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A NOVEL

Where

LILACS STILL BLOOM



Perseverance

A lesson from Where Lilacs Still Bloom by Jane Kirkpatrick

"Anyone who meets a testing challenge head-on and manages to stick it out is mighty fortunate. For such persons loyally in love with God, the reward is life and more life."

James 1:12 (The Message)

I enjoy words, looking up their origin and exploring their many meanings discovering new insights into words and life. That proved true for the word *challenge*. So many of the historical people I write about are beset with challenges on the Oregon Trail, as homesteaders and pioneers, as mothers and fathers making lives for their families. Challenges are part of the human condition. When I looked up that word I found these definitions that were familiar: "A call to engage in a fight" or "the quality of requiring full use of one's abilities, energy or resources" or "a formal objection as to a juror" or "to summon to action." Quite far down on Webster's list were origins of the word *challenge* as coming from the Latin *calumnia* meaning *trickery*. Right below that was the definition "*to deceive*."

How could a challenge be a deception? I began to think back to a time of great challenge. One of the biggest was finally agreeing to move with my husband to a remote ranch twenty-five miles from the smallest town, seven miles from a mailbox and eleven miles from a paved road. He wanted to build a new life on 160 acres of remote, sage and rattlesnake covered land. After five years of resistance on my part, we stepped out on a cloud of faith believing we wouldn't fall through. We faced enormous challenges from the weather, the distance, the isolation. Acquiring building materials, making phone calls from a barn ten miles away, dealing with a treacherous dirt road that wound up a canyon with a 950 foot drop and no guardrails became almost daily encounters.

Yet from those challenges my husband and I developed a closer relationship. We found ourselves trusting in God's calling to that land and deepened our loyalty to God. Each of us discovered new skills we didn't realize we had and found ways to help our family that might not so easily have occurred before our move. We found happiness and contentment and more life.

The deception in the challenge? If I had stayed where I was I would never have found that joy; our faith might not have been deepened, our lives enriched beyond measure through new professions and helping each other. Sometimes the greatest challenges begin with a deception, our minds telling us "You can't do that! You're too old, too weak, too foolish." We are tempted to listen to the nay-saying voices rather than hear the gentle sound of God calling us to greater

things, helping us through the hard times knowing there are joys on the other side of the challenge because we persevered.

Scripture tells us "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial." Stepping over the deceit does not mean the challenge will be easy, but doing so promises a deeper relationship with God and the reward of "more life." Those words are not deceitful but full of hope.

God the Creator of the universe, give us wisdom to see beyond the deceit to the challenge that will deepen our love for you. Help us face the challenges today head-on trusting that we may know you more deeply and discover all you have planned for "more life." Amen.

Kindness

A lesson from Where Lilacs Still Bloom by Jane Kirkpatrick

"When our fathers were in Egypt, they gave no thought to your miracles; they did not remember your many kindnesses...Yet he saved them for his name's sake, to make his mighty power known."

- Psalm 106:7-8

Writer Madeleine L'Engle once wrote that "compassion isn't general, it's particular." Compassion in the general creates soup kitchens and homeless shelters. Compassion operates orphanages and sustains people on the mission field. Compassion creates hospitals peopled with dedicated physicians and nurses, orderlies and aides.

But compassion is truly known in the particular when the nurse not only removes the bandage and cleans the oozing wound but holds the patient's hand a moment asking "how are you doing?" It's when a child stops her doll-playing and throws comforting arms around her little friend whose tea set has just broken into a hundred pieces. We recognize compassion as a simple kindness when a neighbor asks if they can run an errand for us while they're out running their own.

The Psalmist recalls how fleeting our recognition of kindness and compassion is. I remember reading of the Israelites flight and God's providing manna to them daily, leading them by light, rescuing them from bondage. Yet not long after they complained and charged that God had forgotten them, returning to their old, familiar gods. "How could they forget all of that?" I remember asking my husband.

But I forget, too. That offer of kindness from a neighbor to plow our driveway of a heavy snow. The arrival of an unexpected check. A handpicked bouquet from a friend's garden. That card sent for no reason than to tell us we were remembered. These kindnesses were acknowledged at the time but days later I felt sorry for myself, wondering where God is in my life. My kindness memory is short term.

Even worse, I lament God's absence in the larger things, where nations struggle with each other, politics fills the airways, unkind words are spoken in coffee shops and on bumper stickers. Where is kindness in this fallen world? Have we forgotten all the kindnesses God has granted? I return to my gods of seeking money, disappearing into television, growling about the futility of hoping things could ever change.

But God saves us anyway, the Psalmist assures, to make his power known. So when I find myself wondering as the Hebrews did, where God is I look for the particular, a way I can act with kindness out of God's love. I'll drive my nephew to work while his car is being fixed even if it is inconvenient. I'll bring that book I promised to my neighbor and spend a little time taking tea with her. For today, I'll look for acts of kindness I can give and acknowledge those given me. Kindness is the humus out of which God's glory can grow.

Kind God, help me reflect your compassion in particular ways today. Let me see with new eyes those in need around me. Give me confidence to offer kindness to others and may they see my actions as having come from your nurture in my life. Thank you for remembering me despite my short term memory. May I be ever faithful to reflect your kindness in my life. Amen.

Generosity

A lesson from Where Lilacs Still Bloom by Jane Kirkpatrick

"...how, while passing through great trouble, their boundless joy even amid their deep poverty has overflowed to increase their generous liberality."

"The pressure triggered something totally unexpected: an outpouring of pure and generous gifts."

- 2 Corinthians 8:2 (NIV/The Message)

I confess, I'm rarely happy in a time of trial. Yet Paul writes of the church in the Macedonia province and how the people's true colors came through in their time of pressure and trouble. Instead of going inward, lamenting their sad state, they "pleaded for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians" *The Message* sings. Their joy even amid deep poverty overflowed to increase their generosity. How did they do that, how did they draw upon such a spirit that witnessed to their love of Jesus by giving more than they could even afford?

So many of the men and women who went before us, were pioneers in settling our country decades ago I think discovered that same quality of finding joy in trial, so much joy that it allowed them pass it on, to give generously even when they couldn't afford it. They built barns for neighbors, they raised up schools and churches out of their meager incomes. Today, in rural areas neighbors might make hay for a farmer who is ill burning their own fuel and time; and in urban centers a woman grocery shops and keeps a kitchen stocked for a friend weakened by chemotherapy treatments. These generous acts are not done in order to receive joy but because the people have a spirit of God they cannot help but share.

"Generosity," wrote the esteemed psychiatrist Karl Menninger, "Is the single most important indicator of a person's mental health. Generous people are rarely mentally ill."

I find those words encouraging not only as a mental health professional but especially today as a human being struggling with life's demands and seeing the witness of those who go before me, giving of themselves in joy.

Today especially Lord, help me be the generous person you have inspired in your people through the generations. Let me witness to others through my joy in giving of my time, my talents, my resources that are all gifts from you. Help me pass them on and share in more joy that comes when you grant the privilege of helping others. Amen.

Grief and Sorrow

A lesson from Where Lilacs Still Bloom by Jane Kirkpatrick

"When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow....Get up and pray so that you do not fall into temptation."

- Luke 22:45-46

Exhaustion is a part of grieving. We often fail to eat. Our sleep - if we have any- is wrought with twists and turns and a heavy sense of loss when we awake. Tears while helping us to heal also deplete our bodies. The natural elixirs of healing and hope sink deep into our beings and we often lack the energy to bring them forth. Perhaps this is why when Jesus found his friends in the sleep of sorrow he awoke them with direction, that they might pray and with God's strength defeat the temptation to give in to grief, not to let it consume them into despair. Jesus knew what lay ahead for him and for them and he knew they'd need God's strength to withstand the time of sorrow and demand that they would face.

I like to think Jesus said those words with kindness to his friends, understanding how sorrow takes us to places we would never imagine we might go. Yet comforting others in a time of loss can be almost more troubling than grieving our own losses and disappointments.

Helping another grieve can be like walking on lily pads where with one could sink at any moment to the bottom. Grief is the price we have to pay for loving and it is a price we need not pay alone.

Creator God, bring me through the times of grief and sorrow that I may witness to your presence in my life. Keep me from the temptation to despair and instead remind me that Jesus comes to all of us in our sorrows and bids us pray knowing those prayers will be answered in renewed strength and purpose. Thank you, Amen.