

MY HUSBAND RUDY SAYS THAT HE THINKS I WAS A
OR NOT, BUT I DO KNOW THAT ALL OF MY LIFE I BELIEVED
AT MY GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE, SHE WOULD TUCK US IN
US IN PRAYER. THERE, I BEGAN TO ESTABLISH A SENSE

AIN'T NOTHING LIKE THE

real

{ **MY JESUS WAY STORY**
by **JUANITA CAMPBELL RASMUS** }

thing



CHRISTIAN IN UTERO. I DON'T KNOW IF THAT'S TRUE IN THE POWER OF GOD. WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL AT NIGHT IN THIS HUGE BED, AND SHE WOULD LEAD OF THE FACT *THERE IS A GOD OUT THERE.*

Because of the kind of kid I was—very compliant—I assumed that I had found God. I found God in Vacation Bible School with the rules that said, “Don’t chew gum in here.” I found God when I wanted to join the choir, and they said, “You’ve got to be baptized first; that’s the rule.” And then, of course, ultimately, I found God in the big rules—the Ten Commandments. Real rules of what it means to be a Christian. This God was crafted around rules that filled the imagination of a little girl who wanted to be a “good” girl, who wanted not to break rules. I lived for quite a while with that God that I found. I shared that God with my husband, who married me in 1985. In 1990, he accepted Christ. He says he was a late bloomer. In 1991, he accepted his call to ministry. And I accepted mine.

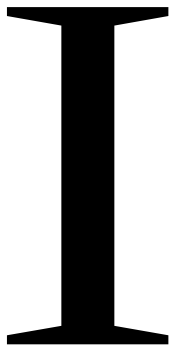
In 1992, we found ourselves literally stepping onto the corner of Crawford and Gray Streets in Houston, where we would become pastors to seven people who were holding the church down until reinforcements could come. When we walked onto the campus, we literally had to step over homeless men and women who were sleeping in the doorway. I remember God clearly saying, “This is your ministry.”

Our church grew. Really grew! By 1999, we had 3,000 members. We provided 6,000 meals per month to the homeless community in and around downtown Houston. We were providing showers and laundry and social service referrals. We were doing what Matthew 25 said to do—meeting the needs of the “least of these.” It was awesome!

My addiction didn’t flare up until around that time: this addiction I have to rules, to performance, to needing other people’s approval and acceptance. It really kind of flared up in a major way—like fireworks on the 4th of July. I remember waking up one morning, August 27, 1999; I’ll never forget it. For 38 years I had lived with the God that I had found. That morning I got up, and I did what I did every morning. I prepared breakfast and called everybody in: “Morgan, Ryan, Rudy, let’s eat. Breakfast’s out!” They all came to the table, and we ate breakfast together, which is always a big deal in our home. That day, Rudy said, “Do you want me to take the girls to school so you can take a few minutes for yourself this morning?”

Maybe he sensed something. I said, “Hey, that’s great! That way I don’t have to drive and put on my makeup at the same time!” (Come on, I’m not the only one.) So I stood at the mirror, and I began to apply my mascara and got hit, all of a sudden, with a wave of nausea that stopped everything. I began to feel *horrible* with some kind of flu-like symptoms. Maybe I had moved too fast that morning; that wasn’t uncommon. But the wave didn’t move. It wasn’t feeling like it was going to go away anytime soon. I called the office, and I told our administrative assistant that I needed her help to reschedule my morning appointment because I wasn’t feeling well. I thought if I lay back down for a couple hours, I would probably be able to come in at around noon or so. She graciously said she would.

I hung up the phone, and as though I was watching a movie of my own life, I saw myself pick up the phone again. I heard myself say, “I’m not coming in. I don’t know when I’ll be in. I’m taking a leave of absence or a medical leave or something. I don’t know what I’m doing.” Then I saw and heard myself hang up the phone.



got in the bed, and I proceeded to have what my grandmother would surely have said was a “nervous breakdown.” For nearly 40 years, I had lived with this God that I had found, but August 27, 1999 was the day that I would enter into my own exile, an exile away from that God. Turns out, it was a place where the God I found would be forever put away, and it was the place where I would be found, instead, by the real God.

During this exile, I slept at times for 18 to 20 hours a day, unable to get out of bed. My psychiatrist said it was a major depressive episode. I was given medication, and I had an excellent psychotherapist. I had a great support team: my husband, our children, and our family. There were times I wondered why I had not been hospitalized, based on what I can now look back and see was a “hell of a situation.”

One of my friends said, “Juanita, God cloistered you to your home.” What a picture! A monk in the monastery of my home.

I believe God did do that because it was there I experienced the discipline of solitude. I didn’t ask for it. Years later, when I picked up the *Life With God Bible*, and I looked up the definition of *solitude*, it said this: “Solitude: the creation of an open, empty space in our lives by purposefully abstaining from interaction with other human beings so that, freed from competing loyalties, we can be found by God.”

In 1 Corinthians 13:11, Paul says, “*When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I thought as a child, and I reasoned as a child, but now that I’ve become an adult, I put away childish things.*” That word for “put away” is *katargeo*, and it means there is actual, literal effort to remove, to put away. For almost two years, during my solitude in exile, God found me and helped me to “put away” that other rule-based, performance-based God that I *thought* I found so many years ago. In doing so, it empowered me to move through that place of exile and into real life... like Jesus during that period of temptation where he had to confront the beast.

Afterwards, the scripture tells us he was comforted by the angels¹. I’m grateful because in my exile, in my solitude, God found me and changed forever my “way.” Now, the way is not *my* way, with my false understandings of God; it’s been replaced, by God’s grace, with the Jesus way. I’ve come to know truth, yes, and grace on this way of Jesus.

There are prophets, and then there are great prophets. To me, some of the great ones were Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell, when they sang this: “Ain’t nothing like

the real thing, baby. Ain’t nothing like the real thing.” I couldn’t agree more.

**TALKING ABOUT THE REAL THING:
A CONVERSATION WITH JUANITA RASMUS**

MINDY CALIGUIRE: Juanita, your story touched everyone at the conference when you shared it, as I know it will here in the pages of *Conversations*. I was especially touched by the way you were able to see how God was molding you in that time of solitude, stripping you of your false views of Him and giving you a greater understanding of who He truly is. Is there anything you would like to say, any advice you would give, to those who are going through their own season of stripping?

JUANITA RASMUS: Early on in my diagnosis, before I could fully comprehend the journey, God gave me a passage in Isaiah 45:3.

I will give you the treasures of darkness
And hidden riches of secret places,
That you may know that I, the LORD,
Who call *you* by your name,
Am the God of Israel.

I was struck by the idea that God was giving me treasures out of the darkness of my depression and hidden riches of secret places. I began to believe that I would have to look for the good out of my experience. The text gave me something to hold on to, knowing that this experience—as devastating and daunting as it was—would yield me treasure.

Miners go deep into the earth to find treasure that the world longs for—but they have to remove a lot of rubble and rubbish to get to the good stuff! The stripping process is just like that. God is teaching us how to look for the truth—the gold—of who God is and the truth—more gold—of who we are in God.

While I never want to experience that depth of darkness again, the riches and treasures I’ve received as a result *far outweigh* the disorienting and debilitating darkness out of which I had to crawl. Behind me in the rubble, I buried the God of my childhood, who had been exacting and, quite frankly, a tyrant. I buried my outlandish expectations that I often exacted of myself and others. In the treasure I found the God of unconditional Love and acceptance. I received hidden riches in discovering that I was the beloved of God, cherished by Him beyond my comprehension.

The silence became the space I needed to be with God alone in order to sort and sift through which part was the trash and what was actually the treasure. If you find yourself going through this stripping process, *be gentle with yourself, take good notes* (you will want to remember what you are learning), and *stay open to experiencing God as a loving companion* who wants you

1. Matthew 4:11.



to get to know each other.

MC: You mention that you had a picture of yourself being “a monk in the monastery of my own home.” Could you say more about what that was like?

JR: A dear friend suggested that I was being cloistered in my own home. In essence I was under spiritual house arrest or, better perhaps, I was in a spiritual ICU. I was lethargic most days, and even dragging myself out of bed was a feat. But there in that exhausted state, God had my undivided attention, no appointments, sermon preparation, or field trips for my daughters... no activity of any kind to distract me from the work of recovery. Silence and solitude became welcome to me. Paraphrasing the *Life With God Bible*, silence became an opportunity to be released from the competing interests in my life to be found by God.

In that monastic silence, I could hear God speak to me while I stared out the window toward my backyard, watching the wind’s effects on the trees. I used no energy—I didn’t have any—but I was spoken to and kept company by God.

Silence became a place for me to gain new life.

MC: Since your experience, I would imagine that you have a different perspective on solitude. How often do you practice solitude now? What are the specific gifts of solitude that mean the most to you these days?

JR: Growing up in the South, my perspective of silence was that it was a form of punishment or my proper place. “*Good girls should be seen not heard*” and axioms like it shaped my understanding of silence. If anything, the idea of silence was “time-out” for being too boisterous. And I *was* surely that as a child!

I often heard an exasperated “*Can’t you be quiet!?*” or “*Do you have to talk so much!?*” But this new experience of silence and solitude gave me an incredible freedom. I was free to gather wisdom, to sense discernment, to surrender to patient waiting without anxiety, to reflect, to experience joy and hope as well.

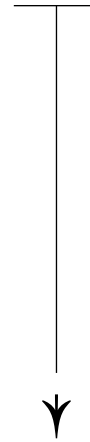
While in silence I have learned to cultivate listening for the still, small voice of God, and I have heard it.

I have learned to practice silence in numerous ways: daily in my car, I drive without the sound of the radio; while waiting in lines, I tune into the still, small voice. Fasting from TV is another way I make space from time to time for silence, and—when time is no object—I check into a local retreat center for a few days of “S & S”: silence and solitude. I have learned, and I recommend to others, to go *slow* even for just five minutes here or there, and build up a little at a time.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Juanita Campbell Rasmus is an inspirational speaker, motivational teacher, author, and founding board member of the Bread of Life Homeless Project. Juanita and her husband Rudy co-pastor Saint John’s United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas.



FINDING THE REAL THING: QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1. How are you creating an open, empty space for God?
- 2. Do you purposefully abstain from interaction with others? Why or why not?
- 3. What are some of your competing loyalties that rob you of time with God?
- 4. How does the 24/7 availability of technology impact your ability to be with God? When, if at all, do you take a break from these?
- 5. What parts of Juanita’s story resonate with you, and why? What have you been learning about God these days that challenge your former assumptions?



NOTES

Series of horizontal wavy lines for taking notes.