

Generous Faith

STORIES TO INSPIRE ABUNDANT LIVING

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Sister Bridget Haase, OSU



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Generous Faith: Stories to Inspire Abundant Living

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WITH GRATITUDE TO MY

*Ursuline Sisters around the world,
each with a story to tell*

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INTRODUCTION



If you're like me and countless others, the question, *Is this all there is to life?* creeps up from time to time. Challenging both philosophers and prophets, the question weaves itself into the basic building blocks of our everyday lives. This haunting question may invade our thoughts at a new home act-of-sale, or at a job promotion party, or at a tragic death, or even at a family picnic. In these moments what we have always wanted, or perhaps what we have most feared, seems to stop us in our tracks and dull our hearts with a sense of incompleteness and subtle meaninglessness.

Hungering for this elusive "more" in life, we waste time and energy in a quixotic search for deeper meaning. We look in the nooks and crannies of life to satisfy our desires or assuage this sense of emptiness. We are left with the feeling that life has short-changed us and has offered us far less than we had hoped for. We begin to anxiously measure our life by the years we have left and panic when we find ourselves caught in a subtle web of discontent and imperfect answers.

While *Generous Faith: Stories to Inspire Abundant Living* will not take away your search or eradicate your feelings, my hope is that this book of stories will satisfy some of your hunger, revitalize your energy, and surprise you at what is right there under your feet. I am convinced that this *is* all there is to life and it *is* quite enough, for in the air we breathe, and in this very moment, the abundant life is available to us.

In order to cultivate this awareness, I offer three basic practices: living in the moment; trusting in divine care; and experiencing God's presence.

This book is not a how-to guide containing methods, techniques, or even a list of do's and don'ts. Neither is this book a manual of exercises to complete, nor an easy step-by-step program for instant success. Rather, here is a collection of stories that will open your heart to these three practices, giving shape and face to the abundant life.

Although these stories are about other people's lives, they may mirror your own journey. They are presented without explanation or evaluation, but they will challenge you to reexamine the path of *your* life. The power in these stories will not only evoke your experiences, but they will also transform you as you find them changing your perspective on your daily life. As you meet these people and think about their stories and reflect upon your life, you may be astounded to discover how abundant your life already is.

As you spend time with these spiritual tutors and personal trainers, you will begin to connect the dots and see how your past, personal encounters and experiences frame the person you are today. You will understand that a passing conversation with a stranger can powerfully reveal a mutual search for meaning in life. You will realize that we do not need to seek abundant life anywhere else. It is right here, right now, under our feet, and in the air we breathe.

This *is* all there is to life and it really *is* quite enough.

You may be puzzled at the title of this book. You may even be curious as to why the word *generous* is used to complement the word *faith*. If you find this an unusual coupling of words, perhaps this will pique your interest and set your wheels in motion to think more deeply about your own spiritual life.

The word *generous* originally comes to us, by way of the Old French, from the Latin word for noble stock. Its characteristics are courage, magnanimity, a largesse that implies a larger-than-life vision. With this understanding as a backdrop, we will meet people who flesh out the meaning of what generous faith is all about. These people believe in their divine noble stock as children of God; they see in the dark and give big-heartedly until it hurts; they trust beyond all odds and rejoice in ordinary things. Living beyond mere optimism, they exude the grace and the hope of the abundant life that is under their feet.

This title asks us to go one step further. “Generous faith” impels us to mine, with integrity, fortitude, and abundance, the faith within each of us. By digging deeply, we will discover a reservoir of divine marvels, and we will come to realize that we are to offer a lavish, reciprocal response. In so doing, we will enrich our own lives and the lives of others as the people in these stories did.



This book is divided into three parts. Each section follows the same format: a reflection on a practice for the abundant life; a collection of real-life stories, each ending with questions to help you mine your own faith and to enrich your own life; and a series of short “pauses” that will take you a minute to read but days to digest.

You may wonder how I came to categorize each story, since stories are not meant to fit under tight titles or to be compartmentalized. Ultimately, I let the stories speak to me and, in a way, they arranged themselves. You may believe that some of the stories fit in more than one category, because you are tapping into more than one of the story’s many levels.

PART ONE explores the first practice of the abundant life: an attention to living in the moment.

People often ask, "How do I really live in the present?" The answer is neither mysterious nor elusive. We are simply called to use our five senses of tasting, hearing, touching, seeing, and smelling to experience the "now"—the fullness of this specific moment in time. Our senses bring us to the simple awareness of the here and now and help us experience the fullness of what we are, as we are, where we are, without judgment. We may smack our lips with Josefina as we savor a warm tortilla oozing with cheese—and taste the abundant life. Beside Sister Mary Xavier, we will reverently contemplate a summer starburst sky and be overwhelmed by a feeling of fecundity.

PART TWO examines the second practice of the abundant life: accepting and trusting in divine care.

As we live in the present moment, we allow the moment to unfold and blossom in its own way. With a trusting heart, we surrender in trust to divine care, confidently casting our daily cares upon God because we know God provides for us. Under a shade tree, we find ourselves sitting next to Appalachian Bird as he shares what makes life "mighty fine." Or we may examine our desires to be acknowledged and honored as we share Nicky's forgotten birthday behind prison bars.

PART THREE brings us to the third practice of the abundant life: experiencing God's presence in our everyday life.

Living with attention in the present moment and accepting its unfolding as both a sign and an experience of divine care fosters the attitude of belief that each moment, each person, and each event bears the footprints of the Divine. We begin to see with the eyes of Delena and Elam who, in sharing a Thanksgiving dinner with a church lady, rejoice that Jesus has come to their home. We become aware, as my mother did, of God's face reflected in gardenias and Pine-Sol-cleaned floors.

While there are many ways to use this book, here is one approach you may find particularly beneficial: beginning with the three practices, THE FIRST STEP is to spend time, perhaps a few days, recalling how living in the moment, trusting in divine care, and experiencing God's presence may already be an integral part of your life.

Be specific as you recall moments when your senses called your attention to the here and now. Ponder how these experiences unfolded and nudged you to greater trust in divine care and to an increased awareness of God's presence. Then thoughtfully read each essay through the lens of your own past experiences. A sharper vision of what already exists in your own life prepares you for the next step.

THE SECOND STEP is to attentively read each story, perhaps aloud in front of your fireplace or quietly at your kitchen table. To avoid feeling like an onlooker, savor the story from the inside out. By doing this, you may discover that you and the person in the story have had similar experiences—that you think alike—even ask the same questions about life's values and choices. Above all, take your time with each story, with even a second or third read-through. Slowly, carefully, let its power take hold of you and offer you another glimpse of your abundant life.

An important word of caution. Your first reaction to some stories may be to wonder how you can identify with them. Perhaps you cannot imagine Aisha's life in a refugee camp in the desert of Sudan; or share Preacher Nevins Ellis's religious beliefs and practices; or even understand Julia's compromised world of AIDS. Do not make the mistake of limiting your own personal engagement in these stories. The geography and situation of your life may differ, but your heart, with its same hungers and language, has a similar landscape. If you openly cross the cultural borders of these stories, you will be surprised to discover that Aisha's reverence for water deepens your appreciation. As Preacher Nevins Ellis did, you may examine your own depth of faith in God's Word. In meeting Julia, you may look on a cranky neighbor's physical challenge with greater acceptance and compassion.

THE THIRD STEP is to ponder the reflection questions that follow each story. Take time to use these questions to mine your own faith and enrich your life. Mull over the questions when you find yourself stuck in traffic, or while taking a break at the water cooler, or baking birthday cupcakes. As you meditate, you may discover that what happened in each particular encounter is also occurring in your own life. You can even take this reflection a step further by choosing a word or phrase from the story. Let it become a mantra—a word of wisdom to encourage and inspire you as you go about your daily routine.

Equally as important as the other three, THE FOURTH STEP requires a slow, steady pace: reflecting on the “short pauses.” Because they are brief and easily read, the temptation may be to gulp them down in one sitting. Beware. Doing so will result in spiritual indigestion. You will find it more beneficial to think of each short pause as a panoramic snapshot of life. Take time to measure its depth; focus on its perspective; and study it from different angles. Finally, frame it with your own meaning and experience.

However you read *Generous Faith: Stories to Inspire Abundant Living*, I hope you will discover a Mr. Ferguson in your neighborhood or chuckle as you realize that you are a lot like Bird, for whom nature was enough. Above all, I hope this book evokes memories and encourages conversations about how you have lived in the

moment, trusted in divine care, and experienced God's presence. Then you may want to take a second look at your life and discover that this *is* all you have. Smiling broadly, you will realize that it is *more* than enough since it is, quite simply, most abundant.



PART ONE

Living in the Moment



For most of my life, living with attention in the present moment, the first practice of the abundant life, has been a challenge. I felt as though I was only respectfully saluting the “here and now”—doing it in a disengaged manner, hurriedly bowing as it passed by. The conviction that mystics and spiritual masters consider attentiveness to the moment the highest form of spirituality frustrated me even more. I sensed the rightness and importance of being attentive, but no one had shown me how to do it.

Then one summer day, while spoon-feeding my mother chocolate ice cream, I discovered how I *could* live in the present moment—sometimes we learn how to live from people who are dying.

My mama sat in her wheelchair, eyes glazed over and unable to speak. At eighty-three, she was aimlessly drifting on the ocean of Alzheimer’s disease. Knowing she had forgotten how to swallow, I was slowly and carefully feeding her. Unexpectedly, she gestured as though trying to smack her lips.

“You like it, Mama?” I asked through the tears that welled up at such moments. I was expecting a smile, a response, a nod. None came from her, but a waterfall of memories cascaded over me.

I began to reminisce how, after supper dishes were done, Mama would get out the jelly jars and the Sealtest ice cream carton. My four siblings and I would dash into the kitchen, putting homework and squabbling aside. Chocolate ice cream was a built-in family reunion. Being alert for equal portions, we would then indulge, slurping until there was no sound but the spoon tapping the side of the glass. Hope for one last taste sprang eternal.

Mama never baked cookies or cakes. Once, when I asked her why, she very firmly said, "No need to when you've got chocolate ice cream." That ended the discussion and explained everything.

I returned from my reverie to reenter the reality of the Alzheimer's disease that was consuming her. How could someone, so brave, so heroic, and so active, be smitten with a disease that slowly robs both physical senses and mental abilities? Would Mama continue to deteriorate in the coming months? Would she feel pain—lose more dignity?

Pity for her overcame me, and I began to feel both anger and deep sadness. Dipping my spoon once again into the ice cream cup, I tapped Mama's cheek so she would open her mouth and remember to swallow.

Suddenly my memories and future worries were interrupted as a strange feeling engulfed me. I realized I had mentally

crossed my personal International Date Line. I was straddling the present, one foot in the past and the other in the future. I had allowed the thoughts that chocolate ice cream evoked within me to distract me from the gift of this precious moment with Mama. Instead of simply enjoying the experience of being with Mama and feeding her, I had allowed myself to ruminate on the experience. In so doing, I had entered into another time zone. Mama, on the other hand, smacking her lips with the pleasurable taste of chocolate cream, was living totally in the present moment. I knew then that this was what I lacked, and for this I longed.

In Mama's ending, I discovered how to begin.

This first practice of the abundant life is to make a deliberate choice: namely, to be aware of and sensitive to what our senses apprehend, to what we are experiencing, without imposing thoughts and commentary about it—experiencing what I am, being where I am, and not evaluating, judging, or weighing the merits. This practice allows us to live fully *in* the here and now without thinking *about* the moment. Simple awareness.

Awareness of where we are and attention to what is happening remind us that we do not need to be astronomers to be overcome by a starry night sky. We do not need to study combustion before

we feel the warmth of a fire. Nor do we need to understand the digestive system in order to quench our thirst with the sweetness of water. What matters is that we see the person before us or feel what is around us. It's really that simple. To live *in* the moment is to *experience* the moment.

We, too, are created to savor and enjoy every moment of life. Unfortunately, we do just the opposite. When we shower, we plan the day's schedule rather than simply feel the rush of water upon our shoulders. When we smell a gardenia, we draw up future plans for a garden rather than just let the fragrance bless us. When we sit by a stream in a local park, we wish we were at a popular mountain resort, far away from our daily routine and duty, rather than hear the gurgling gift of flowing water. When we see flowering lilac bushes in the spring, do we begin summer vacation countdown or linger over the beauty of lilacs? When watermelon juice runs down our chin, do we wonder if mangoes would have tasted even better?

Living in the here and now demands daily discipline. It does not simply "happen." Being attentive to what surrounds and encompasses us takes a response of the will and a diligent awareness of our five senses. Our senses bring us to the here and now as we observe every detail and feel our physical setting. We become entirely present to what we see, hear, taste, touch, or smell. Nothing escapes us; everything speaks

to us. Each one of our senses becomes a clue to the mystery of the present moment.

As we experience what is unfolding before us, we are like the young child who, walking with her mom in a garden nursery, called her mother over to see the brilliant colors of the gerbera daisies. Her mother, engrossed in her garden planning and vegetable list, nonchalantly responded, "Yes, I see them."

"No, you don't, Mommy," she whined. "Look NOW."

Her mother stopped short, and, peering over her reading glasses, leaned over the vivid blooms and gently cupped a flaming red daisy in her hand. All mental activity seemed to stop as she, in one intense moment of attention, *really* looked.

Acute listening can also anchor us in the power of the present. Being a teacher, I learned this lesson from one of my third graders. One warm, spring day, my students were playing kick ball, rhyming jump rope, and running wild as they were getting winter out of their bones. My eye caught Corey, sitting quietly alone on a wooden bench, lost in thought and staring straight ahead. It was unusual behavior for this dynamic and sensitive child. Certain that his feelings had been hurt, I sauntered over and sat down beside him. He didn't budge. Gently, I touched his arm and asked him what the matter was. He jerked out of his trance, smiled and whispered in his lisp, "Nothing, Sister, I was just listening to the boids." Sure enough, from a nearby

bush, came melodious chirping and twittering. This eight-year-old was swept up in the symphony of the "now." I, his teacher, hadn't heard anything but the ringing of the five-minutes-left-to-recess bell.

Touch, too, can root us in the reality before us. During the famine of 1986, a young woman named Fatima came to our relief camp birthing center with its straw overhang, makeshift table, and dirt floor. She had walked across the Sudan desert suffering from enduring labor pains. Without a moan or wail, as is the cultural ritual, she gave birth to a crying baby girl. Emquoish, her sister and companion on the journey, immediately took the child and, with bare hands, began to clean the infant. She shook the slimy blood from her hands, never flinching as it stuck to her clothes and slid under her fingernails. Oblivious to its stain and smell, she, chanting and caressing, continued to soothe the infant and heal her trauma of leaving the womb. With her eyes riveted upon the child, Emquoish forgot about distended stomachs and parched lips just a few yards away. In seeing and feeling red, slippery blood, she was holding new life.

Sight can also bring us to attention. "You must see the Alps before you leave France," invited Sister Martine. "I know just the spot," she told me. Gathering the most physical energy I could as an inexperienced climber, I joined Martine, as we trekked up a short but winding path that she knew like the back of her hand.

I plopped breathless on an uneven rock and then glanced up. I gasped. It wasn't the snow-capped mountains, the gentle mist, or the mysterious aura of silence that nestled me in the here and now. It simply was the fact that these mountains *are* and I *am* in this precise moment.

To live deliberately with acute attention to our surroundings also means to be consciously aware of the odors and fragrances that encircle us. A few weeks into my service as a relief worker during the Sudan famine, a wave of cholera hit some of the children in the refugee camp. We immediately isolated them as best we could by cutting small holes in the cord beds so that the diarrhea could pass through onto the desert dirt floor. The smell coupled with that of the children's vomiting was overwhelming. To remain in the moment was our only choice. There was nowhere else to go. Smell held us captive, and there was nothing to do but experience the odor that linked life and death.

Allowing ourselves to truly engage our senses joins us to all people, cultures, and faiths. From Buddhism to Christianity, all the great religions witness to the extravagance of the present moment. Jesus, for example, teaches us to jump into our senses without evaluation. In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus eats and drinks with sinners; tells us to look at the birds of the air and the lilies of the field; reminds us to use our ears to hear the divine message; offers a healing touch to both a leper and a

servant with a severed ear; and in the Gospel of John he accepts Lazarus' stench of death. Jesus, engaging himself fully in the five human senses in each and every moment, shows us how to live life abundantly.

Living with attention in the present moment is a day-by-day discipline that sometimes takes us a lifetime to realize. But, in return, we suddenly hear a cardinal's whistle trumpeting the sunrise. We feel life even as we wipe a bloody nose, see a storm brewing on the horizon, smell our reeking compost pile, or taste the chocolate ice cream gliding down our dry, summer throats.

Blazing Fire

ON ATTENTION TO PASSION

When life seems like a pile of ashes, how might living in the here and now rekindle my passion?



He never knew his advice had implications far beyond the coal stove and the cold, Appalachian winter.

Summer brought out the copperheads in the woods across our creek, the dandelion greens we picked in the hills, and the lightning bugs galore visible in the cool of the evening. Dog days came and went. Gradually summer ended.

Frost coated the pumpkins. The air, so long heavy and thick, was crisp with fall freshness, and autumn leaves began their good-byes. With winter peeking around the corner, thoughts turned to chopping wood and preparing the coal box.

My beloved neighbor Mr. Ferguson took notice of the preparations. He would wander over, watching carefully as I sorted through the wood box to find pieces of wood to split for kindling. Flinging the axe, I would hit and then miss. Mr. Ferguson said nothing about these feeble attempts and small successes. He would, after some time, just stand up, shake his

head, and softly mumble under his breath, "Fraid not." Then he would saunter home.

The time came to stack wood on the porch for easy access on cold days. I paid no heed to separating pine from oak from hickory logs. Only experience would teach me that pine burned quickly, oak would simmer, and that bitterly cold days needed the long-burning hickory. To me, wood was wood.

Mr. Ferguson would again meander over, eye everything, say nothing. After a bit, he would get up, mumble once again and amble home.

Crisp frost gave way to snow and biting cold. Day after day, I would start a fire, tend it, shake the ashes, and try to bank it for the night. But the three-room house never warmed up. I just assumed that everyone shivers in Appalachian winters. After all, life is rugged, and coal stoves can only give out so much heat.

One December evening, Mr. Ferguson paid his regular neighborly visit. I invited him in. He sat close to the stove, rubbing his hands and face, graciously receiving my apology for my icy hands and home. As was his habit, he sat in silence and simple presence.

"The best words come slowly," he was prone to say.

Mustering my courage and swallowing my pride, I finally spoke. "Mr. Ferguson," I said, "there's something mighty wrong with this coal stove. I've been so cold and miserable for weeks.

What should I do?"

Suddenly, he rose with the dignity of a university president before a major address. A broad toothless smile came over his face and a Santa Claus twinkle was in his eye.

"At last you asked," he declared, rather than spoke. "Now I can help you. I am rightly pleased."

With the conviction of a preacher and the certainty born of many a mountain winter, he stated, "What you got here is nothin' but smolderin' ashes. You ain't got a real fire so you ain't got heat. You're gonna freeze before too long. Everything you need is inside this coal stove, but you got to learn your wood. You just got to make it work for you—to learn to tend and keep it. You got to live from a blazing fire, and not from some cold ashes. Then everything around you will feel warm."

When he said "blazing fire," I saw a spark shoot from the twinkle in his eyes. His secret was betrayed.

Detail by detail, he began to teach me the art of tending a fire, of caring for a coal stove, of splitting and stacking logs with attention and appreciation.

"Remember. Live from a blazing fire, not some cold ashes," he would say, as he stoked the fire in rhythm to his chant.

Three hard years later, on a frigid February day, this dear neighbor came for his regular weekly visit. Warmth penetrated the house as the fire crackled with its own melody. After some

time, his face aglow, Mr. Ferguson rose slowly and deliberately, as he had on that cold night now long past. Breaking into his trademark toothless smile and rubbing his hands in contentment, he declared:

“Reckon I can say it now. You got the know-how of starting a fire, tending it, and warming everything around you. Now you’re living from the fire, not just cold ashes. You know your wood, and you’re making what you got work for you. I’m so honored to tell you. You’re a real, one-hundred-percent hillbilly.”

This old mountain man’s flint of wisdom had sparked a fire within me. Could I believe that, like my coal stove, I have everything I need inside of me and I need only make it work? Could I live from a blazing fire and not cold ashes?

Fidelity to daily routine burns and consumes the best of us. Sometimes it seems easier to live from the cold ashes of yesterday’s regrets or worries. Only if I live from a blazing fire—live my passion and follow it in the present moment—will everything around me be ignited.



MINING OUR FAITH, ENRICHING OUR LIFE

From what cold ashes of the past am I tempted to live? What “kindling” within me might spark a blazing fire and ignite a passion to live in the present moment?

SHORT PAUSE *Smack in the Middle*

Eight-year-old Nancy, an academically challenged student in my learning center, was always more interested in her lip gloss and her hairbrush than in remedial reading.

One day, she burst exuberantly into the center, "Sister," she blurted out, "I know exactly what happens when I pray."

With a sweeping gesture toward the heavens, she continued, "My heart goes up and God's heart comes down, and we meet smack in the middle."

Hearing those words, all my years of theology and all the books I had read on prayer seemed to pile up in a heap at my feet. In order to pray, I don't have to "find" God or wait until life is sorted out. God is smack in the middle of each moment and everything in life—be it gloss or tangle.

SHORT PAUSE *Snakes in the Attic*

It was a strange encounter.

I plopped in the nearest subway seat and the woman next to me scooted closer.

"Miss, got any snakes in your attic?" she asked.

"Not me."

"Sure you do," she persisted. "Everybody's got 'em. They slither and slide. Real annoying but harmless. It's the boa that you got to watch out for. That one can swallow you alive."

Oddly enough, this fellow commuter raised deeper questions within me about living in the present moment. I still ponder this strange encounter and unusual conversation as I ask myself, *What pointless anxieties and constant motion slither and slide in my life? Do past regrets and future worries swallow the life of the here and now?*

Do you have any snakes in your attic?

One-on-One

ON ATTENTION TO CALL

When a desperate situation calls us and stretches us beyond our limits and abilities, what is the secret to living in the present moment?



Our eyes were fixed on each other. Her eyes were dulled with the pangs of starvation; mine were hungry to know if she would have the strength to hold the cup of milk today. We were surrounded by hundreds of children, sitting on straw mats with hands outstretched for food. Flies stuck in their noses, ears, and hair, but the children were too weak even to swat them away. Cries for hot milk gave way to whimpers and wails. Here in the midst of the children of famine, it had taken me a long time to discover the importance of reaching out to the one child in front of me. I had come to realize that if I focused on a crowd of starving children and hundreds of needy refugees, and did not see individuals, my service would be impersonal, distant, and perhaps, uncaring.

We never know when life—or maybe God—will stretch us beyond our perceived limits. My moment came on a Wednesday night in spring while I was watching a BBC television special on the 1985 famine in Sudan.

The filmmaker had zoomed in on a feeding center in the desert. Three times, a child stretched out her small, thin hands for bread. Three times, a relief worker, his attention stretched beyond its limits, bypassed her.

As I was to learn later on when I worked for a relief organization and fed hundreds of children a day, skipping a child was an easy mistake to make. Relief workers had to retrace their steps over and over. But at the time, in front of the television, I did not realize this and found myself fervently praying, "God, give her something to eat." I went to bed hoping that God would answer my prayer.

The next morning, the image of the starving child still captivated my mind and heart. Yet, as happens over the course of a night's sleep, the impact of that child on the television lessened in my mind. Thoughts of the demanding routine of the day ahead—teaching challenged students and an afternoon teachers' meeting—assuaged my guilt as I relished cold milk and fresh strawberries on my cereal.

Later at our school Mass, I again renewed my heartfelt prayers that the hungry child would have something to eat.

Time came for communion. I approached the altar, as is custom, with hands outstretched. Suddenly an unexpected awareness gripped me—this was the same gesture the starving child offered as a plea. But there was a difference: I was asking for the Bread of Life, and she was begging for bread to live.

I realized that I had been praying as the disciples did in the Gospel of Luke. The worn-out crowd of five thousand was hungry, and the disciples of Jesus begged him to give the crowd something to eat.

Jesus replied with these words, "Give them some food yourselves," as the Gospel of Luke records in 6:13 (NAB).

With Jesus' words, an unwanted and forbidding sense of God's issuing a demanding call crashed upon me. I began desperately to beg God to ask anything of me, but not for my physical presence in the desert of Sudan. Yet, I also knew in my heart that fidelity to my vocation required me to consider preparing my passport, getting the necessary vaccinations, and packing my bags. So I began, slowly and hesitantly.

These preparations brought home the reality of my upcoming departure for Sudan. Inwardly I felt riddled with doubts and uncertainties. At times I was overcome by fear. Was I really being called to feed starving children on another continent? Did I have the courage it would take? How would I handle my own hunger, the desert heat, and the inevitable malaria?

I had more questions than answers as I closed my carefully arranged suitcase and wished I could pack away my insecurities and fears as neatly.

Within three months, I would arrive at Wad El Hileau, the smallest of the thirty-five camps spread throughout northern

Sudan. It was home to twelve thousand starving Sudanese and Ethiopians. Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw. Hundreds of tents were sprawled across a dry, barren desert. With the absence of latrines, human waste was scattered everywhere. Children, emaciated with starvation, sat listlessly in the dust. Mothers with shriveled breasts were sitting alongside them, trying to feed their infants. Too weak to interact, the mothers' and children's silence was caught up in the swooshing and howling of the hot afternoon sandstorms.

The enormity of the situation overwhelmed me and a debilitating depression rendered me immobile. For two days I lay collapsed on a simple construction of poles and rope that we relief workers called a bed, mentally plotting how I could return home. I had responded by coming, but could not endure staying.

I do not remember the exact moment it happened. Into my thatched hut strode one of the refugee camp doctors, gaunt with several months of dedicated service. She gazed tenderly at me and then offered a knowing smile.

"How have you done it this long?" I quietly asked, with a heart overwhelmed with sadness.

Sighing from deep within, she revealed the mystery of her being able to cope and to minister day after day. She stared directly into my fear-filled eyes and depressed heart.