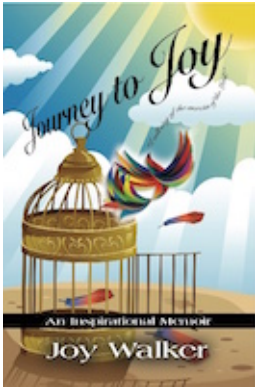


Journey to Joy

"By walking of the mercies of the Lord."

An Inspirational Memoir

Joy Walker



A story of faith, Journey To Joy chronicles the pilgrimage of a teenage girl living with visual impairment. She migrates to America from Jamaica in search of a diagnosis. As a legally blind student, Joy eventually obtains a college degree. While still reeling from the trauma of divorce and trying to keep it together for her young son and daughter, Joy loses her mother and is diagnosed two weeks later with breast cancer. She struggles to raise her children alone, while enduring chemotherapy and radiation treatment. Her suffering is soon heightened by the death of her father and sister. These losses are followed closely by the tragedy of September 11, 2001. Through the tumult of raising teenagers and various other health crises, Joy finds an outlet in her poetry. Her verses will transport you through the lows and highs of human emotions. She will have you crying and laughing as you turn the pages.

Her Christian faith enables Joy to rise above her circumstances, and to reach out to others in need. Her ability to find joy in the ashes inspires others to do the same. Her trust in God to give meaning to her trials will certainly inspire you.

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JOURNEY TO JOY

An Inspirational Memoir

Joy Walker

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The stories in this book reflect the author’s recollection of events. Some names and locations have been changed to protect the privacy of those depicted. Dialogue has been recreated from memory and journal entries.

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PART 1. EARLY CHALLENGES

BUMPS IN THE ROAD

Halfway across Maxfield Avenue, I suddenly heard the roar of a motorbike barreling toward Paul and me. By the time the bike and its rider entered my field of vision, it was too late. I panicked. My next sensation was slowly waking to darkness, hearing an excited crowd and the ambulance siren.

My brother and I had been on our way to Friday evening youth group. He made it across safely and ran back home to alert the family. Our terrified parents accompanied me in the ambulance. Because the focus was on my complaint of a severe headache, my fractured left knee was not discovered until the next morning. That summer was spent in a full leg cast, and I still have scars on my lower leg from the battering and bruising it received. I was 16.

During the elementary school years, my family lived in a tenement house that faced the back of the dormitories belonging to the Salvation Army School for the Blind. As my siblings and I played in the front yard, students often called to us through the wooden window blinds. My sister, Grace, Paul and I attended the elementary school a few yards from home and adjacent to the school for the blind. The trash outside the blind school stirred our curiosity. There were papers and whole books covered in bumps. We played with the papers, rubbing our fingers over the bumps, ignorant of their significance.

In 1960, passing the Common Entrance Exam, Grace and I won scholarships to an all-girls high school in Kingston. A secondary education was not free, so this called for great celebration in our family. Two years later, Jamaica won her independence from British colonial rule. There was much festivity as people celebrated with merrymaking and dancing in the streets. We proudly sang our national anthem, as the Union Jack was lowered and Jamaica's flag of black, green and gold was raised.

As a young girl, I loved reading but began to seriously struggle in high school. I had difficulty reading the fine print of language dictionaries used in my Spanish and Latin classes. Math was a challenge as numbers were often distorted. Reading the comic strips in the newspaper had been a favorite pastime, until that became difficult too. I usually sat in the front row in order to see the chalkboard and didn't enjoy playing games that involved catching a ball. "Butterfingers" was my name on the netball court. No one wanted me on their team. After being hit in the face by the ball, I would put my hands up to protect myself, never sure where the ball was coming from or where it would land.

Because my vision was decreasing gradually rather than suddenly, I don't think my parents fully understood the trauma. Daddy said I was making myself miserable; besides, they couldn't afford a doctor. An affluent relative soon heard about the problem and offered to pay for a visit to the optician. At the age of 15, I started wearing glasses, but soon realized they didn't make much difference. As an adolescent, I was already challenged with establishing my self-identity, and this new dilemma did not help.

An ophthalmologist directed me to read the eye chart, I asked, "What chart?" I slowly moved my head around trying to locate it. At the University Hospital, doctors and interns took turns peering into my eyes while mouthing their fascination. A social worker told me to hurry up and do whatever I wanted to do with my life; I was going to be blind. Alone when this thunderbolt struck, I sat in stunned silence.

Already an introvert and never part of the popular crowd, I was embarrassed when asked to read my essay to the class. Unable to decipher my own handwriting, I stuttered like a bumbling fool. In chemistry lab, the students giggled when the teacher called me "clumsy." I was waving the test tube next to the Bunsen burner instead of directly over the flame. Sauntering toward the bus terminal after school, girls would fall back a few paces just to watch me "kiss" the light post. I laughed with them, but actually felt like an idiot.

At home, I bumped into furniture; on the street, I walked into parked cars and collided with people head on. Neighbors accused me of being a snob when I failed to recognize them, while strangers

rescued me from approaching danger. Some friends doubted my veracity; others, oblivious to my inner turmoil, were convinced I was handling it well. They couldn't detect my faltering faith. I began relying on man, rather than on God, ultimately a disillusioning decision.

The following incident, amusing only in retrospect, confirmed my worsening vision.

MANGO HARVEST

We lived at Berwick Road, #1B,
With heavy-laden mango trees.
When Daddy went to harvest some,
I said I'd help since I was home.

As Daddy lifted up the stick,
I cupped my hands to catch the pick.
I saw just one where Daddy aimed,
Had plum forgot my eyes were lame.

I saw just one, I am no dunce,
But three were hanging in a bunch.
Three mangoes came careening down
Upon my head then hit the ground;

Huge Haden mangoes, one, two, three,
With great precision fell on me.
Bang! Bam! Bop! Bash! Splat! Plop!
Then busted on the ground they plopped.

I saw just one, I tell the truth!
Soon I saw stars instead of fruit.
Grabbing my disbelieving head,
Crying and mangoless I went to bed.

Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia, created historical momentum upon his arrival in Jamaica on April 21st, 1966. He was hailed by thousands of Rastafarians who deemed him their Messiah, a claim he denied. That was a significant year for me as well. Graduating from high school in June (after A level exams), I obtained an entry level position in a government office in Kingston. My success was short-lived. After two or so years, failing the medical portion of the civil service exam, I soon received a letter of dismissal. It was suggested I find another job that didn't require good vision.

The blow wasn't so much the loss of the job per se, but its implications. Something was wrong with me; I wasn't normal. By the time I became unemployed, my parents and five siblings had left the country. Being separated from my family for the first time in 21 years increased feelings of loneliness and depression.

When Mrs. Urquhart, a former elementary school teacher, heard of my dilemma, she sent me to Captain Lucaris at the School for the Blind. "Tell her you want to learn Braille." Initially, it was fun, like learning a new language, and soon I was reading and writing Braille. The bumps now made sense, and Captain Lucaris loaned me a Perkins Brailler for practice.

A year after my family had migrated to America, my mom's uncle, who resided in Boston, came home for a visit. Concerned about my depression, Uncle Boysie consulted a doctor at Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary. He made an appointment and sent me the confirmation letter. This enabled me to obtain a one-year medical visa.

In 1970, Dr. Eliot Berson diagnosed me with paracentral retinitis pigmentosa with macular degeneration. This was a progressive, degenerative disease with a recessive genetic link. I was declared legally blind, having lost most of my central vision. After conducting a family study, Dr. Berson published a paper with my case history. Carol and Faith, two of my three sisters, received a similar diagnosis some years later. Before returning to Jamaica, I researched resources for vision impairment, and started the paperwork for my permanent visa.

Accepting my new reality, I resolved to acquire some new skills. A musician friend was developing a play-by-ear course and needed a test student. I had always desired to learn piano, but my parents couldn't afford lessons. He taught me the basics for a year. Having a natural ear for music, I applied myself, and before long, was playing for the youth group, church services and choir. I even taught myself to play the accordion.

Meanwhile, with the hope of finding a job, I learned to touch-type at a local evening school. The teacher was reluctant to make the necessary accommodations for me to develop proficiency with the Dictaphone. I couldn't hold a typing job without using this device, so I felt cheated. Learning macramé and Popsicle stick art, I developed my own designs and sold my creations to friends and neighbors. Under the auspices of the Jamaica Society for the Blind, I earned a small stipend teaching macramé to two older blind women.

On the last day of high school, I said goodbye to friends with short verses I composed. My poems were well received, and I discovered a gift. Having had only a modicum of training in writing poetry, I couldn't envision the major role this gift would play on my journey past life's bumps and thumps. The choir director at my church fostered my musical skills as well as my poetry writing. In 1972, he played a pivotal role in helping me publish *Memories*, my first book of poems. Proceeds from the sale paid for my return ticket to Boston.

As I disembarked at Logan Airport, a stranger pressed some money into my hand and hurried off the plane. I smiled to myself. Little did he know; that "poor blind girl" was richer than she had ever been. I had money in my pocket, earned from my own ingenuity.

MIXED MEMORIES

As higher and higher up life's hill I climb,
Steeper and steeper the pathway I find,
And mixed are the memories lingering
Of people, places, moments and things.

Sweet are the memories that lighten my step,
That cause me to smile and my sorrows forget,
Of friends who have faithfully done their part
And secured a permanent place in my heart.

Some are still with me, others are gone,
But never, never will I forget one,
For moments of pleasure that I can recall
Are filled with faces of friends great and small.

Times when I've stumbled or miserably failed
Remind me that I'm only human and frail.
Yet even these memories serve to sustain
And strengthen for struggles that still remain.

More sobering still are the memories of grief
When adversity's whip made me cower and weep,
Yet in some reflections the pain distant seems
Like the shadowy sensations we get in dreams.

Some memories remain still poignant with pain,
Making me hurt and weep again.
Some I can share with my closest friends,
Some will be secret until life ends.

PART 7. CONFOUNDING CONUNDRUM

THE PLEDGE OF A FRIEND

I need a heart that's open to my gaze,
A heart not filled with devious ways,
To whom I can say, "Here is who I am,
I'll show you all of me, love me if you can."

I need earnest eyes that with hopefulness shine,
Full of compassion, keenly looking into mine,
Peering past the flimsy camouflage of a painted smile
To discover my broken spirit, dreams that have almost died.

I need eager ears to listen as again and again
In emotional catharsis I pour out my pain.
I need strong arms that will steady my step
As I sway 'neath the load life has heaped on my breast.

I need genuine connection with someone who cares,
Who will laugh and cry with me and always be there,
Who won't try to say when my grieving should end.
What I need, I believe, is the pledge of a friend.

"A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."
Proverbs 17:17

DEEDLESS WORDS

I will not live for deedless words
Brushed from your table like crumbs for dogs,
Flung out to momentarily save face,
Then quickly nullified by deprecating actions;

Words for the mindless fool who rushes to embrace
A gaudy, empty bauble.
I will not live life cheaply,
Banking principle on a mirage
Created by your hollow platitudes
To charm the unsuspecting;
Promises that promenade like prize horses
Then stumble under scrutiny.

THE WOMEN AND THE MEN

There is trouble in the air and it is serious.
It's the women and the men and they are furious.
Whatever can we do, does anybody have a clue?
The heat is so intense, I am delirious.

To say "boys will be boys," that isn't fair to us.
They treat us just like toys, that's what they do to us.
Today they'll play with one and discard her when they're done,
Then tomorrow they will find some more at "*Toys for Us*."

All the women should be friends, it's really up to us.
If they had no place to go, they'd give the matter up.
We must stop this gross abuse, don't let men our bodies use,
Then this disrespect would stop and they would honor us.

I DON'T KNOW WHY

I know you're hurting and I am too,
But there's room in my heart to care for you.
You may push away the love I share,
But you can't intercept my prayer.

You've shown me the pain in your aching soul
And I wish that pain I could control.
I'd take it away, that's what I'd do,
But it seems that I heighten the pain in you.

I just don't know why life is this way,
Why living and loving make us pay
Such a great price in grief and fear,
Why the pathway so often seems unclear.

Yet I'm committed to love and life
Even with its cares and pain and strife,
For I'd rather be a heart that's risking still
Than a heart alive, yet atrophied. 1995

ANNIVERSARY OF A FRIENDSHIP

We've been friends long enough to have peered past
The pleasing camouflage of best foot forward,
To see the imperfections of each other's person.
We have felt the heat from rough edges in motion,
Tasted the bitter sweetness of hearts exposed to scrutiny,
And tripped in the pothole of enmeshed emotions.
Daunted by the crippling fear of intimacy,
We've measured the limits of our friendship.
Let's adjust our hope for this relationship,
Accepting what it is and what it's not.

PART 9. UNWELCOME INTRUDER

THE DIAGNOSIS

On December 11th, 1996, I was sipping hot tea in a room at the Diagnostic Imaging Center. The technician, having just done my ultrasound, had asked me to wait for the doctor's feedback.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Brown!" Shaking my hand, he explained, "It seems you have a cluster of cysts in the right breast. There are also cysts in the left breast." He was scanning the films. "Since they weren't there when you did your first mammogram in '94, we'll watch them. You don't want a biopsy if you don't have to, do you?"

"No," I muttered, unsure.

"Then come back in six months and we'll see if there are any changes." I felt no relief and was very depressed all weekend. Maybe I knew in my spirit that it wasn't really over, or maybe it was the letdown from the other emotional storms. My Sunday school classmates expressed their relief when I shared the news.

The following Monday afternoon, December 16th, the phone rang. "This is Dr. Gooden from the lab where you came for a biopsy last Wednesday. A team of radiologists looked at your ultrasound, and all agree that you should return for a biopsy. There is a form of micro-invasive cancer that starts in the ducts. Looks like it's just starting to leave the ducts, so with luck we'll catch it early. Someone will call you to make an appointment."

There was a slight disturbance in my spirit, then numbness settled in. Preparing to leave home for the lab on December 18th, I felt a swell behind my eyes. Tears were gathering reinforcement. Unable to weather a deluge right then, I kept them at bay. My spirit somehow knew there would be pouring down of heavy rain again.

As I exchanged information with the receptionist, the technician approached the counter. She was a soft-spoken woman who had done my ultrasound the previous week.

"You are back?"

"They told me to come back for the biopsy."

“Bummer!”

Local anesthesia was applied to my right breast as it dangled through a hole in the table. The only discomfort came from having to lie perfectly still for about two hours. I could hear what sounded like a staple gun, and could feel a dull sensation as if the doctor was shooting my breast full of staples. He was doing a needle core biopsy. What sounded like a gun was the instrument used to close the needle over the tissue being removed for testing. I learned later that they had inserted five needles, to which even the surgeon said, “Ouch,” on reading the report.

As I walked out of the lab numb and dazed, someone said, “Merry Christmas!” I thought, “That’s right, it’s almost Christmas.” I felt like answering, “Bah, humbug!”

Working obsessively all next day, I finished the last six lessons of a Braille reading correspondence course I had been working on. Then the ominous phone call came.

“...I’m afraid we found some malignancy. I think we are catching it early. Dr. Mahoney will be contacting you about the next step. I’d say you could safely wait ‘til the first of the year, but I wouldn’t wait much longer. I’m sorry to deliver this kind of news just before Christmas.”

Incredulous, I called friends and family, repeating the news in monotone as if sharing information about someone else. It was December 19th. “I knew I’d been falling apart,” I said to my sister, “but I didn’t expect cancer.”

I don’t know what prompted me to ask the question, but when I last saw Mama, I asked the doctor if he had checked her for cancer. Unsure of the cause of her pain, he had suggested exploratory surgery, but Daddy had declined. At Mama’s funeral, I discovered that one of my cousins had died from cancer. I didn’t know then that the disease had already taken root in me.

Doug, the Sunday school teacher, read a note from me to the class:

“...It seems that I’m being launched into yet another period of testing. I would like to bow out or pass the honor on to someone else, but I do not have a choice (chuckles). I was just diagnosed with

breast cancer (gasps). I am very scared about the unknown, but must still believe Romans 8:28 and Jeremiah 29:11. I need your prayers and support more than ever.”

The silence was broken by Doug’s voice. “But you told us last week...” After I explained the recent events, he led the class in prayer. Several people hugged me, expressing their sympathy. Some were crying. I still had not cried.

The Monday before Christmas, accompanied by my friend Judy, I had my first consultation with the surgeon.

Dr. Carlson remarked as he entered the room, “You are so young!”

“I’m 48,” I replied, not thinking it that young.

“Even so, I’m used to seeing women in their 50’s and 60’s.” He gave me two weeks to decide between a lumpectomy with radiation and a mastectomy with chemotherapy. I cringed at the thought of either scenario. My friend, Roslyn, had done some research on my behalf and had copied excerpts from *Reclaiming Your Health* by John Robbins. He discussed the negative long-term effects of chemo and radiation; i.e., damage to tissue causing growth of secondary cancers in other parts of the body. I was against radiation immediately. Glancing at the information I handed him, the surgeon tried to assure me.

“The radiation beam would only be aimed at your breast and would not affect any major organs except those in the chest.”

“But my lungs and heart are in my chest!”

“I know, but the amount of radiation is minimal. You may get a sunburn, or at worst develop a cough that will eventually go away.”

“Would you consider a lumpectomy without radiation?”

“If that is what you want, you will have to go somewhere else. It is too risky. I won’t do it!”

The shock was intensifying. After collecting some informational brochures, I left the office carrying a mountain on my back. It was true. I had cancer, and it wasn’t going away.

CHRISTMAS BLESSINGS

“Friends are there when you need them.”

In our house, the Christmas tree was decorated right after Thanksgiving. My son’s birthday is in December, so he got to enjoy the decorations for an entire month. The tradition continued for Christmas ‘96, though I was not in a celebratory mood. The recent traumas had left me in a stupor. I didn’t have a spouse at home to pick up the slack, but I kept functioning somehow.

After Mama’s death and the legal proceedings, I had dared to think, “Surely there’ll be a respite from grief now. Maybe I’ll start fresh after Christmas.” I had hoped that the New Year would be the one in which I could focus on Joy. Now I would indeed be focusing on me, but not in the manner I had anticipated. Physically and emotionally drained, I couldn’t cope with all the demands.

Gradually I absorbed the fact that my life would never be the same. The “D” word loomed large on the horizon. No one knows how long they have to live, but a cancer diagnosis surely brings the issue to the forefront, and every time I watched television there was some new story about cancer.

Although I was mostly in shock during the Christmas season, there were moments when humor brought needed relief. With my daughter’s help, I composed “Zap the Boobs” and “Mastectomy Song.” In the process, I had subconsciously made my decision to have a mastectomy. This decision was later confirmed by second and third opinions.

On Christmas morning, our pastor surprised us with a gift from the church. It was heartwarming to know that people cared. The children had a brief visit from their father, after which we left for a friend’s house.

A couple from church invited us to spend Christmas Day with their family. The day was pleasant, though I remember being very weary. I chatted with everyone from Karla’s rocking chair, dozing off occasionally. The children were in a constant uproar, chasing each other with water guns, dashing in and out of the house until

Randy, who had three boys, put a stop to it. We felt like part of the family. Karla even had a gift for each of us. I was particularly pleased that the children were enjoying themselves. I couldn't have kept them entertained had we remained at home, and they did not need to be burdened with my preoccupations.

That evening, I received a call from Hyacinth, who had planned to spend the next day with us. She asked me what I needed. I suggested things the children would enjoy. Hyacinth arrived carrying a huge basket of fruit, a freshly-baked chocolate cake, and leftovers from her Christmas dinner. After we visited for a while, she asked the kids, "Where would you like to go for lunch?" They chorused almost in unison, "Jack in the Box!" There was one within walking distance.

After the children left with their dad, Hyacinth and I went shopping. I was moved by her kindness, but a little uncomfortable. Shopping without weighing the cost of each item was foreign to me. She even took me to the local health food store to purchase vitamins. As she prepared to leave, I thanked her profusely.

"This is such a blessing! I really do appreciate it. We will enjoy everything. This is so much more than I expected."

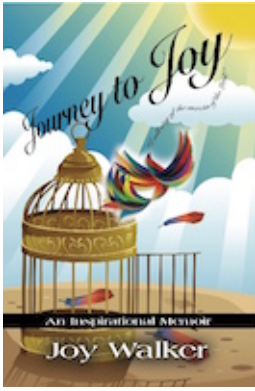
"Well, it was my pleasure, and thank you for allowing me to bless you!"

Hyacinth has continued to be supportive on many levels, and I consider her a friend indeed. The road ahead would be bumpy, but I was not alone.

MASTECTOMY SONG

(Tune: "Oh Hanukkah Oh Hanukkah")

Lumpectomy, mastectomy, which one will it be?
See how the surgeons are dancing with glee,
Gathered 'round the table at sight of this treat,
Waving their scalpels as if I am fresh meat;
And while they are dancing, one surgeon is bending low,
Brandishing a knife he is standing on my right
And my poor boob it will have to go!



A story of faith, Journey To Joy chronicles the pilgrimage of a teenage girl living with visual impairment. She migrates to America from Jamaica in search of a diagnosis. As a legally blind student, Joy eventually obtains a college degree. While still reeling from the trauma of divorce and trying to keep it together for her young son and daughter, Joy loses her mother and is diagnosed two weeks later with breast cancer. She struggles to raise her children alone, while enduring chemotherapy and radiation treatment. Her suffering is soon heightened by the death of her father and sister. These losses are followed closely by the tragedy of September 11, 2001. Through the tumult of raising teenagers and various other health crises, Joy finds an outlet in her poetry. Her verses will transport you through the lows and highs of human emotions. She will have you crying and laughing as you turn the pages.

Her Christian faith enables Joy to rise above her circumstances, and to reach out to others in need. Her ability to find joy in the ashes inspires others to do the same. Her trust in God to give meaning to her trials will certainly inspire you.

Journey To Joy: An Inspirational Memoir

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