

## **This Is Who You Really Are** (Mary Poplin)

Psalms 137; I John 1:5-10; Phil. 3:10-14

Read I John 1:5-10

I invite you to make some notations in your sermon insert, as you listen to this testimony.

Here are a few questions to get you thinking.

What grabs your attention?

How does the Holy Spirit work?

What can we learn from testimonies about God, the church, and ourselves?

Then we will end the sermon by you sharing your impressions and learnings.

The article subtitle is: An Enthusiast of all things New Age, I Fancied Myself a Free Spirit and a Good Person. God showed me I was neither. Another way to summarize this testimony from Mary Poplin, from Christianity Today magazine is: Then a strange dream, an old friend, and a disturbing psalm woke me up to reality. (Dec 21, 2017) I will be sharing this in first person, as the author, Mary wrote it.

I met God in a dream. He arranged the encounter; I was not looking for him. At the time, I was 41, and I considered myself wildly progressive. As a college professor, I had been teaching critical theory, radical feminism, multiculturalism, and postmodernism since the early '80s. One colleague reported to another that I was "the party girl of the department." I was "spiritual but not religious," which meant I could be good without God. In my spare time, I would attend all kinds of "paranormal seminars"—the kind advertised on Whole Foods bulletin boards.

As a graduate student in the '70s, I had attended transcendental meditation classes and experimented with marijuana and psychedelic drugs. Then, as a professor in Los Angeles in the '80s, a colleague and I would regularly explore the city's weirdest religions. I would collect crystals & study strange spiritual books. (Authors like the feminist Neopagan Starhawk were among my favorites.) Eventually, I would dabble in workshops where we bent

spoons and practiced hypnosis on each other, while the braver ones tried walking on coals.

A central image in my life was the actress Shirley MacLaine, dancing on the beach in free-spirited fashion. I was seeking happiness, self-fulfillment, and freedom from restraint, all the while deluding myself about my own "goodness" We were children of the '60s, products of the "I'm okay, you're okay" culture.

In my mind, I was like Shirley, dancing freely on the beach. But in certain moments - in the middle of the night or in the darkness of depression - I could see glimpses of who I really was. I was not growing freer. My heart was growing harder, my emotions darker, and my mind more confused. But I was unable to admit this candidly.

### **Sub title - Filled with Filth**

In late November 1992, I had an unshakeable dream. When I awoke, I remember every detail – sights, sounds, colors, thoughts and feelings. It was there that I met Jesus and saw who I really was, all at the same moment.

I was in a line of people; so long I could see neither beginning nor end. We were dressed in gray robes, marching ahead very slowly. Suddenly we reached an area where a yellow light was emerging. As we approached it, I saw the scene of the Last Supper (recognizing it from Sunday school).

The disciples were eating and drinking and talking to one another. Jesus was not at the table with them, but standing up ahead – we were in a reception line. When I got to Jesus and looked into his eyes, I grasped immediately that every cell in my body was filled with filth. Weeping, I fell at his feet. But when he reached over and touched my shoulders, I suddenly felt perfect peace!

The next morning, I called the most spiritual and peaceful person I had ever met, a former graduate student living 120 miles away – and the only man who ever took my class on feminism.

Over dinner, I described the dream, confident he would recommend a sweat lodge or some new sort of New Age experience. I was wrong; he immediately asked if I had a Bible – I didn't – and he then suggested we go find one.

He encouraged me to read one chapter of Proverbs and five psalms every day. Then he casually added that, since Jesus had been in my dream, I might try reading the New Testament.

From the beginning, I liked the Proverbs and cautiously enjoyed the New Testament. But the Psalms made me somewhat uneasy, particularly Psalm 137, a poem of protest against Israel's Babylonian captors that culminates with a disturbing vision of vengeance.

Let's read and listen to Psalm 137

Mary Poplin continues: Not long after confessing this uneasiness to my friend, I had an experience like scales falling from my eyes. I suddenly realized that evil exists and – more importantly – it was me.

I remembered a popular New Age teacher I had once seen holding court in a California restaurant, aglow with light and love. Afterward this woman had gotten into an altercation with the owner of a car she had backed into accidentally. Amid her angry shrieking, the man kept telling her, calmly but firmly, "This is who you really are." When I heard this, I knew I was just like her: pretending to be good yet filled with bile.

My friend handed me 2 brochures – one for Bill Gothard's Basic Life Principles conference, and another for a charismatic Benedictine monastery. Though totally foreign, (and very different from each other) I went to both and came away feeling blessed. Gothard's lecture was effective at bringing Scripture to life and illuminating the reality of human nature. At the monastery, I was touched by the devotion of believers who spent days seeking closeness to God.

On the first Sunday in January 1993, I was sitting in a very small Methodist church where my mother had grown up, listening to the pastor

invite the congregation to Communion. When the time came to go forward, I prayed to God, "If you are real, please come and get me." Suddenly I felt the same peace I had known in the dream.

To clean up my soul, God taught me what a good friend of mine calls the "bar of soup" passage – I John 1:9 – "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." I asked God to forgive me for having watched pornography, and I felt no desire to see it any longer.

But forgiveness wasn't always easy to accept. I had undergone two abortions, and over three long years of prayer, I doubted whether God had truly forgiven me. Some counselors and fellow Christians had encouraged me to "forgive myself," but the more I searched Scriptures the more confident I was that forgiveness could only come as God's gift. Like Paul, I had to learn to "(forget) what is behind and (strain) forward toward what is ahead," toward "the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (Phil 3:13-14)

Sub title - **Finding my Kolkata**

Coming to Christ changed not only my personal life but my intellectual life as well. My scholarly work has always focused on the best ways to educate the poor. So in 1996, after seeing documentary about Mother Teresa, I decided I would volunteer with her organization, Missionaries of Charity, in Kolkata (then Calcutta).

I spent two months tending to sick infants, performing some cleaning tasks and running supplies to the mother house, where we would begin each day with Mass and a simple meal.

One day, as I was sitting on a bench, waiting on some materials to take back to the orphanage, Mother Teresa herself walked straight up to me. She shook her finger and instructed, "God does not call everyone to serve the poor like he calls us, but God does call everyone to a Calcutta – you have to find yours!"

When I resumed teaching later that year, I experienced a profound intellectual crisis – my Kolkata, then and now. I would weep before entering class. Midway through the semester, I realized I was still teaching the same things I had always taught, even though I knew they were untrue. I was allowing secularism to define my intellectual boundaries.

But the more I read the Bible, the more I could see Christ’s wisdom reaches beyond secular thinking, even where it poses no contradiction. For example, almost every culture and religion believes that we should not do to others what we would not want done to us. Christ goes further: “**Do** to others what you would have them do to you.” (Matthew 7:12) Be proactive!

And Mary Poplin ends this testimony with these words: “There is physical water, and there is spiritual living water. In Christ, there is always a higher rationality.”

Today Mary Poplin teaches at the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University. As usual, the testimony is on the bulletin board in the education wing.

### **What jumps out at you from this testimony?**

Discuss your thoughts with the people around you and then let’s share with everyone.

Mary went to **Sunday school** but it was only later she decided to follow Jesus. So what role did her upbringing play in bringing her to Jesus? It may have given her an openness to read the Bible, to consider Jesus. Maybe somehow the church culture didn’t connect Jesus and followership? What stuck and what didn’t?

It’s important to note that the friend she turned to – pointed her to the Bible, urged her to read it, and to two different types of learning events. I’m sure they conversed about a variety of themes, but he **encouraged Mary to explore**. Mary doesn’t say her friend offered a lot of answers.

Notice God **works through all kinds of people** – from Bill Gothard to Benedictine monks!

That’s two very different angles on faith! And we need to be open and sensitive to her comment: “Though totally foreign, I went to both and came away feeling blessed.”

Again – we see the **power of Bible reading** as it draws people to Jesus and changes lives.

Again – **dreams** have an important role in the Holy Spirit speaking to people.

Her comments about **forgiveness** are important. Christian culture often talks about being able to forgive oneself – but the Bible only talks about forgiveness as God’s gift. There is some food for thought here. I think it is important to move on, to not be hindered by the past, to learn from it, but if our focus is about forgiving ourselves, it’s too easy to take Jesus out of the equation, as well as making forgiveness about ourselves.

Another idea we need to consider is Mary’s comments about **deluding herself into thinking she was “good.”** It took her a while to see and admit, quoting her: “I had an experience like scales falling from my eyes. I suddenly realized that evil exists and – more importantly – it is in me.” So even the vengeful Psalm 137 has a role in getting people’s attention.

And it’s important to note Mary’s **Kolkata** – Calcutta comments. She said, “Coming to Christ changed not only my personal life but my intellectual life as well.” Mary had to find her new calling – as a disciple of Jesus in her mind, spirit, habits, strength and soul. She continues to teach, but she could not teach the same things she had been teaching, because she knows they are untrue.

Mary outlines a **journey** – new revelations, stages, new discoveries, a process in her conversion. I encourage you to listen to Mary giving her testimony on line. She gives more for us to reflect on. Her Creator led her to discover who she really is. How does The Almighty do this with each of us?

One site is listed in the insert.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xKiZs81hTuk>