



Dear Friend,

Merry Christmas from Focus on the Family! This has certainly been an eventful year in our nation and around the world, but it's my hope that you are filled with peace and joy as you reflect on the world-changing Advent of that Babe in a manger over 2,000 years ago.

For the past few years, it's been customary for me to take a break at Christmastime from the ministry update I typically provide via this monthly newsletter and instead share a holiday-themed story. We've based each of these stories loosely on a real-life testimonial that has arrived at Focus detailing our impact on a family or individual. This year's story was inspired by a couple whose difficult marriage was helped by Focus' outreach. I hope you'll find it encouraging!

Robin took a deep breath and unlocked the door to her parents' house. It had been nearly three weeks since her mother's memorial service, and her father had passed away eight years earlier. Still, she wasn't prepared for the wave of emotion that hit her as she surveyed the familiar home that contained almost six decades of memories.

The narrow entryway in the Alaskan cabin was filled with family photos. Her mother's latest needlepoint lay incomplete in the basket beside her recliner, and her father's boots and heavy winter coat still hung on the coat rack beside the front door. Her mother had never been able to bear getting rid of them. It was as if she was still waiting for him to shrug into his parka, step into his boots, and head out into the snow to shovel their front steps.

Robin moved into the kitchen and took in the tidy countertops, the stack of worn cookbooks, and the rickety old oven that had tirelessly baked thousands of her mother's home-cooked meals. A quilted apron hung on a peg near the back door, which led to a covered porch. She could still see her parents sitting in their rockers sipping coffee on a summer morning.

As she passed the master bedroom, Robin spotted a bright, clothbound book on her mother's nightstand. She entered the room to pick it up and began leafing through it, recognizing her mom's delicate, spidery handwriting filling the lined pages. A prolific journal-keeper, her mother had maintained a record of her reflections and prayers for as long as Robin could remember. A tall bookcase lined with dog-eared journals attested to her mom's faithfulness in that regard.

Opening to the final entry, Robin noticed it was dated two days before her mother was admitted to the hospital. She began to read the shaky script:

Not feeling well today. Cancer is a terrible disease, but God is a good God. He has cared for me for 84 years, and I believe He'll soon take me home to see Him face-to-face. How wonderful to know my dear Evan is waiting for me.

Robin wiped her tears away and replaced the journal on her mother's nightstand. She crossed the room to the bookcase and began skimming the spines of each journal, which included beginning and ending dates. Her mother had meticulously arranged decades' worth of these notebooks chronologically along the shelf.

The first journal dated back to the same year her mother and father had married. Curious, Robin opened to the first page, which was written the day before her parents stood before a justice of the peace in downtown Anchorage and recited their vows.

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I'm not sure why I agreed to this. A young man stationed on the base with me has suggested we marry in order to reap the benefits afforded by the Air Force to married people. I know it's wrong to enter into a sham marriage, but I'm tired of living alone in the barracks. If we marry, we can move into a true home off base. I enlisted because I wanted to serve my country, but I'm so far from home and in such a remote place. Is it wrong to marry a complete stranger in order to make life a little easier?

Stunned, Robin read her mother's entry again and then a third time. How was it possible her parents had never told their children how their marriage had begun? She knew only that they had not known each other well when they married, but never realized the true nature of their arrangement. Robin read the next entry, dated just a few days later:

Evan and I are officially man and wife – but in name only. We sleep in separate rooms and move awkwardly around this small cabin we share, trying not to bump into each other. I find myself looking for an excuse to go into town later today just to escape the tense silence. We have agreed to divorce when one of us is transferred to a new assignment. In the meantime, we must try to make the best of a situation I'm coming to regret more and more with each passing day.

Robin flipped through several more pages that recounted similar discomfort and loneliness. Then, in an entry written six months later, she noticed a page filled with wobbly penmanship and what appeared to be dried teardrops.

How could I have let this happen?! Evan and I are still strangers in many respects, and yet we allowed ourselves to begin getting to know each other. Now, here I am, stuck in a disastrous marriage and pregnant! Whatever will I do? And how will I tell Evan? Last night as we ate dinner, he said, "One thing I can tell you for sure, Anna, is that I'll never be a father. I have no desire to be saddled with a kid for 18 years when there's so much out there to experience."

Robin continued to read, discovering that her father was distraught when he learned that her mother was expecting. To his credit, he stuck around long enough to welcome Robin's oldest brother James. However, when her mother discovered that Sandra was on the way less than a year later, it was too much for her father. He buckled under the increasing pressure and left one night after everyone was asleep. Two weeks later he returned, only to repeat the cycle several months later. This went on for the next few years, even after two more children came along. It was clear to Robin from her mother's journaling that her parents made a mighty effort to pretend everything was fine each time he returned.

Then one Christmas Eve shortly before Robin was born, something changed.

We brought the children into town for the Christmas Eve service. We don't typically attend, but the kids have been rambunctious all day and needed to get out of the house. Carols were sung, and then Pastor Cramer gave a brief sermon. I've heard the Christmas story again and again, but never before has it moved me the way it did tonight. A tiny, helpless infant came into the world and lived a sinless life for someone like me? He willingly left His throne above, was born to a young girl in a filthy stable, lived humbly and died a criminal's death ... all to save me? I'm overwhelmed. Life can never be the same, nor can my marriage.

Robin had heard this part of her mother's story so many times that she knew it by heart. Her mother spoke so joyfully of how the Lord had begun working within her, teaching her about God's deep and abiding love, His "rescue mission" for sinners, and the importance of the marriage covenant. Her mother devoted herself wholeheartedly to her

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husband from that day forward.

As Robin read on, she discovered that despite her mother's newfound faith and renewed commitment to their marriage, life was hard. The demands of military life coupled with the challenges of raising a large and growing family took its toll. So much so, that when Robin was not quite one year old, her father left once again.

Robin turned the final page in the journal and then reached for the next volume on the shelf. To her surprise, there was an eight-month gap between the journal in her hands and the next one. She scanned the dates on the remaining journals, but to no avail. This pivotal piece of her parents' story was missing. The next notebook simply picked up her mother's story at a time when Robin was a toddler, her father was home again, and life seemed to have taken on the normal rhythms and routines she remembered so fondly. But what could have happened to bring her father back? And what caused him finally to embrace the faith that was instilled in her and her siblings?

Robin spent the next couple of hours searching high and low, but without success. She finally gave up. Heading to the front door to lock up and make her way home, she stopped to run her hand along her father's rugged coat, missing his steady, fun-loving presence. Her hand bumped into something solid. Reaching into the deep, inside pocket, she pulled out the missing journal.

Robin stared at it. Why would her father have it in his coat? She opened to the first page.

Evan is gone again, probably for the last time. And so now I'm sitting here alone on Christmas Eve. Am I to be a single mother to five young children?

The Christmas tree is lit, the gifts are underneath, and the children are excited to wake in the morning. I don't know how to tell them their father has left once again. They will be heartbroken.

I can only cling to the certainty that God is a Father to the fatherless, and that He will care for us. If that is not the message of Christmas, I don't know what is.

On the very next page, Robin was surprised to see her father's handwriting.

Dear Anna,

Yes, I'm back. And I'm not going anywhere. I have such regret for what I've put you through, but as I drove off last night I just couldn't see past the immense pressure I was feeling. And then suddenly the truck was sliding off the road and became stuck in a snowbank. I tried to drive on, but the tires were stuck. I was spinning my wheels, in more ways than one.

Then, out of nowhere, it was as if I could hear Pastor Cramer's voice during that sermon that changed you in every way. He talked about a Savior who gave up everything so that sinful people could be free. If God did that for you, maybe He'll do the same for me?

And so I decided to come home.

Throughout the following pages, Robin found letter after letter her parents had written to each other during those initial months following her father's final return. They shared about their fledgling faith, their growing love for one another, and their dedication to their children. Hardship continued, but her parents consistently expressed their trust that God would provide for them. Their marriage healed and flourished right before Robin's eyes as she read their letters.

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Her eyes filled with tears as she realized that this journal meant so much to her dad that he had carried it with him anytime he ventured out into the cold. Perhaps it was his way of reminding himself why he would always come home again.

Robin slipped the journal back in her father's coat pocket and looked again at the family photos gracing the entryway. She and her siblings beamed with joy and security, and her parents' smiles were filled with contentment. Robin thought of her own three children, all now young adults and walking with the Lord. She considered her siblings and her many nieces and nephews, who were living out that same legacy handed down by her parents.

Before leaving, she walked over to her mother's unfinished needlepoint. A floral border encircled the verse found in Psalm 89:1: "...I will make known your faithfulness to all generations."

She tucked the needlepoint in her bag. She would bring it home and carry on what her mother began.

We regularly hear from people like Anna and Evan — couples who have seen their marriages hit the rocks, a husband who walks away in anger and a wife who is left to try and steer the ship. Many of them feel as if there is no hope. But thanks to the generosity of people like you, we're able to minister to them and play a part in the type of healing that Robin witnessed firsthand.

Friends, this is the very essence of what Focus is trying to accomplish: life-giving ministry that brings redemption and hope to hurting families so that they can embrace God's divine purpose for marriages and families — and ultimately impact future generations.

Christmas is a highly anticipated season, a time when God shocked the world by sending His only son to earth in the form of a helpless baby. What is more exciting and hope-filled than the arrival of a newborn baby? Ours is a God who "makes all things new" (Rev 21:5) everyday by restoring marriages and providing a lifeline to those who are struggling.

This season, you can share a priceless gift—HOPE for healing, HOPE for restoration, HOPE for families. Every \$30 you share helps save one marriage. And right now, you can reach even more.

Your gift will go twice as far through a \$4 Million Matching Opportunity provided by generous friends of the ministry. Your gift will be matched through December 31st and we will be able to help more couples and families like Anna, Evan, and Robin.

I hope you'll reach out to us if we can play a role in your own family's story. Simply visit www.FocusOnTheFamily.com or dial 1-800-A-FAMILY (232-6459).

May God grant you a safe, blessed, and joy-filled Advent season as we marvel that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Merry Christmas!



Jim Daly
President

P.S. We are so grateful for the generous partners who fund Focus' mission. We could not do it without you. Thank you for considering making a gift to us!