

Something to Believe In

Cathy Harrington

“To believe in God is impossible –
not to believe in God is absurd.” --Voltaire

I had what could be called an idyllic childhood. I was the youngest of four and my dad was my hero. He was handsome, funny, smart and crazy about us kids. He loved to surprise us on Saturday adventures and my favorite memory is when he took us to Coney Island theme park in Cincinnati. Dad would purchase a mile-long string of ride tickets, wave them over his head and holler, “Charge!” and we raced after him to the thrilling roller coaster, the Shooting Star! I can still remember the way it felt to sit with fear and anticipation as the cars climbed slowly to the first peak, stopped and dropped twisted and then turned so fast that my long braids whipped every which way and my stomach lurched into my mouth. When it was all over we begged to go again.

My father made us feel like we were the most important people in his life. He was a powerful presence, larger than life, and my memories are vivid even though he was away from home a lot traveling for work. Dad had twin degrees in engineering and he owned a consulting firm. When I was around twelve years old, he bought a twin-engine airplane for business trips, and we got to ride co-pilot on trips when the plane wasn’t full. Dad had a plaque on his desk that said, “Everybody Wins” and he lived up to it. I watched him fly Red Cross supplies into Louisiana when Hurricane Camille devastated so many towns and he was always helping folks one way or another.

We were taken to Christian Science Sunday school as young children but not consistently and probably just enough to pacify Grandmother Harrington. Dad’s mother was a rather stern woman who was a devout Christian Scientist. Mom said my father abandoned Christian Science after reading Mary Baker Eddy’s admonition against “desecrating the womb” by having sex during pregnancy. Mom told me Dad tossed the book, *Science and Health*, aside and said, “The hell with that.” Our religious education came more from example than formal training. Our parents taught us to be fair, honest, and loving and to not speak ill of others. Dad’s admonition still emerges when I find myself being judgmental or angry, “The Father didn’t make a mistake when he made that person.”

My mother filled the house with the smell of fresh baked bread and homemade cookies. She carried breakfast on a tray to my father every morning so he could watch the Today Show in bed before going to work. For thirty years she repeated this task without fail. And she’d send us off to school with lovely dresses (often matching and handmade)

with petticoats, Stride Rite shoes and lace socks, and perfectly braided hair. I rarely came home with my braids intact and those lace anklets were usually filthy and shoved down in my shoes, but she never gave up on me, and the next day we would repeat the process. She read to us every night when we were young, usually a chapter from Winnie the Pooh.

The implicit messages of gender inequality assaulted my self-esteem at every turn, like the time Dad gave my big brother (the only boy) a ticket for a trip around the world when he graduated from college. We were gathered together as a family so he could explain that it was something they could do only for a son. My mother sat silently though I know now she was furious. I also learned later that my father had a series of affairs with his secretaries and other women for years. Mom's anger came out in bursts; she once smashed a ceramic piece that was given to them by Dad's father and new wife. It was a hideous frog sitting on a lily pad that Mom hated. She hoisted it over head and said, "So there" as it hit the floor perfectly centered in front of Dad as he was eating his breakfast in bed. It was awesome! She slapped him once with a wet dishrag, too. Perhaps her small acts of defiance are what gave me the courage to break away from a bad marriage when divorce was taboo. We weren't allowed to complain either. He would often say, "Don't plague everyone else with your disabilities." The double standard and patriarchal structures were well established in my family like most families in those days. She finally left him when she was fifty-seven and she showed up on my doorstep announcing triumphantly, "I've left your father!"

1957 Wyoming Ohio

When I was in first grade and I witnessed the almost daily paddling of an African American boy in my class who was considered disruptive. Even with my immature six year-old understanding, I knew that he wasn't *bad*; he couldn't help it! Robert was mentally handicapped. My heart would pound, and my eyes blurred with tears as the principal called him into the hall where his punishment awaited. I remember feeling extremely unsafe. Robert always returned wiping tears from his eyes and I felt like I had let him down because I didn't have the courage to stand on my desk and scream "Stop! This is wrong!" I couldn't save him so I tried to love him and be kind to him. "The Father didn't make a mistake when he made Robert." Robert was the sweetest boy I had ever known. I am still haunted by this memory and the injustice of a system that failed to see the dignity and soul of a handicapped child.

When I was around nine years old, I remember hearing whispers about my father's colleague whose wife gave birth to a Mongoloid baby. She was older and "these things happen." They never brought that baby home, he went straight to a "special home" and

his mother never even saw him! She never even held him. He was sent away because he wasn't "normal." I felt so sad for the mother's empty arms and that motherless baby. Did he feel sad and scared? Would anybody love him? I remember like it was yesterday the stark sense of insecurity with the realization that I was living in a world where babies can be discarded and forgotten just because they weren't born meeting our expectations. And what about God? What about Dad's promise, "The Father doesn't make a mistake?" Doesn't it apply to birth defects? Back in the fifties these babies were called *Mongolian Idiots*. Today, the terminology has shifted to Down Syndrome. Time has rendered somewhat of an improvement in language and attitude, but we still have a long way to recognizing the wholeness and worth of each and every human being.

The next summer, Dad took us to Tarpon Springs, Florida for a two-week vacation of deep-sea fishing breach bumming. When we stopped in a small town in Georgia for lunch and gas, I was exposed to the ugliness of hatred in the form of segregation. Having never known this kind of prejudice, I was confused and scared. Now it appeared the God I learned about in Sunday school, who was *Love*, not only couldn't prevent birth defects somehow couldn't prevent hate and evil. I couldn't be safe around the adults who were running things.

When I was in junior high school, my friend's big brother, Stevie, was in a car accident. He was in the front passenger seat and was thrown through the windshield. They had been drinking. He survived, barely. A "vegetable" is what they called him. I visited him when he was brought home from that place on the hill where he lived with all the other people society hid from. He always recognized me, and I mustered my courage in the face of my anguish and fear. My faith in an all-powerful and loving God was diminishing.

My idyllic family illusion began to fall apart in my teens and my parent's personal and financial situation grew fragile and tense. Three children in college added to the pressure and I was finally an only child. We lived in a one hundred-year old house with three stories and the second floor with four bedrooms, that Dad labeled "kid's country" was silent and lonely. Mom worked as Dad's secretary (with no salary) and they worked late almost every night. My memories of this time are dark and depressing.

I wound up the only child not to go to college because I married my high school sweetheart at age seventeen. I didn't attend my graduation ceremony because my seven-month pregnancy was impossible to hide and even if they would have allowed me to attend (they wouldn't,) I was too filled with shame to go. My parents were wonderfully supportive, thank goodness. They never stopped loving me and when my son was born twelve days after my eighteenth birthday, they were proud grandparents

to the nth degree. This beautiful red-haired baby seemed to take the center stage and the other problems seemed to fade away (temporarily.)

Mom quit working and became a full-time grandmother and because my husband's mother owned four beauty shops, it seemed logical for me to go to beauty school. Not my idea and not something I was terribly proud of, but college seemed out of the question and I needed to help support my little family. The stigma attached to hairdresser or beautician still exists. Hairdressers are not generally portrayed in the media fairly as intelligent, compassionate, moral, etc. For the most part, hairdressers are not only artists, they are decent and charitable human beings. They are often in the role of ministers, counselors, and almost always, dedicated professionals.

My teenage marriage was a mess but I did my best to tough it out because it was shameful enough to *have* to get married. Divorce would be the ultimate humiliation and embarrassment for my parents and me. Shame lurked beneath the surface of my being and was always willing to surface when I ran into someone I knew. I was lined on the inside with my mistakes like a bad-wallpapered bathroom (*Poisonwood Bible.*) *I just couldn't get past it.*

Four years later, a second child on the way and I was working part-time in one of my mother-in-law's beauty shops. One of my clients had a severely handicapped child and when she brought her in for a haircut, it was *horrible*. She was spastic and violently resisted my efforts. Her mother would hold her down as she screamed and flailed. Sometimes she would wet her pants or throw up. I was filled with utter terror when I was faced with this task and at the same time, thoroughly disgusted with myself for the feelings of repulsion and fear that I had for this child. I was in awe of a mother whose life was completely consumed with caring for this child and I couldn't imagine how she coped because I was having difficulty coping with one child! How unfair is that? Where is God? What is this about? My guilt and fear took the form of deep-seated anxiety that I could have a handicapped child. It never left my mind during entire pregnancy; God would teach me a "lesson."

After enduring for too long, I mustered the courage to end my marriage and became a single parent. The struggles were great, and another failed attempt at marriage left me tired, broke, and disappointed, but fiercely independent with three small children to raise. My quest in life, besides sheer survival, was to raise children that would be good citizens of the world, and to earn my keep in the world.

But, there are no guarantees that being born healthy one remains healthy. Around this time a grieving mother formed the organization, Mothers Against Drunk Drivers. It seemed to me that so many people who have met tragedy in their lives are moved to

service. It occurred to me that I could bypass the tragedy by moving to service first. Sort of like leaving out the *middleman*. So when the opportunity presented itself, I was ready.

I had another client with a handicapped child and I seized the opportunity to face my fears. Cathy was thirty-five years old and spent most of her life in a loving home with siblings and caring parents. When her father died, her mother could no longer manage her, so she was moved to a state home (another home where we hide the people we don't like to look at) called Whitten Center in Clinton, South Carolina.

Cathy's mom asked me to go to Whitten Center one Sunday to help with a Christmas party they were giving the residents. She asked if I would go early to cut Cathy's hair before the party. I agreed and I made dozens of little sandwiches with the crusts cut off for the party. I wasn't prepared for what I saw at Whitten Center. The parents club that consisted mainly of a handful of dedicated parents sponsored the party. Most of the residents either had no one that visited them either because their parents were dead or just didn't care. Cathy was one of the *lucky* ones.

The range of disorders and deformities was tremendous. Most of the residents attending this party were over 35 and many were in wheel chairs. A terribly mediocre country band was playing for free and the ones who could, danced to the music. Santa Claus arrived and passed out gifts of lotion for the ladies and socks for the men. I saw a man with the Elephant Man's disease and quickly looked away, and many of the residents that were fairly healthy, and were the most mobile and outgoing had Down's Syndrome. My thoughts raced back to that mother's empty arms and the baby that was sent away when I was nine. It was overwhelming and my emotions were rising to dangerous levels, but I was determined to face my fears.

I busied myself at the party, serving food and drink and feeling gratified and a bit righteous that I was very helpful all the while doing my best to avoid looking directly at them. It was too upsetting. As I was pouring soda for a severely handicapped man in a wheelchair who precariously held out his glass with spastic and deformed fingers, I felt powerfully compelled to look at him. I found myself looking into the most beautiful blue eyes I have ever seen. He was a sight. His white hair was disheveled and his face unshaven for days. His smiling mouth revealed crooked teeth with remnants of his meal lodged between them and his face was smeared with cake. Yet, I was mesmerized and it felt like I was sinking into a deep blue well of love and peace. I was literally paralyzed. Words fail miserably in articulating what happened in that moment, and all I can say is that I was convinced I was looking into the eyes of God. From that moment on my life was transformed and I cried all the way home.

I didn't tell anyone about my experience for years. But I had a deep conviction from then on that the children that come into the world needing extra assistance are not just the responsibility of the parents. The "tragedy" of birth defects or illness, or whatever happens in life that forces someone to become dependent on others, falls on the shoulders of humanity or I would prefer to say, "falls into the arms of humanity." They belong to all of us and they are valuable human beings deserving of love and respect. I had found something to believe in and it didn't require a God that could make everything "perfect." My childhood Sunday school had a plaque that said in big gold letters, *God is Love*. What I believe is that God/Love is a verb. Richard Gilbert wrote, "God is a divine process we are all invited to participate in." What else is there? What other possible explanation is there?

I volunteered to give haircuts to the residents in Cathy's unit for several years, one Sunday a month, and I took my children with me every chance I got. We "adopted" a woman named Sylvia who was forty-three at the time and when I went to cut the residents hair, we enjoyed taking her out for lunch and supplying her with gifts and clothes. Sylvia had a mischievous twinkle in her eye and her sense of humor was delightful. She loved coloring books and dolls and was a skilled con artist and she found me an easy mark. She became a very important person in our lives.

The gifts I received far outweighed my efforts. I enjoyed the challenge of crafting unique styles for each of them for which they made me feel like a hero. One afternoon, after a long tiring day of haircuts, and I was looking forward to the solitude of my hour-long drive home through the beautiful serene countryside, they brought me one more client and my heart sank. As she was led towards me, I couldn't imagine that even with all the talent I could muster that I could help this head of hair. It looked like a fright wig and the woman resembled every conjured up witch or crone in the history of fairy tales put together. And she scared me! I wasn't sure that she would be stable enough to sit while I cut her hair. Oh dear, the only thing I knew to was to reach into my weary being and muster up the willingness to see it differently. In other words, *I prayed like hell*. And I reminded myself that she was as beloved and perfect to God as anyone.

Much to my amazement, underneath the dry frizzy mop was hiding an absolutely gorgeous head of natural curly hair. Some hairdresser (who should be shot) had given her a permanent wave and ruined her hair! It had grown out in the shape of a wild and monstrous Brillo pad. As I cut away the mess, sculpting and crafting, a magnificent coif appeared. I gently repeated, "You are going to be so beautiful." When I finished, she was! She was transformed and in her shining face, I saw that same light and love that had made the earth stand still with the blue-eyed old man. Of course it was always there, but in my fear, I wasn't willing to see it. God doesn't make a mistake, we do.

Love is a choice. I had learned to look beyond form and see the perfect love in each of them and I have grown to believe that God/Love can be found in the “eyes” of each of our brothers or sisters; it only requires the willingness to see. We are called in every moment to make that choice to love. It doesn’t require knowledge or finding the right religion, but it does require the willingness to show up fully for life. As the Deuteronomist states, Choose Life, even when the evidence is grim, even when the going gets tough, choose life and choose love.