MY JOURNEY OUT OF THE DARK

By

Kathy Nimmer

When I was a little girl, I could see the world spread out in front of me. This was true on a literal and figurative level simultaneously. I had perfect vision, and I had an enormous imagination. That imagination converted doll houses and their little figurines into real worlds with complex stories involving vivid characters who interacted with realistic intricacy. And let’s not forget my fictional world of competing gymnasts who flipped and twisted on our backyard Jungle Gym with the girl bearing my favorite name always winning the gold.

And somewhere, I knew God was watching over me, guiding this shy and introverted dreamer toward a future of … what I didn’t know, but He was there. My bedroom was pink, my brother was only as annoying as siblings are allowed to be without crossing that forbidden line into enmity, and my pet dogs completed the picture of joy.

Then, life beyond my imagination slipped in quietly and swiftly. My parents divorced, we moved to a new town, and my vision started deteriorating. I went from doctor to doctor with the constant message that I was making up the vision problems to get attention. God seemed to have gone silent, especially the day that my mom and stepfather heard the news that I would never drive and might experience enough vision loss to classify me as blind one day.

At age eleven, the doll house figurines, minus the doll house itself which was too cumbersome to pack up, accompanied me to a school for the blind 150 miles away. There, I found a future which was much different than I’d ever counted on. New challenges, new teachers, long and scary hallways which twisted and turned in spooky ways, … it was overwhelming. But, my keen interest in learning and dreaming emerged once more, and I felt my feet find a place on which to stand again.

Age 14 swept away any pretense of being sighted for the rest of my life as I learned braille, crossing that line between the seeing and what I feared would be the unseen. After all, how could God allow loss at the most critical time of growth and development in a young girl’s life? Where had He gone anyway? I slipped into anorexia and depression, clawing for control in my spinning universe. Those little figurines of childhood could help me escape no longer, and I was lost.

With the prayers of a minister from my home church and with the belief others had in hope, I began seeing a flicker of light in the darkness. My desire became to succeed, to find excellence, to soar above expectations and fill the emptiness with achievement.

And so, I did just that. National champion gymnast, head cheerleader, speech team member, writer, pianist, organizer, valedictorian, all titles I added to my resume. I used these successes to propel me into college at a small Christian school nearer home. There, I lost travel vision and began using a cane. But, I found a career that seemed to fit as I trained to be an English teacher. See, the characters who inhabited my childhood worlds now were leaping forward, out of existing books that I could bring to life for my students and also out of my own imagination and onto paper which was finding publishing opportunities. I felt God’s presence again and knew He hadn’t been gone; I’d just been turned the wrong direction.
After grad school, I interviewed with a maverick principal who liked to be “first.” I was his experiment; he would be the first principal in our region to hire a blind teacher. Bravo for me, for it got me in the door. Had I any way to know what was behind that door, I might have turned and run back to the rusting and discarded Jungle Gym back at my parents’ house.

My first years of teaching were one continuous haunting nightmare. Students slipped quietly out of my classroom, teachers didn’t speak to me, parents didn’t support my decisions, and chaos reigned. In the bleakest moment, right after a student’s thrown book bag shattered a frosted glass window between my room and a nearby office, I contemplated quitting and starting over in some other career. I would have done this, but I had no idea where to start and no clear leading from God to make a move.

I prayed, harder than I ever had done before, even in the darkest moments of loss and change in the past. And, finally, a wall that had kept me from the constant knowledge that God loved me how I was, where I was, and His hand was in everything in my life, … that wall shattered like the frosted window in my classroom. I finally knew I didn’t have to imagine, succeed, or flounder anymore: Jesus was my living, loving Companion, and I only needed to trust.

Nothing magically became “okay.” But, I did have a new direction, a new hope. Dear friends who ran a ministry for the blind were pillars during this time of rebuilding. They knew already what I was just learning, and I looked to them for guidance. Gradually, classroom problems declined, and my sense of worth grew. Issues from the past which had been silent mocking forces surfaced and then slid into the corners of my existence where the loving presence of my Redeemer shadowed their supposed importance.

Now, I am finishing my thirteenth year of teaching. I walk with a beautiful guide dog by my side and with an assurance that God is using me in this public high school as a testament of hope. I falter and fumble, but then I stand strong once more. And, as in those imaginary outdoor games where the gymnast with my favorite name always won, I cling to the favorite name in my life with the sense of certain and eternal victory: my Lord Jesus Christ.