 1987, the day of the wedding when it was time to walk down the

aisle, we realized my father still had not arrived. We tried to stall as long as possible. My brother stepped forward. He offered to be the one to take me down the aisle. It made sense that he be the one. We had tried to be there for each other even through very difficult family times. I was very proud and happy to have my brother at

my side. My father did eventually arrive part way through the ceremony. Though I was happy to see him, there was a feeling of disappointment, as I did not understand God's plan at the time.

The stress of marriage and change in lifestyle was difficult for us but proved

especially difficult for my husband. Tensions rose high when faced with day to day

problems and I became the victim of emotional, verbal, and physical abuse. Meanwhile, my father's health was failing. This caused him to fall into a deeper depression. Despite intense treatment, he continued to feel helpless. On April 15, 1988, the grip of depression had won, and my father took his own life by hanging himself in the basement.

(Psalm5:1-4) Hearken to my words, O Lord, attend to my sighing. Heed my

call for help, my King and my God! To you I pray, O Lord; at dawn you hear my voice; at dawn I bring my plea expectantly before you.

My sister was to be married three weeks after the funeral. They decided to go

on with the wedding as planned. My brother walked my sister down the aisle on her

special day. It was then I then realized our God's plan.

Dealing poorly with my huge loss and the continued stress of my marriage pulled me further away from the Church and God's Word. I attended when it was convenient for me. Moreover, much of that connection I had with God left me as well.

The years passed quickly and could be compared to a bad roller coaster ride. I

deeply desired children despite the difficult times. Somehow, I convinced Russ it would be a promising idea.

Starting a family in your mid-thirties proved no easy task. With much stress in

my life and an overwhelmingly busy work schedule, month after month passed with

anticipation and then disappointment. Even though I remained open to the idea of

adoption when approached by my husband, I began to wonder what was wrong with

me. Why had not God chosen us to have children of our own? Family and friends

prayed for us.

(Matthew 6:25-27) Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or, ‘What shall we drink?’ or, ‘What shall we put on?’ (for after all these things the Gentiles seek); For your Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things shall be given to you besides. Therefore, do not be anxious about tomorrow; for tomorrow will have anxieties of its own. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

Nearly a year later our prayers were answered. We were going to have a child

of our own! I bonded immediately to the life within me. He or she would bring us hope

and joy! My thoughts daily would turn to our new gift. This was to be an incredibly happy time in our lives, but the prospect of having a child brought more stress to our

relationship. The abuse escalated.

Nearing the end of the pregnancy, we needed to think of the "perfect" name for

our child. We eventually found out through ultrasound that I was to have a girl. Even though we had it narrowed down to a few good names, neither of those felt exactly right. One day as I came home from work, I found my husband poring over the book of baby names. "I think I found it!" He was so excited. I could only imagine what his idea was this time. "Elizabeth" he said. "It says here it means 'Gift from God'. Isn't that what she is?" I give him credit as this being one of his best ideas and on April 24, 1993 our beautiful baby "Elizabeth Justine" was born. We were truly blessed!

(1Thessalonians 5: 16-19) Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all things give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus regarding you all. Do not extinguish the Spirit.

We had agreed to raise our children Catholic, and had Elizabeth baptized at

Saint Thomas Church in Naperville. Although I had good intentions, I could think of

any good excuse not to attend church: it was too far from our new home in North

Aurora, I was busy with the new baby, I worked night shift at the hospital...I knew

them all.

We always dreamed that Elizabeth should have a sibling. Since we

waited what seemed like an eternity for her, we did not waste any time in getting ready

for another child. We were to wait only three months this time. Even though we were

excited at the news of having another baby, this pregnancy proved to be more different

than the first. Nearly halfway through the pregnancy, I began to bleed heavily while at work. I drove to my local hospital, and the emergency room obstetrician said there was the chance the baby had died. It was late Saturday night, and in the morning, he would schedule an ultrasound to check for a heartbeat. I was admitted and prepared to wait the longest night of my life. During the night, I asked my nurse for some water. "You can't have any water now...if the ultrasound shows your baby is dead, you're going to surgery!" Surgery? I was confused. She replied, "Well, you can't keep a dead baby inside you!" I was shocked and speechless. I never gave up any hope that there was still a chance the child within me was very much alive.

When Sunday morning arrived, a priest came to visit before the ultrasound. He

spoke to me about the fact that if the baby had died, he was surely in heaven already, as

it was our intention to have our child baptized. He also talked about how as a mother it

was important that I not give up hope. However, most importantly, he spent time praying with me. It was then I regretted giving up going to church and continuing to develop my spiritual life through prayer and study of the Scriptures.

(Philippians 4: 4-7.) Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, Rejoice. Let

your moderation be known to all men. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety, but in every prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your petitions be made known to God.

And may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts

and your minds in Christ Jesus.

During the ultrasound, not only did the doctors hear a heartbeat, but also the

technician captured a picture of our son giving his mother the "thumbs up" sign. I still cherish that picture to this day.

The remainder of the pregnancy was a rocky course, but I made it to the end of my thirty-fourth week before delivering. On September 11, 1994, our son Robert James was born. On that day of the emergent ultrasound, Robert had amazed the doctors and he continues to amaze his parents even today.

Robert was baptized at Holy Cross Church. I really liked Holy Cross. I could

feel something calling me back however I refused to listen. Having two small children and working full time added even more stress to our family life. As the years

went on the arguments and abuse from Russ became much worse. We drifted very far apart. I continued to have career goals but could not pursue them. Besides his anger management issues, Russ gambled and drank. I went to church only a few times a year and regular prayer was nonexistent in my life.

On October 21, 2000 came the worst argument. Russ became filled with rage

as I stood my ground. As temper consumed him, he began to strangle me. I genuinely thought this was my end. This was how I was going to die. Deep within me, I wanted to live, and I struggled free. I ran to the phone to call 911. This was not the first time I had called for emergency help. The officer, who spent much time with me, suggested I get counseling at the women’s shelter. He left me a list of resources. Even though I agreed he was probably right, I continued to ignore all the warning signs. I continued to sink into a deeper depression. My life was at its worst. Responsibilities and stress were at its peak. I continued to use self-destructive ways to cope as I was losing control over my life.

(Isaiah 41:10) Fear not I am with you; do not be dismayed; I am

your God. I will strengthen you and help you, and uphold you with my right hand of justice.

About seven months later, my friends also noticed I was unraveling. I

had no more emotional reserve. My depression and poor coping skills were affecting

every aspect of my life. With their encouragement, I took the first steps in getting help.

Recovery included individual counseling and group sessions. I learned that

the physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of one's life are very much inter-related.

In order to do well, I would need to work on all three. Counseling helped with the

emotional side. I started a healthy eating and exercise program. In addition, I was encouraged to get involved in church. I began to go back to Sunday Mass. There was a special sense of peace that I felt at Holy Cross. I also called one of our lay ministers, Diane, to see if she needed another CCD teacher for Saturdays. It would be an effective way to get involved and spend some time with my children as well. Diane said she especially needed help with second grade. That year, there were to be over 150 children making their sacrament of Reconciliation and First Communion. Although my own children were not in second grade, I liked the idea of being involved in an eventful year. I was so excited and happy that first day of class. I looked around the room at their curious faces. "I'm so excited to be a part of your lives this year." I began. They were wide-eyed and speechless. It felt so good to be back in a ministry!

As weeks of therapy continued, I hit many obstacles. As I attempted to

regain my self-esteem and set boundaries for myself, my family did not always like the

new me. I vowed to change the codependent behavior. There would be no more enabling and no more rescuing. My husband and his mother did not hesitate to tell me what a

disappointment I was as a wife and failure as a Christian woman. Those words cut like

a knife. I started thinking that maybe they were right and drifted back into depression.

The task seemed insurmountable. Sadness and loneliness took over

my life. Even with therapy, I felt hopeless. I gave serious time to ending my life.

(Psalm 42: 2-4.) As the hind thirsts for the living waters, so my soul longs for you, O God. Athirst is my soul for God, the living God. When shall I go and behold the face of God? My tears are my food day and night, as they say to me day after day, "Where is your God?" Those times I recall, now that I pour out my soul within me, when I

went to the throng and led them in procession to the house of God, amid loud cries

of joy and thanksgiving, with the multitude keeping the festival.

Several days went by. A friend of mine, whose husband had started classes to

become a Deacon, asked me about the "Liturgy of the Hours." I not only told her what

I knew but also assured her that she could have all my volumes. I did not have any use

for the books anymore. One night, I searched the basement boxes for her books. I found

them, a little water damaged from an earlier flood, but very readable. I was sure her husband would find them helpful. On top of the books, I also found my old Bible given to me by my 6th grade nun, that I had used from grade school through college. It was perfectly dry! In it were my notes from bible study. Scripture references to God's love and comfort. I stayed up late looking up each one. The words that I had used before to help others and myself were speaking to me again!

A week later came a woman's retreat, Christ Renews His Parish (CRHP). A friend, who thought it would be a promising idea to give a weekend to myself, invited me. The timing was perfect. CRHP reaffirmed my walk with Christ. I realized I could not go on any longer in this life without His he1p. His words are the constant source of strength and nurturing missing from my life. God now has control of my life and leads me, leaving me with a sense of peace. The power of the Holy Spirit had truly touched our lives that weekend. The following year, I was one of the speakers at another women’s retreat.

(Psalm 103: 1-5.) Bless the Lord, Oh my soul; and all my being, bless his

holy name. Bless the Lord, Oh my soul, and forget not all his benefits; he pardons all

your iniquities, and heals all your ills. He redeems your life from the destruction, he crowns you with kindness and compassion, he fills your lifetime; your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

After two years of counseling, I finally was strong enough to file for divorce. I had lost 175 pounds over the course of a year and a half. I ran many Chicago Area Runners Association events. Several times, I received medals for my age group/division. I was honored twice at their annual dinner celebrations. In 2003, I ran a half marathon in Anchorage, Alaska raising several thousand for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. It felt good to be getting stronger physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

In 2005, after I ignored many of the warning signs, my Elizabeth entered the hospital for treatment of anorexia. She had gotten down to 72 pounds on her 5 foot 2-inch body. Her heart rate was extremely slow. One of the doctors on staff told me if I had waited another week, I might have lost her. Nothing is scarier than when your child becomes ill. There is a deep feeling of helplessness. As a mother, you would like to figure out a way to “fix things” for them. The sad part is that you cannot do anything for a disease like anorexia. The affected person has to do the work. During the last four years, I had been a hospital administrator, working for Home Care and Hospice. I had long days and immensely blamed myself for not staying on top of the signs and symptoms. It was hard to get to the hospital often enough to be with her. I prayed day and night for her to get better.

(Proverbs 3: 5-6) Trust in the Lord with all your heart, on your own intelligence rely not; in all your ways be mindful of him, and he will make straight your paths.

Elizabeth spent four and a half months in treatment. I had used several thousand from my 401K for the divorce in 2003. Now I needed to withdraw more for unpaid hospital bills along with follow up care needed. I relied on my faith to get through these difficult times.

In 2005, my then current girlfriend moved in with me. She did not have a job at the time and money was tight. She wanted to study real estate and eventually have her own business. Eventually, she wanted her own office and thought we should get a bigger place for our family. Somehow, I was talked into getting a place a few blocks away. For a number of reasons, this move would later turn out to be the biggest mistake of my life to date.

Four months after moving in, Batavia had what they deemed the “100-year flood”. Most of it ended up in our finished basement. We lost our heater and air conditioner due to the flood damage. Additionally, we had over four feet of water that had to be professionally cleaned. Insurance did not cover the mess, and the cost for me ran considerable thousands of dollars.

It was difficult getting my then partner to the Catholic Church as she was raised Lutheran. It became challenging to live authentically and continue to go to a church who did not accept my lifestyle. I was afraid of not being able to receive communion, which was something I dearly treasured and needed.

Later that year, I went to an Episcopal service at Calvary Episcopal Church. It was on All Saints Day and I found the service very moving. I felt very accepted and we joined the church a few weeks later. Eventually, I became involved in several ministries at the church and in the community. I made some wonderful friends as well. About a year later, I was officially received in the Episcopal Church.

(Romans 8: 37-39) But in all these things we overcome because of Him who has loved us. For I am sure neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The days at Loyola were getting increasingly difficult. Employee cuts were made and there were only two of us to take care of a 500-bed hospital in respect to discharges with Home Care and Hospice. I eventually left Loyola for an even more grueling and stressful job as Hospice Coordinator. I had to lead two teams of nurses at two different hospitals. My superior had an extremely bad temper and I lasted a mere six weeks before giving up.

I spent the next two years trying to figure out where life was calling next. Several of my close friends thought it was the perfect time to consider going to seminary and become ordained. I was greatly encouraged to read books concerning discernment and spiritual gifts. I spent much time reflecting on what the Holy Spirit was saying to me. It seemed like the barriers that were there before were now lifted. My years of strength in our God would help me make good decisions. I felt very called by God to move forward.

During that same time, Elizabeth had a relapse and was back in the hospital. She ended up needing to stay another four and a half months! Elizabeth was eventually able to get into a halfway house as part of her treatment plan and it really helped her adjust to living in the world.

Since acquiring my Master of Divinity was one of the requirements to becoming a pastor, I started back to school in 2009 to finish my bachelor's degree. I had obtained many college credits during the nursing program, but it was a diploma program. Since I was not interested in furthering my nursing degree, I chose Business School. No matter which route I would go in, a business degree could be helpful in many professions. At the time, my employer offered tuition reimbursement, which helped cover some costs of tuition.

I really enjoyed going back to school. I excelled in the honors program and received six scholarships to go to Europe for a travel abroad class in the summer of 2011. It allowed me to complete research for my honors Capstone Project. This experience was an incredible opportunity for someone who loved to travel. I still cannot believe I was chosen for the scholarships. I felt so blessed and honored. Our class traveled to Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and England. Six countries in five weeks were challenging with classes held very early in the day, but I enjoyed most every minute. Additionally, I was able to travel one week ahead of my class to complete my research in Rome, Italy. In the evenings, I enjoyed the beautiful historic sites of Rome. There were so many beautiful cathedrals and historic buildings to explore. This experience was an incredibly happy time in my life!

I finished my undergraduate degree in May of 2012 with high honors. Unfortunately, with all the stresses and expenses since 2003, my 401K was depleted. I graduated with no job prospects and $3.98 left of life savings. I considered a homeless shelter. I had some friends in Indiana who offered to care for me until I could get on my feet again. It was very depressing to leave Illinois after 54 years especially since I did not know many people in Indiana.

By being focused on finishing my degree, I had ignored my failing health. I had not been to a doctor since Robert was born (eighteen years) and had multiple serious symptoms that were of concern. Two months after graduation, because of how horrific I felt, I had no choice but to finally seek out medical care. The challenge was to find someone who would see me with absolutely no money for care and Medicaid pending. After three days of phone calls, I was able to get to a Purdue Family Health Clinic. The nurse Practitioner’s phrase of “What brings you in?” was met with my weeping, “I think I am dying.” That day, I was put on eight medications and had referrals to see other doctors. Plans were made for a spinal MRI and other tests once Medicaid was approved.

(Romans 5: 3-5) And not only this, but we exult in tribulations also, knowing tribulation works out endurance, and endurance tried virtue, and tried virtue hope. And hope does not disappoint. because the charity of God is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Shortly after, my pap test came back “suspicious” and required a biopsy by two different physicians. That resulted in the dreaded trip to Indianapolis to see an oncologist who recommended surgery after completing a variety of her own tests. Although I was scared of the surgery, I was more afraid of the possibility of chemotherapy and/or radiation especially with no family or support people nearby. I was going to Saint John’s Episcopal Church since moving to Indiana, the associate pastor, Hillary, of Saint John’s was genuinely supportive. Hillary was wonderful in helping me focus on my faith and the strong relationship with my God to get through this challenge in life.

During the surgery, I lost my blood pressure for one hour and thirteen minutes. An emergency was called to the operating room. I was hemorrhaging from an accidental ripped artery when my uterus was removed from my body. A code was called, and extra surgeons arrived to help with my case. After the hour and thirteen minutes, a decision was made to do a laparotomy to find the source of bleeding and repair it. What was supposed to be an hour and a half procedure and discharge the following morning turned into eight-and-a-half-hour surgery along with a trip for me to the ICU on a ventilator. I received five units of blood along with many crystalloids to recover my hemodynamic status. The doctors gave me potent medications to relax all muscles so I would not fight against the ventilator and other medical equipment. However, what was the most life changing for me, was what happened during the hour and thirteen minutes of no blood pressure and emergent code in the operating room.

Studies show that near-death experiences (NDE) are a common human experience. I continue, even to this day, processing, reflecting, and discerning the details of my awe-inspiring experience. As this spiritual autobiography is already lengthy, and near-death experience details could fill a book, I will briefly summarize the specifics of my incident. I am convinced human words are inadequate to describe the vivid event.

It began with what I know to be God holding me very close. I felt so much serenity and joy to be in the arms of God. He (although no actual gender exists for God) knew everything about me: all my experiences, challenges, concerns, thoughts, and joys for my entire life. We were surrounded by vivid light. In the beginning, He told me he wanted to show me something. I was lowered to an initially dim gray area but as we traveled deeper, it became quite dark and dreary. I was firmly held above what I saw and the entire time our God never let me go. The horrors of what I witnessed still terrifies me and it is hard for me to lend extended periods of time for processing or evaluating details because of the terror I experienced.

Initially, I saw a few people, but with time and traveling further, I saw more individuals. They were sobbing. Their images had looks of dread, loneliness, and hopelessness. Blood and cuts could be seen on many. There were large shards of bloody glass on the floor and something, which to me, looked like dead animal carcasses. However, I am still uncertain as to what exactly that was. Some of the people had what appeared to be their necks hyper-extended gazing up and what appeared to be the area where their eyes should be, filled with great fatigue, anguish, and fear.

After some time, God told me it was time to go. I was lifted from this horror back toward the vivid light. In this light, I felt such joy and incredible peace. I wept hard at the relief of completing life’s challenges. Earthly life was too hard. I could feel God’s unconditional love for me and that made me cry even more. Even as I try to describe this to you, I am overwhelmed with the ultimate joy, serenity, and reverence of those moments.

Regrettably, God told me that I needed to go back my earthly life. I begged Him not to let me go. Repeatedly I kept pleading “no.” He told me my time is not now. In addition, I was told I needed to continue to treat others with love and kindness, and that He will always be with me. God said I needed to continue to be His disciple, and help others reach heaven and attain eternal life. With that, my NDE was complete.

When I awoke, I was told by the medical team that I was in the ICU. I was intubated and I started to fight the ventilator, which was supposed to be doing the breathing for me. I motioned with my right hand that I wanted to write something. The nurse gave me a clipboard with paper on it. I first wrote “tube out.” I was told it was not time yet and with that, the nurse and respiratory therapist bagged me with the ambu-bag and suctioned my lungs. The second thing I wrote was “call Hillary.” My “friend” sitting at the bedside ignored my request. Later, after discharge, I was given that very piece of paper and comments were made at my excellent printing despite being hooked up too many devices with wires traveling in every direction.

From my research, near death experiences may take several years to integrate. The initial physical challenges I faced was the loss of my peripheral vision due to the extensive blood loss. Additionally, I have significant optic nerve damage although there is no buildup of any fluid or pressure, so this type of glaucoma is irreparable. During most of that first year, I was angry at having to deal with yet another life challenge. Additionally, my back was intensely painful requiring me to work on getting from wheelchair to rollator type walker and eventually walking independently. The eventual MRI showed ruptured discs along with spondylolisthesis in two spinal areas. There were also two types of arthritis noted, all of which made my disability case a straightforward grant by the judge. The spinal surgeon wanted to do two surgeries and quite possibly a third. I told him I refuse to have any further surgeries unless I could not walk anymore. In the meantime, over the last four years, I have been through twenty spinal injections of various medications and steroids. I have not had any since November of 2016.

Even though I had made some nice friends at Saint John’s Episcopal in Lafayette, IN, no one called or checked to see how I was getting along. The church had an interim pastor from the south. I had heard him preach for several Sundays before my surgery. His words fell flat, and he exhibited little emotion. He did not delve deeply into the topics of his sermons, and his cadence was grossly off during the service. Church attendance dropped significantly as there was now ample parking spaces on Sundays. Many of us counted the days until we could welcome our new Pastor. He would have big shoes to fill following Pastor Robert’s retirement. Moreover, I retreated into the comfort of my home, developing my prayer life independently, spending much time reflecting on what happened during the NDE, and secluding myself from others.

(Jeremiah 29: 11-13) For I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare not for woe! Plans to give you a future full of hope. When you call me, when you pray to me I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me.

Finally, I heard via the church newsletter the new Pastor had arrived and I eventually got back to church ministry. It was once again amazing to be back. The peace and joy I felt had been so missed. I could feel the Holy Spirit present during our gathering times. Father Bradley came over to the house to talk and give communion. He has a caring soul with genuine concern for people. I discussed much but I kept the NDE to myself. Father Bradley thought it would be a good idea, once I became stronger, to be more active in church via some ministry and I really liked his ideas. I was able to do the monthly church newsletter from home and eventually got back to helping part-time at the church food pantry. I was able to attend a class by the Bishop’s office to become a Lay Eucharistic Visitor. I was so much happier.

My disability was granted one and a half years after my surgery and concurrently my physician thought I should consider moving to Arizona for the better climate among other benefits. I always thought I would eventually end up in Arizona, but this was several years earlier than predicted. One of my first tasks to complete would be to search for a church that had some wonderful ministries with which I could be involved. Advent Church had online sermons, which I regularly listened to, and a thorough web site listing all the available activities. The second task was to get a home close to the church. It would be my *eighth* move since 2003. I was ready to plant roots somewhere and thoroughly researched everything related to my new location.

The church members of Advent warmly accepted me. I could be my authentic self in its surroundings. One of the most life changing ministries for me has been the Education for Ministry class. Even though it is a four-year commitment, I thirst to go even deeper. My prayer life and Bible study have fed me spiritually and deepened my relationship with God in ways that only attending Sunday service could not do. Now that I am much stronger physically and emotionally, I am once again discerning possible call to ordination. My involvement in several ministries allows me to have wonderful relationships with those at Advent along with fulfilling my need to help others and pray with them. Ministry gives me the chance to serve my community and the world.

Further, the Holy Spirit has blessed me with the gift of a wonderful woman I call “partner” and wife. Through Lowana, I am finally able to experience unconditional love here on earth. We are able to work together on various projects and responsibilities as a team. Because of Lowana, I have the opportunity to see the face of Christ regularly and have a beautiful soul giving me an example to live by. She holds me closely without hidden agenda. Lowana and I have a deep friendship and share many laughs, tears, and Holy moments together. We nurture our relationship with prayer, respect, special time together, and a profound trust, which will produce an enduring, loving relationship. For so many years, I searched for this type of love in a human person. I sacrificed money, time, energy, and myself trying to create in relationships what I have today, only for it to come crashing down eventually. I realize now I needed to wait for the grace of God to bring her to me. Together we work for the kingdom of God.

Recently, on August 7, 2016, my mother died of inoperable intestinal cancer. She battled the disease for 3 years. The wake and funeral were packed with people. Mom had touched so many people during her lifetime. Many of the kids I grew up with, who are now adults, paid their respects to this incredibly strong woman. My Lowana was at my side through it all. Elizabeth and Robert each had roles in the funeral as did Mom’s other grandchildren. I received much support in the way of calls and letters. I miss her terribly and many times, I want to pick up the phone just to talk to her.

(Philippians 4: 13) I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.

The challenges in my life were difficult and sometimes long to endure, but through them, I was ultimately able to attain gifts from the Holy Spirit, which I use for my ministries. Peace and joy fill my soul as I continue to develop my relationship with God and make Christ known to others. My involvement in several ministries allows me to have wonderful relationships along with fulfilling my need to help others and pray with them. I give all my work to the glory of God. I eagerly look forward to seeing where my life journey may take me. My perseverance has brought me hope and that hope is spreading to others I meet on the journey. I try to live more consciously aware of the Holy Spirit and am keenly mindful of the impact my thoughts and actions have on others and myself. It is with God’s grace, wisdom, and the Holy Scriptures I can move forward to handle anything in life. These three things have been there for me my entire life. We only need to accept the invitation from our God.

(Philippians3: 13-14) Brethren, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it already. But one thing I do; forgetting what is behind, I strain forward to what is before, I press on towards the goal, to the prize of God’s heavenly call in Christ Jesus.

Life continues to give me challenges. Eventually, I had to step away from Advent. The Pastor and my family had a difficult falling out. He degraded me and my disabilities as well as my sexual orientation. I was once again faced with the task of finding a new church home for Lowana and I to attend. I researched much, including finding one that would be more open to accepting us as an open and affirming couple. Eventually, I found one very close to the house. Desert Garden UCC Church extravagantly welcomed both of us! One of the key influencers is their statement of “No matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here!” It rested well with me. I am eternally grateful to have finally found a church home! Pastor Sam was especially supportive of me and my spiritual journey. He encouraged me to attend seminary and become ordained. He firmly believed it would happen with God’s help. On March 24th, 2019 we were officially welcomed as members of the church in a very beautiful and moving service.

(Romans 15: 13) Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Losing Pastor Sam to an unexpected death was especially difficult for me and many others in the congregation. Some of us continue to grieve in different ways. Our healing is happening gradually. We ask God for patience as the process unfolds.

God continues to provide great resources. We have an interim pastor now, Len, who also has been very supportive in my spiritual journey. He has supported my desire to go to seminary and has provided countless references for seminary and scholarships. I now am a Pastoral Intern and look forward to accepting more leadership opportunities. I look forward to serving our congregation and learning much along the way.

My Education for Ministry Course (E.F.M) which was four years in length is nearly complete. I have enjoyed the deep learning and challenges I have been presented. Learning the right way to do theological reflections is challenging but I think I am getting the hang of it. Taking the Education for Ministry course has helped reinforce my call to seminary and ordained life. It has been a long spiritual journey, but I feel ready and committed to excelling in seminary. I have a strong, profound desire to continue to be God’s disciple and serve my community in His name. I am eager to see what God’s plan is for me and rest on Him for strength, endurance, and trust.

(Psalm 28: 6-7) Blessed be the Lord, for He has heard the sound of my pleading; the Lord is my strength and my shield. In Him my heart trusts, and I find help; then my heart exults, and with my song I give Him thanks.

I graduated from Chicago Theological Seminary in April of 2024 with a wonderful grade point average, ready to help others grow in strength with their God. I am involved in Desert Garden Church in a variety of ways. I am a member in discernment working with the Southwest Conference toward my ordination. I am on the worship committee where as a team we work on vibrant services including music that praises God. I am part of the care team who visits those who are ill or in the hospital. I am the email prayer coordinator who sends out emails with prayer requests for my team who prays for the individuals who require prayer. I am currently working on my portfolio and web site so that I can be ready for my ecclesiastical call meeting with the Southwest Conference. I am in discernment whether to be an assistant pastor or chaplain at a hospital or senior center. The current Pastor Rev. Bill Utke is a wonderful mentor and support person. I have learned much from him which I can use for my work. He encourages me and gives good feedback on my progress. Everything I have been through in life has brought me to this moment with strength in faith and the Holy Spirit guiding me forward. Praise be to God.

**1 John 4:16-19**

God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God in them.