Spiritual Autobiography

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 I am rarely asked to tell my story. That is not necessarily because people do not want to hear it, but is rather because they may think they already know it, or because in our busy society there is little time set aside for this kind of storytelling. We know one another—and often even ourselves!—at only a surface level, rarely pausing to peer beneath what is easily observed in order to get at the depth of who a person really is. For this reason, telling my story to an interested, captive audience is enlivening but also intimidating. Where do I even begin, I wonder? Who are the people and what are the contexts and events that have formed me spiritually? What is important, and what can be left out? Given the opportunity to reflect, I see that my story is one of significance, of depth, of joy, of heartbreak, of possibility. I also see that through my life journey I have learned a number of personal and spiritual lessons (yes, I include both personal and spiritual developments, for how can they ever truly be disentangled?), all of them formative but many of them destructive. But that is for later. For now, we begin at the beginning.

 One might think that the beginning was my birth. Of course, at the most fundamental level, it was. However, my story began even before that, for when I came into this world on September 29, 1984, I was not born into nothingness. Rather, I was born into a family, comprised of my father and mother, Wendell and Jackie, and a brother, Joshua. My mom and dad met during their time in school at Harding University, married in 1976, and moved soon thereafter to the hills of northwest Arkansas, to a little town called West Fork. Dad worked his way through a master’s degree in history at the University of Arkansas and began teaching high school history at West Fork. Mom, who had also once been a teacher, at the elementary school level, now spent her time raising her children and caring for her family. Joshua was five years old when I was born, and had just started kindergarten. And then five years after I came along, my younger brother, Jedediah, was added to the family. From that point onward, I, the only daughter of the family, would also be the middle child, complete with many of the stereotypical strengths and weaknesses that correspond to that situation.

 This family I was born into and brought up in was one of deep faith and conviction. My parents were thoroughly invested in the small, conservative West Fork Church of Christ. Though attendance varied throughout the years for a number of reasons, there was a core group of generally around 50 people at this faith community in which I grew up. My father regularly taught class at church and was one of only two song leaders, and my mother, also a Sunday school teacher, eventually became director of the church’s weekly program for preschoolers. For a time, the two of them also coordinated and led a fledgling youth group for the handful of teenagers in the church. Ever faithful servants and leaders, they were my examples of what it meant to love and serve God and the church. The oft-heard phrase “raised in the church” absolutely applies to my situation. Church was not just one thing that we did; it was in many ways what our whole lives revolved around, or at least I remember it that way. My family was at church, my time was spent at church, all my friends were at church. I learned from the outset that *faith and a faith community were vital to a healthy, flourishing life*; I also learned that *to be a true, dedicated Christian is to be a self-sacrificing servant and a leader.*

 One church family in particular, the Kennedy family, was important to my personal and spiritual formation. John and Gail Kennedy and their three children mirrored my own family in age and lifestyle. My mom and dad were close friends with John and Gail, and we children were close too, especially Ivan and I, who were best friends for the first fifteen or more years of our lives. Ivan and I were inseparable, even to the point that most around us (and even we ourselves, at times) assumed we would eventually end up marrying. Ivan’s gentle yet energetic and adventurous spirit and his steadfast friendship formed me greatly as a person.

 Though to tell these things jumps around a bit in the timeline of my life, there were two specific events related to the Kennedys that I have always found to be extremely important to my own story. At some point in early middle school, Ivan made the decision to dedicate his life to God and become a Christian. I remember clearly the day of his baptism and how, though I was excited for him in this choice, I cried a bit as well because I now felt very much alone for perhaps the first time in my life. Ivan was going somewhere I could not yet follow, leaving me behind on my own. To be honest, I felt a bit like God was stealing him away from me. It was at that time that I internalized lessons I now wish I had never learned: *someone else will always be preferred over you, and even your best friend will leave you when something better comes along*, feelings which were reinforced intermittently over the years as Ivan began dating and eventually married. Of course, that perspective is melodramatic to say the least, for he and I still remained best friends and our relationship hardly changed. It was just that now there was someone else in his life who was more important to him than I was, and that was very difficult for me as a child. A few years later, the second event took place. Again, I remember with almost perfect clarity the conversation Ivan and I had and the events that followed. One day after church, the two of us were sitting together talking, as we often did. Ivan told me, seemingly casually, that his parents had decided to get a divorce. Never having had any kind of hint of this before, I was incredulous and thought he was joking. Unfortunately, that was not the case. After twenty-something years of marriage, his parents were separating. I was crushed. How could this inconceivable thing actually be happening? It was impossible! Yet, over the coming months and years, the story played out in a heartbreaking way for his family and for me as well. Given how close we had been, it was almost as though my own parents were divorcing; my dad, sensing my turmoil, even made the solemn promise to my brothers and I that he would never divorce my mother. However, another lesson was drilled into me deeply through the excruciating process: *there is no true stability; even what seems solid might break down at any moment*.

 In spite of the distress and disappointment caused in my early spiritual life by those two particular events, it might seem that I was slated from the very beginning to become a Christian. I had grown up in a dedicated and relatively healthy Christian family, I had been surrounded by the church and the Christian way of life even from the womb, I had been given every opportunity to learn about God, and I had constantly been encouraged to give my life to God. I was even given the chance to experience the different expressions of church that a small church and a large church provided. When I was in fourth grade, my family began attending Wednesday night services at a larger church in Fayetteville, a nearby town, because our church in West Fork did not meet on Wednesday nights. At this larger church, North Street (later known as Mount Comfort), we kids became deeply embedded in the youth group, an excellent place to grow spiritually. And since my parents had become spiritually depleted by their never-ending responsibilities at the church in West Fork, over the years we slowly transitioned more and more to North Street, until, when I was in tenth grade, we finally bid farewell to our longstanding church home at West Fork and embraced North Street as our full time faith community. This congregation would be my church home for the remainder of my time in northwest Arkansas.

 Even given this overall healthy spiritual environment and upbringing, however, the decision to become a disciple of Christ was not a quick or easy decision for me. Even as a child, I was already an introvert, a deep thinker, a serious decision maker. I was also a skeptic, at least as much as a twelve year old can be. Although I had been surrounded by faith all my life, I sincerely did not know if I even believed in God or in the Bible’s stories about Jesus. I remember spending quite a bit of time and energy (again, at least for preteen) pondering the truth and validity of the Bible. I did as much research as I knew how to do to see if it was really possible for something like Jesus sweating blood to happen. It all just seemed so irrational, so unbelievable. To make matters more difficult, I had been taught, or perhaps I intuitively sensed, that *becoming a Christian was a serious commitment, and I was never one to make serious commitments lightly*. There were a number of times when I desperately wished I *could* make the commitment: when Ivan was baptized; when I began to fear for my soul’s security (for I knew I was sinful, however mundane that sin might seem, given my life as a straight-laced “goody-goody”); and when a boy around my age died suddenly. At those times, I wanted more than anything to be able to honestly dedicate myself to God as a Christian and to have the security of knowing that in God’s eyes I was cleansed of my sin. But I knew that it would not be a genuine, wholehearted commitment to God for the right reasons. So I was stuck.

 Eventually, however, God did win me over. It is not easy, or perhaps even possible, to explain how. The best I can say is that in one powerful moment I was brought from persistent (if unwilling) skepticism and unbelief to firm faith and dedication. Knowing that I could not and would not continue denying God, I gave myself fully to God and was baptized into Christ. That is not to say that my faith has been unquestioning since then. No, even after this one particularly important moment of conversion, God has repeatedly converted me into further faith and trust, working through circumstances in my life to challenge my assumptions and answer the doubts that persisted. However, even at this beginning point, when I made my initial pledge at the age of nearly sixteen to follow and honor God with my life, I knew: *this was an irreversible, lifetime commitment for me, a promise which would require much of me but which would absolutely never be discarded, no matter what the cost.*

As I began to live into my identity as a Christian, two short accounts of my time in high school are illustrative of what that identity meant to me. For one, *my identity as a Christian was essential to who I was, and others should know about it even if they would not understand or agree.* There was one teacher at my high school with whom I was especially close. Soon after my baptism in the summer, I made sure to write her an email to let her know about this new aspect of my life. I did this not only because I wanted her to know about the decision I had made, as I mentioned above, but also because *I have always greatly desired the approval of those whom I respect and love, often to an unhealthy degree.* I remember that in my email I explained what had happened and mentioned that I hoped it did not “sound or seem stupid” to her. Her reply, though gracious, left me disappointed because she could not share in my own enthusiasm. Through another experience, this time when a close friend of mine withheld from me the fact that she and her boyfriend had been sleeping together, I discovered that *my identity as a Christian might put distance between me and others I knew because they might view me (and sometimes rightly so) as a judgmental, self-righteous religious snob.* With both those experiences and the lessons I learned through them prominent in my heart and mind, it became clear to me in the early stages of my Christian life that *it was crucial that I always live with integrity and extend grace towards others, for this was what would truly draw others to Christ.*

It was with this kind of deep-seated desire to live virtuously that I began my college years; in fact, that aspiration even influenced my choice of where to go to school and what activities to be involved in during my time in school. Rather than go the sheltered route of a Christian college, which honestly never appealed to me for a long list of reasons, I elected to attend the University of Arkansas, which, in addition to being close to home and offering me an unrivaled scholarship and stipend, was an exciting opportunity for my faith to be challenged in a state school environment while at the same time being nurtured through a flourishing campus ministry, the Razorbacks for Christ. My older brother had preceded me in that course, and having observed his experience, I was eager to follow.

 In the fall of 2002, then, I began my time at the University of Arkansas, eventually majoring in history and European studies and minoring in German and religious studies. This medley of disciplines, focusing especially on Christianity and twentieth-century history, allowed me to pursue an area of study in which I had long been interested—the horrors of the Holocaust and of Cold War communism. In my final semester of school, I wrote an honors thesis entitled “Testimony of Conscience: An Examination of the Lives and Legacies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Franz Jägerstätter,” which compared the experiences of these two men, who had both resisted the Nazi regime because of their moral and religious convictions and had therefore become martyrs for their faith. Bonhoeffer’s book *The Cost of Discipleship* was especially influential for me, both academically and spiritually. And as much as I loved my studies at the time, it was not until just earlier this year that I completely understood that *my motivation for my academic areas of interest was my concern for godly justice and integrity*.

 To jump from my entry into school straight to my thesis, however, leaves far too much unsaid about those immensely formative years. Outside of academics, my college experience involved two other major pursuits: the Razorbacks for Christ campus ministry and the Razorback Marching Band. Both of these activities presented different blessings, challenges, and potential for personal and spiritual growth.

 Let me first begin with a few words about my time in the Razorback Band, as it is much more easily summarized. For four years, I played cymbals on the band’s drumline. This might seem irrelevant to my spiritual development, but that is far from the case; rather my time in band was an opportunity for and indicator of spiritual growth. Although I loved my band experience overall, it was not this love that kept me participating year after year. No, I even had a desire to walk away from band after finishing my second year because of the time commitment it involved, but I was convinced that the band, and the drumline specifically, was my ministry field. This was an opportunity I had, using something I was good at, to position myself among those who did not know Christ, to be salt and light among them, living in integrity and grace, as I had learned was so important during high school. Of course, at that point in my life, that basically meant recruiting people to come to church with me or be involved in my campus ministry. However limited that vision might have been, though, it was sincere. So I stayed. And in staying, in making a commitment to serving God in that environment, I gained wonderful experiences, a number of good friendships, and an understanding that *while sometimes God asks of me things which I do not desire to give, I (and perhaps others) will benefit if I obey.* At the same time, I also learned that *life among non-Christians can be challenging but can also be invigorating and full of blessing precisely because of that challenge.*

My other major involvement throughout my college years was the Razorbacks for Christ. Though I will do my best to describe it, this experience could never be encapsulated in a paragraph or two, or perhaps even in words at all. From the beginning of my freshman year until even after my graduation, most of my life revolved around this faith community of students, the RFCs. I embraced every opportunity open to me: weekly devotionals, participating in and leading weekly Bible studies, Bible classes at church, fellowship times, meals together, weekend missions, spring break missions, summer missions, outreach to campus, retreats, ministry internships, and so on. My time in the RFCs allowed me to grow immensely in faith and in the fruit that faith produces by cultivating in me a deeper love for God and God’s people and by providing a nurturing and challenging environment in which I could develop as a Christian servant, minister, and leader. It was not merely the structures and activities of the RFCs that allowed this to happen, however. While that environment was important, my formation was largely due to the influence of a few specific people and the opportunities they offered me to grow.

 Scott Karnes, my campus minister and the man who has been of greater significance to me spiritually than perhaps any other person, was the most powerful of those influences. His obvious love for God and the things of God, his wisdom and innocence, his goofiness and seriousness, his adventurousness, his passion for relationships and righteousness, his unassailable optimism and faith—all of these things and so many more had an immeasurable impact on me as I continued to explore my identity as a Christian and as a minister of God. Scott, who still remains my most trusted mentor and spiritual father, instilled in me a clearer comprehension of who I was before God. He continuously encouraged me to seek after God uncompromisingly, following and trusting in God wherever that would lead. It was from Scott that I really learned that *genuine Christian character, true faith lived out well, has the power to permeate life at even the most basic levels.*

It was also from my engagement with the RFCs and with Scott especially that I came to comprehend fully something that I had only previous noticed hints of: *I am a minister and a missionary at heart.* The rhythm of the RFCs was something I came to cherish dearly: time in fellowship, time in study, time in prayer and worship, always with the aim of loving God more fully and drawing others into that love as well. This was a way of life I could devote myself to, for this was where everything that was truly important came together. Nothing else had the capacity to elicit such joy and life from me. *Ministry and service resonated with me in a way no other pursuit or interest had, except perhaps my unwitting devotion to integrity and justice.* Scott saw this passion in me and carefully cultivated it; he built me up by extending opportunities, wisdom, and encouragement. At one point a little further on in my story, for example, Scott would show me the extent of his faith and trust in me by inviting me to be part of a mission team he was forming to move to Dublin, Ireland. Even now he surreptitiously sneaks in a word or two now and again, sometimes directly, and sometimes through our mutual friend Chris Flanders: “Don’t forget to remind her that she’s a missionary at heart!”

Two experiences through the RFCs were particularly influential for me as I began to understand and fully embrace my love for ministry; the first of them was summer missions. Working with various missionaries and churches throughout Europe for five summers in a row, I learned from both observation and participation what it meant to be a long-term missionary, involved in the work of proclaiming and living the gospel in a foreign culture. This kind of life captivated me. I could not imagine that someone might even pay me to be a part of something so significant and life-giving! Though at times I had had my doubts about how I might be involved in ministry as a career choice (especially considering my position as a woman within the Churches of Christ), missions was one thing I could easily foresee myself doing.

 The second undertaking that was instrumental in confirming my dedication to ministry was Operation Nehemiah. During my senior year, I helped lead a spring break mission trip to New Orleans to work with a hurricane relief organization there, Operation Nehemiah. I returned home after that one brief week with the stark realization that our diligent efforts had been only the miniscule beginning of a response to the horrors of Hurricane Katrina. Much more was left to be done, and I could—and should!—be a part of that process. With that conviction holding firm, I and my friends Megan and KT—KT being another of the most spiritually formative people in my life—decided (disregarding our parents’ anxious warnings) to take a semester off of school and return to New Orleans to devote ourselves fully to the relief efforts for a time. The events of the ensuing four months were some of the most memorable, heartbreaking, and fulfilling of my life. The three of us essentially took over the daily functioning of Operation Nehemiah: recruiting, accommodating, and coordinating volunteers; maintaining contact with those who desired our help; managing the mountains of paperwork that were generated; and working with other organizations and citywide initiatives to begin the task of rebuilding the city. It was an amazing blessing to take part in such meaningful work! Yet at the same time, the struggles took a toll. Seeing people day in and day out who were enduring so much physically, emotionally, and spiritually… Being accosted by the frustrations of church and city politics at a time in which other things seemed so much more crucial… Dealing with a workaholic director who nearly ran himself, his family, and us into the ground because of his insatiable urge to fix and improve things… During my time with Operation Nehemiah, I learned an incredible amount about both the joys and challenges of ministry, and though I emerged from the adventure with some frustrations, I also emerged with an incontrovertible conviction that *my life would be centered on some sort of ministry. I could do nothing else.*

Upon my return from New Orleans, I worked through one final semester of school (in which I wrote my aforementioned honors thesis), and I graduated in May of 2007. Unfortunately, as my graduation approached, I still had no clear idea of what I wanted to do, of how I wanted to proceed in life. I was finishing school with BAs in history and European studies, and with minors in German and religious studies. How impractical! What had I been thinking all these years? And why had I not foreseen this dilemma? I was not yet sufficiently qualified to do much of anything, even if I had known specifically what I wanted that something to be. I knew that I loved ministry, but to be perfectly honest, so many ministerial doors seemed closed to me. I knew that when it came to ministry, I was a woman in a man’s world. And a single woman at that.Despite the efforts of my campus minister and a few other mentors, messages I had learned early on from various sources—my church culture prominent among them—prevailed: *even the things I might feel drawn to and suited for would not be fitting (or wise) for me to do alone. They would require the presence of a husband or a team, and those two things were conspicuously lacking in my life. It seemed, then, that as a single woman, there was little I could do in ministry.*

As I faced this traumatizing realization, my life was paralyzed even further by the darkness of a severe depression. Melancholy itself was nothing new to me; it had been an aspect of my life nearly as far back as I can remember. Even as a child, I would cry excessively, dwell on dismal thoughts for inordinate lengths of time, and wonder if my existence even mattered. For whatever reason, I internalized a number of destructive thoughts and feelings even in my youth and had had to live with them to one degree or another throughout the years. This long mental rule of life of mine goes basically as follows: *You are not wanted; you are merely tolerated. Who you are and what you think is not important. You have to succeed and excel at everything you put your hand to in order to meet expectations and be worth anything. If you are not the best, you are a failure, and failure is not an acceptable option. Humiliation comes easily and is an irrecoverable situation—avoid it at all costs. You cry hard, and you cry alone because you should never show your weakness to others. You are just a poser—you cannot really deliver on what you pretend to be. You are not interesting enough for anyone sane or interesting to be attentive to you for any reason, other than perhaps pity or their desire to benefit from your self-sacrificing (self-mutilating?) service. No one would really care if you stopped existing. So for all these reasons, you should run away and hide, pretend like you don’t care, and harden your heart, because that is the only way to avoid the pain of rejection. Deaden your heart, kill your hopes, have no expectations. That way you will never be disappointed.*

 Perhaps these persistent thoughts are not all that uncommon. I know only that they have always been my experience. Yet as unhealthy as they are, I had found my own ways of coping with them (and even at times eluding them!) throughout the years. However, as I neared graduation and was overwhelmed by feelings of directionlessness, powerlessness, and purposelessness, this time there was no escaping my despondent perspective. In fact, this time it was much, much worse than it ever had been before. This was no mere melancholy, as difficult as even that might be. This was full-blown, intensive depression on a scale I had never before seen in myself.

 Looking back, I can see that my downward spiral into depression began as far back as the summer of 2006, even before my involvement in Operation Nehemiah or my final semester of school. It would continue in this agonizing form for over the next three years. Much of that time is nearly impossible to describe to anyone who is not already familiar with the wracking sobs, the numb emptiness, and the self-despising wrath of such an ordeal. How many tears can one person cry? How many irrecoverable faults and irredeemable sins can one person find in herself? How many times can one person plead for and at the same time question the presence of the “loving God” she has given herself to fully—heart, soul, mind, and strength? I almost wish I could answer these questions, but the truth is, in my experience at least, these things are innumerable.

 However, even in the midst of such anguish, hopelessness, and despair, life continued on, carrying me along with it. Enervated as I was, I could not just let life fall apart around me. To do that would be an admission of weakness, which was in itself a failure. I did not yet know what I should or could do, yet I could not do nothing. So for appearance’s sake I continued in my habits of family gatherings and church attendance, though I was filled with dissatisfaction, loneliness, cynicism, and bitterness the entire time. And I found a job: a random job in a bank’s customer service department. I quickly began to hate the job and its constraints, but at least it was something to pay the bills and give me a chance to sort through the fragments of my life and begin an attempt at discerning what the next step should be.

 *I spent those years in a spiritual wilderness, seeing few signs of life anywhere within or around me.* Disappointed by my church and the ways it became obvious that it continually failed both me and God, I withdrew my heart from it. Disappointed by life and its cruelty, I no longer hoped for much of anything. Yet, as barren as that wilderness was, God brought me through it and even taught me some things along the way. Always at the center of my life was the vow I had made years earlier: my life was God’s, and that commitment was immutable, no matter the cost. Though I often doubted God’s presence in and will for my life, I knew I was bound in a way that would never change.

God proved faithful even in this time of desolation, though I could not always recognize it at the time. I began counseling with a talented woman who helped me begin to look more acutely at myself than I ever had before. I stumbled across Kathleen Norris’s *Acedia and Me*, which offered some helpful insight into aspects of my malady. I was blessed with an amazing roommate, Libby, who soon became a best friend; a woman of beauty and of faith, she loved me unconditionally and helped me learn to let go of some of my pain and love her back. I was surrounded by a few Christians in a lifegroup I began attending who had also been disheartened by the church but who had learned to see Christ in one another and were forging on in their faith despite the frustrations and difficulties that inundated them. They loved me, prayed for and over me, accepted me, and breathed new life back into me spiritually.

 Meanwhile, my attempts at vocational discernment continued. Though I knew all along my heart was in ministry, I had been discouraged from that course by others’ questioning disapproval and by my own sense of inadequacy. Over the two years that I worked at the bank, I considered a number of options: teaching history or German, counseling, the Peace Corps, professional photography. However, I kept coming back to missions and ministry. Try as I might, I could not escape it. As interesting as the other possibilities were, nothing came even close to capturing my heart like missions and ministry, even though I still had no specific understanding of what that might involve. Eventually, I caved in. *Even with no earthly idea where God might take me through the process, I could no longer deny what I had been designed to be and do. I was a minister.*

Even with that decision made, it was still quite a long process of discernment that brought me to ACU. What eventually finalized my decision was my impression of ACU as a community of learning and faith in which I would be loved and formed both academically and spiritually. Recognizing that I was coming from an extremely fragile place, I assessed that that would be fundamental to my health and growth as a minister. That supposition has proven true in the best possible of ways. I am thankful to say that the year and a half for which I have now been in Abilene has been extremely formative for me, with increasingly healthy results.

 Here in Abilene, I have found in HOPE Church of Christ a church home that has worked wonders toward redeeming my cynical views of church. Surrounded by this loving, intimate community—a robust reflection of God’s kingdom—I began to emerge from my time in the wilderness. I have been especially touched and influenced by one of the shepherding couples, Daniel and Cathie Orozco, who have served as spiritual friends, mentors, and parents for me.

 Being a part of the GST community has also encouraged and strengthened me greatly. Having a conviction that I am doing what I believe God has called me to (even if I do not yet know the specifics) has brought new hope and purpose to my life and has helped me break away from the torment of depression. Participating in classes and co-curricular activities (such as a mentoring group with Jeff Childers and MRNA) has helped me begin to see more clearly who it is that God has created me to be and what that might mean for my life as a minister. In my time here thus far, one class and one group of people have been particularly life-altering for me.

 In the spring of 2010, I was part of a weekend intensive course entitled “Justice in the Biblical Tradition.” I am not sure how much people believe me when I tell them that this class, taught by Dr. Robert Foster, whom I now esteem highly, has changed my life. It is true, beyond a doubt. Dr. Foster’s teaching and the materials that we were able to cover in the class allowed me to discover and begin to understand my longstanding passion for justice. At the same time, I was able, for the first time in a very, very long time, to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ as truly good news and to be excited about giving myself to it. This sounds peculiar coming from someone brought up in a Christian environment, living a committed Christian life, and training to become a Christian minister. Again, though, it is true.

 And while it is still only in its infancy, the group of people that has already been so immensely formative for me is the St. Ann Community, a spiritual family called together by God to serve one another in community life and to minister to places of brokenness within Abilene. Having been witness to some amazing acts of God in our midst, this community of which I am a part has committed to live and serve together as God calls us into a ministry of redemption, restoration, and reconciliation within the College Heights neighborhood of Abilene. At one point I proclaimed this experience the “reinvention of my faith.” I stand by that statement. For in the adventures of the St. Ann Community thus far, I have learned that *my God is living and active, bringing about astounding things for our good as humans, and sometimes even using us in the process, limited and sinful as we are.*

So where does all that leave me now in the journey of spiritual formation? What has God done in me, and what does God still have left to do? I have discussed much of this as I have told my story. There are a number of personal and spiritual lessons I have learned, both helpful and destructive. And while my background does not define me, it absolutely does inform who I have become. Many of the struggles that have permeated my life persist to this day. And God continues to form me in ways similar and related to those I have already described. However, there are a few summarizing thoughts with which I would like to conclude.

 To begin with, I know that I am still a broken person. Some of the harmful messages and lessons of my life I am still striving desperately to unlearn with the help of the indwelling Spirit and my community of faith. This will take time. But while I do hope and pray for complete healing at some point, I am also able to recognize that brokenness is not exclusively a bad thing. While its extremes can be debilitating, a humble recognition that “we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7) is life-giving. And I have been privileged to see that *God can and does use my own fragility in ways that are redemptive.*

However, while I am still clearly able to see my brokenness, at the same time I am also learning to see with even greater lucidity the image of God within myself. *I am a thinker and a learner, an intuitive and empathetic feeler, a listener, an artist, a wordsmith, a servant, a teacher, a peacemaker, a passionate champion of justice and love. I am a lover and beloved of God.* It is these things that give me hope and confidence about how I am being formed and will continue to be formed in the presence of my God. And *that* is a good story!