

My Heart's Desire

By Patti Jackson

The first time I met Laurel Lee, it was through her first published journal, *Walking Through the Fire*. A good friend from Walla Walla, Washington had put it in the mail to me with a note that simply said, "I borrowed this book from our church library. It is something you need to read."

That particular summer, I had experienced an emotional breakdown. The doctors believed I had a chemical imbalance that had triggered a suicidal depression. In 1979, this diagnosis was not generally talked about. Most people still believed the theory that once you had been diagnosed with severe depression, that you could expect a lifetime of mental illness.

This type of depression went far beyond my ability to control. It consumed every moment of my day and stole my sleep at night. Completing the simplest chores, as a wife and mother of two children under the age of three, became insurmountable obstacles. I gradually became incapable of doing much of anything, as my husband of six years watched me turn into someone he hardly recognized. I believed that my family would be better off if I was dead.

I pulled the book from its wrapper. "At least reading is something I can still do," I thought, carrying the book into the bedroom. I propped up the pillows on the bed, curled up under a blanket, and started to read.

Walking Through the Fire was a daily journal that Laurel Lee had kept in 1975. At the age of 29, married, pregnant, and raising two small children at home, she was told that she had Hodgkin's disease. Her doctors told her bluntly that she would die. The journal described the confusing maze of the tests, surgeries, and best known practices within the medical system at that time. Her writing had an element of faith that intrigued me. As technicians placed lead aprons over her unborn child during radiation therapy, she quoted Isaiah 43:1,2. "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee."

The fact that Laurel and I both lived in Portland, dealt with doctors up at Oregon Health Sciences University (OHSU), and were raising small children, created a kindred spirit between me and this young author. I was in awe of her deep desire to see her children grown. "In one stroke, I cut with some mental shears that fifty-more-years river, leaving me a short stretch...I wanted the privilege of guiding the arrows of my children and giving them the exhortations that can shoot them into the high place."

The realization came to me that I had been given a great gift in life. I not only had my health, but I had been given the opportunity to see my children step into adulthood. The thought came to me that it would be a terrible mistake to throw that away. My resolve to live and reclaim my life was drawn from the well of Laurel's book.

As years went by and doctor's experimented with different medications for my diagnosis, it became increasingly important to me to follow the story of Laurel's life. I wanted to know if God allowed her to live. I wanted to know how her faith carried her through the day when her husband abandoned both her and the children, while she was still undergoing chemotherapy. I needed to know how God had sustained this young woman when she was left to be a single mom with an uncertain future. I identified with her struggle to cope with pain, disappointment, and broken promises.

When Laurel's second book appeared, *Signs of Spring*, I was thrilled to learn that Laurel was indeed still alive. I was shocked at her lack of bitterness and her determination to cope. I marveled at the miracles that took place in her life and the joy she took in simple things. Unknowingly, she had become my mentor and role model as I struggled to gain control over the thoughts inside my head. I began to believe that God could perform the same miracles for me.

Recovery from severe depression would take me on a seven-year journey that was never easy. My assignment was to learn not only how to get well, but how to stay well for the rest of my life. My counselor at Western Baptist Seminary urged me to read a book by William Backus and Marie Chapian called, *Telling Yourself the Truth*. The daily exercise was simple. For every lie that would appear in my mind, I was to correct the thought with a true statement. The quicker I could replace a

negative thought, the better. Two Bible verses became my mantra: II Timothy 1:7 and Isaiah 26:3. “For God hath not given us a spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a **sound mind.**” “Thou shalt keep him in **perfect peace**, whose **mind** is stayed on thee: because he trusts in thee.”

God was the *Only One* who could give me victory over depression. Most of my life I had allowed negative thinking to carry me into a downward spiral away from God. Now I was determined to turn this into an upward spiral and send heavenly thinking upward toward God. My assignment was to look up and to keep looking up and I asked God to give me the strength to make that happen.

In 1984 Laurel’s next book, *Mourning into Dancing* appeared. My depression had taken its toll on my marriage at that point. My husband wasn’t sure he had much more to give and was sad over the happy years we had lost. He had reached a point where he was deciding to stay or leave. I couldn’t blame him. The years had not been easy and in many ways he had pulled double duty with raising our children and maintaining our home. Similarly, Laurel was dealing with a second failed marriage. Her book inspired me to persevere. It reminded me that our lives rested in God’s hands and that whatever happened with my marriage, that the children and I would be OK. I held fast to God’s promises through this crisis.

In 1987 I realized I had recovered enough to step away from counseling and medication. It was like learning to walk for the first time. I had some unsteady moments, but by and large, I was able to sustain my own weight in the daily demands of life.

In 1988 Brad and I moved to McMinnville, Oregon and I started back to college to complete my four-year degree in Computer Science. Laurel Lee had released yet another book called, *Godspeed* telling her amazing story about how she couldn’t find anything to read one night and had randomly opened her Bible to the Sermon on the Mount. Her conversion from *hippie* to *Jesus Freak* during the 1960s described a God who would never let us go. I marveled at God’s amazing power and overwhelming love for each of us.

In 1990 God decided to test me on everything I had learned over the earlier decade. Would I be able to cope with one genuine crisis after another, without my mental health spinning out of control? Six months after receiving my BA degree at Linfield College, my husband was called to active duty in the Army Reserve. On Christmas Day he flew overseas to serve in Operation Desert Storm. In January I learned that the house we were renting had been sold and that I had less than three weeks to move out. The day after the Super Bowl, my teenage son was hospitalized for severe depression and was put on suicide watch. The *crazy gene* that had been passed down from my father to me, had somehow managed to be passed down to yet another generation and had touched our son. My physical health was slowly deteriorating.

In earlier days, any one of these problems would have been more than I could have handled. But the lessons of the previous ten years held fast and God sustained me through each of these trials. There were times when God’s answer was to walk me right back into therapy and short term medication, but I never allowed that fact to convince me that depression had returned in full force and that recovery was hopeless.

In the years that followed, I continued to watch for new books from Laurel. When there weren’t new books to read, I would re-read the old books. My desire to meet this amazing author became a voice deep within my soul. I wanted to thank her for being my dearest friend during the darkest of times.

When I learned that Laurel had become a Writer in Residence at George Fox University, I requested time off from work to take her creative writing class, but there was never time or money. After trying for several years, I let it go. Some things were not meant to be. I tried to tell myself it didn’t matter, but my longing to someday meet her lingered.

In May 2004, I did my periodic “google search” on the internet for “Laurel Lee” to see if she had any new books out. To my surprise, Laurel had just released her new book, *Tapestry: The Journey of Laurel Lee* I could not click to the Lighthouse Trails Publishing web site fast enough. Brad and I were planning several camping trips, and I couldn’t think of anything better than having a new book to read.

That is when I learned the sad news that Laurel Lee had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in October of 2003. At that time she had only been given a few months to live. As slim as the odds were of Laurel still being alive, I sent an email message to her via her editor.

“Dear Laurel, In so many ways I owe you a debt of gratitude for being a guiding light in my life and my inspiration. I thank you with all of my heart... God bless you Laurel. Thank you for sharing your life with me all these many years. My life is so much richer for having known you.”

I left for work feeling sad that I would never have the chance to meet this wonderful author and even sadder for Laurel and her family. Two days later, I received the following email from Deborah Dombrowski: Laurel’s editor.

“Dear Patti, I read your email to Laurel over the phone yesterday morning. She was touched beyond words. She wants to meet you.”

I re-read the sentence twice, blinking through tears.

“She’s as precious today as she ever was. You will love her, I know.”

It would turn out that Laurel Lee and I had been neighbors for many years, living less than two miles apart. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

Since that time, I have had the opportunity to not only read Laurel’s latest book, but to meet this amazing author in person. Laurel deals with this second battle with cancer the way she always has. Her life is completely in God’s hands and under his control. Whatever He has in mind for her life, she is willing to do. As Laurel puts it, “I’ve traveled to fifty countries during my life, but I’ve never been to heaven.”

Many of us continue to pray that Laurel will be healed. None of us want to lose this sister in Christ. I was asked to join a group of women who attend to Laurel as a caregiver during her illness. It has been one of the greatest honors of my life.

Psalms 21:2 says, “Thou hast given him his heart’s desire; and hast not withholden the request of his lips.” For me, this moment has arrived: full, packed down, and running over. My cup overflows.

Over the span of 25 years, God has brought me full circle to the point where my battle with severe depression began. In His miraculous way, God worked through Laurel to turn my life around and point me in a new direction. Laurel’s words from *Tapestry* say it all. “How could there ever have been a David without a Goliath? How can you be counted in the group of overcomers without things to overcome? C.S. Lewis was right, ‘God whispers to us in our pleasures, but shouts to us in our pain.’”

About the Author

Patti Jackson is an Oracle Database Administrator and UNIX System Administrator for Xerox, Corporation in Wilsonville, Oregon, where she has worked for the past 14 years. She has been attending the Willamette Writer’s Conference over the past six years and is currently working on a book with her son about how to help children who have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). The focus of her book is to help families cope with this difficult illness.

She has been married almost 31 years, and has two grown children. Kimberly is 28, and will be spending the next eighteen months in Garmisch, Germany working at an Army Recreation Center. Joshua is 26, has a BS degree in Biology from PSU and is working full-time for the Department of Environmental Quality in Portland. His job is to test the water quality up and down the Oregon coast and to close down beaches when necessary. Her husband, Brad, is a retired major from the Army Reserve as of 2000. He served as a medical corpsman during the Vietnam War and a surgical RN during Operation Desert Storm. Patti says, “God has blessed our family more than any of us could have dreamed.”

Recommended Reading

Walking Through the Fire

E.P. Dutton (c)1977

Published in 52 countries

Movie released in 1979-*Walking Through The Fire* CBS

Signs of Spring

E.P. Dutton(c)1980

Mourning into Dancing

E.P. Dutton(c)1984

Godspeed

Harper & Row(c)1988

Tapestry: The Journey of Laurel Lee

Lighthouse Trails Publishing(c)2004

<http://www.lighthouse Trails.com/Laurelbio.htm>

Telling Yourself the Truth

by William Backus, Marie Chapian

Bethany House Publishers

Learning to Tell Myself the Truth

by William Backus

Bethany House Publishers

Telling Each Other the Truth

by William D. Backus

Bethany House Publishers

The Healing Power of a Christian Mind:

How Biblical Truth Can Keep You Healthy

by William Backus

Bethany House Publishers

What Your Counselor Never Told You: Seven Secrets Revealed —

Conquer the Power of Sin in Your Life

by William, Dr Backus

Bethany House Publishers

Telling the Truth to Troubled People

by William D. Backus

Bethany House Publishers