

# Sharing Christ WITH THE Dying

BRINGING HOPE TO THOSE  
NEAR THE END OF LIFE

MELODY ROSSI



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# Contents

Acknowledgments 11

Introduction 17

## Part One: Who Shall Go?

1. Send Me 23
2. Hope 31
3. The Preparation 39
4. Unlikely Converts 49

## Part Two: What You Need Along the Way

5. A Road Map (*Know the Destination*) 61
6. Sturdy Shoes (*For the Rugged Terrain*) 71
7. GPS (*To Keep You on Track*) 77
8. Emergency Information (*The Documents You Will Need*) 81
9. Traveler's Assistance (*When You Feel Lost and Weary*) 89

## Contents

### Part Three: No Turning Back

- 10. Spiritual Warfare 107
- 11. Endurance 115
- 12. God's Covenant Love 123
- 13. Making Arrangements 135

### Part Four: Journey's End

- 14. The Invisible Work 145
- 15. Giving Gifts 149
- 16. Physical Changes 155
- 17. The Home Going 167
- 18. Grieving Well 173

Appendix 181

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“We will have all of eternity  
to celebrate the victories, but  
only a few hours before sun-  
set to win them.”

—Amy Carmichael





# Introduction

Today is one of those clear, crisp autumn days that reminds me that summer has said its final farewell for the year. A twinge of sadness accompanies this changing of the seasons not only because I hate to relinquish the long dog days of warmth and sunshine but also because this is the time of year when my mother died. All the trappings of fall, from the slight bite in the air to the changing colors of foliage, are hopelessly and irrevocably intertwined with the events surrounding the last days of her life.

On a strikingly beautiful morning so similar to this one, we sat at her kitchen table for what would be our last cup of coffee together, remarking about the beauty of the burnished maple tree across the street. So many hospital trips—including the last, after which she came home to die—were on days like today, when the leaves had just begun falling. Her final breath was taken on a day like this, when the sun, though low in the brilliant sapphire sky, was warm enough to make us thankful it wasn't yet winter.

Because there are a thousand memories such as these hanging in the gallery of my mind, all with the backdrop of a beautiful autumn day, the sights, smells, and the slight chill in the air at this time of

## Introduction

year take me back to all that happened during that season of my mother's passage Home. I feel again the weight I shouldered. The constant physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges of caring for someone who was dying took an enormous toll on me, as did living with the continual throbbing heartache of knowing I would soon be losing someone I loved very much. Those experiences are now gone, but their pain was so real it is still almost tangible.

Though it is impossible to reflect upon these experiences without acknowledging the difficulties, sorrow, and fear that accompanied them, other memories of that last autumn of my mother's life have a completely different feeling. These are the memories most dear to me and that have given me the perspective of hope—and even gratitude—surrounding the profound experience we call death.

As I prepared to deal with the deepest of all human losses, there emerged a gift so sacred that it made the struggle bearable, even worthwhile. At the same time my mother's body was beginning to shut down before my eyes, her spirit, which had previously been diseased with bitterness and anger, began to find its way to life and health. The disappointments and injuries that had caused her to shut her heart to God seemed to ebb away from the shore of her soul. As she faced the end of her physical life, she finally found the impetus to reach out to the Lord—in a way I had never dreamed possible. What couldn't take place in the routine of living finally came about in the process of dying. As we shared that last autumn together, I had the distinct impression that I was not witnessing a death but rather a birth.

Almost one year to the day after my mother died from bladder cancer, Rita, my stepmother of nearly thirty years, took her last breath. Sixteen months after that, my father died. Within only twenty-eight months, all three of them were gone. None had been Christians before becoming ill, but all three came to Christ before dying. Tragically, some people will die without coming to faith. However, in the case of my parents, none of whom were likely candidates for giving their hearts to Christ, God used the dying process itself to bring about their conversions. As they struggled with the indignities of a deteriorating

## Introduction

body, they were finally able to understand they were created to be eternal. Their deathbed became the cathedral in which they finally found peace with the Lord.

When an unbeliever is nearing death, we Christians understand better than anyone else that the stakes are high. We may not know exactly what to do, but we know something must be done. If we have not been accustomed to sharing our faith, doing so now may be uncomfortable. And if the person is quite close to us, or has been hostile toward God, we may be completely at a loss to know how to talk about our faith, even though we want the person to be able to understand how important faith is. We may be tempted to leave a copy of *The Four Spiritual Laws* by the bedside when no one is looking, or call in the pastor, hoping he can “close the deal.” Though God sometimes uses these methods, more often He chooses everyday circumstances played out by people who have some kind of relationship with the dying person and who are willing to reflect Christ’s love, even in the smallest ways.

When my parents were dying, I learned the power of serving. Listening to the words of my Christian mentors, I learned to “find a need and fill it.” Initially, this took the form of going to doctor’s appointments, running errands, and making meals. Later, as illness intensified, I had opportunities to serve in more challenging ways. Over time God used these acts to disarm the lifetime of arguments my parents had built against Him. Every time I showed up and quietly attended to something that needed to be done, I gained credibility in otherwise skeptical eyes and was granted access to souls that might have been shut to me and to my message of a Savior. Because Jesus came to the world as a servant, it makes total sense that He would use this technique as a powerful way to reach the lost.

The purpose of this book is to help you become an instrument through which God can minister to the spiritual needs of a dying person who does not yet know Him. You may be called to do nothing more than pray, and prayer is indeed a crucial component. Or you may be more involved, even to the point of becoming the primary caregiver. Whatever your role, I urge you to find a need and fill it. Someone whom

## Introduction

you love is on the most difficult journey that can ever be taken. This person is lost, but you know the Way. For a little while you have the opportunity to walk along together. God may even use you to intercept the course, to change the destination, and to walk the person all the way Home to Him.



PART ONE

# Who Shall Go?





# 1 Send Me



Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” Then I said, “Here am I. Send me!”

—Isaiah 6:8

It all began with Marge. This was, in fact, the most unlikely of all beginnings, for although Marge and I had known each other for many years, we were acquaintances, really, and not what one would call close friends. Therefore, I never would have anticipated having such an intimate and powerful visit with her before she died. It was a moment that would change us both forever, and that would later have a huge impact on people whom we both loved very much.

Marge and her husband, George, were best friends and business partners of my father and stepmother, Rita. Unlike many people who work together, these four friends were inseparable. In 1972, when Dad and Rita were married in a Las Vegas wedding chapel, George and Marge were there with them, and more than thirty years later, they were still fast friends. They socialized together, vacationed together, celebrated most holidays together, and seemed to never tire of one another’s company.

Marge was like a perfect *crème brûlée*. Inside she was sweet, soft, and somewhat delicate, but on the outside she was a bit crusty. Though she could swear like a sailor, it was never to inflict hurt but only for emphasis or to add color to a story. Her sense of humor was probably her predominant trait, and she saw the opportunity for laughter in almost every situation. Even the most mundane occurrence became hysterically funny when she would relay it to others. She was often the cause of side-splitting laughter for anyone within earshot of her tales, though no one could laugh more robustly than she.

Marge also loved practical jokes. I worked for her my first summer out of high school. At the end of August, when I was getting ready to leave for college, she masterminded a going-away party for me. A sumptuous, homemade chocolate sheet cake was the centerpiece of our little gathering, and I was coaxed into cutting the cake while everyone around smiled supportively.

With the knife in hand, I pantomimed how I would divide up the baked rectangle to ensure the proper number of pieces. After these calculations, I carefully plunged the knife. Much to my surprise, the cake resisted, and the knife sprung back! I took another pass, with even greater pressure, but still couldn't complete the incision. Thinking there must be a dreadful cook in our midst, I tried everything I could think of to cut this ill-formed confection without incriminating the poor baker, who would surely be humiliated.

When I began to hear snickers, I looked up at my co-workers and realized the entire scene was a ruse. As I cut, poked, sawed, and even stabbed, the cake simply would not give way. This was because my "cake" was really a piece of upholstery foam that had been cleverly decoyed with a luscious layer of chocolate frosting! Though no one ever took credit for putting that cake together, Marge's reputation for practical jokes made her the prime suspect, and everyone knew she was guilty as charged.

Through the years, I continued to see Marge at family gatherings, or whenever I would drop into the office to visit Dad and Rita. I admired Marge on many levels. She was a fine businesswoman, wife, mother,

grandmother, and a good friend to my father and stepmother. But it was how she dealt with pain that impressed me most.

Marge suffered from debilitating rheumatoid arthritis. As she aged, her condition worsened. Her hands and feet became severely gnarled and twisted, and just one look at her mangled joints gave a clear picture of the suffering she endured on a daily basis. Marge was one of those people who took everything—including pain—in stride. She *never* complained. Nor did she become irritable or take her hardship out on anyone else. She chose laughter instead. Marge was amazingly courageous, and because of her bravery, I had tremendous respect for her.

There came a time, though, when courage and laughter were not enough to sustain Marge. Her body and immune system were breaking down, and she caught one infection after another. When she was hospitalized for pneumonia three times within just a few months, we all knew it was the beginning of a serious downward trend.

Dad and Rita kept me informed of Marge's condition, but I lived too far away to be involved. Besides, she was *their* friend. I was, of course, sad to hear about her failing health, but it didn't really affect *me*.

At that time, I was teaching middle school in Los Angeles. During school one day, I suddenly had a very strong sense I *had* to go visit Marge, who was in the hospital. I knew I needed to see her face to face, spend time with her, and then pray with her. Since I had never prayed with Marge in my life, and didn't know whether this would be greeted warmly, I tried everything I could to shake that feeling. However, the urge was so strong and compelling, I couldn't deny it. I suspected (and hoped) this was the Holy Spirit leading, and though I wasn't totally sure, I didn't want to risk missing an appointment He had set. So on a Monday afternoon, immediately after school, I set out in the worst of rush hour traffic to visit Marge in a hospital in Orange County, nearly two hours away.

While driving, I began to have serious doubts about what I was doing. First of all, Marge and I had never talked about God—*ever*. I knew nothing of her religious background, and didn't even know if she believed in prayer. Who was I to come barging into her hospital

## Who Shall Go?

room and announce it was time to pray? Besides, I was younger than her children and she probably wouldn't even take me seriously. Even if she were willing, I was sure George, Dad, and Rita would all be there, doing their best to distract Marge and keep the atmosphere lighthearted. It would be virtually impossible for me to walk in, take charge, and hold a prayer meeting. What was I thinking? Still I felt compelled to go, so I set out on my mission.

*Lord, please let Marge be alone when I get there,* I prayed while I was driving. As I envisioned the scene, my heart began to pound loudly. I really wanted to pray with and for Marge, and yet I just didn't know if I would be able to do it. It would be hard enough to do if we were alone, but if anyone else—especially my father or stepmother—were in the room with us, I would be petrified! *Lord, please!*

Something else worried me. I knew Marge had been hooked up to a breathing tube. If it were still in place, she wouldn't be able to speak. This would turn our visit into a monologue, perhaps leaving Marge with a feeling that she had been “ambushed.” I envisioned myself stammering to her about God, and making a complete fool of myself. *God, if this is from you, I need your help!* Holding my doubts at bay, I decided to just go through with it and worry about the consequences later.

When I got out of my car in the hospital parking lot, I felt weak in the knees. How was I going to do this? I entered the hospital lobby, checked with the receptionist to find out Marge's room number, and stepped into the elevator. The ride seemed eternal.

As I headed toward Marge's room, memories of my own experience as a patient came flooding back to me. Five years earlier, I had nearly died due to complications of what was supposed to be a “minor” surgery and then spent nearly a year bedridden. I knew full well the misery of living in a body that was not functioning properly. With a twinge of sadness, I thought about how lonely and isolated I had felt in the hospital, and how grateful I was for every person who made time to come see me. Visitors broke the monotony of what seemed interminable days away from home. Whatever happened, perhaps Marge would at least be glad to have some company.

## Send Me

I sighed with relief as I entered the room, for Marge was in fact alone. She was awake, and her eyes lit up with the old twinkle as she recognized me. My hunch had been right! She was clearly glad to have a visitor. She reached out for my hand and I leaned over the bed in order to give her a full embrace. It *was* good to see her.

I searched for a way to begin. “Marge, I was expecting to see a breathing tube.” In a raspy whisper, she explained that just moments before I arrived, the doctor had asked George, Dad, and Rita to leave so he could remove the tube. So far God had taken care of every detail. *Thank you, Lord, for removing the tube and for using that to clear the room. Your timing is perfect!*

Anyone who has been intubated experiences temporary irritation of the vocal cords after the tube is removed, and speaking becomes laborious. Marge’s voice was barely audible, and in order to hear her, I sat on her bed right beside her, holding her frail hand in mine. I had to read her lips or put my ear almost against her mouth in order to understand her hushed words. Then I would pull back so she could see my face as I responded. We “chatted” in this manner as well as we could. Ironically, the obstacles served to create an intimacy we might not otherwise have experienced. We spoke of her condition, and then of lighter things that offered much needed comic relief. As usual, Marge was keeping a stiff upper lip and tried to be as positive as possible.

All through the visit, I prayed under my breath and looked for my opportunity to divulge the reason I had really come. My hope that Marge would be eager for human contact had proven to be true; perhaps I would be blessed again. Knowing Marge’s circle of friends, I suspected I might be the only one who had come to offer prayer. I hoped she would welcome this change of pace.

Finally there was a lull in our pleasantries and I knew it was time. I squeezed her hand, looked straight into her eyes, and said, “Marge, I have come to do something that no one else in your life can do for you. Do you know what that is?” I think I startled her, and her brown eyes grew big with curiosity. “Marge, I want to pray for you. Would you like that?”

Suddenly, her eyes moistened, and I sensed a deep spiritual thirst in her. My heart leaped inside me, and I realized it had most assuredly been the Holy Spirit leading me to come here. Emboldened by Marge's openness, I leaned very close to her ear and prayed words that seemed to come from outside of me.

It was a prayer for her soul more than for her body. I asked God to be real to her, to be present with her, and to answer all the questions that were on her heart. I prayed for peace, for comfort, and for eternal hope. I prayed a long prayer, wondering all the while if perhaps it was too long. Knowing she was receiving numerous medications, I suspected she might fall asleep, but I kept on praying anyway. I prayed everything that was on my heart, and while I prayed, the sweetness of the Holy Spirit began to permeate the room.

When I finished, Marge was crying, holding tightly to me. After she regained her composure, she seemed to be searching for words. Her eyes were filled with wonder and awe when she said, "*He's* been here. I've seen *Him*." As she spoke, her tears flowed anew. "I didn't want to tell anyone."

My mind could scarcely take this in. I had hesitated to come, thinking my visit would be an intrusion or perhaps an opportunity for my own embarrassment. Yet long before I had the idea to come see Marge, God had been at work, revealing himself to her in this very room!

"Marge, if you saw Him, He is trying to tell you something. He must have sent me here today to help you. You can have His peace right now. Do you want to know how to receive it?" She nodded.

I had been terrified of this visit and hadn't known what I would say. I simply knew I *must* come. Now here I was, sitting on the bed of a dying woman, talking with her about Jesus as though we had done this every day for years. It suddenly seemed easy and natural. By the time I left, I was certain the Holy Spirit had arranged the entire evening. I nearly floated out of the hospital to the parking lot.

As I drove home in the silent darkness of the freeway, I knew God had sent His radiant light into the heart of one woman in a hospital room. My earlier sense of icy dread had melted, giving way to the beautiful warmth of purpose and oneness with Christ. I knew I had



## Send Me

witnessed a miracle, and that angels were rejoicing over what had taken place. Our conversation had far exceeded anything I could have hoped for or even imagined, and I was overcome with joy for having been part of what God did in her life. He could have sent anyone, but He sent *me*.

Marge died a few weeks later. At her funeral, George thanked me profusely for coming to see her in the hospital, and told me how much our time of prayer had meant to her. His expression of gratitude was deeply moving as was the fact that Marge had obviously relayed the whole story to him. It had no doubt been a very significant event for her. But even as George spoke and conveyed to me the most sincere appreciation, I knew it was not Marge but I who had received the most during our time together. God had used her to touch me in a profound and life-changing way, and to begin a work in me that would eventually spill out onto the lives of others. Some of them would be Marge's dearest friends.

Marge taught me that people come to the end of life spiritually thirsty. The dying process, though painful on so many levels, brings a new understanding that the physical world is not the complete picture and allows the person time to contemplate the significance of this. Though some may fight against God until the very end, there are many who, like Marge, are ready to drink at the Well. For them, illness and death are not an end but a beginning. As we offer a cup of cold water to them in the name of Jesus, the Lord can use it to quench even the deepest thirst.