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FROM HURT TO HOPE: A BATTERED WOMAN'S JOURNEY INTO AND OUT OF ABUSE

By Evelyn J. Dahlke

When a girl is sixteen years old, it seems like life is full—innocent and wonderful—opening up like a book waiting to be storied on fine, white linen pages. The confines of childhood are being left behind while the concerns of adulthood are yet far enough in the future so that the moments of teenage hood burst with joy and possibility. Yet at any time, we are vulnerable to forces both within and outside of ourselves that can both gradually and quite quickly shift the course of our lives in ways that will affect us as long as we live. I say these things as one speaking from my own experience of feeling the wonders of being sixteen, later complicated by life and marriage to an abuser.



It was late in my sixteenth year as I was busied with school work, activities, and preparing for my first prom, when I accepted a date for that prom with one of my male classmates, whom I thought I knew well. Bob had been in several of my classes, and being typical sixteen-year-olds, we had “cut up” and joked together with classmates to make learning more entertaining. As prom approached, friends of mine, who also were friends of Bob, encouraged me to accept Bob’s proposal for a prom date. The prom date soon grew into a regular “thing” as one date led to another and another, and a relationship between the two of us developed.

The summer of my seventeenth year was filled with trips to the movies and dances, after which the two of us would walk the blocks of the small town near which we lived, getting to know each other better. Bob was courteous and kind to me, and I was drawn to him like a paperclip to a magnet. I was shy and reserved and did not make friends quickly, while Bob was outgoing and friendly, both qualities I wished I had. Instead I saw myself as the silent, intelligent “nerd”—a nobody in search of love and acceptance.

If I had anything to be worried about regarding the relationship, I was able to put my worries aside, desiring to be with Bob, to be Bob’s “girl,” more than anything else in the world.

This was all at a time in which a girl was nothing without a guy, where social norms put pressure on the coupling process. I thought I was most fortunate to have landed a prom date and a fulltime relationship all in one fell swoop.

Bob and I dated regularly and had become a “thing” in the eyes of our classmates. So what if Bob was moody and sometimes said unkind things to me? I must have deserved it. So what if Bob flirted inappropriately with other female classmates embarrassing me? It was me that he continued to date, not them. So what if Christmas of my senior year in high school was ruined because of Bob’s sullen and ornery behavior? Everyone has bad days, I reasoned. If I had anything to be worried about regarding the relationship, I was able to put my worries aside, desiring to be with Bob, to be Bob’s “girl,” more than anything else in the world. Besides, I could talk Bob out of his

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moods and sarcasm, if I gave him my time and undivided attention. Bob needed me as much as I needed him. Like lock and key, we were made for each other.

Our relationship continued throughout our years in college, slowly and surely becoming rockier and his behavior becoming more abusive. I had become so used to his verbal put downs and name-calling (all done in private of course), I didn't ever think they were a reason for us not to be together. Once during college, when I complained to Bob that he had acted inappropriately by teasing a female dorm mate, he punched me repeatedly in the stomach. This was the first instance of physical abuse at his hands. It sent me to the emergency room with a broken rib, which of course I said had occurred when a group of us guys and gals had been playing basketball. I said I had taken an elbow to the ribs, which was an out-and-out lie. Bob willingly agreed to the story and took me back to my dorm to mend. The next day when I returned from classes, a bouquet of red and white carnations with a twisted pipe cleaner heart was waiting for me. I never thought *not* to forgive him. And I really believed with the gift of the flowers, such an incident would never happen again. So I didn't worry as I became more deeply involved with Bob, and we began to talk about marriage following our college graduations. But I should have.

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By our senior year in college, we were engaged and wedding plans were under way. I received a diamond ring for Christmas and was the envy of many of the girls on my dorm floor. I was student teaching that semester, and Bob was in his last quarter of study before graduation. My days were busied with kindergarten children, lesson plans, and all that student teaching entails, while Bob didn't seem to have a care in the world as he coasted to the end of his college career. One night he wanted to go to the bar with friends. He insisted that I go with him. I told him truthfully that I had too much to do and that I needed to be ready for another day of student teaching that next morning—I simply couldn't go. He again insisted, twisting my hand and fingers until he broke the small finger on my right hand. So I accompanied him to the bar that evening. I had already learned what it was to fight against his will. And the next day I bandaged the finger and said I had fallen on the ice the night before. No one, I believe, was the wiser. Never did I think that I should fear this man that I was about to marry. Never did I think I shouldn't marry him. That would have been embarrassing and shameful. Besides, I "loved" Bob. I believed that providing a loving home away from all the incidents that had occurred during college would prevent his abusive behavior.

Bob and I married in the scorching July heat of 1974, and I moved in with him into a farmhouse. A summer of drought and our lack of farming experience triggered abusive episodes. Many of those episodes were of the name-calling, belittling type of verbal assault that were over nearly as quickly as they began. One time a glass flew across the room, smashing into bits as it hit my newly painted kitchen wall. Another time a fork flew into the door of the stove, denting the fine, chrome edging around the oven's window. Yet another time a wrench flew, putting a rather large dent in the gold refrigerator we had received from my parents as part of our wedding present. Of course, outside on the farmyard both words and wrenches also flew, and one had to be careful to avoid an airborne object on a particularly ornery day. Sometimes Bob would become angry at me just for looking at him "wrong." On such an occasion I might have to dodge a pitchfork or end up tackled, my face being ground into the gravel of the driveway. I learned to pick myself up, bandage my wounds, and get on with life. Never did I think of leaving. That would have been too shameful. Besides, by this time I was so used to Bob's abusive behavior, it had almost become normal.

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Living with Bob's verbal, emotional, and physical abuse continued as we built and expanded our dairy operation and added our three daughters to the daily mix of cattle chores, field work, and my teaching career. When the weather was bad, Bob's abusive moods escalated, when the cattle were sick, they escalated, when I had to stay late after work, they escalated, when the girls were sick, demanding, or crabby (which, of course, all children are at times), they escalated. Looking back on it now, Bob's abuse had become so "normal" and life so demanding, I just tried to get through each day not thinking about what another might bring *or* that I might actually *leave*. On top of that, I was a Christian woman, so divorce was not even entertained as an option. Also, there were not laws to protect abused women during much of this time, so I really had no recourse. And besides, I "loved" Bob.

So life went on. By this time I had learned to disassociate so the instances of abuse disappeared from consciousness as quickly as they occurred. The girls, who had lived with the abuse their entire lives, didn't know a life that was any different—until they got older. Then at times they would comment on some of Bob's behaviors or wonder why it was so calm at a friend's house and always in a frenzy at our home. Over time, Bob's abusive behaviors had so permeated his being and our relationship as a family that they were all-consuming. Life was like balancing on the top edge of a fence. One could fall off either way in the wink of an eye—and I believe, both ways were equally as bad and as dangerous. Life just went on as I tried to stay afloat with the farm, my teaching job, three growing children, periods of weather that were either too hot, too cold, too wet, or too dry, and Bob's fits of erratic behavior. I didn't think about how complicated everything was. Yet even though I couldn't have said it at the time, my "love" for Bob was beginning to wane.

After nineteen years on this merry-go-round, I finally hit a cement wall I couldn't pick myself up from. It had been a year of flooding on the farm. We had lost nearly everything to rainy weather and sick cattle. I had hit some major obstacles in my job, which were demanding more of me than I had to give. I fell into a deep abyss of depression. As I fell, all of the instances of abuse that I had tolerated for more than twenty years of marriage flashed before me like lightning, and I saw Bob as the domestic abuser that he actually was. Since Bob refused to let me get help for my depression, I had to live with it for months until one night my sixteen-year-old daughter screamed at me to get some help.

Against Bob's wishes and putting up with his abusive behavior, I began to see a therapist, take medication, and heal. One day he finally physically threatened one of my teenage daughters after a lengthy time of spewing verbal assaults and put-downs on her. When I intervened on her behalf, I was severely beaten. And that was the first day I called the sheriff.

I give God the credit for my healing process entirely—God put therapists, counselors, and pastors into my life to give me wise guidance and counsel as I took the necessary steps to leave the abuse. And God gave me hope through a dream of entering the formal ministry. Along with my depression came this urgent call to follow that dream. Two years after entering therapy, I began studying to become a pastor. A year after that, I left Bob. And two years later I divorced him. None of this was as simple as the words you find in this article. I had to deal with the effects of the abuse, the resulting Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, taking care of my daughters as they have moved into adulthood, and the legal system, which has made strides in helping abused women but which still has a long way to go to really protect and help them reorder their lives in places of safety. And I had to deal with my faith beliefs surrounding marriage, relationships, and divorce. I am still working on that journey even now as I serve the church and life moves in a fairly predictable and safe pattern.

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Yet by God's grace, I was gradually set free to live my life—the life God has planned for me. For that grace I am forever grateful. I was once paralyzed, but today my faith, my girls, my therapists, and my faith community carry me through as I step towards brighter tomorrows.

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