

# *Papa's Daughter*



*a story of a  
transformed life*

Tharanga Abeysinghe

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*A Story of a Transformed Life*

Written by Tharanga Abeysinghe

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## CHAPTER ONE

# *Fear*

I pressed my face on the chilled glass. The cold reminded me that I could still feel. Wiping the pane fogged from my breath, I watched as the rising sun began to flirt with the mountain peaks.

My fire died hours ago, about the time I began looking out my window. Yet, I couldn't move, afraid I might miss a hoped-for sign. Maybe something outside could point the way. Numb not only from the cold, but frozen in fear. Lost in my own home.

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A low fog wandered down the street, providing a blanket over the receding snow banks, when the stillness shattered. A distant crushing of ice. Footsteps. They came closer to my window. Strangely, I welcomed them; yet when they grew louder I stepped back from the window while leaning to look out the corner of the glass.

The cold in the room finally claimed me and shortened my breath. I wouldn't leave the window to find another blanket, so I clutched closer the one already draped over my shoulders. The breaking of packed snow stopped. The quiet returned. It's strange and yet wonderful where the mind will take us when we are alone. It took me in that very moment, oddly, thousands of miles away to my native land, where the sun covered my dark skin and warmed my face. I could almost smell the baking of my mother's bread – almost.

## *Fear*

The footsteps continued and brought me back to Alaska. A movement in the far corner of the window caught my eye. Again, I backed away. I became afraid. What could be outside, so close, so loud? The furry antlers of the bull moose passed across the bottom of my window pane. In search of tasty leaves before the morning rush, he glanced up at me staring at him. It wasn't a sign, at least I didn't think so; but I was grateful nonetheless. A smile found its way on my face – the first one in weeks.

Still cold, but a little warmer, I left the window to build a fire. Soon my 6-year-old son and 2-year-old daughter would wake, and the room far too cold and dark for breakfast. Gratefully, the daily routines of life gave me a sense of normalcy. They broke, if just for a moment, the burdens of a single mother alone, far from her beloved Sri Lanka. My arranged marriage, a tradition in my homeland, and the reason I



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lived in Anchorage, failed. My future looked as bleak as the gray landscape, and I couldn't shake the depression that rolled in and out of my life like the morning fog. My window was more a mirror with a steamed, distorted reflection, and that sound of crushing snow, actually my soul.

Today I will finally see a doctor. Maybe he will have a sign, or at least a prescription. But what medicine can heal deep wounds? What words bring peace when more than words have inflicted such pain? But for my children's sake, I must try. They deserve their mother to rediscover the person I had been: bold, unafraid, with the confidence to speak to thousands. I couldn't recognize that person in the mirror – covered in shame, afraid of the world, trusting in no one.

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It didn't help that I also hurt physically – the pain of falling on the slippery ice months before added another knife into my back. If I could only take my children and, like the Alaskan bears, hibernate for the winter. Back pain is unrelenting. It seeps into your emotions and it crushes your spirit. But young children expect a happy mommy and I would not disappoint. Yet, the woman of the past who could glide down a runway now hunched over in pain, waiting in the doctor's office. I wasn't there for the back pain; I was there for the mind pain, and I didn't know which hurt more.

I sat alone in the waiting room, glad I didn't have to feign a smile for strangers. I looked out yet another window, this time just to pass the time. My mind, as it was oft to do, went to a happier place – to the comfort of childhood memories. I let them flood over me, floating me away from the dark, cold place.

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The old man in his tattered shorts and unbuttoned shirt drove the ox cart past me – he and his cow in no hurry. I had seen him before, but didn't know his name. I waved at him anyway. I happily ran through the woods with the giant ferns brushing against my arms. The rapid alternating of sun and shade created sparkles of light upon my face. I ran until coming to a clearing where the forest gave way to a vast rice paddy – miles of flat, wet land. It smelled of still water and mud. Farmers sloshed knee deep, planting and pulling, only stopping to wipe the sweat from their brow. Water buffalos ploughed the soaked earth, and the blue magpies screamed at one another. It was heaven.

## *Fear*

I loved my small town of Gampaha. Families lived together for generations – life ordered, simple, with customs and traditions as rich as the black Sri Lankan soil. In a family of two children, I was the youngest. My mother – a fashionable, loving, and caring woman. My father treated me like daddy’s little girl. They were both dignified, traditional, and fervently passed these values to their children. As Buddhists, we never failed to attend Temple to observe the full moon day. The temple produced both awe and fear in me as I walked past the intricate carvings and glittering gold. Confronting the massive statue of Buddha, my nostrils filled with incense, creating an overwhelming feeling of attraction and foreboding – strong emotions for any little girl.

Sometimes school, in the dry season, would be outdoors, and my thoughts would wander from the teacher’s lecture when the birds

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would sing. Out of respect and custom we all would kneel before our teachers when entering the classroom. My white uniform contrasted against my dark skin. I liked my red and green tie along with my daily braiding of my thick black hair. No electronics, only a lead pencil and manila paper. Traditional dance became my favorite, and I excelled at it.

But more than anything, I remember my time alone in the jungle where I instructed the green shrubs and plantain trees, which magically became my students. In the second grade I learned about Africa and its many children whom I yearned to know. They were my students in the emerald forest, listening in silence as I instructed on subjects only a little girl could know.

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The doctor himself invited me into his office. I smiled at him, but I didn't trust men. His office desk cluttered and his bookshelves full, I slunk down in the big leather chair. Listening to his first remarks, I kept my eyes focused on his; but I can't tell you anything he said. A few words stumbled out when he asked me questions. Shame and embarrassment took turns to mock me. But he listened like my father when we would walk on the beach, letting the foam from the Indian Ocean cover our feet. I became more comfortable.

Everybody needs somebody to talk to and listen. In the back of my mind I knew he was getting paid for this time; but I didn't care.

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Soon my life spilled out like a cracked cup of water. Actually, more a fire hose unleashed on a flame that burned away inside. No emotion too raw, no hurt too shameful. Three times a week I would go.

I grew up in a culture that wouldn't understand so much introspection, and especially so much self-disclosure to a person of the opposite sex. But I found each time with my doctor liberating. There are deep, dark recesses in all of us. For some that basement door of emotions can remain locked, while others fumble for the right key to open it. Even then, however, the hurt exposed can still remain. I discovered pain can become an unwanted friend that never wants to leave.

As a divorced person, I brought great shame to my family in Sri Lanka. The few friends I made in Alaska were really my husband's first,

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so they slipped away. More than just failing, I was a failure. The unforgiving mirror reflected an ugly person I could not recognize, but it stared back at me daily, even after our therapy sessions. Soon he prescribed the pills.

The human brain is a wonderful creation. Synapses fire by the millions in a mere second, all in order, and all for a purpose. Sometimes the wiring and the chemicals in the brain malfunction. Sometimes a drug can assist in the rewiring process. They helped me some days, while others not so much. The doctor increased dosages, yet still with little change. I could exist, however, dependent on the new chemicals that inhabited my brain and freed me from my basement, if just for a few hours.





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An outdoor market in Sri Lanka is a magical place, especially among the flowers. Aromas compete fiercely. Colors explode. My mother and I walked hand in hand, while each of us held a bag full of food and spices. While my mom stopped in the fruit section to inspect the durian, freshly picked, an older woman approached me.

“You should take part in a beauty pageant,” she said matter of factly. She spoke to my mom while I listened. I could barely comprehend the concept. I was a lanky tomboy who loved competing on the athletic field, not on a runway full of girls with too much makeup. But I could improve my communication skills, posture, and a few social graces. Why not try?

The training for Miss Young Sri Lanka was intense, but I thrived. It wasn't simply about me; it was the opportunity to represent my com-

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munity. Even at a young age, a teenager, I cared deeply about the needs of the people. While most of my friends followed typical teenage pursuits, I wanted to make a difference.

When the pageant day arrived, my conversation with the judges flowed easily because I've always been an authentic person. I didn't memorize lines, but shared my heart. Never nervous, despite the crowd and flash of cameras, my smiles came naturally. I enjoyed every moment.

Hearing my name called as a finalist both shocked and thrilled me – not from a lack of confidence, but from a lack of expectation. I simply stayed in the moment. That moment extended when they called me to accept the crown. Most young girls fantasize what it must be like to walk down a runway, flowers in hand, flash bulbs popping, with a cheering crowd. As

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I stood there alone, the future seemed as bright as the stage lights that directed my path.

I don't remember all the questions the judges asked. Did they ask me the requisite question about world peace? Little did any of us know during that glorious day in June that merely a month later we'd all be involved in the beginning of a bloody civil war – a war no one could ever imagine, that would last for nearly three decades.



My doctor must have noticed that my mind had wandered to another place. When he said my name I came to attention, shoulders back despite the pain, and a ready smile. My smile

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has always served me well. The session nearly over, he wrote another prescription. I still looked forward to our time, but somewhere deep down I knew it was the promise of pills that brought me back.

The freezing temperatures and wind blowing sideways came like a thousand knives while I struggled to find my car keys. I didn't care. A new adventure stirred my heart. Far from all the green shrubs and plantain trees, I would soon be fulfilling a dream to teach. My love of children never left me; no change of venue could do that.

An unexpected delight happened when my teaching career began to focus on the indigenous peoples. My culture, though seemingly so very different than those native to Alaska, gave me insight into their thinking. My school in Anchorage had students from many ethnic-

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ities. I've seen the tragedies that can happen when people who live together never truly integrate. Maybe it is the extreme environment that encouraged us all to know each other better. The wonderful people of Alaska, not without their struggles, seemed to embrace diversity. Perhaps people living in a harsh climate must work together despite their differences.

I've always been fascinated by other countries and cultures – especially the children from different nations. They start out life open and willing to embrace each other; but unfortunately, many are influenced to stop trusting and hold back their love. What happens between the innocence of childhood and the corruption of adulthood? This is a question I've contemplated my whole life. To answer it unlocks the door to, dare I say it, world peace.

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My classes were often featured in local newspapers and on television stations. I nurtured a curiosity, among my young students, for various cultures. The native Alaskan culture is very different from those of the dominant societies, both in content and communication. What I found is that student, teacher, and parents must work together and believe that education is a powerful, positive, and never-ending process. Sociologists will tell you that in cultures where education is highly valued there is less poverty and crime. Education is not the only answer; but without it, we are doomed to live in ignorance.

As a young girl in Sri Lanka I dreamed of visiting schools and orphanages. I imagined ways we could improve their opportunities and help them become successful citizens of this world. My joy was identifying the talents in children and helping them reach their fullest potential.

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Now here I was, no longer dreaming, but living the dream. My children, however, were not wearing shorts and sandals, but parkas and boots. Children, no matter the geography, are children. How they grow up, what they will learn, determines their future.

Even as my work as a teacher prospered, my days full and my children happy, I still felt a deep pain inside. I continued to visit my doctor, but less frequently. But it was my busy schedule and the medication that kept me going.

An emptiness – something was missing in my life. Maybe love? Deep, deep down I knew the answer wasn't another man. I felt so lonely, but for more than a physical embrace.



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The scream left me cold. It stunned me, unable to move, trying to process the dreadful sound. I made my way to the door of my cousin's house in Colombo. Other screams joined the first one, soon turning into cries for help. I had to open the door and look. What I saw will never leave my memory. Neighbors, shrieking, climbed their walls into our yard, a pregnant woman ran through the bushes, all coming toward me.

The gunshots and bomb blasts joined the voices of fleeing people. Smoke began to fill the air. People chased other people in the streets with machetes and guns – faces full in monstrous hate. In an instant the world went mad; and I watched from the doorstep.

The neighbors came closer, as did the pregnant woman. I didn't know it in that instant, but they were running for their lives. Even if I had



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wanted to, there was no time to close and lock the door. People ran past me into the house, hysterical, trying to find anywhere to hide. They hid in the bathroom, under the beds; their screams became muffled gasps for air and quiet sobs.

Terror has a smell. It's the burning of human flesh. A foul, musky, sweet aroma began to fill the air. Once you smell it, you never forget it; but at the time I didn't know. Cries continued in the distance, sometimes stopped after a gunshot. The screams of children are unbearable. I still shake with the memory to this day.

Nobody slept that night. We pretended that our locked doors would keep out the madness. We all had experienced a horror movie; but this was not make-believe. The mind cannot comprehend such atrocities, so it shuts down or deflects, trying to protect our sanity. You

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question the reality of what just occurred. You alternate between panic and numbness.

The sun rose the next morning. Sunrises usually bring hope for a new day. This sunrise in 1983 brought dread. The neighbors came out from under the beds, the pregnant woman from the bathroom – their faces of terror and panic now replaced with a gloom. Were their loved ones alive? Would their homes be burned? With few words, they left to find answers.

Soon we would learn that this was the beginning of the Sri Lankan civil war. It had been carefully planned to occur simultaneously throughout the country. My world of innocence shattered, my new crown meaningless. I walked, zombie-like, down the street. Bodies, contorted in death, lay strewn about. The hard rain fell on my face, but I could not look away.

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The strikes of lightning and claps of thunder did not persuade me to return home. I watched in horror as the rain-bloated rivers carried bodies away.

It was as if God abandoned all of us, Sinhalese and Tamil. God was angry and I stood terrified. Lifting my soaked arms toward heaven, the rain washing away my tears and the thunder in my ears, all I could speak, “My God, my God.”

## CHAPTER TWO

# *Desperation*

Sitting in my doctor's big leather chair, I pick at a frayed edge while he peppers me with questions. Normally I like to talk – not today. Today I look down, often consumed by one of my least favorite, but most familiar demons: failure. But for some of us, failure begins to dress us every morning and wraps us in a wardrobe of despair. We may even learn to wear it well throughout the day and hope no one notices. But we know. Inside we die another day looking for something, anything to distract us. Life becomes one continuous

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distraction as we flee failure. But it's never far behind and normally arrives sometime every morning to greet you at your lowest. Today it owned me, and all I could do was cry.

Failure has many friends, sometimes famous ones. You hate to believe you take consolation in that fact, it seems so selfish. The old expression, misery loves company – well, failure is its sick cousin. The famous author JK Rowling surprisingly knows failure well. In a speech during commencement at Harvard she said something I could definitely relate to,

“I had failed on an epic scale. An exceptionally short-lived marriage had imploded, and I was jobless, a lone parent, and as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain, without being homeless.”

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Then she finished the statement with something profoundly simple,

“And so rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life.”

In her speech she challenged the students to embrace, not run away from, the failure in their life. Failure had taught her things about herself, things she could not have learned any other way.

“It is impossible to live without failure at something unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all...”

Unfortunately, I would read these inspiring words well after my time in the big leather chair. Today, I wore failure home, even to bed. I felt grateful, at least, to be able to tuck my

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children into bed after our time of reading. I loved to read to them every day. The pages took me somewhere beyond myself. Tonight I shall dream of Sri Lanka.



I looked out from behind the curtain at one of the largest auditoriums in Sri Lanka. Thousands crammed inside, waiting for the Miss Sri Lanka pageant to begin. The backstage – full of nervous, beautiful women and the scent of too much hairspray. I loved everything about it: the preparation and training, how to properly walk down the catwalk, or preparing for that question on world peace. Actually, a similar question could be asked, as Sri Lanka continued to struggle in civil war. This pageant

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gave us all one night to come together, Tamil and Sinhalese. Yet, the military watched the perimeters, and I'm sure plain-clothes police inside. We had learned to live with the terror, the bombing, the unknown. But tonight, lights, lots of makeup, and dazzling dresses would fill the eyes, and I would enjoy it all.

Of the many joys in participating is getting to know the other women – some from rich families, others not. Like any large group of girls, there are those you hope to know forever, and those you'd like to forget. All of us had prior experience in beauty pageants. There are, of course, the comparisons and competitions. I was grateful I never got caught up in the dark side of competitive glamour. My healthy childhood kept me grounded and focused on others, and not always on myself. It allowed me to enjoy my fellow participants because, though I wanted to win, I could never betray



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my values. Believe it or not, good sportsmanship applies to beauty pageants; and I was a good sport. That didn't mean I wouldn't compete. Beauty pageants are as competitive as the martial arts. We are samurai warriors with a smile. Instead of a gi, we wear gowns.

Like Young Miss Sri Lanka, I advanced to the final stage. Then it came down to just two of us. You don't have time to consider how life will change depending on a rather arbitrary outcome. You are completely in a state of anticipation. But I let my mind entertain images of my family, especially my mother – her beauty, her poise, her encouragement to me. I shared this moment with her when they called my name.

As thrilling as the moment was, the best experiences were in my future as a goodwill ambassador for the country. Meeting so many

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people from so many nations and cultures only increased my hunger to grow and learn. It also allowed me to recognize I had a gift. This gift was simply the ability to engage people and truly enjoy their presence. I suppose you can learn this, but I think it must come naturally, effortlessly. When people feel accepted, even loved, something magical can happen. My gift allowed me to become a bridge between the many communities and commerce in Sri Lanka and the world. It taught me the critical lesson of life that outer beauty cannot compete with the grace within. Our bodies will age, but inner beauty – ageless. We can try to keep attractiveness of our youth, yet it is the allure of a beautiful old soul that will always draw others to us. Our face can hide an ugliness inside, but our inner beauty never needs makeup.

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Maybe my life will be that of a bridge builder between people, I thought. In a way, a small way, maybe I could help to bring world peace.



The light dances over the rooftops, waking me from a hard sleep. I hold the covers close to my chin as if to keep out the day. My children will be awake soon. They are the only reason I would ever leave this comfortable refuge. If depression has a floor, I am standing firmly on it as I look for my slippers. I can't possibly feel any worse, any more irrelevant to this world. To find my slippers I bend down, slowly, rising in fierce pain. Oddly, the pain is welcomed – it reminds me I'm alive. Chronic physical pain is the enemy that slaps you in the face; emo-

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tional pain squeezes you from behind and chokes you from within. Both took turns today.

A fellow teacher, a friend, has invited me to go to a concert; at least I think it's a concert. Maybe it's a conference. I'm not too sure. I just want to get in a car and drive somewhere and be in a room full of people. There's something about being alone with lots of people. It's better than being alone, by yourself.

My children want me to hold them. I can't say no. My doctor says I need back surgery, but how will I take care of them and work? Returning to bed seems like the best option, but it's really not one. Actually, being busy is almost as good as the pills my other doctor, the psychiatrist, prescribes. I know I'm much too dependent on them, even though they barely work half the time.

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Today feels like life is coming to a final juncture. I can't go on, but I can't stop. When you hit bottom I suppose the only thing is to get up. I wonder about today as I get dressed. Shall I put on my daily mask? Or will I let others see me for real today? Now why would I ever let them know what is really going on in my life? The façade protects me; it guards me from those looks of disdain and judgment. If people think I'm normal, it gives me a little slice of feeling normal. I have a right to feel normal, don't I? But I wonder, if I remove the mask, maybe I might become stronger. Maybe wearing "real" could feel right. What is it like to feel normal? I've forgotten.

Looking forward to my time with my teacher/friend helps me to leave the house. But today is different. Something has to change. I love my children, my sweet, sweet children. I also love my kids at school. They so

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look up to me and love me back. I wish I could share with them my pain. Maybe I could become their hope. I know their lives are difficult. They know way too early the cruelties of broken families and abusive parents. They hold in, as best they can, the horror of seeing Mom beaten or Dad drunk. My classroom might be the only stable thing in their shattered lives. They also have a right to feel normal, if just for the afternoon.



My homeland is formerly known as Ceylon. Sri Lanka is an island full of nature's beauty, its people even more beautiful, which is why the civil war made no sense. Of course, war rarely

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makes sense when we have the capacity to listen and forgive.

Part of my duties as Miss Sri Lanka allowed me to visit villages impacted by terror. Seeing the missing arm or leg is horrible, and listening to the stories of dead loved ones heartbreaking. Many times I was treated like a celebrity; but the real joy came when, after hearing someone's pain, I could hold them as they wept.

There is not much I could do for those whose eyes were empty. I was bewildered at the depth of soul hurt that causes one to become a shell. I understood emotional withdrawal, but the people I saw lived on a far different level. Severe trauma can short-circuit our brains. It is why so many war veterans or war survivors find healthy relationships difficult or impossible. The brain thinks it is protecting them, but we are originally wired to connect,

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to feel, to love. It seemed as if most families had someone under their roof with damaged wiring.

Why are people so cruel? How can they justify the killing of someone they don't know? Especially when their only sin is being part of a different group. People who once babysat each other's children, shared food, and went to temple together now stare with abject hatred.

I confess I didn't know the depth of losing a loved one to a senseless bombing or shooting. I suppose no one really knows how they will react when revenge knocks at the door. Yet it was Mahatma Gandhi who said, even after experiencing so much loss personally,

“An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind.”



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So many people I visited in the towns and villages demonstrated such courage by embracing forgiveness. I've heard similar stories of mercy and grace from travelers living in Asia and Africa, who visited Sri Lanka and knew firsthand the horrors of genocide. Forgiveness is pure power. It cannot be legislated, but only codified in one's heart. When forgiveness is spoken or acted upon it changes the very atmosphere in the room. I think those who have been forgiven know best how to forgive. My country must learn the lesson of forgiveness or the ugliness will erupt again.



Getting in the car with my friend and driving to the conference gives me the chance to

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clear my mind. I still don't know what I'm going to hear, but for the moment I feel alive. There is music, as we enter the building, which I've never heard before – but it sounds happy. I like happy. I need happy. We sit down and someone leads from the stage in singing. People sing along. My friend seems to know the words, yet she is singing with her eyes closed. There is an energy in the room I haven't experienced since the night I was crowned Miss Sri Lanka. I looked around – no armed guards.

The music continues, and though I don't know the songs I'm enjoying the moment. Many of the songs use the name Jesus. I know the name because of Christmas. Maybe they are singing Christmas songs. I try not to think too much; thinking invites depression. I love that people are moving to the music. They clap, sing, and sway. Some even lift up their arms

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like I did in the rain the day after the start of the civil war. Maybe they are crying out to God. I hope he is not still angry.

My friend occasionally glances over to me and smiles. I smile back. She seems worried about me and I am thankful for that. A man begins to speak after we sit down. I really don't understand what he is saying. He mentions Jesus often. They really love Christmas all year long in Alaska. I listen, but my mind wanders. Maybe they will sing again.

Then he does something I've never seen before. He is speaking about diseases, pain, and physical problems. I think he believes they are all in this auditorium. Some people raise their hands. I hear someone, an older native lady, cry out for help. I want to help her, but don't. My friend seems perfectly fine with this, so I continue to watch. I'm not sure what to feel;

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but the atmosphere in the room, despite the occasional outbursts, is calm.

The speaker looks at me. Is he looking at me – maybe someone just behind me? No, he is definitely looking at me. Our eyes lock. “You! Yes, you!” He’s looking at me for sure.

“You have back pain.” I am stunned. I’ve never met this man before. Did my friend tell him? I stood there, not sure what to do. Then he says so firmly, “God is going to heal you!”

Is this man crazy? How does he know what God is going to do? I’d rather be singing the Christmas songs.



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Tennyson once wrote,

“’Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.”

I’m not sure how I feel about those oft-quoted words. My “love” was decided for me. My family’s history is replete with arranged marriages, and divorce rare. It is done with the best interests of their sons and daughters, so I never searched for romance. That may seem very strange to the Western mind; but I accepted it with little reservation.

Being Miss Sri Lanka gave me visibility, with my photo in multiple magazines. I did have some say in the matter as families were talking about me as a potential bride for a few bachelors. I could voice an early objection and hope to quell any more discussion about possible nuptials. All I knew at the time, marriage

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was forever and family ties more important than my whims or needs. Who was I to question tradition and the wisdom of my parents? And after all, in the words of my beloved Shakespeare from *The Merchant of Venice*,

“Love is blind, and lovers cannot see the pretty follies that themselves commit.”

But an arrangement did not deny my dreaming of romance. What would it be like to walk hand in hand on the moonlit beach with my prince? Would my future husband and I meet by chance at one of my promotions? Our eyes to lock and after a long flirtatious look, acknowledge each with a small, yet seductive smile.

What really is love anyway? According to my traditions, the emotions are transient, but the partnership permanent. Beautiful flowers and fine dinners will fade. To quote the words sung

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so powerfully by Tina Turner, “What’s love got to do with it?” Yet there I was, young and never really knowing the love of a man. I’m not sure I ever really have.

One of the chief organizers of the Sri Lankan fashion industry visited the United States. She had a magazine that featured me and showed it to a family living there. The rest now seems like a distant dream, something that never happened. But it did. The families met, the arrangements were made, and I would be leaving for America.

Before I left, the only man I really loved and felt love from, my father, died. People came to our home and filled the room. They had heard the tragic news that a bus driver killed my father, who was simply walking home from work. I needed to escape to my room and hide. I wanted to crawl under the bed, like those

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neighbors escaping death. Now Death had visited me; and at that moment I wished to join him. Until you've experienced the loss of someone so close, you cannot conceive where the mind goes – my emotions raw and becoming numb, but my thoughts random and capricious. I'd like to say I focused on supporting my mother and family, but I wept and battled selfishly the overwhelming thought, "Who will love me like my father?"



What is happening to me? The man just prayed, at least I think he was praying, over me and now I'm lying on the floor, flat on my back. Something like a heavy current flowed through my body and I couldn't stand. The last thing I



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wanted to do is pass out in front of my friend and all these Christmas carolers. But I didn't pass out. I'm fully conscious, and yet I feel detached from my body. All my back pain is gone.

For some reason the man keeps saying, while I'm flat on the floor, "More Lord, more Lord." More of what? But strangely, I'm not fighting it and I'm not afraid. Time seems to have stopped. And I seem to be floating. I keep checking myself for back pain. Even my mind pain seems to have left the building. I feel like a little girl running through the jungles of Sri Lanka, but I'm lying here in Wasilla, Alaska. Music is still being played, no one has left, and a bright, soft light fills the room.

Then I see something, as if everything else happening to me wasn't enough. What I see my mind tells me isn't real, but it feels more real than anything I've ever witnessed. Thou-

## *Desperation*

sands of people are gathering, they look like me, my people, and are dressed in bright white. Together, in unison, they are singing, their arms outstretched with all of their attention focused on just one man. Who is he? Is he God? And why am I seeing all of this? But I know it's all for me.

Everyone in the room continues to sing. I don't understand the words, but I open my mouth to try. Words I don't understand flow out of my mouth. I've never heard words like this before. I don't want to stop speaking. It's a language I've never learned.

As I speak the words something seems to grow stronger inside me. Is it my spirit? All I know is all of this is new and nothing I could ever imagine or create on my own. I try to get up but cannot. I came into this room full of anger, fear, and rejection, but now it all is a

## *Papa's Daughter*

distant nightmare. Is this real? How could this be? It's wonderful. Let it happen. Don't be afraid. There is a peace I've never experienced before. I don't understand it, but I'm enjoying it.

As I stay suspended between the body and spirit, I speak out the name of God over and over. And in my mind another name, a name I have never associated with God before now. As I say the name to myself I know he is the one who has touched my body. My back is healed, my mind free. He is responsible and I am certain of it. I don't understand much of what is happening to me, but I do know it's because of Jesus.

Now I know why the people in this room kept saying his name. This Christmas will be very different in my home.

## CHAPTER THREE

# *Hope*

I took the bus today. Normally it would be just another way to travel, like the tuk-tuk, a colorful cross between a moped and VW Beetle. But today news of another bombing killing innocents and the recent death of my father by bus leaves me hesitant to travel at all.

As we go I am surprised at not being jammed inside and standing. Fewer people risk crowded and confined spaces. So I get by the window and watch as we pass under the black and white funeral ribbons hung across the

## *Papa's Daughter*

road. Life in Sri Lanka has not been the same since “Black July.” Barricades and security checkpoints are as common as the open-air storefronts. And death waffs through the air like the mourning flags.

A young man sits to my right, ahead one row on the other side of the bus. I can't help but notice him. He could be a terrorist. He could be a shopkeeper. The side of his face looks tense and I find myself becoming nervous as he looks straight ahead, never looking out the window. He seems to be fingering something around his neck, unconsciously so. I've heard where every rebel soldier wears a cyanide capsule necklace as a precaution against capture. What drives someone to kill or to take their own life? Like every civil war there are always two sides. But it's hard to be fair-minded when you fear your own demise.

## *Hope*

The bus enters into a section of town known to be primarily inhabited by Tamils. I am Sinhalese by birth and now, at this moment, the minority. Yet, because we are in Tamil territory I feel a bit safer on the bus. Tamils speak a different language, though most Sri Lankans, especially in the city, speak English. We are a nation of two languages, but the language we all must learn is the language of love. Yes, my optimism borders on, or crosses into, the land of naivety; but it is what drives me to travel today into an area I probably shouldn't go.

We pass by a roofless building, a casualty of war. Yet it is still filled with students wearing white shirts and listening to their instructor. The young man leaves at the next stop, never looking but ahead. A mother and her child enter, sitting just behind me. The red dot on her forehead signifies that she is married and a Hindu. Hinduism is the religion in this town.

## *Papa's Daughter*

I've never thought poorly of this faith. Many Buddhists, because they do not believe Buddha as God, will pray to a Hindu god during stressful times. We all used to get along, but not anymore. Sri Lanka's name has roots in the word serendipity. Someone has described our people as living by a code of "happy-go-lucky fatalism that governs life." Only now we seem to have lost the happy-go-lucky.

A large, older man eats a vadai, a deep fried donut made of lentils, while another enjoys a raw mango sprinkled with salt and chili powder. I see palm trees burnt black, probably from the war, and the twisted metal of a bus on the side of the road. My bus stops. This is where I am to meet my host. I hope she is waiting for me. I hope I can bring some love and healing, if just for a few moments. I hope this war to end.

## Hope



This morning I will brave the slick, wet roads to visit my surgeon. I hope he will confirm what I already know – that I am healed. So much has happened in the week since the “crazy man” prayed for me. I can laugh now at that description; he is more sane than anyone I had ever met before. I spent three days soaking in all I could about this Jesus and the unknown language that seemed to bring me peace. The people at the conference, all strangers, welcomed me as if I was family.

The surgeon later told me, “You don’t need surgery.” He seemed baffled, but my lack of pain and the x-rays told of a new reality. I look forward to seeing my other doctor; I hope he



## *Papa's Daughter*

can see the healing inside of me. The day after my physical healing I sat in the very front of the conference room hoping to experience more of what happened yesterday. I sang the songs not caring if I missed some words, because they seemed to usher me into a holy presence. This is all new, yet not strange, to me. If God is real and he can heal me, why should we not encounter him? No one told me God is only to know with my mind. My intellect is only a portion of who I am – cannot God invade my entire being? Is he not God?

As I sat there soaking in all I could, once again I felt an electricity pulse throughout my body. But this time, another experience – the overwhelming sense of God's love and his compassion. It was an amazing combination of the cognitive and emotional. They intertwined, alternating between mind and heart, yet as one. I think this is how true religion is to be lived,

## *Hope*

our full humanity engulfed by an engaging, personable God. I had the benefit of not being jaded by the limitations and corruptions of past experiences. Nothing hindered the purity of the moment. God loves me. He loves me as I sit here, having done nothing but open up my mind, my heart to him. He still loves me – the joy of being accepted despite myself. I cannot stop the tears. They are like a river that takes away the pain, hurt, and resentment. I have found peace. And I know it comes from the author of peace, Jesus. Yet I know so very little about him.

My doctor greeted me at the door. He recognized it immediately. “I see a shift in you. What has happened to you?” It’s so hard to describe to him; I hardly understand it myself. But as always, he listens with the kindness of a father. No more drugs, although he still gave me a

## *Papa's Daughter*

prescription. We will stay friends until the day he dies.



This Jesus really gets involved with people's lives, and the speaking in an unknown language makes it even more complicated. But I am so thankful. My dear friend Dr. Leslie Keegel, a fellow Sri Lankan and someone I trust immensely, shares this story. It's comforting to know I'm not the only one whose life has turned upside down by a power much greater than ourselves.

He was greatly feared in Sri Lanka. Trained in every aspect of military tactics, he never wavered in pulling the trigger. Many met

## *Hope*

their fate at the end of his rifle. However, after many years of dedicated service, honoring his parents' request to leave the battleground, he relocated to the U.K. Months of attempting to adjust to civilian life left him battling with alcohol and emotional trauma.

Feeling completely lost, he decided to become a suicide bomber and die a martyr for his cause. His sister, hearing of the news, visited him trying to discourage him from his mission. Exasperated, her final request to her brother: that they would go to church together for the very last time. He accepted her invitation.

They attended a mid-week evening prayer service where members would typically break into small groups and pray. Much to the horror of this man, he became sep-

## *Papa's Daughter*

arated from his sister. If the separation didn't cause enough anxiety, soon one in his prayer group, an African woman, began speaking in tongues for five straight minutes.

She spoke not in a prayer language, but in classical Tamil, one of the two main languages of Sri Lanka. Her message was the full gospel – words of invitation to Christ, words of love from Jesus himself. But they also included stories from the battlefield, how his life was spared, stories no one could possibly know. And this all took place in his native language.

He was deeply moved, especially when this African woman concluded, “Why are you trying to destroy yourself?” in perfect Tamil.

## *Hope*

When the prayer time ended, he immediately addressed this obedient woman and asked how she knew his mother tongue.

“I don’t know any Tamil,” she rather incredulously replied.

The force of the moment nearly took his breath away. Only the true God could meet him in such a powerful way. He gave his troubled heart to Christ that evening, never leaving to fulfill his deadly mission. God had other plans.

Ironically, some three years later while sharing his testimony in church, someone in the audience approached him afterward. He too was ex-military from Sri Lanka, only on the opposite side. They knew each other with each hoping to kill the other.

## *Papa's Daughter*

There would be no more killing, for the gospel had set these captives free.

So who is this Jesus that has invaded my life? Greatly Enlightened? An avatar? A sinless prophet? Buddhist, Hindus, and Muslims respectively attempt to understand him. I couldn't even pretend to say what I believed about him. Like the blind man he healed over 2,000 years ago, "All I know is that I used to be blind, but now I can see!" I felt like this man seeing for the very first time, a jumble of contradictions. A sense of awe combined with questions and fear invaded my mind. I know I am healed. I know I am free of depression, and I know it comes from Jesus. But again, I'm not sure who Jesus is. But something I can only describe as my spirit cried out to Jesus, no one else. It continues to cry out to him. I must learn more about him.

## *Hope*

Getting to know the people at the conference, where my life changed, helped me immensely in my quest to know God. Receiving a Bible, a book I had never read before, felt like an explorer being handed a treasure map. I held it in my hands with reverence; after all, it said Holy Bible and I understood what holy means. My fingers glide over its edges and turn its thin pages respectfully. I know each word must be from God himself. I read slowly, carefully, allowing my mind and my spirit to engage every corner of the truth it revealed. I wanted nothing in it to escape me but to lead me on this new journey.

Maybe some approach this book as history or tales of morality. I see it as a guide – living, breathing, taking me into the presence and the person of the holy. It speaks to my spirit at times even when my mind does not fully understand. It strengthens me by story and song.



## *Papa's Daughter*

Its poetry lifts me beyond the mundane to a place rich in beauty. I long for it every day like the embrace of a lover. My soul has been dry for so long, but now I can drink from “the water I give them will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” And as Jesus said, if I drink the water he gives, I will never thirst again.

I ask so many questions. Yet all my new friends seem eager to help me. I'm afraid of being a bother, but that is overridden by a drive to know. The big question I seek to understand – why did God send his only son to die? And why die on a cross? Couldn't he have simply lived a good life, spread wisdom, and died peacefully as an old man? Other issues like Jesus being born of a virgin, or his need to be baptized, are questions I want answers for, but they don't quench my faith. I know I am a pilgrim, a sojourner with so much to learn. The same power that healed both body and mind will teach me. This I trust to be so.

## Hope



Today I will leave my home, my beloved country. America is but a dream, an idea, not a place I ever expected to live. And Alaska, I know so little about it except the cold. Sri Lankans don't know cold. We live with the warm breeze and open air that kisses our skin and gives us hope for a better day.

My father is dead and I am newly married. Who really is this man that I will learn to love? And will I really love him or simply accept what has been decided. My mind wanders into romance, but I don't allow myself that fantasy. It is time to grow up and do the things that are expected of me.

## *Papa's Daughter*

As I drive to the airport I watch the sights that, though familiar, take on a special place in my heart. Will I ever see them again? I already miss the sounds as I roll the window down to take in all that is.

The man on the bike holding the bananas, weaving through traffic, the old woman with children bartering with the storekeeper – they all seem so precious. And the green – green beyond my vision – its emerald hue beckons me to stay. I decide to look straight ahead.

I arrive in Anchorage. Though the airplane window is fogged, I can see the barren landscape and the white that lies on the ground. I think of my father, his hand so big and mine so small. What would he tell me? How would he encourage me? I feel like a little girl and this is all a dream. Here is my future, I tell myself. Be strong, I repeat in my mind. The un-

## *Hope*

known greets you with two hands – one is fear and the other faith. I am not sure which hand to shake; I may not have a choice.



## CHAPTER FOUR

# *Freedom*

There is a new word I have learned today. It is a word that presses into my heart, yet my mind is trying to comprehend. The word is grace. It is a concept foreign to me, to most Sri Lankans. I'm told it is a gift from God because of Jesus, that is given to anyone who asks for it; yet it is given even though we have not earned it. I'm used to making offerings, to trying hard to live right so that I might gain some favor beyond. Grace is different. I can only receive it, not earn it. How wonderful, how different, but I still find it hard to believe it.

## *Papa's Daughter*

There is something in the Bible someone shared with me. The words are so profound I feel that God is in them. “For by grace you have been saved, through faith and not from yourself, it is a gift of God.” The other words confused me, “not by works, so that no one can boast.” I am used to the religious being proud. After all, they have done all that is required. What is this new truth that tells me to lay down my pride and hold out my arms like a little child waiting for Papa to pick me up? I call God “Papa” now. It seems right to me. Maybe some might think it too familiar, but he has been so tender, so loving, like my daddy.

Grace feels so opposite of religion. I know religion. Living in Sri Lanka it is as prevalent as the street vendor. It fills your nostrils, eyes, and ears, but can leave you empty. I respect people of all religions – because we are all trying to find God. Yet Religion seems like a

## *Freedom*

man climbing out of his hole to discover God, only to be buried alive in ritual. We who are not clergy often feel abandoned by it, left to the side of the road with no promise of returning home. Grace, as I understand it, is God reaching into that hole and walking us home.

A former Catholic priest once said, however, “My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ. I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it.” I know this to be true in my heart, but it still has not moved up to my mind. All relationships seem to have some form of conditionality, yet grace screams “no.” For now, I will enjoy it on an emotional level. I will swim in its waters and allow the tide to take me deeper.

Another author wrote these words that I cling to in my new journey with a “new” God. “Everyone’s path is littered with the debris of dys-



## *Papa's Daughter*

function and disappointment... But God is in the business of using those experiences to prepare us for future opportunities.” God’s business is giving the gift, a free gift of grace. I have opened it and will never give it back. Grace is so new to me, but I want to share it with everyone. Who would want to keep secret something so liberating and transforming? To do so would be like a scientist keeping secret the cure for cancer. Grace is the remedy for a world so full of hate. Grace heals the heart poisoned by fear and mistrust. I shall cling to it today and receive it fresh tomorrow.



God is both outside and inside. He is spirit and able to be inside you and me and anyone who

## *Freedom*

invites him in. Days after my healing of back and mind, I've discovered there is still more work to do inside of me. The way I understand it is I have to make room for more of God. There are still hurts that reside somewhere deep. They compete for place in my heart that Jesus wants to reside. This is not to say I was not healed. The day I fell at the feet of God my heart and mind were purified. But I am learning that this is a collaboration between the natural and supernatural. Jesus set me free; but as a human I find myself at times more comfortable in a jail of old thoughts.

I am undone by these words of Jesus, "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." They are so true. I am also learning to walk in that freedom. I never want to focus more on my problems than his promises, or I will never walk in all he has for me.

## *Papa's Daughter*

The German philosopher Goethe famously wrote, “He only earns his freedom and his life who takes them every day by storm.”

My new faith and new freedom agree partially with those words. I didn't earn, nor can ever earn, my freedom of mind; but I must walk every day in it. And even more, walk boldly. Today I am taking steps to do so. I am taking a course that is designed to help me lead others in the quest to be free of inner pain, but to do so I must be willing to look inside.

What are the things that hold us back? The places in our hearts we don't want God to touch – not because we don't want to be free, but because we don't know how to let go. When someone you trust hurts you deeply, profoundly, how can you forgive that? What about an act of violence that leaves you forever feeling vulnerable and full of shame?

## *Freedom*

Every one of us has those moments locked away in our lives. I am learning, discovering, every day that Papa has given us the keys – one of them profoundly simple: forgiveness.

I learned today about a woman who survived a Nazi concentration camp. Her sister did not. I can't imagine the horror, the fear, and then the deepest of resentment. She said these words, "Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door of resentment and the handcuffs of hatred. It is a power that breaks the chains of bitterness and shackles of selfishness." I don't think I've ever heard any words, outside of the Bible, more profound. I won't ever forget her name. It is unusual even for someone with a name like mine, Corrie Ten Boom.



## *Papa's Daughter*

It is one of those days where the cold sticks to you like the snow that is falling outside my window. My family in Sri Lanka could never conceive such temperatures. Unlike the humid heat that would occasionally keep us inside in our home in Colombo, this cold hovers like death.

A fire roars, filling the room with the scent of burnt pine. I look at a photo of my parents, sitting on the mantle. My children are still in bed, so I open my Bible and drink my tea. Occasionally I glance out the window wishing for a sunrise, but that won't happen till nearly 10:00 am. The extremes of darkness and light play on the people's psyche in this part of the world. I have learned to adapt.

My Bible is speaking to me as it always does. I agree with what author Alice Mills has written, "The Bible is the only book whose Author is al-

## Freedom

ways present when we read it.” We read the Bible, but it also reads us. I feel the presence of God when I open this book. It is alive. Someone told me there is a verse saying that; I must find it.

Here is the verse Papa has for me today,

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths. Proverbs 3:5-6*

Trust, like forgiveness, is an essential part of growing in my faith. I trust in the Bible. I trust Papa. I'm not so sure how much I trust man. I wish I knew where my life is going. Will I always be alone? What about the vision Papa gave me the day I was healed? Walking in faith is walking in trust that he will never leave. I know all too well the price of betrayal.

## *Papa's Daughter*

There is a story of a famous ethicist who went to Calcutta, India to see Mother Teresa. He went for three months to serve at the “house of the dying.” He wanted to find out how he should live the rest of his life.

When he met Mother Teresa he asked that she would pray for him. She asked him simply, “What do you want me to pray for?”

His response, “Clarity. Pray that I have clarity.”

I want clarity of purpose; I think we all do.

Her reply shocked me. “No. I will not do that.” He asked her why. “Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of.” The man noted that she always seemed to have clarity, the kind he desperately wanted. Mother Teresa laughed and said, “I have never had

## *Freedom*

clarity. What I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God.”

The desire to know my future could become the enemy of trusting in God. He knows my future. I do trust Papa. I sip the last of my tea and close my Bible. This is a new day. As cold as it is outside, it is as warm in my heart.





## CHAPTER FIVE

# Death

A few months have passed since the day I died. I like the way that sounds as I speak it out loud. There are so many verses about death to self that keep me pondering.

*For we know that our old self was crucified with him...*

*Now if we died with Christ, we believe we will also live with him.*

## *Papa's Daughter*

The same person who wrote those words to the Romans wrote in a letter to the church in Galatia,

*...the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Galatians 6:14*

A lot of talk of death. Death is but a doorway to life. Death to your self means more of you can be given to God. This is not just a concept to me, but something I've lived.

A German minister who fought the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in reference to Jesus' words, "If anyone would follow after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me," wrote the following,

"When I call you, I bid you to come and die."

## Death

He would eventually die at the hands of his captors.

Again from the Apostle Paul in Romans,

*If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*

I lived in a country more acquainted than America with the face of death. Here we like to hide from death. It frightens us, so we run from it and pretend it is for someone else.

Many religions see literal death as a passage. What I believe the Bible is teaching me is that the joy of living is dying to old ways that weigh us down. We can experience the fullness of life that God intended since the Garden of Eden. We can lose ourselves in the presence

## *Papa's Daughter*

of God, even though God is pure, holy and we are not.

Less of myself is a good thing. Yes, the Bible also says to “love our neighbor as ourselves.” We cannot hate ourselves. Papa knows how I did, and how it nearly destroyed me. But when we are truly, divinely loved we become less about our old selves and more conformed to our loving creator – more like he originally intended. “If (anyone) be in Christ (they) are a new creation, the old has passed away, and behold, the new has come.” Less of myself means less fear, less greed, less hate, less envy, and strife. More of God means more love, peace, joy, and contentment.

*It is no longer I who live, but Christ in me.*

It is ultimately an exchange of wills. To die is to see my will become more his will. This new

## *Death*

life goes so deep. I don't think it is possible to stop learning or to arrive at some point of completion this side of eternity.

Paul's words, "I die daily," are not a curse, but a condition of true living. It is freedom. Some of my new Christian friends seem perplexed by this concept; I find it liberating, and it must happen every day for the rest of my life.



Hope is a word I've been reacquainted with since my new life. I knew the lack of hope; it hovered over me for some five years. Hopelessness is a dark tunnel where you lose yourself and forget how to seek the light. I want to bring the light of God to everyone. My only

## *Papa's Daughter*

motivation is love. If others see God's love in me I believe they will want to experience it themselves. I've asked the Lord to open divine doors for me. He has.

Today I am in Juneau, Alaska having been asked to speak at a church. Leaders from the community are there to greet me, each wearing native outfits. The drums and special instruments play; I am humbled. As the worship begins I am lost in his presence, nothing else matters. Like the days of the beauty contests, I am not anxious, but today is not confidence in myself but a supreme sense that Papa will speak through me. Why would he send me here if he would not be present?

I share my story. The words flow. All are listening. A small child leans against his mother; he moves about but keeps his eyes on me. An old man, probably an elder and respected, nods

## *Death*

when I say something he agrees with. A young couple in the back seems to listen more intently as my message continues. I speak about healing – healing of mind, body, and spirit. As I end my time, I ask people if they want prayer. Almost everyone does.

Papa is in the business of transforming lives. If you are broken he wants to put you back better than before. I share from my heart and many in this church open theirs. After the service I am presented with a Kuspuk, a native dress, which I wear to the luncheon. I am so very humbled to be a vessel of Papa's love, mercy, and grace. I am still so young in this new faith. Looking into a mirror at my new outfit, tears begin to flow. They officially adopted me as a Native Athabaskan and gave me an Athabaskan name, Dutitalan (meaning "cute woman").



## *Papa's Daughter*

I begin to worship again for I don't have any choice. He overwhelms me. Someone wrote:

“At my lowest, God is my hope.

At my darkest, God is my light.

At my weakest, God is my strength.

At my saddest, God is my comforter.”

But the person I see in the mirror is so very different than the one I knew just a few months ago. I think to myself, in times of prosperity or despair I will always be safe in knowing he is there. There is a new scripture that burns in my heart,

*...Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may*

## *Death*

*present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.*  
Colossians 1:27-28

Now I go to share at a Korean church in the evening and at a radio station tomorrow. Papa, help me to remain faithful and use me any way you choose.



I can't believe the words I am hearing. Their weight forces me to sit down. My beloved Sri Lanka has just been devastated by a 9.1 magnitude earthquake off the coast of Sumatra. But it is not so much the earthquake, but the tsunami that followed, killing over 30,000 in my country. I am desperate to call home. How are my family and my friends?

## *Papa's Daughter*

The numbness overwhelms me, like the days before Papa came. I even forget to pray. I keep thinking of the destruction. My students, second graders, are so kind and concerned. I share how Sri Lanka did not have a warning system that could have saved thousands of lives. They want to help and will collect their pennies to help the victims. I will personally take their love offering because I must go and see for myself what has happened.

The flight, which is long, seems short as I am consumed in thoughts and prayers. What will the devastation look like? How are the people surviving? As the jet lowers altitude to land, green is covered in brown, and trees stripped of branches. I ask Papa to use me any way he chooses. He begins to speak clearly to me, not so much in words, but in an overwhelming love he has for the people below. I have had such a natural love for all Sri Lankan people,

## *Death*

but now God is filling my heart with supernatural love.

As I deboard the plane I stop for a moment to let all the emotions flow over me. I am excited to see loved ones, but apprehensive to once again be surrounded by death.



The six-passenger plane sat on an icy tarmac, engines revving, causing snow to flurry about us. My son and I will be flying to a village of 900 people called Point Hope. Like many isolated communities in Alaska, the village has no road or rail connection. You can only reach it by sea or air. The community consists mainly of Inupiat people, known by outsiders as Es-

## *Papa's Daughter*

timos. It is a place littered in bleached white whale bones, rising up from the ground like a bony hand to greet you.

Looking through the window of this small plane we see miles of sheets of ice that are both majestic and terrifying. Alaska can be harsh and unforgiving. It is a part of earth that man can never tame. We are all visitors in this strange and wonderful place. Survival isn't a game, but a way of life. In a nation often focused on eccentricities, Alaska demands the necessities. You cannot cut corners or cheat the cold – it will come for you and drive you to your knees.

We land forcefully in snow after a flight that brought us all closer to Papa! But seeing the smiling faces of the church's greeting party calms any frayed nerves. The pastor is driving slowly on the icy roads and we stop at the

## *Death*

local grocery store. Inside, I'm immediately attracted to an old woman with tanned skin and a face full of deep crevices, her teeth white, like the whale bones, as she smiles at me. I speak with her and find out she is the oldest person in this village, at 96 years old. She invites me to taste the whale meat, which I do, and she smiles again as I nod my head in appreciation.

Sunday morning I am the guest speaker, and once again Papa comes to visit. I share my story and pray for the sick. The Holy Spirit falls on many. The old woman is part of this church, and I am honored to lay hands on her and pray. In turn, I ask her to bless me and pray for me. Her hands are strong and weathered, her voice firm, and her words seasoned with life well lived for God. I am truly blessed.

## *Papa's Daughter*

Later in the day I meet the mayor and many town leaders. We feast on foods I never dreamed of eating, and I love it all. I love the native Alaskans. They know better than most how to flow in the “unforced rhythms of grace.” They are so very real in an age of make-believe. They are heroes in a world that ignores their courage. Life is a real struggle, but it is in that struggle they have discovered how to really live. Each day must be lived to the fullest or it may be your last.



The fog has just lifted, exposing the crest of the rising sun, as I walk alone on the wet sand. The waves, rhythmically crashing, send foam and sand that cover my feet. Yet waves, seem-

## *Death*

ingly so peaceful, so calming, had destroyed the lives of thousands only days before. As I walk and pray I think of my father and my Papa.

Debris from the great wave litters the dry sand far from the water's edge. Palm trees are bent and broken, like my people. One would hope that such tragedy could unite us, but the sad fact is the civil war continues. The many orphans of the tsunami are being recruited by terrorists. But where else will they go? I am crying to God for help. He is no longer the distant deity associated with the thunderstorm of the day of the uprising. He is loving, caring, compassionate. But how can I share that with a family who has lost everything including a loved one? This I know, the God who cared enough to heal me can heal our land. I am weeping once again, but now the tears come from hope, and death is losing its sting.



## *Papa's Daughter*

Terror can seize an entire society. Sri Lanka, over the last few years, had become deadened to the fear of terrorism, almost accepting it as a normal part of life. Now with the brute and arbitrary force coming in the form of a monstrous and mysterious wave, terror has re-taken its foothold. Sri Lankans can be superstitious, and superstition is born of a sense of powerlessness over the unknown. What will hit us next? Cholera is creeping in to make its presence known and compete with the chaos gripping an entire country.

Though it's been years since becoming Miss Sri Lanka, people still remember and seem to want me in their homes. All I can do is listen, love, and pray. I see the photos of lost loved ones surrounded by flowers and candles. Most have lost hope by now for their miraculous return. Many make daily pilgrimages to the local morgue.

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My family is glad to see me. If there is any lack of enthusiasm, I understand. No one in Sri Lanka has escaped loss. I share about my new life, my transformation. They are happy for me, but I sense their skepticism. I shared often, “All I have is a relationship with my God. I met Jesus.” Some stigmatized me because of my divorce, but none could argue something was very different about me.

Most of my family and friends are fascinated by Alaska. How could I, a Sri Lankan “girl,” survive among the freezing? Remember, most living in this Emerald Island only know of snow through photos or movies. Thinking of me wearing a parka instead of a sari made them laugh out loud. I loved the teasing; I know it allowed them to smile despite the pain.

Sri Lanka, like India and Pakistan, still suffers from the discrimination inculcated through cul-

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ture from centuries of the caste system. If your family was an “untouchable,” you would be an untouchable, as would be your children and your children’s children. It is one of the reasons the dream that is America continues to flourish in many nations. Anyone can rise. Yes, there are challenges and prejudices in the States, but compared to the caste system they are minor.

Today I’m holding the hands of a family of “untouchables.” They are so very honored that I would enter their humble home, but I am the one who is humbled. Their love for each other and for me, a stranger, is disarming. We drink tea and they offer me banis, a soft, light, sweet bread. We talk of America, Alaska, and the future of Sri Lanka. In time, they share the heartache of losing loved ones in the wave. These are tough people, so the tears that fall come from a deep place. I pray over them. Our

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departing embrace is longer than culture requires, and I leave a better person.

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Frederick Buechner



I watch out my window as hundreds of mourners jostle to pay their respects before the final rites. Men hold the casket on their shoulders and walk slowly through the streets. I can hear the women weep. I press my hands together and bring them to my lips. My time in Sri Lanka has been filled with many such funerals. Though I do not know the dead or the

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families that mourn, I am overwhelmed by the weight of so many in eternal repose.

I fall to my knees. Today, at this moment, death does sting. It stabs. I am but a new disciple who knows so little. I cling to the Scripture because I do not understand this world and its darkness.

Papa, take my hand. Hold me close. Let me hear your heart.

## CHAPTER SIX

# *Destiny*

“There is no greater discovery than seeing God as the author of your destiny.” Ravi Zacharias

I look out my window for the last time. There is a beam of sunlight that fights its way through the gray sky. That only seems fitting. The fireplace cold and clean, the children grown and gone, the boxes of possessions ready to be moved. Melancholy meets me at the window. I’ve been saying hello to it for a few weeks now. Some friends understand –

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others do not. I miss my children. I miss the children at my school. In my heart I know I must go.

The seasons in Alaska are stark. The summers can be hot and have very long days, the winters dark and cold. The seasons of my life – so much the same. Since Papa saved me my season has been warm. Yet there are days, like today, that I struggle to be in his presence. I know there are benefits to every season. I have grown so much since the day he healed me, even through the lonely days, especially the lonely days, when Papa came to me with an embrace that only he could give.

Though today I leave for California, my journey is still uncertain. I go because I know deep inside my God is leading me. I don't know where I will live or work. Some of my friends are wor-

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ried. I understand. The great Mark Twain famously said,

“The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.”

I feel strongly that this move is part of the process, part of Papa’s plan to lead me in discovering my purpose. I know I am called to be his disciple and that gives me great peace. But the vision he gave me standing among thousands of my people drives me to follow his leading wherever he takes me.

This house, my favorite window, they are like the big leather chair in my doctor’s office – comfortable. Following Papa is not always so. I do, however, take comfort in the words of Corrie Ten Boom,



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“If you look at the world you’ll be distressed.  
If you look within, you’ll be depressed. But  
if you look at Christ, you’ll be at rest.”

Some might dismiss them as simplistic or lacking sophistication. They are words of wisdom forged in the furnace of tribulation. They are not merely cute; on the contrary, they are cutting because rest in Christ must always come by way of the cross. I sing the old hymn as I walk to the door, “No turning back, no turning back.”



I believe in following your dreams. It often takes courage to do so. But sometimes our dreams are not God’s dreams for us. We must

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always place our dreams at the feet of Jesus; otherwise we may end up in a nightmare, just like Larry Walter's dream.

Larry became known as "Lawnchair Larry," not because he spent countless hours sitting on his patio, but due to where that lawn chair went – over three miles up in the sky. Larry had a 20-year frustrated dream of flying. He joined the US Air Force to become a pilot, but due to poor eyesight he was relegated to becoming a cook. Years after leaving the military Larry's dream of flying did not dissipate; in fact, it grew stronger. He would later relate, "It was something I had to do. I had a dream for 20 years, and if I hadn't done it I would have ended up in the funny farm."

So what did Larry do? He attached 42 helium-filled weather balloons to his lawn chair, a chair he nicknamed "Inspiration I." He ex-

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pected to only hover about 30 feet above the backyard, but the cable wire broke and Larry and his lawn chair shot up into the sky. Soon, commercial pilots were contacting air traffic control to warn others of this unidentified flying object. “This is TWA 231, level at 16,000 feet. We have a man in a chair attached to balloons in our ten o’clock position, range five miles.”

This cautionary tale reminds me of the fine line between boldness and blindness, between courage and carelessness. Our boldness may blind us to the realities involved in following our dream. Our courage may lead us to taking careless steps that leave our dreams shattered. Larry would never be the same after his ill-fated flight ended. In fact, a few years later he would take his own life.

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I wonder if I have made a mistake coming to California. I wonder if the balloons will pop and I come crashing down. It is OK to question, but somewhere in your pursuit of a dream you must remind yourself, “Who gave you your dream?” I know my purpose comes from Papa. I know he is leading me. Yet, fear has found its way to my new doorstep. Do I let it in?

It is now that I must take responsibility for my thoughts. That I must, as the Scripture teaches,

*...Casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ... 2 Corinthians 10:5*

I am thankful that this is a discipline I have learned over the years. So I guard my heart against the fear that wants to come in. I make

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a decision to feed faith, not fear. Whatever we feed and water in our lives will grow. I love the quote, “Don’t dig up in doubt what you’ve planted in faith.”

I remind myself that my dream came from God, that he is guiding my paths and will never leave me or forsake me. But I must choose to obey him and not blindly follow impulse or ambition. I will not sit in the lawn chair; instead, like the little children, I will run into the arms of Jesus. Only in his presence do I find the perfect love that casts out all fear.



There is a saying I hold on to: Where God guides, he provides. Today I found a job in the

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most implausible way. Doing some research, I discovered a school that possessed all of the demographics I felt drawn to. It consisted of just about every socio-economic disadvantage possible. As I walked up to the school office, immediately I knew this was the place Papa was calling me to. Thankfully, the school agreed.

The culture in my new classroom of second graders in Los Angeles, California is vastly different than those in Sri Lanka, and even Alaska. Here the community's needs are much more intense. Almost all of my students are being raised by single parents. I love the African-American and Latino cultures, so spending extra time to connect with families is a privilege. The African proverb that says, "It takes a village to raise a child," was never more true in this community. When a mother, who is working three jobs, looks you in the

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eye and says thank you for helping her children with homework, you know you are in God's will.

Primary grades are so instrumental in determining a child's ability to read. They can succeed or fall behind during these pivotal years, and it could haunt them the rest of their lives. It's shocking to see the correlation between the lack of reading skills and the prison system. Governments can determine how many prisons were to be built by how many students did not read by the third grade. I feel the weight of this. Destinies could be determined in my classroom. I must give these young minds everything in my power. But I have another weapon. I intercede for each precious one daily. I ask Papa to take them into his loving arms, and I pray for their families and the community that surrounds them.

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A boy in my class still cannot read. Yet, he clings to me daily, and I see the frustration every time he opens a book. His father died just after he was born due to a drug deal gone bad. His mother abandoned the family last year; but grandmother and grandfather give them everything they can. They are devout Catholics and love it when I pray for them and for their grandson when we meet to discuss his reading plan. There is so much more involved in learning to read than simply aptitude. Young hearts crushed by their surroundings can close off to learning. Survival, even for a second grader, can compete with the luxury of education. Emotions are complex – damaged emotions even more perplexing and daunting. But this boy will learn to read. He must.





## *Papa's Daughter*

It is Easter morning and I wake up to the news that seems like an old, bad dream. Three churches filled with worshipers have been bombed in Sri Lanka. Three other blasts happened in hotels in the city of Colombo. Nearly 300 deaths, hundreds of others wounded from suicide bombers.

I'm on my knees, for I do not know what else to do. Though I have lived in America for nearly three decades, they are still my people. I feel them deep in my heart. My soul aches and my mind is numb. Why must so many innocents die? What is wrong in this world that terror is seen as the only means to justify an end? I must again visit my beloved Sri Lanka. I don't know what I can do, but I sense the leading of the Lord.

Again, the flight is long and my thoughts travel in many directions. I remember the time I ran

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through the jungle, light and shadow playing with my eyes, and the soft brush of ferns against my arms. How I long for such a time of innocence. But I am older now and I see the reality of a sinful world. We are in rebellion against a loving God. In his love he allows us to choose to receive or reject his mercy. Most decide to go their own way, and like a blind man they stumble and fall, never knowing the light. I weep, I weep. My people are blind and I know the one who can heal them.

I am fortunate to be able to visit many of the victims and their families. I am amazed that my past title as Miss Sri Lanka allows me access to so many. There is once again a palpable sense of helplessness over the nation. The civil war, the tsunami, and now outside terrorism – what more can we take? I hold hands, I listen, and I pray over families. I do what I can to help them with necessities.

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I walk into a church building partially destroyed by the suicide bombers. People are cleaning up the debris, so I help. Later on I talk to the pastor and his wife. She remembered warmly welcoming the terrorists who came into the service. She had missed the explosions because she had left to attend to another need. The blast had been filmed by a church member and I watched the horrible scene. The screams of terror reminded me of the start of the civil war. Once you hear something so chilling you can never forget.

Later the pastor and his wife joined me to visit victims in the area – people missing limbs, blinded, and catatonic from the trauma. Others whimpered and wept. Many mourned their loss. The pastor explained that his church could no longer meet at the same location – not so much the physical damage, but the emotional toll it caused. His people were fear-

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ful; so we looked together for another place to worship.

I continued to meet victims and their families. The verse from the Apostle Paul guided me in my conversations and in how I knew I personally must respond to such a senseless tragedy.

*...weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.*

*Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is*

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*Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. Therefore*

*"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head."*

*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:15-21*



It is one thing to hold the hand of a victim, but quite another to unite the hands of many from different faiths to pursue peace. So, I visited the Buddhist monks in their temples. I spoke to the Hindu priests and the Christian leaders. I reached out to the mosques and the mullahs.

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I was able to coordinate a meeting of key faith leaders to begin the hard conversations rooted in years of misunderstanding. Somehow, being a woman helped bring together this council of men. I was no threat, only a facilitator. Women's rights as we know them in the States are vastly different in Sri Lanka.

Though emotions were still raw, the dialogue was constructive. I kept being reminded of the words, "Don't repay evil with evil... overcome evil with good." Peace often starts with humble steps. It may take many painful conversations, but without them we are left to plot our revenge. Everyone in the room knew there was no alternative; we must come together, denounce violence, and embrace one another to bring healing to the land.

I wanted to do more. More determined than ever, I created a bridge between my mother

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land, Sri Lanka, and my homeland, the United States, to promote global interfaith relations, called “Identity of Sri Lanka.” Its mission – to be a catalyst for leaders joining together to diffuse hate and misunderstanding. Promoting love and tolerance for differing faiths and cultures seems at times like a quixotic quest. To quote Don Quixote, “There is a remedy for all things except death.”

If we do not talk to each other, we will never understand each other, and the further misunderstanding will lead to more death and destruction. Maybe a second grade teacher, an aging beauty queen, a divorced, single mother of two can help. I’ll never know unless I try. But this time “peace” takes on new meaning. I am but one person, yet I have within me the “Prince of Peace.” Where I go, Papa comes too. “For greater is he that is within you than he that is in the world.”

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I continue to work for peace. The Lord has miraculously opened influential doors in Washington, D.C. I'm currently working with global leaders of all faiths to develop a global platform for interfaith solutions and faith-based bilateral relationships. I and others embrace the universal right to openly practice the religion of your choice.

But it is with the children that I believe is my ultimate destiny. They are the ones who are born with no bias or hate. Yes, we live in a sinful world, but that must never excuse us from teaching our children to love one another. Just as children learn to fear and fight, they can learn to listen and embrace – even others of different faiths. I believe in education. I've seen firsthand how it brings light into a darkened heart. I've watched children inspire their parents, and parents inspire their children. We need now, more than ever, for nations to allow



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their children to be taught the value of accepting others of different faith and culture. I say this as a Christian who believes Jesus is the answer. Yet, I don't need to diminish anyone's faith to declare that. But I do need to speak truth in love. And it is with love that I walk boldly through the corridors of power, fearing not man, but only God.

When I was but a teenager I learned to walk on the brightly lit stage, to keep my chin up, shoulders back, and move gracefully. Now, by the grace of God, I continue to do so.

There is a reflection in my window and I see myself dimly. I cannot see clearly the lines of age, but I know how I have changed. I smile back at myself. I am so blessed. I've been transformed, and I'm being transformed. There is so much to do, but so much to be. I only want to be Papa's daughter and to walk

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hand-in-hand with him until that day when he takes me into his arms and holds me close, forever.



## About the Author

Tharanga Abeysinghe is an educator, author, speaker, and foremost a disciple of Jesus Christ. Formerly Miss Young Sri Lanka and Miss Sri Lanka, Tharanga is dedicated to cause interfaith relationships and a world free of ethnic, gender, and race discrimination.

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## *About the Publisher*

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# *What Others are Saying*

Living in a world rocked, tossed “to and fro” by major and minor conflicts politically, ethnically, and religion-wise, it is imperative for us to look for avenues and opportunities to come together and reconcile. Therefore, we must do everything we can to find grounds to reconcile and unite. Our world is ripped apart by war, conflicts, ethnic and religious disharmony; therefore, it is crucial that we make every effort to forge interfaith relations in our communities. We must dig into moral values of each religion and utilize them collectively to serve our communities in a way that it would bring friendship and camaraderie across reli-



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gious, ethnic, and political divides. We must educate, train, and empower both young and old people to look for opportunities to serve the hungry, needy, homeless, and the disenfranchised, particularly at times of natural calamity, such as floods, tsunamis, forest fires, pandemics, and droughts. I am deeply committed to the cause which Tharanga Abeysinghe has thrown herself into. Knowing her passions and vision for interfaith dialogue, I endorse and fully support her efforts without reticence.

### **Dr. Leslie W. Keegel**

Chairman, Global Church of the Foursquare Gospel

President, Church of the Foursquare Gospel in Sri Lanka



## *What Others are Saying*

I have known Tharanga for over 20 years. Her life story and her passion for God and for those Jesus identified with in Matthew 25, the least of these, is impressive. We need more stories that people can look to who have experienced brokenness in life, especially for the millennial generation. Stories that build or rebuild faith for the possibilities with God.

Blessings in and through Him,

**Randy Clark, D.D., D.Min., Th.D., M.Div., B.S.**

### **Religious Studies**

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## *Papa's Daughter*

Three major events have taken place in our island nation in recent times: the end of the ethnic conflict, the Easter bombings, and now COVID-19. These events have created a pause, or slowdown, in our hectic lifestyles, creating space and time to think.

Tharanga Abeysinghe has been a very good friend to me for more than 25 years. I appreciate this book because I know the author very well. I also know her passion to promote interfaith relations among people and nations.

Tolerance and respect for each other's beliefs is of paramount importance today, and the mutual respect of one nation to the other. We join you, Tharanga, for your devotion and sincere efforts to the cause of interfaith relations between people and nations.

**Chandran Rutnam**

Author, Sri Lankan film maker and entrepreneur

## *What Others are Saying*



In a world full of chaos and dysfunction, Tharanga's personal story as "Papa's Daughter" expresses how **God's LOVE through Jesus Christ provides a remedy for healing, wholeness and freedom from all pain.** When we choose to lay our lives down, by holding our arms out like a little child, and wait for "Papa" **GOD to pick us up—we too can experience LIFE transformation.**

This powerful testimony of GRACE is a true representation of a Father's LOVE for all. The heart of Papa is full of compassion and forgiveness. This book reveals true GRACE and FREEDOM THROUGH JESUS, GOD'S LOVE FOR THE WORLD. I love these words, "**Grace is the**

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remedy for a world so full of hate. Grace heals the heart poisoned by fear and mistrust. I shall cling to it today and receive it fresh tomorrow.”

*So if the Son Jesus sets you free, you will be free indeed! (2 Corinthians 3:3)*

**Rev. Julie Stott**

South Pacific Women Empowered



This is the true story, in journal form, of Tharanga Abeysinghe. Experiencing the heights of personal success, the lowest of personal lows, and the terror of a civil war, the former Miss Sri Lanka writes eloquently about her mental, physical, and spiritual transformation.

Her battle with loss, depression, and chronic pain brought her to a place that anyone struggling with life yearns to experience. You will be both inspired and challenged as her transparent story unfolds.

Robert Hunt, Director  
Foursquare Missions Press

