

What I Learned at the Fork in the Road

I was sure my destination in life involved writing novels. But at a point of decision, God changed my course.

When my husband and I were first married, his grandparents asked us to drive them from Nebraska to Houston. On the way there, while I was driving, we ended up in Louisiana.

It wasn't my fault. Really. I wasn't navigating; I was just at the wheel. But Grandpa Hays never let me live down how I'd gotten lost in Louisiana.

There are some life lessons in this:

****Having four navigators never works.**

****There are many roads to the same destination.**

****When you're driving through life, don't rely on other people's directions.**

****Even if you get on the wrong road you can always get back on the right one.**

The truth is, life comes down to taking a chance. Taking a risk at a fork in the road. On faith.

I shouldn't be a writer. Certainly not a writer of books with a Christian theme. My degree is in architecture, and I've never had a writing class.

Plus, I was a casual Christian for 40 of my 48 years. I believed in the essence of faith and even prayed. I never closed the door on God; I left it ajar. But it was a very one-sided relationship. He gave and I took.

CHARTING MY OWN COURSE

Back then, I had one destination in mind for my writing: fame.

I wanted to be on the best-seller list and on Oprah. I looked to my goal with single-mindedness and logic.

I reasoned that if I wanted to be a best-selling author, I should write the kind of books that were on the best-seller list: books about murder, adultery, incest and greed—things I knew nothing about (except the greed part. I was doing a good job with that one).

While I was writing these novels that were sure to be best sellers (five of them), I was also writing short inspirational humor pieces on motherhood. Talk about disparate themes!

The inspirational pieces started selling. The novels did not. I was the rejection queen. I could have papered my walls, carpeted the halls and wrapped the Christmas presents in rejection letters.

But I was also the queen of persistence. Every time I got a rejection I allowed myself 10 minutes to cry and pout, and then I would send the manuscript out again.

What I didn't realize was that the rejections were a part of God's plan. He was trying to get my attention. No easy feat.

I'm sure He was totally frustrated. Obviously something more than a normal rejection would have to be utilized.

Enter the scathing rejection letter.

Most rejection letters are form letters: "Dear Author: We are sorry but..." Yet on March 14, 1995, I received an individualized letter, sent just to me.

Soon my elation evaporated. Basically, it said: "Though others may find your heroine humorous and charming, I find her tedious and boring." Ouch!

I was crushed—devastated. But in true never-give-up fashion I allowed myself 10 minutes to cry and pout (OK, so maybe it was

15 minutes). Then I went to my computer, determined to change the manuscript to suit the tastes of this New York agent.

After working on it an hour I realized I was taking out everything that made the writing mine. A rebellious thought took root: This agent is wrong.

To recognize an agent or editor could be fallible was heresy. It wasn't that my writing couldn't be improved—it could—but the style, the “voice” was fine. I was writing the novels using the same author-voice as I used in the inspirational humor pieces that were being published.

Needless to say, I was a bit confused. So I went on errands.

I ended up at a new place—a Christian bookstore. My car just drove in. A clerk approached and asked, “May I help you?”

A question surfaced: “Is there such a thing as Christian fiction?”

She showed me lovely books. My heart beat double-time. An idea was forming.

I bought three novels and headed to my car. Could I, should I (would I) write for the inspirational market?

God had brought me to a fork in the road. I could take it or continue on the same path—it was my choice.

HIS WAY OR THE HIGHWAY

I was facing a crisis of belief between what I'd known and felt before and what I could know and could feel in the future. My destination, heretofore, had been fame, but now...

Sitting in my car with the Christian novels in my hands I did not ask anyone what to do. This was a He-and-me moment. I felt with my entire being this was “it.” And it was.

On the drive home I felt God leading me, urging me toward this

new focus. The idea overwhelmed me.

I laughed and cried at the same time. By the time I got home I'd decided to dedicate all my writing to God.

Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart" (NIV). What I didn't realize was that God changes our desires to fit His.

FAITH SCHOOL

My life drastically changed direction. The next Sunday I went to church alone. And there, the pastor shared the story of the Prodigal Son. It was my story. For now I was home.

I hungered for God. I listened to Christian music and Christian radio. I read the Bible, memorized verses, and I read Christian novels to see how they incorporated God into their plot lines.

Then I did a dumb thing, but definitely a "Nancy" thing. I pasted God into my manuscripts. I thought: Hey, it's Sunday, they could go to church! And here? I might be able to slip in a prayer.

It was pitiful. I'd obviously missed the point. To truly have faith you do not paste God into your life; He becomes immersed within the very fabric of it.

There is no time that is not God-time. But that was a lesson I had yet to learn. I submitted one of these God-pasted-in novels for publication. It was rejected.

I was walking on the shoulder of the right road but it was time to ask directions. "Accept correction, and you will find life; reject correction, and you will miss the road," wrote Solomon (Prov. 10:17, CEV).

I took portions of my pasted-in novel to my writers' critique group. They ripped it to shreds.

But in the ripping came an idea: What if some people got an anonymous invitation to go to a town, and they didn't know who invited them or even why they were being invited. What if they had to go—on faith?

On the way home I thought of the mustard seed verse: "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed you can say to this mountain, 'move from there to here' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." (Matt. 17:20, NIV). It was a verse for me, and a verse to place on the fictional invitation in my new book.

The next day I realized I had to commit myself to the fork in the road and not look back. So I set aside my five secular novels, deeming them "practice." I started writing *The Invitation* (Multnomah Publishers).

I wrote the book in two months—a feat never repeated. I'm not saying God gave me the words, but He did inspire me, lead me and teach me.

I'd love to say that the first publisher who looked at the manuscript took it. I have to admit that is what I expected. After all, I was writing for the Lord. Surely He would bless me in such an amazing way.

Yet He did bless me, by telling me an answer we hate nearly as much as No. Wait.

I sent the waited. The usual waiting period was a few months. But just because you're on the right road doesn't mean it's going to be easy.

Four months, five months, nine months...

It was definitely time to recall Hebrews 10:23: "Hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful." And 12:1: "Run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

As my waiting neared a year, my faith grew. I learned to pray, to trust and to need Him. I learned to surrender.

So will you as you wait for God's will to be accomplished in your life. And you may discover you are not waiting for Him, He is waiting for you to learn a lesson of obedience. Waiting for you to learn that your relationship—your road—with the Lord is more important than your work for the Lord.

Finally, on July 1, 1997 I gave it up. This, from my prayer journal: "I tell You now, even as I beg for The Invitation to be accepted today, I will wait longer, Lord. I will wait years if necessary.

"I will not like it, but I will do it and somehow, You will help me through it. I cannot force The Invitation on the world. If I could, it would fail and fall on deaf ears.

"You are preparing its way in order that it may bring You glory. I don't want the glory, Lord. Not any more. It scares me.

"I just want the book to be out there, doing something, instead of lying dormant. I want to share it, Lord. Please, let me share it soon!"

Three days after I surrendered my dream, God gave it back. I got a call from the publisher.

Nine novels later I often think of the rejections I received for the five secular novels. Think about the "no" responses you've received on your road. If God had given you a single yes, would you have found the right road? Sometimes "no" is a blessing.

God is never late and never early. Life has to be lived according to His timetable, not ours. And if we hold onto our dream tightly, intent on taking the road we plan, we miss the blessings.

Only when we let go and open our eyes to the fork in the road will God show us a better way. His way.

Your dreams, your gifts and your road are not the same as mine. Brethren minister J.B. Stoney said: "It is plain enough that every believer is called of God to something definite. The real difficulty is to ascertain the specialty, and this I do not think can be discovered but in nearness to the Lord, and when you are interested in His interests.

"We first learn that He is interested in us, and then we gradually become interested in his interests. It is then you apprehend your mission in life."

There is a road that is yours alone. It is your responsibility—and your privilege—to find it. And with it, you will find peace.

"Whether you turn to the right or to the left, you will hear a voice saying, 'This is the road! Now follow it'" (Is. 30: 21). Even if it leads you through Louisiana.

Read a companion devotional.

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