

Introduction

From *Letting Go Into Perfect Love*

by

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When I was about five years old, standing beneath a tall eucalyptus tree at our desert farm on the outskirts of Brawley, California, I turned to my two younger sisters and said, “Someday we will be big and they will be little,” referring to our parents. Though I don’t recall the circumstance that evoked this declaration, I do remember my sisters’ nods. As we marched off to play, we were confident that this would be the case.

Over the years, I’ve thought back to this revelatory moment and wondered, why did I say that, and what did I mean? Though I don’t have an answer, Mom and Dad did indeed become little with time, their bodies growing tired and their memories slipping from reach. And we became big with responsibilities and care, but was this what I was speaking of as a child of five?

As perplexing as my youthful assertion may seem, there is an undeniable circular quality to life. T. S. Eliot wrote: “What we call the beginning is often the end, and to make an end is to make a beginning.” We leave a job and search for a new one, we end a relationship and begin another, we say our earthly good-byes to a beloved friend or family member and welcome a newborn. Our beginnings and endings blur as they repeat through one experience after another.

Haven’t we all been told that when one door closes, another opens? We may protest the platitude as we condemn the injustice, the indignity, the tragedy of our situation—whatever it may be. Our hearts may break because of the sorrow we know; our bodies may collapse beneath

the pain we endure. Hope may elude us as love withers, but with time, the door of hope opens and we acquiesce to possibility.

It is about this ebb and flow of the human journey that I write.

We learn about life through family interactions, significant events, and stories passed down through generations. Our families are melting pots of behavioral and physical attributes. As impressionable children, we adopt and assimilate these characteristics as our own, and thus we are told, “You are just like your father [or mother or aunt or uncle],” because we have innocently learned their script.

My father lived through the Great Depression, and that ordeal left an indelible imprint on him. He expected much of us and had no patience for halfhearted efforts. I grew up hearing accounts of survival, of hardships faced and surmounted. In contrast, my mother knew deep sadness. She lost her mother at a very early age and suffered that loss throughout her life. Her stories were of selflessness, penance, and sacrifice. Together my parents taught me about the great expanse of human struggle, and imperceptibly their words found a place in my heart—until the stories became my own.

Because these family patterns become part of us as impressionable children, we imagine everyone shares the same, but such is not the case. We each have a different social history that influences how we perceive and respond to life. A challenge for me may be an opportunity for you. It depends upon the lens through which we see.

Still, common ideals beckon all of us. When we are at weddings and witness lovers commit to each other, their passion triggers our own. When we watch the sun set over the ocean or mountains high, such splendor makes our hearts soar. When we feel the excitement of a musical composition or the hug of an innocent child, we are lifted beyond ourselves into bliss.

And after our minds have quieted and our bodies become still, we rest in the timelessness of serenity. Joy and peace summon all of us, irrespective of our differences. But the most elusive value, the one that encompasses all others and the one that propels us most, is love.

Our family histories, places of worship, and society in general inform us about these ideals. We trek through life looking for and trying to generate the standard we've been taught exists: unconditional love, ecstatic joy, and pervasive peace. Our intentions are virtuous, but more often than not, we fall short of our desired goal and then try to create the illusion of that which we seek. It is our created illusions that lead to secrets and untold torments. We want to believe that we have what we don't have, and we want others to think that we have found and are living our bliss.

The pages of this book invite you into my life journey, replete with childhood stories and adult meanderings. You will read of my search for love, joy and peace and will note the ways in which I tried to preserve the illusion of these ideals when I could not find that which I sought. I encourage you to listen to your heart as you travel with me. You may come to understand yourself a little differently, because the pursuit of these fundamental elements of life is a widespread quest. As you accompany me, you may also realize that your family has secrets just as my family did, and when you unravel those hidden parts of your experience, you may discover that they originated to protect both your family and the facade of achievement.

Though the state of affairs surrounding my story may be quite different from yours, I suspect you will find much of it familiar. Our joys and our heartaches are, curiously, both unique and universal. Through either sentiment, we communicate with and understand one another. The details of my life travels are as consequential as the details of yours, because we walk a shared path.



When I was a young child, countrywomen gathered to sew quilts for celebrations and passings. Mother took us with her when she met with her friends in the basement of the rural Methodist church, beside the dirt road at the edge of the sugar beet fields. We were told to play quietly with our coloring books while they worked. Sometimes we did; other times we did not and chose instead to run wild through the church.

The women stacked their scraps of cloth next to the folded yards of batting on the table near the wall. I saw my dresses there—pieces of them—and wondered about the other striped and flowered samples of fabric. To whom did these fragments belong?

Sometimes I snuck under the stretched material on the large wooden frame and listened as the women stitched and knotted. They talked about their families, about local people, about their hardships, and about love. When they cried, I cried—even if I did not quite understand. It was their emotion that spoke to me. Later I would ask Mom about what I had heard, but she always said it was *private*, not something for me to know. I was left with just strands of stories—and feelings.

“He grabbed me around the neck,” Bonnie said. “I can’t even wear my pearls now, can’t have anything around my neck.” *Why not?* I thought from my hiding place near her feet. As the women consoled her, I was left with questions—and fear. Who did this, and why?

“Mary lost her baby earlier this week. It wasn’t full-term. She got to hold it, though,” Dorothy explained. “When I lost mine, they took it away,” she said tearfully. Mom whispered something in return, and I strained to hear—something about another baby lost before its time. I desperately wanted to know more, but I never did, until many years later.

“Did you hear about Jane’s husband? Cut his arm on the blade of the plow and hasn’t been able to work since. Awful, awful,” Patty said.

“Do you suppose we could bring over dinner?” Mom replied. The women quickly agreed and then decided to alternate nights among them. I thought about Theresa and wondered if she was okay. Her daddy was hurt, and that made me sad. Was there something I should do, too?

I learned a lot through the stories these countrywomen shared. Their cloth leftovers rhythmically sewn one to another helped me see the interconnectedness of life—though at the time, I understood only that the collected and fastened snippets created something beautiful for a family in need or for newlyweds just starting their life together.

This book is a quilt of sorts, a patchwork of stories each with its own sorrows and joys, connected by and resulting in a life that is mine. I’ve attempted to capture events that helped shape the person I am now by rereading old journals, as well as reports from doctors, attorneys, and counselors. Though the stories are linked chronologically, they sometimes span years and interweave with other events. I’ve changed the names of my family members and associates because the book is not about them; it is about my journey, and ultimately the twists and turns of life that bring all of us home to ourselves.

While walking our life path, I think, very few of us would choose the obstacles presented to us. It is only later, after the storms have passed and the rains lifted, that we see (sometimes dimly) the blessings in our fate. We do not need to condone the circumstances to recognize the steps we have taken toward wholeness through the quandaries of our destiny. But honoring our courage, resilience, and love opens the once-closed door to the extraordinary.

One such difficulty for me was a physically and emotionally abusive marriage of twenty-five years. I tried in all the ways I could to fashion the model family of which I had dreamed,

even in the face of distressing impediments. But my steadfastness led me to accept my predicament because I didn't know what else to do. As the chapters to follow will reveal, over time I became less and less capable of choice. I was captive to dreams and to fear—until grace awakened me.

My hope is that in my responses to my experiences, you will recognize yourself, even though you may not have known the same difficulties. Perhaps you denied your truth in another way, thinking that you, too, were supporting a higher good.

A central component of my journey involves my children, three sons and one daughter. They are an integral part of my life story, and throughout these chapters, they travel alongside me as I wrestle with decisions that involve them.

Like mothers everywhere, I marveled at each child's birth. During those first precious moments, while doctors, midwives, nurses, and staff were busy with the birth details, I fell in love with my newborn. I would softly rub my baby's sweet head, stare into his or her sleepy eyes, and count perfect little fingers and toes. I was overcome by love, and my tears flowed. My pervasive desire at the time was very elementary: I wanted only to protect my treasured gift.

Most parents, and in particular mothers, feel unconditional love at the birth of their child. It is perhaps a human being's first glimpse of Perfect Love. Our labor may have been lengthy, the conditions of our life may have been complicated, but all such matters fade in the light of the beautiful child we behold. We are not worried about the baby's prospective career; we don't think about what schools the baby will attend. We are not even concerned about our own personal troubles—financial or otherwise. We simply want what is best for our child. Because of this fervent desire, a mother's soul is wounded if her child is harmed.

When my daughter recalled being molested by two priests and a nun, she was thrown into an abyss of despair—and I with her. The horror of what she endured sent shock waves throughout our entire family, and my devastation was overwhelming. There is no greater sorrow for a mother than to see her child in pain. I would gladly have suffered in my daughter’s stead. As you read the chapter with this testimony, my hope is that you will pay homage to the anguish you have endured and see anew our collective, hallowed journey.



Mothers know what is expected of them. The television families of the fifties, sixties, and seventies—captured on such shows as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best*, and *The Brady Bunch*—may have faded from our memories, but they have not vanished in our collective consciousness. Though times have changed, the composite image of the perfect family persists, and it is this ideal that we mothers try to replicate in our homes. Because of our heartfelt aspiration to provide only the best for our sons and daughters, we sometimes confuse what is real with what is imaginary. We may even opt for the dream and hide what does not correspond with the fantasy. Consciously or unconsciously, we decide to provide our children with what we had *and* what we think we did not have as children but wanted.

Most of us live with expectations that colleagues or friends or our communities place on us, but mothers carry a particular burden. We are measured by prior and future generations, by societal norms—and by other mothers.

“My in-laws are visiting this Wednesday,” I told my neighbor Barbara one day.

“I should paint the hallway before they arrive. The kids have drawn stick figures on the walls.”

“I don’t know about your mother-in-law, but I always check the baseboards in a house,” Barbara replied. “If there is dust, then I know that the person who lives there has not cleaned as she should—no matter what her home looks like.”

When Barbara told me this, I shuddered as I thought about my baseboards. *Have I ever cleaned them?* I thought. I tried to keep things tidy, but between my full-time work and my children, I had barely a minute on my own.

“Goodness, I have a lot to do over the next few days,” I moaned.

“Well, if you need help, give me a call,” Barbara responded generously.

“Thank you,” I replied, but inside I was thinking, *Never! What would she find besides dirty baseboards?*

Mothers live with these types of imposed expectations. So when our child does not sell all his class candy, it is we who are at fault. If our child neglects his homework or acts up, it is we whom the school contacts.

“Your son threw his backpack down the stairwell, Mrs. Taylor,” the middle-school principal said when I answered the phone one day. “He could have hurt someone.”

“I’m so sorry,” I quickly responded. “I’ll talk with him as soon as he gets home.”

“You need to pick him up now. We’re suspending him for the week. We can’t have this kind of behavior,” the principal continued.

“It will take me a few minutes to get there,” I replied. “I need to explain this to my boss.”

“He’ll be waiting for you in my office. And by the way, I know I can expect your support on this. We must have a united front!” he tersely concluded.

Without knowing the full story of this transgression, the principal expected a certain response from me, and his tone of voice communicated that he was as frustrated with me, the

mother of this young criminal in the making, as he was with my son. I had to wonder, would he have responded similarly to my husband?



We are all guided by life challenges and blessings. Much like directional signs, these hurdles and affirmations provide us with the opportunity to reconsider, to reevaluate, and to choose our way yet again. Most of our choices are mundane, but some are chillingly difficult, and sometimes our unique life prism shrouds the situation before us in such a way that we do not see the obvious. As the chapters that follow will reveal, at times I was blind to what others could plainly see.

To go back through the pages of time to write this book has been an unexpected healing adventure. As I connected my early experiences to the decisions that followed, I saw that I helped create my stories. I was not a hapless victim; rather, I was a participant. Sometimes my choices were courageous and righteous; other times, they were driven by fear and shame. As I realized my participation in some of the tumultuous events of my life, the unanticipated occurred—I began to let go of judgment, and as I did so, forgiveness emerged. Instead of chastising myself for my failings, I felt profound tenderness and respect for the person I was so many years ago. These sentiments extended beyond just me, for as I accepted myself, I accepted others as well. We all do the best we can with the decisions before us, but none of us is perfect. What is astounding is that no matter where we are in life and no matter what we are facing at the time, we can always choose a different path that can lead us to the joy we seek.

Through the process of writing this book, I realized how I was deeply supported and loved throughout my life. It was a delusion to imagine that I was alone, just as it was to imagine that I was unworthy of love. When tragedy is part of our life, it consumes us. Its coldness is deep-seated, and it can entrap our hearts, our hopes, and our dreams. We can lose perspective,

and in such a state, no words can comfort us. It is only as we look back, sometimes years later, that we regain perspective—and possibly find a deeper meaning if we have changed for the better because of what we have withstood.



When my father's mother came to live with us, my dad purchased a mobile home for her and situated it a few yards from our house. Grandma spent her time there, quietly embroidering and stitching intricate quilts. She used the leftover scraps of cloth from my sisters' and my sewing efforts. From these simple pieces, she generated beautiful spreads for the entire family. After drawing a design, she'd cut the fabric into squares, triangles, and diamonds. Then she'd sit and stitch, rocking slowly to and fro. When I sat with her, she told me about growing up in Georgia, about her father, who was a preacher and a farmer, about her three sisters. She told me she learned to read by studying a dictionary and said she always had a knack for playing the piano. Her stories were of times long past, sometimes funny and sometimes sad, and as she spoke I could see the tales were alive in the present; they filled her world when she stitched.

"I'm going to tell you what happened to me in a buggy," she said one day as I watched her sew. "You know what a buggy is?" I nodded that I did. I had seen them on television.

"Well, I had a boyfriend, and he picked me up in his buggy. We were going to an all-day singing at church. And I guess my friend ran out of dry feed for his horse. Anyway, we were about halfway to the singing when the horse had to use the bathroom. I wore a white dress. Oh, what a mess I was in. My dress was more green than white! My face became burnt red, and I cried and told my friend I wanted to go home. I fell on the bed and cried more. Then, around noon, a man called and said they wanted me to play the piano that eve. So he sent for me, and then I felt better. I hope you never go through this," she said with a smile.

I was confident that I would never encounter the same, but when I was in high school, my sister and I were driving to town in our family's old Pontiac station wagon. We heard a loud *thump, thump*, and the car swerved side to side. I pulled off the road and noticed a flat tire. Neither of us had ever changed a tire, but for the next several hours, we labored to do so. When we finished, our clothes weren't green like Grandma's, but they were black from the tire and covered with dirt. A man drove by just as we were finishing and tried not to laugh.

"Well, I'll be! I've never seen anything like it," he said. "I didn't know it was possible."

"What are you talking about?" I said, becoming frustrated by his amusement.

"You've put the tire on backwards," he laughed.

"What? I didn't know there was a front or back to a tire," I said.

"You can make it to town," he added. "But you'd better go to the filling station and have them put it on right. Don't try to drive farther on it as it is," he warned, still chuckling.

"Okay," I responded, thinking anything but kind thoughts.

I never got to tell Grandma this story, but I think she would have been amused. It wasn't as dramatic as hers, but much about it was the same.



My most beloved quilt was a patchwork of a star radiating to the four corners of the comforter. This giant mandala of color had life sewn into it: my lilac polka-dotted Easter dress, my sister's flowered apron that earned her a blue ribbon at the fair, my mother's seersucker blouse—all were there, the remnants of cloth that we no longer needed. When I finger the fabric pieces, some soft, some crisp, I see my grandma—her hands stiffened and her eyes dim with age. I hear again her stories of sorrows and joys, and I see my own. This quilt, more than the others, pulses with the beginnings and endings of life.

I don't sew like I did as a child. My writing has become my stretched cloth; it is the medium for my stories. Just as I unfold my grandma's quilt and allow my eyes to wander through the maze of colors and print designs, reliving the tales now long gone, I invite you to do the same with this book.



I recently purchased a canvas print by the artist Clare Goodwin, of a mandala entitled *Soul's Stillness*. This beautiful artwork draws one into the center, where light emanates. As lovely as a stained-glass window, the mandala reaches beyond time and speaks to heart reality. Clare quotes John O'Donohue in explaining her work: "When your way of belonging in the world is truthful to your nature and your dreams, your heart finds contentment and your soul finds stillness. You are able to participate fully in the joy and adventure of exploration, and your life opens up for living joyfully, powerfully, and tenderly."

Sometimes it takes a lifetime to find such stillness and freedom. *Letting Go into Perfect Love* is about that journey.

