

ONE

WINGS AGAINST A WINDOW



*My mother and I have an understanding.
We've agreed not to understand each other.*

—Renee Zellweger as Beatrix Potter in the movie *Miss Potter*.¹

For nearly ten years my husband, my children, and I lived in Erie, Pennsylvania, in a 1920s two-story rough brick home with a full-size attic and a postage-stamp-sized backyard. Tightly nestled between two neighboring houses, it boasted a spacious front porch, which made up for its small yard. The porch was enticing, the kind made for sitting outside during raging thunderstorms and breathing in the musty scent of rain from the safety of a porch swing.

Our Erie home also had a detached two-and-a-half-car cinder-block garage. Near the peak of the garage roof were paned windows that allowed natural light to stream in. We often left the garage door open during the day so the kids could have easy access to their outdoor toys. Consequently, an occasional bird flew in. Fooled by the light from the windows, the creature would futilely beat its wings against the glass, unaware that freedom lay behind it.

At times while pining for and trying to duplicate good mother-daughter bonds, I have identified with those desperate birds beating frantically against a closed window. My wings have felt tattered, my emotions bruised. How I have longed to be a daughter who calls

her mother for happy weekly chats or goes with her out to dinner or shopping excursions! Instead, when the phone rings and I see my mother's name on the caller ID, I dread answering. The relationship I share with her is not ideal. It is, however, improving and has moved from a work of destruction to a work of reconstruction.

THE TIE THAT BINDS ALSO GAGS

I never realized I had a poor relationship with my mother until my father died when he was fifty. We were very much alike; consequently, we were always close. We shared the same passion for reading and collecting books. We both had a strong creative streak and an aptitude for art. Dad was skilled with pencil and paper, and I remember with delight sitting in the attic looking through his old art books and sketches. He also loved to sing and play the harmonica. Music strengthened our tie.

In my mind I can still hear his rich baritone voice resonating through our church's small sanctuary as he sang in the men's quartet. In high school I, too, discovered my musical abilities and participated in concert choir, madrigals, girls' barbershop group, and an interdenominational Christian singing group called Remnant. The bond Dad and I shared was special.

My parents were both Depression-era children—practical and hard-working. They could squeeze a dollar out of a nickel. I endured countless lectures on running a minimal amount of bathwater in the tub and how to make do with only one paper towel. Nevertheless, despite his frugality, my father knew how to play.

It wasn't until I was a young married that I realized Mom didn't really play. I don't think she ever learned to enjoy life. For her, living equals drudgery and responsibility, an uphill battle in a dark and threatening world.

Just a few years after I married, my father succumbed to cancer after three years of treatment. Mom must have felt like a sailor clinging to the deck of a vessel that had run aground. Left to fend

for herself and my youngest sister, Wendy, the only one of five siblings who still remained at home, Mom did the best she could.

In those early years of my marriage, my husband, Jeff, saw negativity surfacing in me, and he quickly pointed out this tendency of mine to look on the dark side. His words stung like alcohol on a scraped knee; yet I knew instinctively that his observations were true. Like many others, I was a product of my upbringing by a perfectionist father and a critical mother.

Proverbs 27:17 holds a wonderful truth: “Iron sharpens iron.” Staying in close association with those whose actions and words smooth and hone our rough edges makes us a better person. Though I didn’t particularly like the fact that Jeff had pointed out my shortcomings, I begrudgingly admitted to myself that he was right. Some changes in my attitude were in order. Over time, with practice, I was able to alter my outlook. I complained less and began to look more on the positive side of life. I owe much of this ongoing transition to my marriage partner.

Mom, on the other hand, lost her marriage partner, the primary person who could have inspired her to refine herself. With her protector gone, Mom’s insecurities rose to the surface. She allowed fear to assume the throne of her life. Having suffered through a difficult childhood, and as an adult whose wall around her safe world had crumbled, she was battered and bruised. There was no one she could trust, no one to keep her safe.

I moved away from home when I married, and the geographical distance mirrored Mom’s and my distance in our relationship. In those early years I battled homesickness. My phone calls home to Mom and Dad eased some of the misery. However, after Dad died, the phone calls changed. I still called to touch base but often hung up the phone more downcast and discouraged than I had been before initiating contact.

When I did call, I shared only surface issues. With no one to counterbalance her, Mom’s negativity and worries about her own health became more dominant. Mom did most of the talking during

those conversations. I hesitated to share anything of depth, fearing that I would be misunderstood or that what I said would be shared with other members of my extended family. I wanted to be friends with my mother but felt that our relationship was strained.

My three sisters had nearly the same issues with Mom. Many women can identify with my earlier illustration of the trapped birds. We batter against a window, hoping to find our way to the freedom of a close, loving relationship. Unfortunately, our own brokenness, and that of those with whom we desire a whole relationship, gets in the way. The tie that binds also cuts, gags, and smothers.

TATTERED LOVE

That fact that many women fear they will turn out to be like their mothers is an indicator that their relationships with their moms are not what they should be. Some still cling to the hope that some day the awkwardness they experience and the hurts they feel will subside enough to allow healthy interaction with the person they love. Others, after years of being hurt during attempts at connecting, have given up.

Personality differences, poor listening skills, control issues, mental illness, wounds caused by a painful upbringing or marriage, inability or unwillingness to forgive, and even substance addiction are just a few of the reasons contributing to these rifts.

It's easy to think that we are the only ones experiencing these problems, but the facts indicate a different truth. While working on this book I had the opportunity to speak to numerous women regarding their mother-daughter connections. Their pain is evident as they open their hearts. Below are just a few of their comments.

"Troubled mother-daughter relationships seem to be a universal problem. I believe one of the reasons is because mothers have been the controlling force in their small child's life, and as the child becomes an adult, mothers continue to try to control" (Margaret).

“My mom is a recovering alcoholic. We struggle. Even though she’s in recovery and is now a Christian, we still butt heads like two goats fighting over a choice scrap” (Carrie).

“Due to all in the past she still hangs onto, she has an unforgiving spirit and bitterness. She makes my monthly visits a terrible ordeal for me” (Marie).

“My mother raised me and my four siblings after my alcoholic father left us. . . . She worked in a prison to support us. She could be the most creative (painted tempera portraits of Santa or the Easter Bunny at holidays on the windows) and supportive (encouraged all of us to honor grad status in high school, always attended our concerts, plays, art shows, and so on) person in the world. But when her depression took hold, she could turn into a shrieking lunatic and make us wish we had never been born. It has been a life-long mystery to know which mother I would get on any given day: Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde” (Linda).

“My mom is very controlling and domineering, and our relationship is very shallow too. Basically, she talks and I listen—or pretend to. Now that she’s gotten hard of hearing, she has an excuse for “poor listening skills” except that’s the way it’s been all my life. None of my adult children really like her” (Rachel).

“When I was a child, my mom was great. She was a stay-at-home mom, active with all our activities (I have one younger sister and younger brother) like Scouts, ballgames, fun home life with indoor and outdoor games, gardening, fishing, swimming. But when I was about eight or nine, my mother had to go to work full time, and that changed her relationship and her attitude toward us. Work became her focus, her passion—her kids and her husband, our dad, became her secondary life” (Beth).

GROANINGS WE CAN'T EXPRESS

As I listened to these women tell their stories, I saw the misery in their lives. They tried their best to express it in words, but in real-

ity I could only partially understand the depth of their hurts. Their stories are, in a sense, written groanings.

When we go through difficult circumstances, we cannot always put into words—though we may try—the longings of our hearts or the pain we are experiencing. This is especially true in broken relationships. Brokenness makes us inwardly groan. It weighs down our spirit and extinguishes joy we might otherwise have.

When despair threatens to overtake us and we feel completely alone, it's important to remember that we are not. There is one closer than a brother, sister, or mother who treasures a loving relationship with us deeper than we will ever have with any spouse or human relation. The Holy Spirit is Comforter, Counselor, and Intercessor. He knows and feels our pain.

Jesus promised us when He left that He would send a Counselor in His place. In John 16:7 He said, "Very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate [Counselor] will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."

The Counselor isn't meant for just anyone. He was specifically sent for those who choose to follow Christ. The Holy Spirit helps us be shining lights in a dark world. Jesus knew the wretched brokenness we would face in the world even in close places such as family relationships. If we are going to stand firm for Him, He wants us well-equipped to do so.

Romans 8:26 tells us, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express."

We may be locked into hurtful relationships we must deal with indefinitely. After days, years, and months of trying to cope, it can wear us down. When our situation appears hopeless with little chance for improvement, it is good to remember that there is another who not only can identify with our struggles but also feels our distress. He takes the pain on himself, just as one puts on a heavy garment.

DO YOU WANT TO BE HEALED?

God sees our distress and comes to our aid, but He won't provide assistance unless we are truly ready for it. The story of Jesus and Bartimaeus is a wonderful example of this. Jesus, surrounded by a large crowd, was preparing to leave the city of Jericho (Mark 10:46-52). As he passed by where Bartimaeus, a blind man, sat begging, Bartimaeus heard the noise of the crowd and asked another beggar what the excitement was about.

"It's the prophet, Jesus from Nazareth," replied the man, "the one who does great miracles." Bartimaeus tilted his head, straining to pick out Jesus' voice above the din of the mob.

He had heard of this man and the many miracles He had performed. His skin tingled from the excitement in the air. His one chance at healing was about to walk out the gate. Determined to gain Jesus' attention, he cried out in a booming voice—"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Still fearful that his opportunity was passing him by and ignoring the rebukes to be quiet, he called out again.

Jesus stopped and looked around, and then His eyes fell on Bartimaeus. "What do you want from me?" Jesus noted Bartimaeus's hazy eyes and immediately knew why the man had called out. Still, He wanted Bartimaeus to express his desire for wholeness.

"Rabbi, I want to see." Only after he told Jesus that he wanted his sight did Jesus heal him.

Odd, isn't it, how Jesus often made those He chose to heal express their desire for healing aloud? Surely, as the son of God, He already knew and could see what the need was. Perhaps He knew that making the man state his request aloud helped him acknowledge what was broken within himself.

In our relationships we may know in our deep places that something is broken, but exactly what that is may not be fully known until we speak of it aloud. In the next few chapters you will embark on a healing journey to restore, as much as possible, your mother-daughter relationship. The Scriptures tell us that God heals the bro-

kenhearted and binds up their wounds (Psalm 147:3). Many of us are walking around wounded. God wants to restore our relationships to wholeness.

The Bible contains many examples of reconciliation: Esau reconciled with Jacob (Genesis 33:4), Joseph with his brothers (Exodus 45:3-14), Christ with Peter (John 21:15-19), and the loving father with his prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31). If it can happen for them, it can happen for you.

Just as Bartimaeus wasn't brought to wholeness until he admitted his infirmity and desire for healing, we cannot experience healing and restoration until we first understand and acknowledge our need. The next step is allowing God to work in us to create the change we want to see.

HEALING THOUGHTS

1. As you read through this chapter, did you feel any kind of kinship with the women who shared their stories? If so, which ones? _____

2. Use descriptive words to define your relationship with your mother—*hostile, frustrating* . . . _____

3. Would you say that your relationship with your mother is a work of destruction or a work of reconstruction? _____

4. Are your wings tattered? Do you feel trapped while longing to break free? Use the space below to write a paragraph about your relationship with your mother. _____

5. In Mark 10:46-52 we see that Jesus asked Bartimaeus what he wanted from Him. If Jesus passed by right now, what specific request would you make for healing? _____
