

# Life BEGINS

## WHEN YOU BEGIN TO LIVE

By Janet L. Morris

**W**here did I go, and how did I find my way back? Moments before disappearing, I was a high school senior in Searcy, Arkansas, pondering the possibilities of life after 17. Had I overindulged in the fictional fantasies of Star Trek, captivated by the thought of ‘boldly going where no man had been before’, or were Mr. Spock’s alien alliances really bidding for my brain? If only it had been that simple.

The year was 1979, and life was in my command. At the brink of adulthood, I anticipated challenging adventures for my future, but nothing like the one which would be laid upon my lap and eventually hammered into my soul. Be aware, less we ever believe we are in control. When the shadow of sickness silences one’s dreams, that shadow, regardless of its size, is in control. I know.

Sitting at a stop light in Springfield, Missouri, is the last thing I remember. My mother and sister had brought me to Central Bible College where I would settle into dorm life. Supposing I was drunk, strangers rescued traffic from my violent driving and brought me to my mother and sister’s hotel. Exhausted and disoriented, I began to come out of what seemed to be a merciless dream. Something was wrong, but correctly labeling that “something” would be a 25 year challenge. Twenty-five years of grand mal, psychomotor, and partial complex seizures, refusing medication or other forms of traditional treatment. They would eventually number at about 5,000 individual episodes, with as many as six occurrences in one day, at times. Seizures which would leave me misunderstood, physically injured, brain damaged, and barren. Seizures capable of overpowering my very existence at the moment it so desired, ever demanding instant gratification. Seizures which would mock my pride while it convinced others I was mentally retarded, psychologically ill, or demon possessed. Sadly, some people believed just that. I never did.

“Janet, Janet! It’s just me, Janet. It’s your grandma!”

Daily multiple grand mal seizures made up the decade of the 80’s. I would come out of them screaming as my grandma Beulah and other family members attempted to console me. Gripped with terror and defenseless, I know the devil took advantage of my vulnerable state. Violent seizures caused my body to jerk and twist itself into positions which left my back injured, and my brain devastated. So severe was the damage that I lost my ability to communicate. Like a stroke victim, I knew what I wanted to say but could not express words. Conversations consisted of me pointing at objects, grunting words one might associate with the object, but never quite able to pinpoint

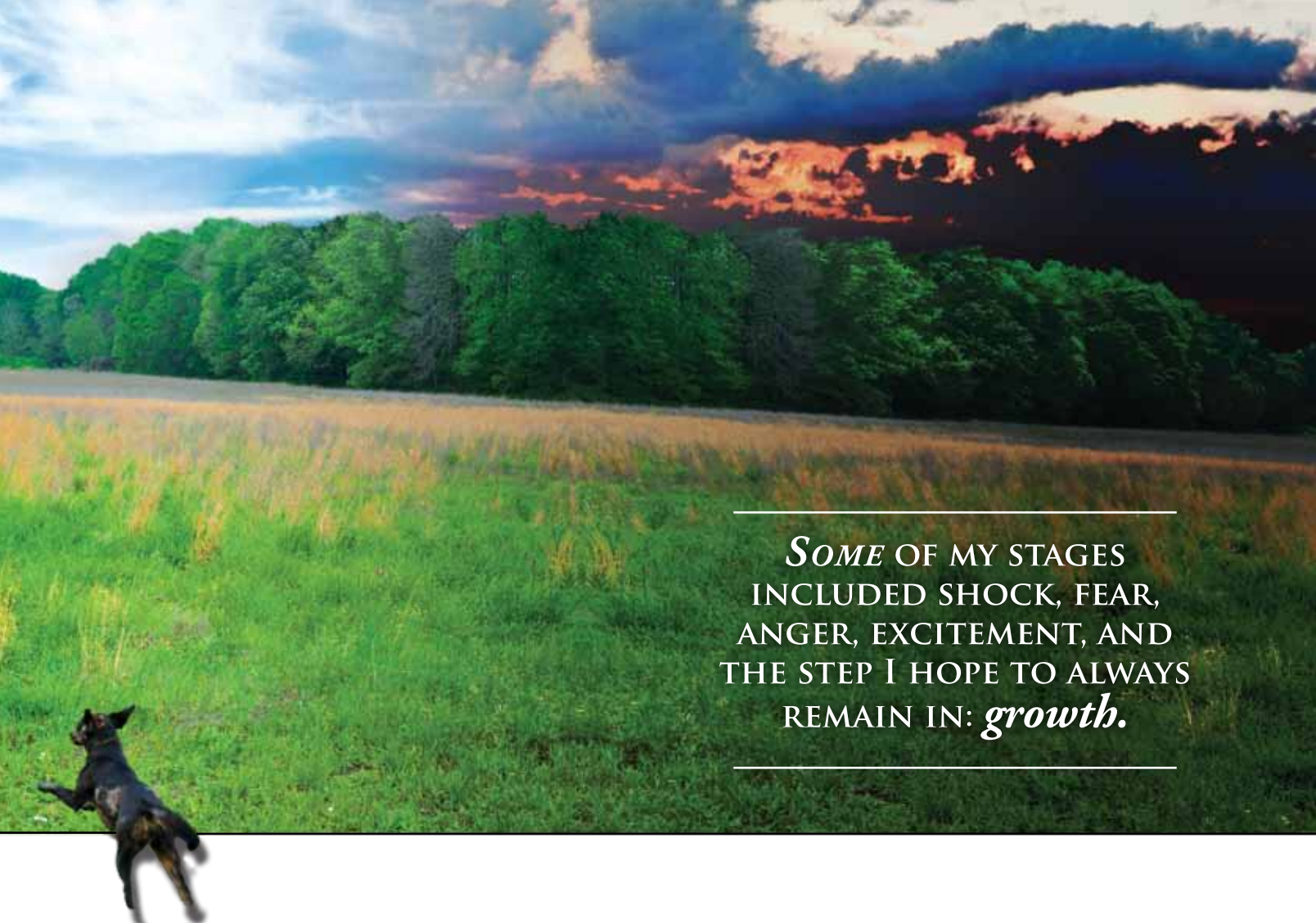


the appropriate noun. Slowly, I learned to connect a rhyming word to the word I really wanted to say, making communication slow but possible. It would take years for my brain to fully recover from the trauma of seizures and mind altering drugs I never really needed.

Brown Paper Bag. Even as I write, I pause and shake my head, smiling to hold back the tears. That was my last trio of conquering words – the worst and most difficult to relearn. And who really needs to be able to say “brown paper bag”? No one I guess... until you can’t do it.

I don’t know a lot from the late 70’s or 80’s. The weddings of my friends and the birth of their children are some of the special things I simply have no memory of. I do remember certain episodes of my own wedding in 1989. I managed not to have a seizure during the small ceremony at my parent’s home, but the evening of the honeymoon was interrupted with a grand mal seizure. I don’t remember the first time I made love to my husband...or the last time. I only know the next 13 years of marriage would be a prison of humiliating shame, over which I am still recovering.

Abuse may wear a variety of hats, and I have worn my share: Hats blending so well with the overall wardrobe that one could be convinced they are supposed to go together; perfectly camouflaged to the point of denial, easy as a smile. Women with strong personalities wear these hats just as well as the meek. Why? In doing so we believe we hide our weakness, attempting to save ourselves from the shame of being overpowered by



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*SOME OF MY STAGES  
INCLUDED SHOCK, FEAR,  
ANGER, EXCITEMENT, AND  
THE STEP I HOPE TO ALWAYS  
REMAIN IN: **growth.***

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someone who is supposed to love and protect. But that's another story.

Doctors couldn't find my problem. CT scans revealed no physical problem with my brain, leading them to suspect psychological disorders. Vaguely I remember writing down my dreams and presenting them to a mental health professional. Anti-seizure medications invaded me with side effects which were almost as devastating as the seizures themselves. I tried them all. When that didn't work, my family doctor tried valium in desperation. For two weeks I had no seizures – the longest I had ever gone. But that was temporary. Doctors would leave me on valium for fifteen years, because it was the only thing that had ever had any kind of positive effect against the seizures, and they felt they had to do something.

The early 90's were my years of recuperating from constant grand mal seizures, as my method of communication improved and signs of brain damage were somewhat less obvious. Its decade also brought a new sense of hopelessness. I began to long for motherhood, but was warned by my doctor never to have children, that there would be no telling what might come out of my body with all the drugs I was on. I hated myself for going through with tubaligation surgery, though now (and even then) I knew it was the right choice. Between the age of about 32 and 42, I sometimes sat on my living room floor and literally howled in emotional pain over being barren. I suffered alone, keeping my mourning between the walls and me. Perhaps some things just can't be expressed among even the closest of friends and family. God and age delivered me from such sorrow, and I now live a productive fulfilling life. Nevertheless my barrenness still

makes me feel like less of a woman at times. Not less loved, not less important, not even less of a person. Just less of a woman.

***I couldn't have tried any harder to work.*** Convulsing on the floors of a department store in front of customers eventually resulted in me being fired and drawing social security disability, however, which is what I needed at the time. In the 90's, I attempted to go back to work, as my seizures of a more violent nature had subsided somewhat. But there were more than seizures to contend with. Mind altering medicine prohibited me from thinking straight, making practical decisions, and performing tasks. My people skills and personality almost always got me jobs, but that wasn't enough to keep them. I went from working in department stores and offices, where my bosses worried about me having seizures before their customers, to working alone cleaning houses. After dropping and breaking a few knick knacks, putting myself and other people's homes in danger, and urinating all over myself during black out spells, I gave up working.

Never have I doubted my family's love for me, and they expressed it well on my 40th birthday. The year was 2001 and a surprise celebration was on the agenda. We did the usual with black balloons, Epson salt, dentures, and anti-aging cream. My husband was the only person who didn't show up. Less than a year later, he would walk out on me and move in with another woman. I didn't love him, yet the abandonment was overwhelming. Today I see it as it truly was: the beginning of hope.

In April of 2002, my sister shared with me a prophesy God had given her about 12 years earlier. She had prayed about my healing, and God gave her a word... something about the month





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*"Janet, I BELIEVE GOD HAS  
 ALLOWED HIM TO LEAVE SO  
 THAT YOU MAY GO ON WITH  
 HIS WILL."*



of June. Now, 12 years later, sitting on the front pew near the altar area of Faith Assembly of God Church on a Wednesday night, my sister knelt beside me with these words: "Janet, I believe God has allowed him (my husband) to leave so that you may go on with His will. And Janet, God says He has a month for you. That month is June. Now I want you to tell me, Janet. Tell me if something happens in June."

Two months later June came and left. June came and left again in 2003. I continued healing from my anger and abandonment issues, learning to deal with poverty as my mobile home was reclaimed. My parents purchased a used single wide trailer for me to live in and put it on their land. Seizures continued and I was tired of living without a life. With nothing left to lose, I decided to fight my seizure disorder like never before. And if I die, I die.

*Late in 2003, I went to see a new family doctor,* Jennifer Faith. I told her of multiple CT scans to no avail, a visit to a local neurologist who said he simply couldn't do anything for me, my 25 years of trying every drug and diet in the book. Dr. Faith ordered an MRI, and I waited on pins and needles for its results. When the hospital called, it was actually a relief that they had found something odd. So, I wasn't crazy. I wasn't demon possessed. I wasn't even mentally retarded. Tests revealed what I knew all along: There was a physical problem in my brain. Thank God the rest of the world now knew that.

At first, the problem in my brain was misdiagnosed, though at least acknowledged. Dr. Faith sent me to a neurologist in Little Rock, who was just as confused as the local neurologist years earlier. He then recommended a neurologist who specialized in epileptic seizures, Dr. Victor Batton. I was placed in a double blind study for the newest anti-seizure medication, which left me hallucinating and experiencing effects similar to paranoid schizophrenia. Convinced I was going to hell and nothing in the world could stop it, I sat on the floor terrorized at the fate before me, which even the blood of Jesus could not prevent. As I write, I remember feeling these emotions, how real they were, how sure I was of burning in a dark pit throughout eternity. Through the power of medically prescribed chemicals in a bottle I have come face to face with hate and terror. Don't take drugs if you don't need them.

Unable to continue with the double blind study, Dr. Batton went on to plan B: brain surgery. On my 44th birthday, May 18th, I met with neurosurgeon Dr. Fredrick Boop, the first person to correctly diagnose my condition. Dr. Boop believed the tiny irregular spot on the left temporal lobe of my brain was a slow growing benign tumor, hiding behind a membrane. He believed it could be successfully removed, and said someone would call me to make arrangements for brain surgery.

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A few days later I got a call from the Methodist Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. The secretary wanted to set up my hospitalization stay for the surgery. "Ms. Morris, I'm thinking we can work you in soon, and I'm thinking... could you come in on, uh, how about June? June 1st?"

On June 1st, I had my last seizure ever in the bathroom of the Methodist Hospital, hours before my surgery. On June 2nd, the surgery was successfully performed. I spent June 3rd in recovery, and went home on June 4th. After 25 agonizing years, it was that simple. Like being born again, I left the hospital frail but free, like a baby becoming acquainted with her new world.

"LITTLE THINGS LIKE A CHANGE IN  
HAIR STYLE, CLOTHING, AND PERSONAL  
PREFERENCES REALLY *aren't so little.*"

*Recovery is a step by step process;* that I know well. Some of my stages included shock, fear, anger, excitement, and the step I hope to always remain in: growth. Social Security and Rehabilitation worked together to help me establish a new life through education. Twenty-five years earlier, my education had been interrupted. In January of 2004, six months after my surgery, I went back to college at Arkansas State University in Beebe. I will always be grateful for a small school with special teachers who held my hand through the challenging process of getting my Associates degree. The last two years of my undergraduate degree were finished at Arkansas Tech in Russellville, Arkansas. I left with a BA in Music with an emphasis in voice, and a minor in...you guessed it, rehabilitation. In December of 2011, I will complete my graduate work with a Masters Degree in Rehabilitation Counseling. My goal is to work with those who are both mentally and physically disabled, and I will begin with a practicum and internship at the Wilbur D. Mills Treatment Center this summer here in Searcy.

My growth has been steady and ongoing. Little things like a change in hair style, clothing, and personal preferences really aren't so little. There is a story behind them. I am not what I once was, praise God.

I still battle certain issues, some previously mentioned. More than once I have embarrassed myself and made others feel uneasy by saying, "I look forward to getting to know you." You see, those I've said that to have sometimes been people who grew up with me, and have known me all of their life. But I don't know them. The last seven years have been filled with re-generating old friendships, learning, and relearning. I don't go to high school reunions. Many of my classmates wouldn't understand that I don't know them, and attempting to rekindle the memory with old stories probably wouldn't help. That's not to say I remember nothing. I know some of those I grew up with (though not all) by name – just not by heart. But that is changing.

God has blessed me seven fold. I recently built my own house on the land my parents gave me, and I live surrounded by family. I've had the opportunity to tell my story to Celebrate Recovery groups, Hope Outdoors ministries, and other functions. I am working on my third and final degree. (Well, maybe! How would "Dr. J" sound?) My big dream is to build a therapeutic recreational center for people with disabilities someday on my 25 acres of land. I don't know how. God knows, and for now that is enough.

May 18th, 2011, marks my 50th birthday, and it will be a great year, of that I am sure. However, some say life begins at the age of 30... some say 40 or 50. For me, it was at the age of 44, and my favorite month will always be June. *I say, "Life begins, when you begin to live."* ☺

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