

A Deeper Surrender -- by John Sage

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I used to live as if I were in total control of my life. If I wanted something, I went after it until I got it. That's how I became an all American tackle on the football team at Louisiana State University. After graduation, I was drafted by the NFL, but passed up a pro career to go into business for myself in Houston, and to marry a beautiful woman named Frances. By 1984, at just 36 years old, it seemed I'd accomplished it all. I'd become a millionaire entrepreneur with a devoted wife and two fine sons. I should have been on top of the world. So why aren't you? I wondered.

I didn't have the answer to that. All I knew was that something was very wrong with me. My nights were spent tossing and turning, and during the day I felt so listless I could hardly function. In less than one month I lost 25 pounds. Maybe I should see a doctor.

"I don't know what's going on," I said after he'd examined me.

"You're suffering from clinical depression, John," the doctor told me. "Most likely, it's being caused by a chemical imbalance in your brain, and exacerbated by stress."

I refused to accept his diagnosis. Look at all you've accomplished, I told myself. What do you have to be depressed about?

Yet getting through the days became more torture than I could bear. Everything I'd worked for was crumbling, just like I was on the inside. I could hardly talk about it to anyone — not Frances, not even my sister Marilyn. That surprised me because Marilyn and I were as close as could be, and I knew she wanted the best for me. I thought about asking God to help, but how could He? It was my problem to solve.

But nothing I did made it better. Finally, I decided the doctor had been right, and I found a good therapist and started taking medication. Within a year the dark cloud lifted. I promised myself I'd never feel such pain again.

While I had been in the depths of depression, my business suffered. I struggled for eight hard years trying to put things back in order. Still, I'd been through the wringer of depression and come out all right. I would get through this, too. Hadn't I proved I was strong enough to face anything?

Then came June 30, 1993. I had left work and was only a few blocks from home when my car phone rang. It was Frances. "Johnny, something horrible has happened!" she said. "Marilyn's dead! Someone killed her!"

"I'll be right there," I said, flooring the gas pedal. My sister, dead? It can't be! But when I got home and saw Frances's face, I knew it was true. Marilyn. We'd just had dinner

together three nights earlier. She'd noticed I was feeling a little down, so before I left she'd hugged me and said, "Johnny, you're the greatest." Next to Frances, no one made me feel more loved than Marilyn.

We'd been born 19 months apart, the fourth and fifth in a family of eight children. From the time we were toddlers, we were inseparable. Marilyn was a tomboy, tagging along behind me to build forts, climb trees and play football. The two of us carpoled in school, and she followed me to LSU for college, where she insisted on doing my laundry for me every week. I ended up marrying her close friend Frances. I couldn't remember a time when Marilyn hadn't been a part of my life. Nor could I bear to think about how her life had ended, especially after one detective told me, "I've investigated homicides for twenty-five years, and I've never seen anything this brutal." But I pressed him for the details. He told me Marilyn had been stabbed with at least three different knives, bludgeoned with a statue and suffocated with a plastic bag.

Just 48 hours later, police arrested two 19-year-olds, a boy and girl, who confessed to the murder. They'd been cruising the neighborhood where Marilyn lived, looking for a car to steal, when they spotted my sister removing some clothes from her trunk. They crept into her apartment behind her, and attacked her when she came down the hall. She never had a chance.

The rage and grief I felt were indescribable. I wanted nothing more than for those two to suffer the way my sister had. I fantasized about killing them. I wished I'd been there to protect Marilyn. But I hadn't been and now she was gone. If someone as good and loving as Marilyn can be taken from us, what point is there to life? I wondered. Her death triggered something in me. I felt hopeless and helpless. I began sleeping less, eating less. I had panic attacks, and my stomach churned unceasingly. The symptoms were all too familiar — depression.

I was furious with myself for succumbing to it. Hadn't I been through this already? How could I fight it again? Rage overwhelmed me. I couldn't function, and ended up quitting my job. I had to file for disability, a huge blow for a proud man like me. Or the man I once had been.

In January of 1994, I dragged myself into the bathroom after yet another sleepless night. The man in the mirror was not someone I recognized. His eyes were bloodshot, his face unshaven, his shoulders slumped. I turned away, disgusted. Marilyn's last words to me rang in my mind: "Johnny, you're the greatest. The greatest what? Failure? Lunatic? What would she think of me now?"

All at once I started crying. "Just tell me what to do, God." I pleaded.

"Give it to me, John," a voice seemed to answer.

I fell to my knees right there on the cold tile floor. "God, I can't go on like this," I prayed. "I'm letting go and trusting you to be in charge of my life."

I felt relief after saying those words, but living them was something else. First, I made the decision to go back to a therapist and back on medication. Having to admit I needed help again was an exercise in humility for me, but I couldn't go on the way I was. Within a few months, I felt I was becoming my old self. But then one of Marilyn's killers went on trial.

In the courtroom, I studied the young man sitting at the defense table. Wearing a suit and tie with his hair neatly trimmed, he didn't look like the monster I knew he was. As the prosecutor played a tape of the young man's confession, I could see my hands wrapping around the young man's throat, squeezing the life out of him. It would feel so good to take his life, just as he'd taken Marilyn's.

"John, stop!" shouted a voice in my head. I snapped back to reality and tried to focus on the proceedings. The prosecution had moved on to showing photos of the crime scene. I couldn't bear to look. Instead, I shut my eyes tight and prayed, Lord, get me through this. Take away the pain, please. And let the jury hang that predator. I knew it wasn't fair to ask such a thing, but I had to see this man pay.

It didn't take long - the trial lasted only five days. The jury took under an hour to come back with a guilty verdict, and even less time to assess the death penalty. One down, one to go! I thought. It was another long year until his female accomplice was found guilty and sentenced to death as well.

Finally, I could move on. Yet, why did I feel nothing had been resolved? I was no better off with the murderers on death row. It wouldn't bring my sister back. In a way, I'd become a prisoner too — of my own rage and depression. How long until I get my life back? I demanded of God. Then I thought of my promise to Him: "I'm letting go and trusting you." If you really had given it all to Him, I told myself, maybe you wouldn't be feeling this way now. My prayer in the bathroom hadn't been enough. Nor had going back to therapy and medication. I was still trying to be in control, but the only thing I was really in control of, was my own misery. What God wanted from me was a deeper surrender, a full and unconditional reliance on his loving will for me.

I threw myself into my spiritual commitment in a way I never had before. I prayed daily, hourly. I joined a Bible study group, and it was there I learned what Jesus said to God in the Gospel of John: "You sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." God loved me? As much as he loved his own son? I could hardly fathom such an idea. But it was right there in black and white. Was that what I had been missing all along — God's love? He seemed to be telling me it was, and that the key to receiving that love was to let go once and for all.

So I kept on with therapy, medication and spiritual pursuits. Gradually, things evened out. My depression lifted and I was able to go back to work. I was able to spend more time with my sons, and take the whole family out for dinner and a movie. And I tried not to think about my sister's killers.

One day, four years after Marilyn's death, I got a phone call from a reporter for a national TV news magazine. "Your sister's killer has an execution date in a few months," she said. "Are you excited?"

"No," I said hesitantly, "I'm not."

"But this awful woman, you can watch her get the lethal injection. Won't it feel good?"

"No, it wouldn't feel good," I told her.

"I'm amazed you're not even angry!" the reporter snapped, hanging up abruptly.

In a way, so was I. Once, the only thing I could think about was what I wanted to do to Marilyn's killers, and it drove me to despair. Now it seemed like that was another lifetime. Sitting there with the phone in hand, I tried to resurrect the hatred I'd felt. But I couldn't do it. It struck me that somewhere during the previous year I had let go of my anger and desire for revenge and put my life — all of it — in someone else's hands. How else could I explain my reaction to that reporter's attempts to inflame me?

At that point I knew I had reached the place Marilyn would want me to be — where I could give God all my pain and He would give me the love I needed to take its place.

After experiencing A Deeper Surrender, John Sage decided to take his spiritual journey further. He volunteered for a program for prisoners called Sycamore Tree in which crime victims meet with inmates once a week for 12 weeks. "Contrary to my expectations, we made a significant difference in their lives," says John. "I could really see the transforming power of God's love and forgiveness." John was so impressed with what the program did for both offenders and victims that in 1998 he founded a similar program, Bridges To Life, for which he now works full-time.

For more information visit their website at www.bridgestolife.org.

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