

THRESHOLDS
AND
PASSAGES

THRESHOLDS
AND
PASSAGES

... portals to the life you were meant to live

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AND
FRAN LANKFORD

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DEDICATION

*For Mother,
bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, heart of my heart,
Edith Capece Howell
1912—2001
Finally!*

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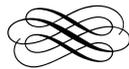
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Cathee A. Poulsen
June 27, 2007
Naples, FL



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To my husband and dearest friend, you always build me up and make me feel that I can accomplish anything. I truly love you.

Fran Lankford
June 30, 2007
Naples, FL

INTRODUCTION

*She took a step further in – then two or three steps... Then she noticed
there was something crunching under her feet.*

—C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

For many years Fran and I convinced ourselves that our lives were neatly managed and meaningful enough. We were so busy whirling about in margin-less living that even two or three steps away from the tyranny of the familiar left us breathless. We measured our lives by how many more things we could add to the day's "To Do List" without missing a breath.

The occasional, haunting whisper of a voice that intimated we might be missing something that could take our breath away was easily dismissed by the next phone call. We were too entangled in our schedules and the high demands on our time to notice anything crunch under our feet.

But the voice was relentless and persistent. Over the course of many years, and through some of the events recounted in this book, we found ourselves turning from the interstate to a dirt road that led...who knows where? We could only see two or three steps ahead.

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Thresholds and Passages is both an awakening and an invitation to real life. The life Jesus came to offer is not based on what we do, but on who we are. We are not only wives, mothers, singles, or employees. We are women; women created in His image. This is a book written by women to women (although many men have responded with innate curiosity as to what our book is about). It is a word to those who have outgrown their familiar life horizons and come to a crisis of faith where old emotional blueprints no longer work. In each chapter, you, our reader, will face a choice to walk to the edge of your old life in order to cross a threshold into authentic personhood—to enter that mystical space where everything is different. It’s the same place Moses stood as he listened to the voice that addressed him from the blazing bush: “Take off your shoes, Moses. This is holy ground.”

This is not a book about felt needs or a treatise on what to believe. It does not offer pat answers but takes a deep and honest look into personal lives with real mistakes and heartaches. It’s a book about life and how to live it. It’s story-oriented, offering a glimpse into the lives of many who have crossed from predictable, quasi-Christian living into intimate relationship with Christ.

Thresholds and Passages offers a series of portals or passageways to the only life that matters—the one lived in union with our own hearts and the heart of God. Fran and I did not feel the need to cover common subjects found in a majority of well-written Christian books for women: dating, marriage, parenting, body care, and household or employment topics. We have focused more directly on a woman’s soul and the call to find and fulfill her purpose, to practice balance and authenticity, to reflect, to play, to celebrate and observe meaningful traditions, and to value the importance of girlfriend relationships. It has a message for all women in any given life setting: married, divorced, single, old, young, employed, retired, with or without children.

This is a woman’s pilgrimage of the heart, a journey to find the lost pieces of your soul. Each threshold, gate, doorway, or corridor takes you deeper into the heart of God, who not only finds delight in you

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but desires to wrench open all the cages inside your heart until you are completely set free to be your own individual self, the person you already are in Christ.

Thresholds encourages your risky curiosity but does not exempt you from trouble or sorrow. Travelers beware. To become a pilgrim of the heart, a woman who surrenders to the summons of Christ, is to encounter dragons lurking just beyond the doorway. It invites you, through Scripture and anecdote, as Jesus did, to count the cost and then press forward. To turn back is to miss the dangerous wonder, the mystery of godliness, and the adventure of a lifetime. Saying “yes” to the beckoning call is to hear the snow crunch and breathe the cold air, to smell the wood smoke and sit in a circle around the fire.

The primary aim of the book is to awaken us all to the beauty, intimacy, and wonder of following Jesus, and to provide inspiration and footpaths that enable us to risk surrender to a Christ who is always good but never predictable. Its purpose is to show, not tell, that life is not measured by the number of breaths we take but by the moments that take our breath away.

It still surprises Fran and me to encounter people at conferences, retreats, or even at social gatherings who tell us, “I’m not seeking something more. I’m thoroughly satisfied with my relationship with Christ.” In our thinking, this is akin to standing on the north rim of the Grand Canyon and saying, “Nice hole.”

How, we wonder, could we have ever been satisfied with our journey in Christ in light of these words:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

—Romans 11:33, NKJV

We happily count ourselves among the dissatisfied—the company of those who seek for more. As long as we can say we haven’t yet reached

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the depth of the riches, wisdom and knowledge that are to be found in Christ, we'll be moving forward on that search. We invite you to come with us, to meet us in the golden sea. It's where we'll be.

PART I

ACHING FOR
SOMETHING MORE

CHAPTER 1

STANDING AT THE THRESHOLD

A Defining Moment of Choice

All of us go through life from one threshold to another. And at those thresholds, most of us stand on very tentative legs, wanting to take a step, but we're hesitant, unsure. We wonder what lies ahead? And what has to be left behind in getting there?
—Ken Gire, *Windows of the Soul*¹



Look! Here I stand at the door and knock. If you hear me calling and open the door, I will come in...
—Revelation 3:20, NLT

We stood in the center of our family room looking at each other, neither of us knowing what to say next. I had just asked Bob a question, and though he answered truthfully, it was the wrong answer. At least it wasn't the answer I wanted to hear. I stared at a little crease in the left sleeve of his otherwise neatly ironed shirt. *How did I miss that?*

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I thought. Bob looked down at me from his 6'4" advantage and waited for my response. When none came, he simply walked away.

It's over, I thought. *My marriage is over*. Bob's secret left me stunned, almost as if he'd slapped me. Was it my imagination, or had the ground beneath me just shifted? I kept standing there, waiting, I guess, for things to go back to normal. A little shaft of waning sunlight bounced off the silver frame of our twenty-fifth anniversary photo. There we were, glasses raised, broad grins on our faces. Was that only five years ago?

During the last few difficult years, with finances stretched thin and three teenagers stretching us even further, I had clutched the one stable thing I could trust—my marriage. Bob was my last reassurance that life wouldn't disintegrate around me.

This can't be happening. Surely it isn't true. My husband is not capable of this kind of betrayal. I remembered reading somewhere that if the earth shifts and mountains are plunged into the sea, God will be there with the help we need. A present help, or something like that. *Where are You now, God? Why can't I feel anything?*

Now What?

Bob's disclosure left me rigid with disbelief and paralyzed with the "now what?" syndrome. Processing this world-tilting event differed little from hearing news of a natural disaster or death of a loved one. A wave of nausea, and then a black fog fell that cloistered me from the frightening weight of the moment. I couldn't feel or think. I had no paradigm for this. Icy fingers of dread slipped into my soul as the questions assailed me: *What about our family? Our ministries? How will we face people?* All the pat answers I gave others now fled like scurrying mice on a sinking ship.

A hornet's nest of questions pelted me like missiles aimed at my mind. What had I staked my entire life on? What about the guarantees? What about all those Bible promises? You know the ones: If you read your Bible and pray and go to church whenever there's an opportunity,

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your life will turn out perfectly. I had believed all this and followed the directive religiously.

God, why didn't You show me? Give me some warning? Why did it have to come to this?

My mind swirled with questions, but the heavens were silent. I felt I couldn't let anyone see that Bob and I actually struggled with sin. We were leaders. This would bring loss of hope to all those whom we had counseled. People might think we weren't committed Christians, or that we weren't mature. We wouldn't be seen as being different from anyone else in this fallen world. Worst of all, people might think that God isn't real or that Jesus doesn't make our lives perfect.

Though I had no idea at the time, God Himself was chipping away at my wall of defense and spiritual pride. It was imperative that I faced these questions. In the past I had focused on doing all the right things the right way, but now I was finally face to face with the truth. Bob's choice tore away the invisible bubble of "safe" Christianity I'd created and in which I'd lived a pleasant life. The screaming question I was left with was the one I'd been quietly stuffing every time I saw a Christian struggle to overcome difficult circumstances: *If something like this could happen to a faithful Christian, what's the point in serving Christ?*

Somehow, in the midst of all this confusion, Bob and I stumbled to our mid-week service. We probably looked like a couple of zombies—soulless bodies walking in a distant haze. Yet while I listened to the message, my mind turned inward, making note of the chaos of my emotions. Something was grabbing at me, sucking me downward into a whirlpool of fear and fury.

Three of my children were adults, and I knew this news would devastate them. Their dad was their hero, their rock in stormy seas. Their image of him would be shattered. My youngest child, a son, was by God's mercy on a mission trip to Mexico at the time Bob shared his story. I looked back later with gratitude at the amazing kindness of the Lord to sequester him from watching the emotional upheaval that took place that week. At the conclusion of the week, Hurricane Andrew hit

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full force just southeast of us and we experienced 90 mph winds. Our son's mission trip was extended two extra days. Even the timing of the storm seemed symbolic.

At the time this happened, I was leading a monthly women's group of 100 women. Some of my first thoughts went to them. *How would I stand in front of them again? How could I counsel them about their marriages anymore? What would I say about my faith in God's ability to lead us through anything? I'm Cathee, the Dragonslayer. To others I am a woman of great faith who has continued to love and serve God in spite of a daughter who is an addict and has served time in jail. But I'm not sure I can go on now. How can I let these women down, Lord?*

My mind flashed back to a small booklet I had read as a young woman. It was called *The Darling of Your Heart*, and it was the story of Abraham and Isaac. It told how we could love something so deeply that it becomes an idol to us and how, like Abraham, God may ask us to lay our Isaac down.

Thoughts came in waves, often opposing each other as the battle raged in my head. I had been fighting the enemy nose to nose for the past seven years for my daughter's life, but this felt like the death blow. This time, my enemy had shot his razor-sharp arrow right at my Achilles' heel. This was my Isaac, and I didn't want to lay him down.

What do I do now, Lord? What about all those verses I believed for years—the ones with promises and guarantees? Why didn't You keep this from happening? Why? Why? Why?

The Threshold

Fifteen years later, I've come to understand that "why?" is the wrong question. It's usually where we start our journey, but it never takes us to any destination. We must find the courage to move away from that place of demanding an explanation from God and take the next step, the one of simple trust: *Lord, what do You want to show me?*

I didn't understand any of this that night. I had every right to walk away forever. But I didn't want to leave. I loved Bob and I loved

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God, even if currently I didn't like either of them. I did understand that whatever I did next was going to influence everything that was to come. I was at a threshold. I see now it was one of the most significant thresholds of my life.

A "threshold" is literally an entry into a new place, a transitional interval beyond which something new will begin. In scientific terms, it is the point at which one substance changes chemically into another.

Everything changed for me at that threshold. While I don't know where the courage came from, my heart told me that backing out was not an option. After three nights of listening to Bob's story, asking questions and getting honest answers, I knew he was ready to make every adjustment required. He wanted to be whole. He did not want a divorce.

I wasn't ready to say yes to Bob. I was still angry and confused, and I wasn't sure what I believed anymore. But my heart wanted to say yes to God—to accept His offer to restore our relationship.

My husband chose to face his sin with openness and integrity. As a result of childhood molestation, he ended up with a lifelong addiction that led to the crisis. His story is for him to tell, but we began our journey to recovery together that week. I say "our" because as a result of this marriage crisis, the shroud under which I'd hidden my pain and loneliness was ripped away. Underneath all the performance and excellence, I discovered Bob wasn't the only broken person badly in need of healing.

Is This All There Is?

Throughout our 30 years of marriage, I believed the Christian myth that if I did all the right things there would be guarantees—that I'd never have kids on drugs or face divorce or financial ruin. By wearing my assigned roles with excellence, I counted on winning favor, position, and admiration. Don't get me wrong; I loved the Lord and truly wanted to serve people, but my own neediness got in the mix. In an attempt to meet those needs, I made service my door to Jesus. I now began to see it was the other way around.

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I had confused my performance and service with God's words about losing my life for His sake. *Isn't this what Jesus requires? My best? Didn't He ask me to lose myself for His sake?* It seemed quite clear to me I had done exactly that. I had lost myself. *What more do You want of me, God?*

Months passed and I began to understand that life, even the Christian life, promises no escape from pain and sorrow, no escape from the consequences of poor choices. I also learned that until our deep wounds are healed, we will translate life through those wounds.

There are many promises God gives to His children, but they are all conditional. Every single one. I see now that the only *unconditional* thing I have is God's love and His presence. Those are genuine guarantees. *My love for you is everlasting. I will never leave you, not now, not ever. My presence will go with you.*

I told God I was counting on that. Counting on His presence going with me, just as Moses did when he told God he would only accept the call to go into a new land filled with many enemies if God's presence would lead the way. I knew God loved both of us and that He would not abandon us in our time of deepest need.

In my desperation to keep everything looking normal, I had forgotten that *being* precedes *doing*. Or maybe I had never even known it. A duplicity had crept into my conduct over the years that had caused me to disguise the inner chaos of my heart. That choice had taken me away from the heart of God and into my own self-prescribed performance. Life had lost its vibrancy and joy, and in the darkness, when all other voices were silent, the question that had continued to haunt me was, *Is this all there is?*

I had become a prodigal, though in a different way than my husband. Making the choice to forgive was to cross a liminal space that allowed transformation to begin. In the end, Bob wasn't the only one I had to forgive.

God challenged me to face the truth about myself and my marriage. As I met with counselors over the next two years, I saw that in order to keep our family from disintegrating, I had taken on the roles of fixer,

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enabler, and controller. My efforts had never changed the reality of our problems, but they had stoked my denial and allowed me to convince myself I was “doing” something. Prior to the threshold moment, I gave myself away piecemeal, like little samples offered in the grocery store, to anyone who needed a bit of me. The entrapment went on for so long I didn’t even know who I was anymore. I needed to find my way home.

Do you ever feel lost like this? As if all of life is a riddle that no one can solve? Have you ever wondered if being a Christian really makes any kind of difference? You love God and believe His Word, but your life doesn’t seem intrinsically different from anyone else’s. The swirl of doubts that seem to hang just beneath your conscious thinking becomes the enemy. When you let the doubts surface into the light of day, they frighten you. You see them as heresies and find it’s easier to pretend they aren’t there.

Finding the Way Home

In the movie *Dead Poet’s Society*, there’s a scene in which Professor Keating explains to his class that poetry is not like laying pipe—something that is just reduced to rhyme and meter. His explanation of poetry is a worthy comment on the meaning of life:

We don’t read and write poetry because it’s cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.²

In the months following Bob’s disclosure, I grappled with the knowledge that my obsession with performance was a disguise. It kept me from seeing how broken I really was. I did not resign my position as leader of the women’s ministry, but I stepped aside for three months and let others from my capable team lead the meetings while I put

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myself under the counsel of those who could help me. Our pastors were completely supportive and felt that God would bring healing to us as we sought help through wise counselors.

In increments of awareness, I began to understand that I had traded poetry, beauty, romance, and love for a tidy circumscribed life. I looked good to the church world—disciplined, faithful, and deeply spiritual—and received the affirmation I craved, the opinion of others that kept my mask in place. None of them had noticed that my joy had slipped—least of all me.

As I came to grips with my lack of authenticity, I decided I didn't like the trade-off. The song had gone out of my soul. The days of wine and roses seemed part of an old daydream. Parents, well-intentioned teachers, and mentors tell us it is a daydream from which we must wake, that dumping the dreams is part of maturity. Most days, I felt more dead than mature. However, as a result of my willingness to surrender control back to God, the sun began to break through the fog. I saw there *is* something that needs to die in us, but it's not the poetry, beauty, and adventure.

What Needs to Die?

Everything in my life and faith was called into question the day Bob disclosed his story to me. Our dream of a ministry together, our future as a godly couple who lived for Christ alone, my expectations of a happy family that exemplified faith in God's Word. It was all shattered in one moment.

I came across the following statement in an Internet newsletter called the *Monday Morning Memo* by Roy H. Williams: "Every dream of the future is a seed. But until your dream falls into the ground and dies, it cannot burst from the ground and deliver the harvest you seek. Is your commitment strong enough to survive the death of your dream? Will you be found *still hanging on* when hope has fled, the room is dark and

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everyone believes you a fool?”³ I almost shouted “hooray!” when I read those words.

That is Roy Williams’s account of Jesus’ statement in John 12:24-25. It’s also what I understood as the question God posed to me at this juncture. If I hoped to regain my life with Bob, receive healing for my own brokenness, and receive with arms wide open the magnificent life I was created for, I had to let go of what had been and trust God for what might be. *THE MESSAGE* puts John 12:24-25 this way:

Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat... anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, real and eternal.

The cycle of life is birth, death, and resurrection to new life. A portion of my life ended as a result of my surrender to God, but as the grain of my old self fell to the ground and died, something new and precious began to happen. God began to dismantle the prevailing ideas I had blindly followed for years.

Leap and the Net Will Appear

Sometimes, when a new door presents itself to us, we stand before it perplexed and indecisive. We can even stand at that threshold for years, afraid to cross it because in so doing we must let go of the old life that is all we have ever known. We are bound to the tyranny of the familiar and terrified of the unknown that lies ahead.

If it’s true that a threshold is a place of transition beyond which some new action is likely to begin, wouldn’t it make sense for God to draw us to the edge? We are so much like ordinary hobbits, content to sing songs about others’ adventures, while God has invited us to pursue our own. It’s so easy to be comfortable and stuck.

Admittedly, walking away from what’s familiar can be frightening. We can remain where we are, treading the water of our present life, and

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then end up where Jesse Sullivan did. In *The Mermaid Chair*, we read her description of her life:

I lived molded to the smallest space possible, my days the size of little beads that passed without passion through my fingers...at forty-two I'd never done anything that took my own breath away, and I suppose now that was part of the problem—my chronic inability to astonish myself.⁴

We are not created by the hand of God and brought to life by the Spirit's breath to live ho-hum, predictable lives. We are meant to live astonishing lives.

Jesus made some radical assertions in the course of His three-year ministry. Those who heard Him often marveled that no one had ever come along who spoke as He did. One of His most definitive declarations, found in John 10:10, turned out to be something of a mission statement: "I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of" (*THE MESSAGE*). This was the first idea to assault my pre-measured, circumscribed way of thinking. In the end, it was the *unasked* question that stumped me. Was John 10:10 a description of *my* life?

Choosing to accept God's offer in John 10:10 doesn't require a crisis. If we've already surrendered to His love, our threshold might be one of new direction or a deeper call to His purpose. For me, it took a crisis. I was standing on top of the high dive, looking into an empty pool while the Lord shouted, "Jump, Cathee. I'll catch you." The funny thing was, I knew He would.

Choices That Define Us

We can't stand there forever staring at the open door. We have to make a choice. Do we want the life that is available to us? The life, as Michael Yaconelli states, of "dangerous wonder, risky curiosity, and

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wild abandon”? In his book *Dangerous Wonder*, Yaconelli explains this type of life:

When we reclaim our childlikeness, we stumble upon the presence of God—and we are amazed to find the place all children know about: the place where we once again can hear the whisper of Jesus. . . . When we find the place of dangerous wonder, our souls come to life and we sense that we are on the brink of a great and mysterious way of life.⁵

Jesus desires to lead us to the brink of choice. He prompts us to venture across a threshold that takes us beyond our wildest imaginations. It’s an invitation to walk to the edge. As we approach the door, we notice a small sign that reads, “Proceed at your own risk!” Crossing over assures we can never return to life as usual—at least not with a clear conscience.

What You Do Next Is Entirely Up to You

This book isn’t intended to be a self-help guide filled with right principles or a neatly packaged formula that reduces your life to five simple steps to freedom. It comes with one disturbing question that we hope will gnaw at your heart until you decide to seek the answer: How do I pursue the life Jesus came to give me?

You are being chased by the “Hound of Heaven,” as Francis Thompson described God in his classic poem by the same name. The One you pursue is already pursuing you. Standing at the entrance of a narrow, rugged gate, He turns and says, “Follow Me.”

In order to live the life of dangerous wonder that Jesus pronounced was yours, you must be willing to cross thresholds and enter passages that seem for a season to take you in the opposite direction of your dreams. The novelist E. L. Doctorow associated novel writing with driving a car at night. Even though you can see only as far as your headlights, you can make the whole trip that way. This is an apt description of our journey in Christ.

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The path we're on is not revealed all at once. It's impossible to see more than just a few feet ahead to the next bend. Psalm 119:105 tells us that God's Word, His instruction and guidance, is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path. A lamp throws less illumination than a headlight, but it is enough to light the next step, and we can make the whole trip that way.

What you do next is entirely up to you. The invitation has been offered. The door leads away from where you are now, out of your place of comfort and what's most familiar, and into a place of wonder and possibility. It's up to you to respond. Once you say yes, He will show you what happens next.

The door stands ajar.