

Actress Jennifer O'Neill Shares Testimony of Inner Healing

The former model, best known for her role in Summer of '42, tells her story of forgiveness at conferences and churches

Jennifer O'Neill spent most of her life in front of cameras, yet the actress and one-time Cover Girl model said that for years she felt invisible.

"I did have a life [that] ... looked so spectacular, and in so many ways it was," said O'Neill, 55, who is best known for her role in the 1971 film Summer of '42. "But it didn't bring me the satisfaction. It didn't fill that empty part of us that only God could fill. As the adage goes, I started looking for love in all the wrong places, thinking someone else could fill me up."

After attempting suicide at 14, she went on to marry nine times and suffer nine miscarriages after an abortion. She nearly died three times—in a car accident, a horseback-riding accident that broke her back, and after accidentally shooting herself in the stomach during a traumatic season when she discovered her fifth husband had sexually abused her teenage daughter.

But her life changed dramatically after she accepted Christ in 1986. She said she found what she had been looking for—a love that was unconditional—and began a journey toward healing, which started with her learning to make Christ Lord of her life. It also included several lessons in forgiveness along the way.

“God wants His children to be unencumbered from their past sins,” she told Charisma. “And it’s all based on our unforgiveness. Our unforgiveness for ourselves and others keeps us crippled, even if we have eternal life.

“God wants His children to be powerful in Him and for Him because the Great Commission is not a request; it’s a command. How are we supposed to go out and do that if we’re all [knotted] up?”

That’s the message she shares at churches and conferences such as Extraordinary Women and Women of Faith, and through her books, *Surviving Myself* and the more recent, *From Fallen to Forgiven*. Whether she talks about her healing from the shame she felt after having an abortion or coping with the trauma of sexual abuse, O’Neill said her mostly Christian audiences thank her for speaking out.

“I used to say when I finally came to Christ that He loved me and He forgave me and He healed me, but not the abortion, not this,” she told attendees at a May Women of Faith conference in Kentucky. “And that’s not true. [Christ’s blood] covers all sin.

“[God] wants us to be free and released and healed. It is our choice to heal through forgiveness. [Healing] is ours for the asking.”

O’Neill says though her life was high-profile and glamorous, people from all walks of life can relate to her journey. “The issues are familiar to us all because they’re human issues, and it doesn’t matter what package they come in.”

She once shared her testimony at a luncheon attended mostly by very wealthy women in their late 40s and 50s. "The outreach was 100 women who literally drove up to this incredible home in their Rolls Royces and Ferraris, and they were all bejeweled and dressed to the nines and absolutely gorgeous."

After she shared her testimony, she said 77 women accepted Christ. "We know those who are incarcerated or in low-income areas or having issues in life need Christ, but everyone needs Christ. Especially those who have never heard [the gospel] because everybody thinks they're cool. That happened with me so much; everybody just assumed I was very confident and had good self-esteem because I was on the cover of magazines and making movies. Not so."

After her 1986 conversion, O'Neill attended Jack Hayford's Church on the Way, and spent several years studying Scripture, avoiding media attention. She later became outspoken about her pro-life views.

The book opened doors to speak, but her message on forgiveness and emotional healing struck a chord. "I think she has one of the most powerful women's testimonies," said Bob Rieth, one of O'Neill's mentors and founder of Media Fellowship International, which offers Bible studies and small-group discipleship for professionals in sports, and entertainment and news media. "In the places where I've been to hear [O'Neill] speak, God touches people in a powerful way."

When not speaking, O'Neill breeds, trains and shows her jumper horses from her farm in Nashville, Tenn., and she has developed a line of health and beauty products. She continues to do some film work, though she says outspoken Christians often have trouble finding work in Hollywood.

A married mother of three and grandmother of four, O'Neill said she wouldn't rewrite the past.

"God is using all of those nightmares for His glory. Sometimes people can hear from a voice who's been there, done that a little better than from those who haven't. So if you've experienced [tough issues] and Christ has renewed you despite yourself, it gives [others] hope."

Adrienne S. Gaines