

choose  
JOY

Finding Hope and Purpose When Life Hurts



SARA FRANKL  
and  
MARY CARVER



NEW YORK BOSTON NASHVILLE

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# Roses in December

On Dreams and Stories



God gave us memory so that we might have roses in  
December. —J. M. Barrie

*Before the accident and the disease, before the hospitals and the steroids, before the blog and the walker and the pup, Sara Frankl was a girl who loved life and lived it to its fullest. She loved writing and leading worship at church, water-skiing and scrapbooking, spoiling her nieces and nephews, and eating Chinese food. Blessed with an abundance of gifts, Sara sang, danced, and acted throughout her childhood. She played Anne Frank on stage during high school and ran hurdles on the track team. And once upon a time, she dreamed of being the next Mary Lou Retton.*



When I was young I really thought I was going to be a famous gymnast. I now see the flaw in the plan as I didn't train or take lessons or work out. But I'm telling you, I could go in our

backyard and do a roundoff like nobody's business. We lived on an acreage so I had a lot of wide-open spaces—and our yard was my own personal area to work on my floor routine.

I'd take the boom box (remember those?) out back, put on music, and dance, do tumbling runs, and always end with the dramatic flair of my arms in the air with my back arched . . . just like Mary Lou Retton. And somewhere deep down inside I just knew that some scout would be driving along that blacktop in the country, notice me, and whisk me away for Olympic training.

Then again, I used to think a talent scout would drive on that blacktop, hear me sing, and give me a record deal, too.

At least the pigs and horses were entertained.



*Gymnastics wasn't Sara's only love. She used that big backyard for a dance floor, too—and kept dreaming of putting on her dance shoes even after she'd grown up and her body had stopped cooperating with her imagination.*



I wanted to be a dancer so badly when I was little. A girl has to dream, and I knew how to dream big.

I think I would have been considered a contemporary dancer (if I actually had skill enough to know what I was doing), but I really wanted to learn ballet. I would walk around the house with my toes curled under, walking on the knuckles, in order to practice ballet like I was in pointe shoes.

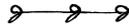
Seriously.

And I'm not talking about a few steps. I would walk around. I would do leaps and jumps and land on the knuckles of my toes in an attempt to pretend I was *en pointe*. It looked so impossibly ridiculous that my family would have me do jumps and land like

that when company was over. (So, apparently, if I couldn't be in ballet I would've been a shoo-in for a sideshow at the circus.)

I have to admit, even though I can barely walk behind a walker these days, there is still something in me that can picture myself on stage. I was watching the season finale of *So You Think You Can Dance* tonight, and I realized that some crazy remnant of my childhood still exists deep inside of me that believes I can do what they can do.

Let me clear this up. I'm not delusional. I know I can't. But that part of me that knew how to dream big still knows how to imagine.



*Much as she loved performing—every chance she got, according to her sister Laura—Sara also loved using her gifts to bless others and lead them to God. Even if that meant standing up in class and belting out “Amazing Grace” when her college professor requested it.*



The recurring theme at my church was, “Don't just go to church. BE church.” I often thought of that saying as I volunteered for different programs, but the phrase really came to life when random little moments to be church presented themselves on campus.

One class in particular, my African American literature course, presented a very unexpected (and uncomfortable) moment to share about my church. The professor apparently had attended my church on a Sunday when I had led worship and sung “Amazing Grace” a capella. I showed up to class on Monday and he started his lecture by talking to us about how spiritual songs were often started by slaves. He began talking about “Amazing Grace,” and then told the class that I had sung it that

weekend—and that he thought it would be a great idea for me to sing it, right then and there, for the class.

You can be sure I was horrified. First of all, I'd had no idea he was there when I sang, and second of all, the last thing I had intended to do in my eight a.m. class was open my mouth to sing. I wasn't even sure I had spoken to anyone yet that morning. So I made everyone shut their eyes so I could pretend I was anywhere other than the broken-down college building—and I sang. And a good number of the class showed up the next weekend to Mass. I have no idea if any of them continued going, but they had a reason to go that weekend, and that was something.



*Sara found herself in hot water like that more than once, but her can-do attitude and confident optimism (not to mention a healthy sense of humor) always seemed to triumph. This spirit led her to start a blog that eventually reached thousands of people around the world with a message of joy—but it started many years earlier.*



You know how people always say, “Practice makes perfect”? I think in my world the phrase is actually, “Habit makes able.” I’m not one of those people who are always confident in what they do. It usually appears as though I am, but deep down I’m not.

I don’t start out with or end with confidence in my abilities, but I always dive in headfirst assuming it will turn out fine. I’m weird. *I know.*

The habit that makes me able to do most things, I’ve discovered, is the habit of saying yes to people who need something—usually because I want to be helpful or make them happy. I will have absolutely NO IDEA how to do what they’re asking, mind you, but I say yes anyway and dive in headfirst.

When we were in high school, I was staying overnight with my friends Katie and Sue Ann at Katie's house. At some point during the night Sue Ann had decided that she wanted to get her hair cut into a bob (they were all the rage back then). She had long hair that went halfway down her back, but Katie and I looked at each other and decided that it couldn't really be all that complicated. She held the pieces of hair and I used the scissors, and Sue Ann went home the next day with a whole new look. We weren't confident. Katie and I had momentary looks of *terror* on our faces that, thankfully, Sue Ann couldn't see. But she wanted it done, so we dove in headfirst.

(Thank heavens I got into the habit of cutting hair that way, because it's the only way mine gets cut now!)

Likewise, I didn't know I could design a Christmas photo card until a friend needed to find a cheaper way to send them out. I never imagined I'd be doodling for a living, until a few of you kept asking me to make them for you. When my friend Susie asked me if I could make a birthday invitation of Diego for her son I said sure, it would be easy. And then had the good sense to ask, "Who's Diego?"

I didn't do those things because I have a huge reserve of self-confidence. I did those things because I'm in the habit of saying yes. I am able to blog every day because I'm in the habit of it working. More than anything, I'm in the habit of believing if I just continue to step out in faith, that God will put what I need in front of me. That He'll line my path with the abilities and confidence that I'm lacking.



*Even more than the physical gifts that allowed her to do the things she loved—even when they were things she'd never imagined doing, like cutting her friend's hair!—Sara appreciated the presence of her family and friends.*

*Susie was one of Sara's best friends, but she wasn't sure about Sara when they first met at college. "I was really quiet and extremely homesick, and I saw Sara and thought, 'Oh my gosh, why is she so happy?! Who is this girl? She needs to just settle down.' I'm not kidding. It was hard for me to see why anyone could be so happy." Luckily for both Sara and Susie, that wasn't the end of their story. One day, after Susie had an argument with her boyfriend, Sara insisted on taking her out to cheer her up. (As Sara said, "I quickly surmised that she was crying over a boy. Stupid boys. And lucky for Susie, we had a cure for crying. She'd be joining us for a drink and did not have right of refusal.")*

*Not only did the crazy evening out that followed cheer up Susie, but she ended up with a lifelong friend, a partner in crime, a sister of her heart. Susie said, "We couldn't believe we didn't know each other our whole lives. How did we not know each other our whole lives? I mean, she became my soul mate. She knew everything I was thinking, even when I didn't." The girls lived together during college in what they and their friends dubbed "the Big House," took road trips together, tried their hardest to get in trouble together (successfully when it came to getting caught with the giggles in church, but not so successfully when it came to overcoming their good natures with any real trouble), and celebrated their two-days-apart birthdays together.*

*As the years went on, their friendship just grew stronger as they walked together through the good times and the hard. When Sara heard that Susie's dad had died, for instance, she immediately went to help Susie's mom even though her own health was declining rapidly. And when Sara could no longer leave her home, Susie would visit often, bearing gifts of Sonic slushes (or a bottle of Moscato) and ready for a Brothers & Sisters marathon. Sara wrote about the way Susie and her other friends loved her well.*



They leave their busy lives and faster pace behind them at the door and settle into my slower-moving way of life. They don't rush me if I'm out of breath while I'm talking and they fill me in on conversations they all understand because they see each other while out and about, but that I miss while I'm here in my home. They show their love in the details, and they do it in an unassuming way that could easily go unnoticed. But I notice. Every little bit of it. And I am grateful.

I never cease to be amazed how, in every stage of my life, God has opened my heart to so many friendships. I love that I have friends who make me laugh until I cry. I love that some of my friends are so shy, until they get comfortable, and then they shock the life out of me with things they say or do. I love that some friends are intellectual and planners. I love that other friends go totally on emotion and spontaneity abounds. I have friends who are so much like me I think we may be the same person, and I have friends who are so opposite of me they keep me looking at life from different angles. I love that God knew I needed all of it and placed me right where I needed to be to find each and every one of them.

A number of people in my life are soul mate kind of friends. These are the people that I can maybe remember the first time I met them, but have no idea how we got from saying hello to knowing each other backward and forward because getting to that point usually took only one conversation. These friends are all such an essential part of my day-to-day life. They are the ones who so effortlessly let me live vicariously through them and their families, making my life feel absolutely whole and complete. I've not only been welcomed into their families but their extended families as well. I get to be a part of their kids' lives, but more importantly they don't mind that I love their kids like my own. They put up with the crazy dog and come hang out at my place

with me anyway, and the ones who live far away keep in touch like we live just down the block.

I am blessed, people.



*Before she'd ever heard of ankylosing spondylitis, Sara treasured every moment she had. She lived life to the fullest, enjoying her career, her hobbies, and—more importantly—her family and friends. So when she began losing these abilities and gifts she found she didn't have regrets. Instead she was thankful for the opportunity to have lived a beautiful life—and for the chance to continue choosing to live a beautiful life, even if it wasn't the one she'd hoped for or planned.*



I used to work at a magazine in town, which has long since been bought out and moved to California. I'm pretty sure the name isn't even the same anymore. I look back now and realize I was so incredibly lucky to get a little piece of my dream before this disease took away my freedom to work. I got to be a part of getting a magazine published. I was able to write articles and have my name in print. I got to travel to trade shows in Chicago and Denver, and did interviews with major companies. I got to be a part of something that is tangible and that's pretty amazing to me.

I think a lot of my life, looking back, worked out that way. I was never a major player at a magazine, but I got to be a part of producing one. I was never a well-known singer, but I was appreciated in my community. I only sang at church and weddings and funerals, but I think I touched people when I sang and I know they offered me a lot when they listened. I was never a celebrated actress but I got to be in plays and musicals and relished every moment.

It's amazing that when you look at what you have, instead of what you won't or don't have, you usually see that in one form or another you've gotten what you wished for. It may not have been yours for long enough, or it may not have been as big as you dreamed it would be, but it was there.

That's why I really think I started my blog. I got tired of telling people what I used to do and who I used to be. I used to be a writer. I used to be a singer. I used to love to dance. When my friend's daughter Alex was a little girl we would spend a lot of time snuggling on the couch and talking about what she dreamed of doing or being. One day she looked at me and said, "When I get bigger I'm going to be just like you." Then she cocked her head and looked right in my eyes, obviously wondering what exactly that meant. Her eyes lit up and she declared, "I'm going to be sick!"

After I picked her mom up off the floor and revived her from her faint, I did my best not to bust out laughing and explained to her that I liked doing a lot of things, and she should just be whatever made her happy. But for the record, Alex, I'm a writer.



*Sara was more than a writer, though that was how so many of her friends first got to know her. She was a singer, a dancer, an actor, and a runner. She was a photographer, a scrapbooker, a dog lover, and an aunt extraordinaire. She was a volunteer, an editor, a dreamer, and an encourager. She loved losing herself in a good story—whether that meant a marathon viewing of her favorite TV show or listening intently to a friend share her challenges and joys. And she was an inspiration and a teacher, a living example to her friends and family of choosing joy and hope through the most painful of circumstances.*



“If you want the rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain.”

Yep, I’m quoting Dolly Parton. I love that quote so much you’ll probably hear me say it more than once, because that little sentence pretty much sums up my day-to-day life. In my body there is a constant rainstorm raging—a storm of debilitating disease, pain, limitation, and progression. At thirty-five years of age I have found myself homebound and having to give up every freedom and ability I used to treasure and enjoy. I can count on my hands the number of times I stepped foot outside of my house in the past year, and all but one of those times were for doctor appointments. There isn’t one function that my body can perform without medication and my ability to do something as simple as type this post changes on a dime.

I have no career, no husband and kids, no financial security, and no potential to change any of those things.

And I’ve never been more at peace in my entire life.

I’ve discovered that when everything is taken away, when nothing is left but the core of who you are, that’s when you have to make a choice. I can either hide inside and let the fear of getting struck by lightning paralyze me, or I can stand out in the rain to be washed free of everything but the comfort of a God Who would never let me fall. I choose every day to be washed free.

It’s not easy, but it is simple. I put up with so much rain every day, but the rainbows I am given are fantastic. I have food, shelter, clothing. I have friends who love me, not despite all of my limitations, but with them. I write every day on my blog—and people show up! This blog has been a connection to the outside world that I didn’t realize was missing until it fell into my lap. I have an obnoxiously cute, spoiled, and ornery pup who keeps me company 24/7 and brings joy to my otherwise quiet days.

I am so blessed, people.

But the reason I am happy is that I choose to look at my blessings more than my burdens.

The burdens are persistent; the pain is relentless. I walk with crutches and it takes me longer to get up out of a chair than it takes my friends to get up and walk the length of my condo and back. But I know that if God didn't have a purpose for my illness He would have taken it away from me by now. So I take it humbly and pray that if He has a purpose for me, I am paying attention so I don't miss the opportunity to serve. I'm okay with not knowing why this is happening to me because I know He knows why.

It's not about me; it's about what He can do with me. My job is simply to pay attention and enjoy the rainbows.