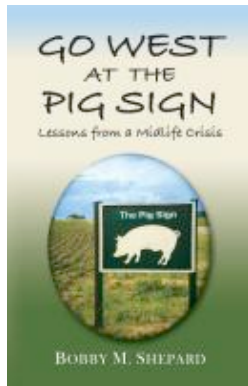


GO WEST AT THE PIG SIGN

Lessons from a Midlife Crisis



BOBBY M. SHEPARD



This is memoir - a summary of some of the important lessons author Bobby Shepard has learned as a result of broken trust. The main points of the book are: 1) We are not alone. 2) The pain we experience is not wasted. Instead, it prepares us for the next phase of our lives. And 3) if we can stay calm, and wait, our broken pieces can be redesigned into something beautiful...

Go West At The Pig Sign: Lessons from a Midlife Crisis

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Lessons from a Midlife
Crisis

BOBBY M. SHEPARD



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First Edition

The Earthquake

*It may never be mine,
The loaf or the kiss or the kingdom
Because of beseeching;
But I know that my hand
Is an arm's length nearer the sky
For reaching.*

- EDWIN QUARLES, "PETITION"

The year was 2004. *Facebook.com* launched. *Friends* aired its final episode. Smarty Jones won the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness. The Boston Red Sox swept the St. Louis Cardinals to win their first World Series in 86 years. Michael Phelps earned eight medals (six gold and two bronze) at the Summer Olympics in Athens. The Indian Ocean tsunami killed nearly a quarter of a million people. I turned forty-five, and I was two years into my midlife crisis.

Early that spring, my good friend and riding buddy, Lisa, found a horse she was interested in buying and asked me to take a look at it with her. It was in a neighborhood called Pinetree, located about ten miles west of Champaign, which is itself about ninety minutes south of Chicago. I had lived in east central Illinois for twenty-plus years, but I had never heard of this unusual equestrian neighborhood. It was a well-kept secret apparently.

To find it, Lisa told me, I needed to drive west, then south for a couple of miles, and then west again at the pig sign.

She said, "After the pig sign, go about a mile, and the neighborhood will be on your right. Go to the first barn, and I'll meet you there."

So that's what I did.

And just as she said, there was a sign at the corner with a white pig set against a green background, and the only words on it were "The Pig Sign."

As the story goes, the couple who lived on that corner erected the original Pig Sign in 1960. It simply included a white pig on a dark background, the man's name, and an arrow that pointed to the building where their two sows lived. Over the years the sign aged, fell down, was repaired and replaced, then vandalized, stolen, and replaced again.

In 1996 the man sold off his now six hundred to eight hundred pigs and closed the farm down, due to his own health issues. He no longer needed his sign, but the neighbors *did*. It had become a reliable landmark. It was a source of comfort for those giving directions to their homes when they could say, "You know The Pig Sign, right?"

"Oh sure!"

"Good—turn there ..."

So the Pinetree residents asked if they could update and maintain the sign. At this point the words "The Pig Sign" replaced the man's name and the arrow. The landmark stood for several years, until it was laced with bullet holes, rusted, and unsightly. Again.

GO WEST AT THE PIG SIGN

That's when the Pinetree neighbors got together and erected a new, wooden sign.

Any time a sign was removed for repair, or was stolen, some panic ensued. When neighbors thought it wasn't coming back, they lamented, "*How can we give directions to our homes if there isn't a Pig Sign?*" Visitors to the neighborhood would call and whine, "I drove up and down 47 and could NOT find The Pig Sign. I am *lost*! What should I do?"

Indeed!

Mercifully, a repaired or replaced sign finally *did* arrive, and all was well with the world again. Because, after all, we really need our reference points, don't we? And what do we do when those reference points are suddenly taken away? We panic. We scramble. We get angry. We demand that someone fix this. *Right now!*

I know that feeling. In fact, I think that is what kicked off my midlife crisis.

It took me quite a while, but I finally learned that when one sign is removed or broken, God often steps in with a new one. There may be a slight gap in between signs, and this can cause some panic in our hearts. But if we stay calm, and wait, the path *will* become clear again.

In my case, God used horses and a hidden neighborhood to help me find my way through my terror, sadness, frustration and confusion.

But first, before I continue, I need to backtrack and begin my story with my years at a stressful, fast-paced Architectural/Engineering office job. It was like boot camp for what I would encounter later.



In the spring of 1991 I began my new position at the A/E firm and it quickly became obvious to me that there was an awfully high volume of work produced by the less than twenty architects and engineers. There was only one other female employee, and she was tough as nails, so I could see that my being raised as the only girl with five brothers was going to come in handy here!

During my first week one of the architects let me know that the bosses had very high expectations for whoever was in my position. When I asked what he meant exactly, he just said, "You'll find out," and wished me good luck.

I determined then that I would rise to whatever challenges came my way since I had just been fired from my previous position, driven out by politics. I wasn't about to let anyone push me out of a job again. When I left this office it would be because I was good and ready to go.

About two weeks into this new position, the President of the company, Roland, yelled at me in front of the Chief Architect, Marcus. His level of anger seemed to be completely inappropriate and unjustified. I complained about it to my husband when I got home that night and he told me exactly what I needed to do.

So, the next day, I put a note on Roland's desk asking if I could speak with him when he had a minute. He soon called me into his office. I sat down in the chair across from his desk and asked him how he thought I was doing so far.

He said I was doing fine. Just fine. Why did I ask?

I told him that I was definitely trying to do my best, but said it was hard to do when I was yelled at. He asked *who* yelled at me, sounding indignant and like he might just have to go after that person.

“You did. In front of Marcus,” I responded.

He shifted in his chair, cleared his throat, and sputtered, “Oh, umph, er, hey, that wasn’t *your* fault. That was Marcus’ fault ...”

I told him it wasn’t anybody’s “fault.” It was just something that happened.

That was the last word I got out of my mouth. For the next fifteen minutes or so he shuffled papers and talked non-stop about emotional women and whatnot. I sat calmly and thought to myself, *Go ahead and talk. But if you ever do that to me again, I’m gone.*

He never so much as raised an eyebrow at me after that.

One challenge I had in that position was that I answered to three main bosses who didn’t agree with one another on how I should do my job or what my priorities should be. Another challenge was the outrageous volume of work. So I began every day with a prayer: *Help me to know the priorities today and please let me catch my mistakes before anyone else does.*

That worked for me over and over and I learned to pay attention to the inner voice that told me, “Stop what you’re doing. Finish this item over here.” I saw the wisdom of it when, sure enough, that item was often requested just as I finished it up.

Since I averaged sixty hours of work per week, I asked my bosses if they could possibly hire someone to help me. After all, I

never took “breaks” during the day (no one did). I worked many Saturday mornings, (everyone did). I took work home most nights. I didn’t chit-chat during the day, talk to friends on the phone or waste time in any way.

The bosses said “no” to hiring help. And they said I shouldn’t work so much over time (since I was paid hourly). They said I should make my family more of a priority.

“Ok,” I replied. “But you want the work done on time.”

“Oh, sure.”

Impossible expectations. Treating employees and people off the street with contempt and disrespect. Lots of yelling. Micro-managing. This was the atmosphere I worked in.

A couple of years into that job, Co-Vice President Allen yelled at me in front of other employees. Once more, I complained about it to my husband, he told me what I needed to do, and the next day I asked Allen if I could speak with him when he had a moment.

I sat in the chair across from his desk and asked how I should handle that situation differently in the future. He shuffled papers, talked for about fifteen minutes, and concluded there really wasn’t any way to do it differently. I said it would help me out if he didn’t yell at me in front of other employees.

He never did again. And I got promoted.

After learning how to juggle the politics and responsibilities of my job, I became a highly valued employee and was surprised whenever I received what I asked for, even if no one in the history of the company had ever received it before. I gained the respect of my bosses and the employees, but most importantly, I

gained *self*-respect, something I had been seriously lacking all of my life.

In addition, I also developed a healthy work ethic as well as a refined sensitivity to that inner voice. I learned how to persevere under pressure over an extended period of time, and maybe most importantly, I learned how to stand up to a bully.

All of these tools came in handy later on.



A little past the four-year mark of my time at the A/E firm, my inner alarm sounded and I sensed it was time to make a change. So, one day, I asked if I could speak with Mitch, Roland's son, who was now President of the company.

Just a side note: One of Mitch's projects during my time there was something he called the "world wide web." He was working with a team of computer engineers at the University of Illinois to develop an "international network of computers." I was told that we wouldn't have to send documents in the mail; we could just hit a button and send them electronically from a computer in Champaign, Illinois to someone in Sydney, Australia. That sounded completely outrageous to me at the time. I just couldn't wrap my mind around it!

Anyway, sitting in the chair across from this highly intelligent man's desk I asked, "Have you noticed how we have secretaries who get really mad, slam their chairs into their desks and then walk out, never to return?"

He admitted he *had* noticed that.

I told him there was a reason for this, and in fact, I had thought about doing the same thing on many occasions. I wasn't

sure why I hadn't done it, but I told him I was finally finished. I just wanted to let him know.

He offered me a raise and asked me to stay. I told him I would think about it, but as I was leaving his office, I added that I was hoping to have a second child. If that happened, I assured him, I *would* stay home and be a full-time mom.

Little did I know that I was already two weeks pregnant with my son, Landon. He was due the following March of 1996. After I got my happy news, I agreed to stay on at my job, but I let Mitch know that I would not be back after the baby was born. I would stay home.

My conversation with Mitch took place mid-July of 1995, and three months later I experienced what I call my “earthquake”—life as I knew it was over.



Up to this point, I had been a very devoted Christian (following my conversion in college that is) and thought I was quite strong in my faith. But as I came to understand, I had more “faith” in rules and people’s expectations of me than I had in *God*. In the autumn of 1995, my so-called faith began to crack and then crumble, and I found myself on some very unsteady ground. A series of events took place that rocked my world, sent me scrambling for new reference points, and challenged me to rethink everything I had relied upon for safety.

In late October I discovered that people whom I had trusted completely had been lying to me *for years*.

As a result of these deceptions, my finances became a disaster (approximately \$70,000 was “lost” and we were in serious danger of losing our home as well). Over a two-week

period, the extent of the damage unfolded. On an almost daily basis, the people who had deceived me admitted to new facts, and new aspects of this bad dream came to light.

It was a nightmare I wanted desperately to wake up from. It was stealing my breath away and consuming all of my energy and thoughts.

One day, in the midst of the bad news spree, I was preparing to plant some tulip bulbs in a pitiful attempt to do something uplifting. My husband told me not to bother; we would lose the house by spring anyway. Although I couldn't see any way out of this quicksand we were sinking into, I completely rejected his statement with, "I'm planting the bulbs. We are NOT going to lose this house!"

And then, just when I thought things couldn't get any worse ... they did.

On November 6, I came home from work as it was getting dark. I was tired, cold, and wet from the drizzling rain. I paused at my front door and despite our current struggles, a thought came from somewhere outside of myself: *Life is good. Appreciate it. You have a warm home, a family, and a baby on the way that you asked for.*

Shortly thereafter, I was sitting with my six-year-old daughter, Jessica, as I brushed her hair and we talked about her day. I barely heard the phone or my husband's voice as he answered the call in his office across the hall. But a couple of minutes later, he called out to me. I stood in his doorway as he said, "I have some bad news."

I thought to myself, *Of course you do. You have bad news every day lately.*

"You know Joey...?" He asked. Our family friend, Judy, had had several miscarriages before she finally gave birth to a son, Joey, now three months old. She was thirty-eight years old when her little miracle came along. Just a few days before this, I had been sitting with her in the back row at church, watching him giggle as she cradled him on her lap. I had thought about how good God was to bless her in this way, after all of those miscarriages.

Gary continued, "Well, you know Lori babysits him." Lori was another friend of ours from church.

"Yes," I answered. By now, I was feeling impatient and annoyed. I wanted him to just get to the point. I was tired, I was cold, I was wet, and I was hungry. And I was sick of bad news.

"Well, Joey died today at Lori's house."

Everything went white. I stepped back from the doorway. My hands went up over my ears and I cried out. My mind said, *Shut up! Stop talking! Rewind the tape! You did NOT just say that. No! No! No!*

My daughter came running into the office. "What's the matter?"

The next thing I remember was heading to the front door, still in my office clothes and wearing my raincoat. I glanced back at my daughter who was sitting on Gary's lap in the living room rocking chair. Her face reflected the shock I felt. I said I would be back soon, and then headed out into the dreary evening on my way to the emergency room.

When I arrived, the hospital chaplain guided me to a private room where Judy and her husband Joe were holding their little

boy. Judy looked up at me and cried, “Why would God take my baby boy?”

Of course, I didn’t have an answer for her.



Nothing was making sense. Life was spiraling out of control. We walked with our friends through the week of the funeral, helping them make decisions on the arrangements. All of us were numb, of course, and no one could come up with any words to ease the sadness. Joey had died of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) and nothing could bring him back.

We continued to walk with them through that awful winter—it’s all we could do to help. Life was broken and there wasn’t any way to fix it.

And then there were our finances. For weeks I prayed diligently, only to watch the situation worsen. So I stopped praying, thinking maybe that would help. The downward slide only picked up momentum.

Bill collectors called and threatened us. Money didn’t stretch far enough to pay for what we needed. We were a little further behind every month. At the grocery store I bought the smallest amounts of only things we absolutely needed. Church people told me not to worry; it was a sin. I just wanted them to shut up.

I felt like I was falling over a cliff, grasping for anything solid to break my free fall but only finding fragile pieces of grass in my hands. And life continued to be very terrifying. I no longer knew what or whom to trust; that was the worst part. I hated the fact that lies had caused this. Truth had always been such an important issue for me and now I was drowning because of lies.

I raged at God—*how could he allow all of this? He tricked me! He let me down! He let me fall for the lies! And how could he do this to Judy and Joe? This was not what I signed up for! This was not the deal I made!* I thought, *If this is how you treat the people who love you, and whom you supposedly love, I'm not sure I want to be in your camp!*

To add insult to injury, I had people from church offering all kinds of “help.” They became a huge source of pain to me as they attempted to *fix* me; their words were like darts, thrown from a safe distance. They were great at judging me—wagging their heads and wagging their tongues.

For example, a lead couple in the church sat me down and told me that the people who had lied to me for *years* and cheated me out of tens of thousands of dollars complained that I had been acting “snippy” toward them. This lead couple asked me if that was true.

I came back with, “*Snippy? Really?* Well, let me tell you something: They should count their blessings that all they are getting is ‘*snippy*.’ Because ‘*snippy*’ does not even *begin* to compare to the *rage* I feel on the inside.”

Oddly enough, all accusations were coming *my* way. Apparently, according to my accusers, it was possibly, somehow, indirectly, *my* fault that people had been lying to me and cheating me. Somehow, they implied, I had brought this on myself.

Amazing.

It was also pointed out to me that I needed to forgive. After all, forgiveness is one of the basic Christian pillars. And, they said, if I truly forgave then I would naturally trust as well. Sure, I could forgive (in due time) but that didn’t mean I trusted the

people who had swindled me. I explained that in my mind, “trust,” at least in this case, equaled “stupid.” And I’m not stupid.

I have many thoughts on the topic of forgiveness—more than this chapter or even this book has room for. There are plenty of other books devoted to it and I don’t need to rehash it here. But in a nutshell, this is what I have gleaned:

Forgiveness is what we do for our own sake. We do it to avoid drinking the poison of hatred. Forgiveness does not equal reconciliation and it does not mean we are obligated to trust the person or institution that wronged us. When we forgive we simply cut the cord that binds us to that injustice. And when we forgive we get out of God’s way. We hand the situation over to him and allow *him* to deal with it. And when he deals with people, institutions, or situations, although he may seem to move painfully slow, he is very, very thorough.

Before I had this clarity on forgiveness though, the foolishness of my critics made me even angrier, which in turn made them look down their noses at me even more.

During that year of my meltdown a whole lot of nonsense was coming my way. I got used to the random accusations thrown at me and I understood that people didn’t quite know what to say to me, so they just said whatever popped into their heads.

The summer after Landon was born, in 1996, I opened a successful home daycare so I could stay home with my baby and still earn an income. It was hard work but at least I didn’t miss his important milestones. For brief moments it took my mind off of our nightmare and helped me to treasure the simple things: nature, kids, music, creativity, discovery and play.

Even so, the stress of our situation caught up with me and began to take its toll on my health. Although I typically have a strong immune system, I became susceptible to whatever flu bug was going around. When Landon was about a year old I was sick for a period of six weeks that ended with a killer ear infection, which gave me a small taste of what it's like to be chronically ill. I couldn't keep up with the daycare and my mom had to come for a week just to help me get my footing again.

Although I don't remember the exact order of events, I do know I was on the verge of completely walking away from my life when *one* man listened to my story and stood in my defense—an elder from our sister-congregation in Chicago. He basically told my critics to shut up and he helped me to at least begin the process of listening to God, instead of just to people.

At that point, my spiritual free-fall lost its momentum. Instead of looking for ways to walk away from God, I instead turned and *slowly* sought after him again. One thought that helped me was: *I know (at least in my head) that God loves me and wants the best for me. Satan hates me and wants to destroy me. That much I know.*

So I hesitantly chose God.

At one point I felt like God was holding my face in his hands, like a parent would with a hysterical child, saying firmly, "*Look at me.*"

My heart answered, "I am looking at you, but we still have this problem!"

And then it was like he pressed my cheeks more firmly and said, "*Look AT me.*"

And I whimpered, “I AM looking at you!” while my eyes darted around, taking quick glances at the financial nightmare I was living.

He said, “Look at *ME!*”

And all I could do was whimper, “Okay.”

As I began to understand God’s whisperings to my heart, I also continued to receive painful comments from church people. I thought, *God, I like you. But I don’t like your people very much.*

Sometimes it was one step forward and two back, but little by little I carefully started reaching out to him again, eventually figuring out that I wanted *him*. Not just the things he could do for me, but him. It was a painfully slow five-year process, but during that time I started to “hear” God singing to me. Not with my ears, but with my heart. I started to follow the melody. I started to understand. I felt like Helen Keller when she understood, for the first time, the word “water.”

I was crying out to God. I was terrified. I was hurting. I was looking for relief. I wasn’t finding it, but I *was* finding God. Not religion—God.

One day at the start of this journey, I was driving along the road when a song came on the radio that almost made me pull over so I could focus on the music. It was Marc Anthony’s “You Sang to Me.”

In the song, a man is singing to a woman about how he now understands, and feels, the love that she had for him all along. He just hadn’t seen it. He missed it, although it was right in front of his face. He says she sang to him, and she showed him where he wanted to be.

It was a perfect expression of what I was experiencing and I was so grateful to run across it. I can't very often articulate my thoughts, but I can point to someone who is talented in that area and say, "Yes! Like *that!*" Sometimes that's my primary form of communication.



Somewhere during this time, I had an epiphany. It went like this:

I was raised to believe in God and attend the Catholic Church. But I started rebelling in junior high, and I picked up steam as I entered high school. This was due in part to my being sexually abused during much of my childhood. Yes, I was a pretty angry teenager, but that would be another topic for another book. Right now I'll just say that during those teenage years I fluctuated between misbehaving and looking in God's direction now and then.

Although I would like to forget a lot of the things I did during those early years, I can summarize them with this: Many of the people I ran around with during my freshman and sophomore years of high school are now either dead or in prison. In contrast, the people I ran around with in my junior and senior years of high school are now doctors, executives, missionaries, professors, business owners, and responsible parents. This drastic change was due in large part to my older brother, Dan, and his sudden transformation at that time; I simply benefited from his new choices. But that, again, is another topic for another book.

And then, on June 29, 1980, right before my senior year of college, I was baptized as an "adult." I became a Christian, and I wasn't ashamed to take that stand.

I did a lot then to annoy my poor family and friends as I was trying to find my way, trying to figure out what it meant to be a Christian. Truth be told, I'm still trying to figure that one out.

As a Catholic kid I had the crucifixion hanging right in front of me every Sunday. As an adult, I read the Bible and listened to lots of lessons on the topic of the cross. But I always felt that I really didn't have a good understanding of what it was truly about. I mean, think about it: What an odd thing for God to use to get us back to himself! It never really made sense to me. So, somewhere around the age of thirty-five, I prayed, "God, help me to understand the cross better."

Be careful what you pray for ...

As the dust was settling from my "earthquake," I stopped in my tracks one day and thought, *Wait a minute! Here I am, in a lot of pain. My friends have disappeared. People are falsely accusing me, and I feel deserted by God. Hold on ...! That's what was happening to Jesus on the cross!*

Oh no! I prayed to understand the cross better and now I was experiencing my own "cross." My prayer had been answered. I understood the cross better.

That was my epiphany.

But I wanted to shout, "Hey, God—when I said I wanted to understand the cross better, I didn't mean I wanted to find out *firsthand what it felt like!* I just wanted to understand it intellectually, you know?"

And although I was feeling so much pain at the hands of well-intentioned people, I had another epiphany—*Wait a minute ... these people are not God. And God is not equivalent to*

these people. There is a BIG difference. Just because they are doing these things to me, that does not mean God is doing them.

So I slowly started to listen to God, instead of listening to all the opinions of people—who are just that, people. They are not God.

Up to that point, I had wasted so much time and energy trying to be “good enough,” but I never could seem to achieve it! I thought things like: *If I have a clean house, if I am excellent at work, if, if, if ... then I will finally be good enough. Then I can feel good about myself, then people will accept me, and then I can be worthy of ... of what? Respect? Approval? Whose approval?*

I have no idea who I was trying to please, whose expectations I was trying to live up to. Who was this invisible judge I was trying to appease, anyway?

Whoever it was, their answer back to me was always, “*Nope, not good enough yet. Not today, anyway. And you know what? Tomorrow’s not lookin’ so good, either. Hey, but you keep trying [bump on the arm]—you never know!*”

Attempting to live up to this “good enough” standard was like trying to hit a moving target—like a bull in a bullfight. He angrily charges the red cape, which keeps disappearing, making him even more furious! He wastes all of his energy trying to do the impossible, and then he gets stabbed with knives to boot! In the end, he dies in his vain attempts to hit the ever-moving target. How sad, and how tragic! But this is how so many of us spend our lives, wasting our precious time and energy, chasing the impossible.

My favorite book as a child was *The Story of Ferdinand*. It’s about a young bull, Ferdinand, born in the Spanish countryside.

All of his peers loved to run and play-fight with each other, showing off to the bullfight talent scouts.

But not Ferdinand. *He* loved to sit under the cork tree and smell the alfalfa flowers.

One day, when Ferdinand was fully grown, he sat down on a bee who was also interested in the alfalfa flowers. As a result of the sting he received, he ran and snorted and bucked around the pasture with such fury that the talent scouts chose him for the next bullfight.

But, on the day of the fight, in the middle of the ring, all Ferdinand did was sit and breathe in the scent of the flowers that the women in the crowd wore in their hair. This infuriated the matador and the picadors, but nothing they did to provoke him worked. He just sat and sniffed and smiled.

Eventually they hauled him back to the pasture he came from, so he could sit quietly under the cork tree and smell the flowers, for the rest of his days.

I love it.



So, one very good outcome of my spiritual meltdown was that I could finally disengage from my efforts to be “good enough.” I gave up that nonsense. I finally got to the point where I could say, *You know what? I don’t really care what you say, whoever you are. I am done with your game.*

From there I could focus on being authentic instead, and honest with God. I watched for *his* direction, *his* input, and *his* approval.

As time went by and the fact that I was obviously beginning to calm down became more obvious to those around me, a woman from my church approached me with a request. She asked if I would talk to “Cathy” who, she said, was “kind of bitter.” So, Cathy and I met in a quiet, dark corner of Panera on a cold, wet November evening and she told me her story.

After hearing her out I thought, *Well, no wonder she’s bitter! Are you kidding me?*

Cathy and her husband had been in the full-time ministry for years and they had struggled quite a bit in their marriage. Her husband had a habit of staying out very late at night, into the early morning hours, and he got angry with her when she voiced her concerns and questioned him about it.

He also lied on a regular basis about their finances, which were in shambles. In addition, he was verbally abusive to her and to their children. There were many other facets to the story, but the bottom line was, Cathy eventually had proof that her husband had been unfaithful. He denied it, of course, and lied. I doubt the lies would ever hold up in a court of law, but they confused the church leadership enough that they chose to believe him.

Cathy was consistently told by the leaders to basically be quiet and be a “good wife.” This came from all corners of the country, from church leaders as far away as California. Leaders she had served with in the full-time ministry. Trusted leaders.

I was stunned by what she told me. I knew that what her husband claimed as a defense was impossible. And I knew there wasn’t much I could do to help her if this was what she had faced so far. But I knew someone who *could* help her. So I gave this advice: “I know one thing: Go after God like a maniac. Cry out to *him*. *He* will help you. I am sure of it.”

So that's what she did, all winter long.

Now, this situation may sound ridiculous to anyone looking at it from the outside, anyone who doesn't have our religious background. I have to admit it sounds like a battered woman situation. When asked why they don't just leave their man, battered women have a variety of responses, none of which make sense to those who have not been in their shoes.

For one, maybe those women have plenty of good memories with their husband or boyfriend. Maybe things weren't always bad, maybe he has a good side to him and they have hopes that he will be kind again. Hope is a good thing, right?

Maybe they are afraid of other people's judgments. Maybe they are fearful that they couldn't survive financially on their own. They may lack confidence. Maybe they are thinking about the vow they made on their wedding day. Maybe they believe that their children are better off in an unhappy home as opposed to a broken home. There could be a long list of reasons why they stay.

Cathy may have had some of these thoughts regarding her situation, but she also had another very powerful motivation that kept her in place. It was the same power that kept me in line. We were both conditioned to believe that church leadership was basically God's final word on any matter. To go against it was to go against God, and we surely didn't want to do that. So it never occurred to us to leave this church with all of its unhelpful advice.

Similar to a battered woman, we had a mixture of good and bad experiences with the church. It wasn't all bad, all of the time. And besides, we had made a vow to stay the course. We were very committed. We had hopes that things would improve. But we felt trapped when we weren't listened to. We felt like we

were drowning. We couldn't breathe. And because we didn't have self-confidence or clear thinking, we could easily be controlled by guilt, shame, intimidation and manipulation.

After my talk with Cathy in Panera, I asked a couple of women in my leadership group if they knew about her situation. They said things like, "Yes, I do. Isn't it so sad?"

I thought, Sad? Saaaad? Is that all you have to say? I'll tell you what's sad. What's sad is that no one is helping her! And again, no wonder she is "bitter!"

I didn't want to overreact to Cathy's situation. I knew from past experience that overreacting would backfire. I had learned a little bit about turning to God for help and waiting on him. So, while Cathy and I prayed about her situation during that winter, I walked a fine line between speaking up about my various concerns and waiting on God.

And then in the spring of 2000 I asked her if she would be willing to tell her story to my husband. She was extremely hesitant, of course. But she finally agreed and we all three sat down at our kitchen table.

Six months later, her divorce was final, but not before her husband was asked to leave the church.

The only way I can explain such swift and thorough deliverance is the power of prayer. Because logically Cathy should have been written off. Again. Just like she had been every other time she tried to get help. My husband was just one of many Bible study leaders. He didn't hold a powerful position in the church.

The way I remember it, our minister became indignant with Cathy's husband, Bob, only after he caught Bob lying about his

Special Missions Contribution. Up to that point, our minister had been asking Bob for help with sermon material as they shared jokes and enjoyed each other's company.

So I would say this was a minor miracle, assisted by my husband.

Although I was part of this process, I didn't gain any credibility in the church. After all, it was my husband who got our minister's attention, not me. In fact, as I spoke up about other concerns I had, I got called on the carpet by the church leadership. I was accused of being everything from "bold and arrogant" to "un-submissive and divisive."

The woman who had originally asked me to talk with Bitter Cathy now sat at my kitchen table and read me a Scripture. *"My heart is not proud, LORD, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me"* (Psalm 131:1 New International Version).

Her point was that I should not "concern myself" with the fact that people were hurting. Apparently, I was a pain in the neck to the church leadership.

Oh, I see, I thought. Don't worry my little head about the fact that our church is wounding people, me included. Just bury my head in the sand, keep my mouth shut, and let the smart people deal with those things.

What I wanted to do was point her to my front door and tell her to be careful it didn't hit her in the butt on the way out.

Over the years, I have encountered that mentality many times—the one that believes women should keep their heads low, their mouths shut, paste on a smile, look the other way, be

nice and avoid having a strong opinion. In fact, they should not appear strong in *any* way. It makes people uncomfortable.

Well, that just doesn't work for me.

I had never heard any sermons in my church on Jael, the Israelite woman who drove a tent peg through the head of the enemy, Sisera, as told in Judges Chapters 4 and 5. Jael was included in the prophetess Deborah's victory song in Chapter 5. (Deborah is another interesting woman to read about when you get the time.) God apparently thought these women were inspirational and honorable enough to include them in his account to us of Israel's history.

As I was writing this book, I *did* hear a sermon about Jael at another church in Champaign (on Mother's Day 2014, of all days) with the title, "The Beauty of Fierceness." It was not your typical Mother's Day sermon and it was all I could do to sit quietly in my chair, in the back row, and not shout out a loud, "Amen!"

Let me just clarify something. The minister was not advocating violence. He was simply pointing out that God created women to be tough, as well as nurturing. And another important point—I do *not* enjoy violence. Just the opposite—I find it extremely disturbing. I can't watch it in movies. I shut my eyes if it comes on the screen and my kids laugh at me because I can miss very large chunks of the movie that we just paid to see.

I don't understand the violence in the Old Testament, and I would rather not think about it. The only reason I bring it up here is because Jael's story is in such sharp contrast to what I have repeatedly been told I must be. But God honored Jael for what she did. And God created me to be the way I am. Sometimes I am nurturing and sometimes I am tough.

I found it very refreshing to hear a sermon that acknowledged this aspect of femininity.

Back to the talk at my kitchen table: I ignored the instruction to *not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me*, and I moved forward. I spoke up and I stood my ground as I sensed God's leading. And things began to change.

Eventually, five years after my initial "earthquake"—I enjoyed a period of relative peace, happiness, joy, fun, and fellowship. For one, our church had new leadership. My husband's and my favorite leaders in the whole world, our mentors and our most trusted advisors, Stuart and Sheri Adams, returned from Chicago to lead the congregation again. We were thrilled to have them back.

My friends Joe and Judy, who had lost their baby boy, now had a baby girl. Although she has brought them an incredible amount of joy, Joey has not been forgotten, or replaced, by any means. Joe and Judy have two children now, one on earth and one in heaven.

As Joe and Judy found a way through their sadness, the church also turned a corner and began to thrive.

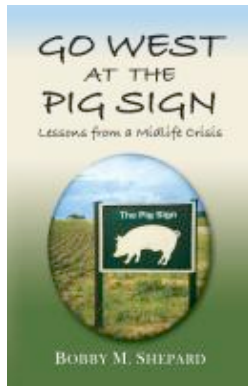
For two years we enjoyed a lot of laughter, many meals together with friends, many parties, productive classes, and fun activities. Overall, it was a great time. The church was united and growing. And although money was still very tight for my husband and me, we were doing ok.

And we did not lose our house.



After 20 years of struggle, I was *finally* experiencing a happy and rewarding time. I felt a sense of purpose, community, unity and direction. Life felt good and I was *finally* safe.

Or so I thought.



This is memoir - a summary of some of the important lessons author Bobby Shepard has learned as a result of broken trust. The main points of the book are: 1) We are not alone. 2) The pain we experience is not wasted. Instead, it prepares us for the next phase of our lives. And 3) if we can stay calm, and wait, our broken pieces can be redesigned into something beautiful...

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