



SOLIMAN LAWRENCE

Readers Write

FAITH

ONE SUNNY MONDAY MORNING ABOUT fifteen years ago, my mother was attacked in her home while she was doing her hair. She was getting ready to go to her teaching job at a nearby church preschool when she heard the doorbell ring. She went to the living room and peeked through the curtains. A man she didn't recognize was standing there. Deciding he must be a salesman, my mother quietly replaced the curtain and went back to the bathroom.

The man, whose name we later learned was Kenneth, went around to the back of the house, where our overfriendly black Lab watched him break in. He came across my mother's purse in the living room, then continued to the master-bedroom suite.

My mother never saw Kenneth. He grabbed her from behind and started punching her repeatedly in the face. When he was done hitting her, he simply left, tak-

ing her purse with him.

At the hospital my mother's face was so swollen and purple that I wasn't sure it was her until she said, "Cindy, it's OK. I'm all right."

A few days later Kenneth's mother turned him in after seeing his picture on the nightly news. He was sentenced to fifteen years. My father installed a high-tech security system and bought a ferocious guard dog, but my illusion of our home as a place of safety was shattered.

My mother returned to work at the preschool after two weeks. (She would have returned sooner, she said, but she didn't want to scare the children.) Kenneth had chipped one of her facial bones, and her left cheek still sagged a little, but otherwise she was OK.

More remarkable than her physical recovery was her emotional resilience.

She never experienced flashbacks or post-traumatic stress, or even felt afraid when alone in the house. (I, on the other hand, wouldn't be comfortable at home alone for years.) By the time Christmas rolled around, she had sent a New Testament to Kenneth in jail, with a card telling him that she'd forgiven him, just as Jesus Christ had forgiven her.

My mother and I rarely see eye to eye on religion, but her grace and strength remind me daily of all that is good about faith.

*Cindy Y. Ogasawara
Seattle, Washington*

PAST MIDNIGHT ON SEPTEMBER 10, 2001, I was lying in my uncomfortable twin bed in my tiny graduate-student dorm room. I'd been attending journalism school at Columbia University in New York City for a little more than a month and was still so new to reporting that I hesitated to call strangers on the phone. The city's summer heat was finally lifting, and my twenty-fourth birthday was just a few days away, but sorrow was seeping into my bones. My eyes filled with tears, and though I rarely went to synagogue and seldom prayed, the prayers of my childhood spilled from my lips. "Shema Yisrael," I whispered, then sang it louder and louder and louder. "Adonai eloheinu. Adonai echad." (The Lord is our God. The Lord is one.)

I moved on to the Jewish prayer for healing, whose melody and words have always comforted me. I'd learned these prayers during countless fidgety Sunday afternoons in synagogue classrooms, and I'd sung them to myself as a child during late-night bargaining sessions with God.

In the dark hours before dawn on September 11, 2001, those old prayers came back to me. Before all the passengers on those planes awakened, brushed their teeth, kissed their spouses goodbye, and left for the airport; before all the secretaries and janitors and business executives put on their shoes and grabbed trains and taxis to work, I lay in the dark crying and singing, singing and crying.

*Jocelyn Wiener
Berkeley, California*

MY MOM WAS RAISED IN A LARGE Catholic family, and she took the best parts of her religion to heart. Our family's life centered on a tiny stone church, where I knew almost everyone in the congregation. Mom worked as the catechism coordinator and often discussed and debated religion with our aging, lovable priest. I remember Father's musty smell, a combination of incense and old books, and the way he would gesture with his arms during Mass.

When my mom told me that Father had AIDS, I don't think I fully understood what it meant. (We later learned that Father's "friend," a kind man with thick glasses who came by regularly, was also infected.) Before Mass on the day Father was scheduled to announce the news — which everyone had already heard — our bishop arrived with a cameraman and a reporter in tow, ready to make an example of this diseased priest. My mom would have none of it. She stood toe-to-toe on the sidewalk with the bishop, a man whom few dared question, and refused to let him bring his cameraman inside. She would not allow him to exploit our grief.

I eventually lost faith in the Catholic Church, but I have not lost faith in my mother.

*D. Erickson
Mountain Center, California*

MY PARENTS HAD FAITH IN THINGS they could see: our blue Buick, our house by the sea. God's name was never mentioned in our home except in vain, usually by my mother when she couldn't find her cigarettes. When I wanted something, I told my wishes to my stuffed rabbit, Suzanna, who had black-button eyes and cottony skin.

There was a girl at school named Amy who said that when she wanted something, she prayed to God. She said God always heard her, even though he didn't always give her what she wanted. I doubted the part about God listening.

Amy had four brothers and a mother with shiny red hair who volunteered in the schoolyard and could jump rope like a kid. Her father traveled all over the country on business. One night he came home from a trip and found that his house

had burned down, and Amy and her four brothers and her mother had died in the fire.

Our schoolteacher told us to say a prayer for Amy. That night, out of curiosity about prayer and affection for Amy, I decided to give it a try. "Dear God," I said, "make sure Amy is having fun in heaven. Don't let her be afraid." A gentle feeling came over me, and I thought I saw my bedroom curtains sway back and forth.

The next night I spoke to God again. This time I asked him to take good care of my mother and father, thinking not of the times when my mother threatened to give my dolls away and laughed at my crying, or when my father taunted me because I couldn't count to ten in French, but of my parents' gentler moments, like when they came into my room at night and smiled gently down on me in the darkness.

For many nights after that, I put my faith in a God I couldn't see, and I blessed everyone I knew. I prayed for my best

friend, Johnny, who had a cowlick and shiny brown eyes and a birthmark on his left cheek. I put in a good word for Queenie, the Dalmatian who often chased me, and his owner, Mimi, who wore her hair in a pink turban. I asked God to make the kids at school quit teasing me because I was pigeon-toed and had corkscrew curls. God never answered me, but sometimes, when the world turned dark, and the sounds of the night came into my room, I felt something in my chest: a warm, familiar hum.

*Stephanie H.
New York, New York*

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Narrow Escapes	July 1	January 2010
Borrowing	August 1	February 2010
Walking Home	September 1	March 2010
The Beach	October 1	April 2010