“Happy About® My Christian Faith”
Book Excerpt
10 Stories that will Touch Your Soul

By Don Huntington

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20660 Stevens Creek Blvd.
Suite 210
Cupertino, CA 95014
WHITE PAPER Table of Contents (included here)

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Happy About My Christian Faith covers a topic that I'm interested in myself. I have spent my life in a pursuit of personal faith and have always been a fascinated explorer into the sources of authentic belief. I've been intent upon discovering how a person arrives at settled convictions about his or her place in the universe.

Most of us aren't particularly attracted to philosophy and theology. The attempts by these disciplines to explain the nature of life often seem, at best, to provide insufficient guidelines for really grasping the life of the spirit in its fullness. At worst, such approaches provide pretexts for bitter argument and even ringing condemnation.

We discover life as much with our hearts as we learn about it with our heads. As a result, we find that personal experiences, relationships, and stories provide more effective media for investigating spiritual realities than any essay or scholarly treatise.

For example, in the third chapter Dr. David Thompson describes the personal sojourn that led him to a life of service in a medical station in Africa. We wouldn't be very impressed, perhaps, if Dr. Thompson attempted to frame a doctrine about death. But when he describes his reaction, as a young man, to the news that both of his
parents had been murdered by Vietnamese gunmen, we are able to understand in our hearts what Dr. Thompson believes to be true even if we do not completely accept it ourselves.

Faith based upon real-world experiences serves to elevate belief above the quarrelsome and impassioned arguments that too often mark our discussions about mere religion. A gift we can give to each other is to provide frank descriptions of our own personal convictions and how we came to believe what we hold to be true. That is precisely the gift that the ten contributors in this book are giving to us.

The content of the chapters follows no rigid outline or order. The contributors provide a free-flowing account of how they came to whatever faith they hold to. In the process of describing their faith, they discuss the relationships and events that shaped their view of the world and that brought them to their understanding of their personal place in the universe. They discuss convictions about God, about their purposes for living, and their particular views concerning death and the hereafter based upon the people and events that shaped their worldview.

The statements of the ten people whose beliefs are represented in the following pages dazzled me. I was delighted that they were able to share so honestly the faith that has shaped their lives. May you be moved and stirred in reading these personal journeys as I was in the transcribing and writing of them.
Finding an Entryway to Healing and Wholeness

NOTE: Alice Ann Cantelow is a retired founder of a battered women's shelter and a Protestant ex-hippie. She is a divorced mother and grandmother.

I came down with a bad case of mid-life crisis when I was 50 years old. This was during the late 1960s and the entire society seemed to be going through some kind of crisis—or a correction, as the members of the counter-cultural movement would have suggested.

I was far too old to become a flower child, but I nevertheless enlisted in the revolution with all my heart. I became pretty wild; I left my husband of 24 years, turned on, dropped out, and did such things as spending periods of bliss with my eyes closed and my head full of some song like Simon & Garfunkel’s “The Sounds of Silence.”

We all shared wonderful visions of creating a world of unity—a true “Age of Aquarius” where everyone could live together in love and harmony.
My life became bound up with such things as Paolo Freire’s revolutionizing concepts of “critical literacy” and I believed in the popular notion that the world could be changed if we simply altered the direction of our educational institutions.

**Unorthodox Side Road into Teaching**

I became a teacher. I really liked teaching and felt that I was good at it, but I applied to a number of schools without any success at landing a job. Although I held credentials as a high school science teacher, the interviewers always left me with the idea that I had to be able to also coach a football team, lead the school cheerleading squad, or do something else in which I had no interest whatsoever.

Perhaps another reason why schools were reluctant to hire me was that during the interviews I might have communicated my passionate belief that children learn best in a non-directive educational environment.

I believed that schools should not dictate to students the content of their education. In my opinion, the best role that teachers could play was simply to facilitate the learning of subjects that the students themselves decided they wanted to find out about. That philosophy did not fit in with the beliefs and educational practices of the schools I was applying to.

I discovered, through firsthand experiences I had as a substitute teacher, that I did not fit into mainstream education. I believe that a number of the students thought I was the best substitute they ever had, but the administrators thought I was the worst.

Some of those administrators undoubtedly based their negative judgments upon my unorthodox teaching style. For example, I got so excited about teaching a lesson on pendulums to one class that I leaped up on my desk and, with great enthusiasm, began swinging back and forth a weight that I had tied to a long string to illustrate how the period of a pendulum is governed by its moment of inertia, its mass, and the distance from the pivot to the center of the mass.

The kids howled with delight at my little experiment; I guess that was the first time anyone had seen a teacher standing on top of her desk. I suppose it was the sort of thing that the principal hated to see, but I’ll bet some of those kids can still remember how a pendulum works.
I remember another time, when I was writing something on the board with my back to the class. When I turned around, I discovered that the students had used their brief period of freedom from adult supervision to completely cover the face of the classroom clock with spitballs. I felt like dashing to the back of the classroom, opening the door, and shouting at the top of my lungs, “Run!” I felt the oppression that the educational system was exerting on those kids just as they were feeling it.

In another of my classes as a substitute teacher, a glum student sat in the back of my class. “I hate science,” she said. “I don’t want to study science again the rest of my life!” At the end of my substitute teaching she said, “I love science.”

When we studied egg yolks I had them each bring an egg to class. We broke them open together and studied how an attachment is made to the shell so that the embryo always develops in an upright position.

The schools quit asking me to substitute, but while I was there the kids and I had a great deal of fun.

**A Watermelon Sugar Experiment**

I believed passionately in the idea that high school kids involved in drugs could learn more successfully if they had non-directional educational experiences, so a few of us banded together to operate an alternative school for some of these hard cases. We permitted the students to choose their curriculum and then we taught them the subjects they had chosen.

At students’ suggestion we called the program “Watermelon Sugar” after the title of a book by Richard Brautigan, describing a mythical place called iDeath where “…the sun shines a different color every day, making the watermelon crops reflect that color.” Furthermore, it turns out that the people of iDeath make “a great many things” out of watermelon sugar. (Is that groovy, or what?)

I inherited the Watermelon Sugar program from a high school social studies teacher who started the school when he became concerned that some of his students simply couldn’t cope with the boundaries imposed by public education.
The Watermelon Sugar experiment really worked! That kind of non-directional learning was just what those kids needed—and they thrived on it. We made a lot of progress and developed great relationships with our scholars.

We conducted the classes in a local Catholic church. There were four of us teaching at the school. I taught English and biology; we had a truly fascinating art teacher. Two others taught history and math. We were having a great time. We got paid almost nothing but the kids were really learning. The Bible says, “I will lift up their heads.” I didn’t think much about the Bible back in those days, but I know that those precious young people came into our school with their heads down, and we lifted them up.

**Living on the Streets and in the Parks**

I was caretaker of a city property and the owners paid me by letting me sleep out of the weather. My services weren’t valuable enough to warrant a bed, so I slept on the floor in my sleeping bag and prepared my meals on a little camp stove.

I augmented the little bit of food that came to me by going into fast-food restaurants, ordering a hamburger, and then cleaning up the fries, drinks, and sandwiches that other people left behind. In the winter I learned to stay warm by spending a few hours reading at the local library. I stopped using my hormone replacement medicine so I could use my hot flashes as allies against the cold.

I realize that it sounds like I was leading a ghastly life, but I considered my lack of resources to be no big deal. I’m a camper! I was just camping out all the time. No problem.

When the alternative school became history, I took a summer job as paid staff at the Grand Canyon. I wasn’t a woman of faith at that time, but I’m sure the job was a God-thing, because after I started working, the staff told me that 600 people had signed up but for some reason my application kept popping up on the top of the pile. They later told me they hired me because they were curious about that phenomenon.
I subsequently became a park ranger for East Bay Regional Park District. My job was to take children on nature walks, and give them lessons about such topics as Native Americans and pioneer history. I taught kids how to make candles and how to grind up acorns for food. That was great!

Even though I was having fun, service as a park ranger was, finally, not emotionally sustainable. I had a “straw that broke the camel’s back” experience one day when a cute little boy came to me and, with great excitement and curiosity, showed me the gall that he was holding in his hand. I saw the delight that filled his eyes as he held the little moth egg incubator out to me. All of a sudden the enormous psychological burden of the innumerable children who had stood exactly where he was standing, holding out exactly what he was holding, and asking exactly the question he was asking crushed my spirit. Before long I submitted my resignation.

Jesus had gotten my attention while I was working for the Park Service. The light came to me through a Bible study led by my boss’s wife at the park where I was working. We studied the Gospel of John for a year. She told me, “Jesus was here in the beginning.” I found out that she believed that because it is a claim that Jesus made for himself.

**Coming Under Heaven’s Protection and Control**

I opened my life to let Jesus come in and take control. Just as a harbor pilot will take control of a ship, Jesus began guiding my life. The morning following that experience it seemed that I was in a new sun-washed world. The sky was a canopy of endless blue. The grass was vibrantly green. I was free! I was in love!

A funny thing about the experience is that it happened in spite of my church. I had been going to church for a while and when enlightenment came to me, my fellow church members thought I had gone crazy. “You’re treating the Bible as though it is God,” one of them told me. I was actually simply treating it as the Word of God, but she missed the distinction. Another person asked a final, crushing question: “What did Jesus know? He was only 30.”
The Bible became the source of a consuming passion, and I began taking notes as I would on a textbook for any class I would take or teach. In a year and a half I had taken notes on every chapter of every book from Genesis to Revelation.

The need to make restitution became compelling and I sought forgiveness from my ex-husband, my three daughters, and from anyone else I could think of who I had harmed during the course of my wayward life. I even wished I could make up to my neighbor’s little fox terrier that I had kicked for barking at me when I went to see my friend, but the dog was long dead. So was the neighbor, for that matter.

My father died, I came into some money, and I went to work part time at the Snow Museum in Oakland as Executive Director of the Audubon Nature Training Society until the funds ran out. Then my mother died, I came into some more money, and I quit altogether.

A dream came true when I moved into a strange but wonderful home. It was a two-story modular house, complete with a little circular staircase. I had been looking at it and even visiting it for years. After I purchased it, I had the house moved to a lovely wooded canyon in Kilkare Woods near 680 off Niles Canyon Road.

**A Vision of Refuge for Women and Children**

I started a shelter for women and children called Shepherd’s Gate. My Shepherd’s Gate dream began to come to me through little interventions. I had been reaching out to homeless women for a while, and had already been taking these people into my home by ones and twos. I began to envision a place where numbers of battered and forsaken women could come and find a place of shelter and protection.

I had been planning to take an extended hike down the 1,500-mile length of the Pacific Coast Trail when God told me as clearly as if He had spoken in an audible voice that I was going to cancel my plans and begin taking care of homeless women and children. I didn’t want to do this, but God kept hounding me. I complained that I didn’t know anything about taking care of homeless people, but the Bible says, “I will lift up their heads.” “It’s time to get out of the sandbox,” He said.
Before we opened Shepherd’s Gate I spent some time studying and learning many lessons from the wonderful professionals at the Richmond Rescue Mission and at the Evangel Home in Fresno, California.

My car broke down one day and I hitched a ride with a man named Denny Smith out to the highway. As we drove together I shared with him my dream of starting a shelter. He was bitten with the same bug that bit me. After a series of meetings with an ad hoc steering committee, we organized a Board of Managers and got down to work on planning and fund-raising. God marvelously brought people together to manage the legal and business oversight of the work.

I sold my house and, through a marvelous series of coincidences (but who believes in coincidences?) I was able to take possession of the original Shepherd’s Gate property. In fact, my 1,100-square-foot mobile cabin sold for almost exactly the purchase price as the 2,700 square foot Livermore facility.

**Days of Miracles and Wonder**

A stream of needy women began to flow through our doors. Many had been abused as children and were being abused as adults. They were suffering from addiction, sexual immorality, and depression so great they could hardly function. Some were trying to cope with rage. One of the women had on two occasions killed another person with a knife in a barroom brawl.

Women with drug dependencies began to enter our intensive nine-month program. Their beautiful natures began to surface in endearing ways. We learned right away that the most crucial thing we could give the women and children was not shelter, food, or clothing but God’s special love that sees only the beautiful person He created. Everyone’s real self, made in the image of God, is in there somewhere. All we have to do is brush the dust off.

The Shepherd's Gate provides an environment that makes the precious women feel like valuable people. We cherish them and embrace them in love. We pray for them and pray with them. We have classes on living skills, including finance classes and job-skills training. We sponsor regular twelve-step meetings and conduct Bible Studies.
We saw cases of healing. For example, one woman scheduled for cancer surgery was absolutely delivered of her tumors. When she went for the operation the next morning no trace of the cancer was found. We prayed for another woman whose water broke in the seventh month of pregnancy and she was miraculously able to carry her child full term. I touched the knee of one guest who had suffered with chronic infection for many years and she was instantly delivered of the pain and the disease.

The Bible says that the “son of righteousness has risen with healing in his wings,” and He spread those wings over our guests on a number of wonderful occasions.

We cast demons out of women, children, and places. We saw women’s bodies lifted off the ground as a dark spirit came out of them and left them clean and free—sometimes for the first time in decades.

Our needs were always met, sometimes in miraculous ways. For example, our washing machine broke down one day. We didn’t know what we were going to do when a new washing machine showed up at our front door. It turned out that the manager of Safeway had bought one for the employees and had “accidentally” ordered two of them.

Our old coffeemaker broke down on the exact day that a coffeemaker showed up in a pile of donations. A nice car was delivered to us as a donation on the very day that one of our womens had gotten a good job, but had no means of transportation. These kinds of “coincidences” were common occurrences and signs of the presence of God with us.

**Imposing Structure Upon Chaos**

Many of the women who enter Shepherd’s Gate are in desperate need of love and structure in their lives. We give them lots of love and begin to see wonderful changes take place almost immediately when, at their first meeting, their new “sisters” gather around them to wash their feet.

A woman came to us with razor blades taped to her stomach so she could kill herself at any time. She left the home a few weeks later with peace in her heart and no razor blades.
An important change takes place when each woman is assigned a chore to do as an assignment, which she has to complete every day before she is permitted to do anything else. Some of the women had never learned to clean a bathroom or wash a sink full of dishes in their lives. As the other women patiently work with them to show them how to straighten up a towel rack or how to clean a toilet, the women start to realize that they can learn how to take care of themselves and even how to serve other people.

We serve our guests three meals a day, but they have to show up on time or (unless they have a very good reason) they go hungry. Clear discipline says, "I care for you!" as much as our hugs and foot washings do. The acts of love and loving discipline created a happy, often merry, environment for Shepherd’s Gate. Visitors often remark about what a happy place we have.

In fact, one desperately needy guest actually broke down weeping while listening to a staff member read the Shepherd’s Gate rules to her. She made the connection between God’s love for her and the regulations we had created. The woman’s life was never the same after that experience.

**Taking the Vision to the Next Step**

We eventually realized the need for a larger facility. It was heart-breaking watching people go back into their old life because we couldn’t take care of them long enough to help them make the lifestyle changes that were demanded of them.

I had a remarkably clear vision of a long-term care facility just across the street and actually saw the site in my mind glowing with light. The board was looking at other properties, but I knew this was it.

Securing possession was a real hassle because the property was located on four acres of prime real estate and featured a farmhouse built of heart redwood. It broke my heart when that beautiful building had to be destroyed because the need for wheelchair accessibility made it impossible to preserve the structure.

The red tape and regulations of the Planning Commission and the city council faded away in such a dramatic fashion that our realtor made the comment, “I’m beginning to believe in this God of yours.”
Raising funds for the facility was a big challenge, but I felt that the hand of God was beneath us supporting our efforts. We always considered that Shepherd’s Gate was a refuge that He was providing for women and children. We were only the instruments He was using to accomplish His purposes.

I worked daily in Shepherd’s Home until I was 70, at which time God showed me that the program had outgrown my ability to manage. Other women and men had stepped up to carry on the program in my absence.

I’m looking forward to the moment when death finally takes me to my Savior. I’m a pilgrim on this earth; I don’t belong here. I want to be free of that rotten devil that grieves my heart. I can’t wait to leave; I take a lot of risks.

My tombstone could have the words “God used her.” Some people don’t like the word “used.” By I know what I would mean by it. It would be a good thing!

**Life’s Obstacles Overcome**

- Dissatisfaction with teaching job and superiors
- Homelessness
- Challenges in setting up and running a shelter for women and children

**Points to Contemplate**

- The Bible says, “I will lift up their heads.” Children learn best in a non-directive educational environment. Schools should not dictate to students the content of their education. The best role for teachers is simply to facilitate the learning of subjects that the students themselves decide they want to find out about.
- Let Jesus come in and take control. To facilitate this, one must reach out to make restitution in a true desire for forgiveness and oneness.
- God takes care of the homeless and needy, and wants us to reach out to others because everyone is made in the image of God.
- The most crucial thing we can give others is God’s special love that sees only the beautiful persons He created.
About the Author

Don Huntington is Editor In Chief of an award-winning magazine, 110° - Contra Costa Living. Before entering the magazine field, Don spent 20 years as a technical writer in California’s Silicon Valley, where he developed the specialty of creating internal newsletters for high-tech companies, besides running his own home-based book production company. Don has a background in theological studies, holding a baccalaureate degree and two masters degrees in the field, plus an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree. He’s the author of several technical books, as well as an online publication called A Daybook of a Man Awash in Grace. Don and his wife, Rae, live in Antioch, California.
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