

Foreword by bestselling author JANETTE OKE

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Faith of Our Mothers — *Holy Faith*

Non-fiction
Keith Clemons

He was born with a smile on his face, so they called him “Sunny.” Though on paper they officially dubbed him Walter, Sunny was the name he would go by all his life. I can’t say I blame him. What child in his right mind would want to be called Walter?

His wife would be Norma Jean, though he certainly didn’t know it at the time, nor did he care; but that was God’s plan, and a good one too. How can you fail with a name like Norma Jean? Having the same birth name as Marilyn Monroe practically made her a star.

Sunny’s mother heard the call of God as a young adult. She’d gone forward and been baptized by Aimee Semple McPherson herself, and if that didn’t make her Christian, well, what did? At least she thought so. But her faith was sincere, so even though Sunny’s father refused to go, whenever Dad was out of town, Mom would bundle the kids up and hustle them off to church. So it was that at age 12, Sunny made that all-important decision to follow Christ. But that was pretty much the sum of his religious training. He grew up believing God was somewhere out there in the cosmos and figured that was pretty much all he needed to know.

Sunny was 19 when World War II broke out, so he enlisted in the U.S. Air Corps to become a pilot. His first week on base in California, he was assigned responsibility for more than 300 men as a squadron leader, which was pretty heady stuff for a young cadet. He was so full of himself, the buttons nearly popped off his uniform.

Norma Jean's life was somewhat different, though not in a good way. Her parents didn't know God. Their idea of being filled with the spirit was drinking 90-proof liquor from a bottle.

But they were a close family. Being good parents, they wouldn't think of leaving their kids home when they went out for the evening. Instead, they'd lock the children in the car and leave them shivering in the parking lot while they went into the dance hall and partied till the wee hours of morning. It was a marriage doomed to destruction.

In spite of their parents' ongoing verbal abuse and periods of heavy fighting, Norma and her brother did have moments of respite. During tumultuous times when their parents wanted to be alone so they could fight in private, the children stayed with their grandparents, who were Christians. I guess, in some weird way, you could call her parents beating on each other a blessing. And there was a short two-year period of grace when her folks more or less got along.

The interludes gave Norma and her brother an opportunity to go to church, but not with their parents—the Holy Spirit invited them, so they went with Him. It wasn't long before these two dear children of God went forward to accept Jesus. The only bad thing about church was they eventually had to go home. It was next to impossible for their faith to grow in a house where there weren't any Bibles and the only time they heard the Lord's name was when it was taken in vain.

One Saturday night, a busload of girls arrived at Sunny's army base for a dance. Having decided not to go, Sunny stayed in his barracks listening to the sound of the band wafting across the parade grounds. But as the evening lagged on and loneliness set in, he changed his mind. He walked into that gymnasium down past all the gals and guys seated along the wall until he spotted the prettiest girl on the floor, the one with the most effervescent smile and hair that just wouldn't stop bouncing.

He cut in on the dancing couple and it was what you might call love at first sight. Boy meets girl. Sunny meets Norma.

Norma was living in a town 50 miles¹ away, but that didn't stop Sunny from hitchhiking every Saturday night for the next few weeks to see her. On their eighth date, Sunny asked Norma to be his wife, on

their ninth they got a wedding licence, and the tenth time they saw each other, they got married. You had to act fast in those days; there was a war going on and Sunny was bound for overseas.

Sunny's parents couldn't make it to the ceremony, though Norma's mother did. There were, in fact, only 12 people there. But just before he shipped out, Sunny's mother gave him something that proved to be of more value than any wedding present she might have bought; she snuck a New Testament into his duffel bag.

Sunny wound up being stationed in Chabua, India, flying cargo ships over the Himalayan Mountains (affectionately called "the Hump") into China to assist Chiang Kai-shek, who was fighting the Japanese. It was some of the most dangerous flying in the Pacific theatre. Pilots had to negotiate 45,000 pounds of loaded weight over the highest mountain range in the world through thunderstorms, gale force winds, snow, ice, sleet and hail. The cabins weren't pressurized or heated. The crew wore two pairs of almost everything just to keep warm, and had oxygen masks glued to their faces from takeoff to landing. They lost about a plane a week. Good thing Sunny had a praying mom.

One evening, as they were preparing to fly out of Kuming, China, for some strange reason (let's just call it what it was—*God*), Sunny decided he needed more fuel. Gas was scarce in China. Each plane was allotted 750 gallons, no more. But on this trip Sunny refused to go unless they gave him 1,000 gallons. To this day, he doesn't know why he was so stubborn. He didn't have any particular reason for wanting extra fuel; he simply butted heads with the operations officer, and pride made him insist on getting his way. Pilots had the right to refuse to fly if conditions were deemed unsafe for the plane or crew. The operations officer was furious and, while he did give Sunny the extra gas just to get him off the tarmac, he swore he'd have his hide nailed to the wall when he got back.

The three-man crew—pilot, co-pilot and navigator—took off without getting a compass reading from the base. The nearest check-point at Yu-Nan-Ye was only 10 miles out, so they figured they could always get a bearing there. But they flew that ship way beyond where Yu-Nan-Ye should have been and never saw it.

Radioing back to base, they were told Yu-Nan-Ye was off the air, which was not good news. They were flying in the pitch black of night without a bearing, and they had no idea how to navigate home. To make matters worse, it wasn't long before the sky erupted with thunderheads, creating an electrical discharge that played havoc with their radio directional finder. The lightning kept attracting the loop antenna which caused the needle to spin around the dial. They didn't know if they were heading west straight into a mountain or east into the jungle. They were simply flying blind.

The thing about gas is (if you drive an SUV, you know) the further you go, the more you burn. And this wasn't a Toyota they were flying (Japan wasn't even our friend then); this was a Curtis-Wright freight train in the sky. One by one, the fuel gauges read *empty*: front tanks—*empty*; rear tanks—*empty*. Good thing Sunny asked for that extra gas. They were almost through their last remaining tank when he finally had to swallow his pride and admit they were lost.

Hailing “Mayday” was reserved for extreme emergencies. It just wasn't done unless absolutely necessary. But in this case they had no choice. So the navigator dropped a long-range antenna out the bottom of the ship and sent the distress call.

Their only hope was that the base would pick up the transmission and give them a heading. There were three possible answers: they could get a Class A: “We have you, here's where you are;” or a Class B: “We think you're approximately here, use Pilot's discretion;” or, the least desirable, a Class C: “Sorry, Charlie, we can't locate you. You're on your own.” Did I say least desirable? Hardly. In this case they couldn't even get a Class C heading. They simply got no response, which could only mean they were way off course and out of range.

On they went, watching the blackness slide by the window, still not knowing whether they were heading into a mountain, or into the drink, burning gas with each passing mile. Bailing out was an option, but very few who bailed out ever got back alive. The likelihood was that they were somewhere over the jungles of Burma. You had to go through the trees before you hit ground, which meant the possibility of getting caught in a treetop and not being able to get down, or suffering broken

bones from crashing into tree limbs and therefore not being able to walk. And the jungles were full of tribal headhunters seeking trophies for the game rooms in their grass huts. And if that wasn't enough, the place was crawling with unfriendly Japanese. They decided to ride it out. The navigator was still hailing Mayday on the long-range radio, but to no avail.

Right now, I want you to imagine Sunny's dear sweet mother down on her knees back home praying for her son at that very moment—after all, this is a story about faith.

All of a sudden, Sunny got the crazy idea to try his command set. That was the radio he used for landing. It only had a 75-mile range and was primarily employed on approach with the base in sight. He hailed a Mayday and, wouldn't you know, got an immediate response. The voice was unmistakably British. "This is George King. We read you R5-S5, what's your problem?"

R5-S5 was the British code for "loud and clear." In fact, the transmission was so clear, Sunny assumed the base was somewhere beneath them. He explained the situation, gave the man a count, and received a bearing. That gave everyone pause to take a breath, but when he pulled out his chart to fix their position and determine exactly where they were, there was no George King on the map.

They knew how many hours they'd been flying and regardless of how far off course they might be, they could only be so far from their base in China, and his radio had a maximum range of 75 miles so they kept searching but... nothing. He got out another set of charts expanding the distance, and then another and, what do you know, there it was, George King, right there on the map. On a radio with only a 75-mile range they were talking R5-S5 to a base 1,000 miles away in Calcutta. Go figure.

They have a technical term for what happened. In the parlance of communications, the phenomenon is known as "radio skip distance," but let's just call it what it was—a miracle. Sunny's mother always did say she prayed him through the war.

The base at George King gave them a bearing, but that didn't mean they were home free. They were still off course, flying on fumes, and 40 miles over Japanese lines. They turned north toward Mount Everest and headed for the base at Chabua on a wing and a prayer. As soon as they were within radio distance, Sunny requested a straight-in approach.

By now, every gas gauge was reading zero and they were coming in too low to bail out. The crew knew if the plane ran out of fuel before they hit the runway they'd have to ditch it in the jungle, and they knew what that meant. Soon after he had arrived on base, Sunny had been assigned to be a pallbearer for a crew member of a plane that had overshot the runway. The jungle just opened up, swallowed that flying bucket of bolts, and bounced back without leaving a trace. It took two months to find the plane and its crew, and by the time they did, jungle ants had eaten nearly all the flesh off the bodies.

By the grace of God, they touched down and taxied in. Sunny dismissed his co-pilot and navigator, but he stayed behind, curious. The ground crew came out and did their post flight inspection and when all was said and done they found the plane had about two gallons of gas in it, just enough to fill the lines and sumps in the carburetors. The Curtis Commando C-46 sported two of the biggest engines ever made. With the gas-guzzling size of those 2,000-horsepower motors, the weight of that bird (30,000 pounds, even when empty), and that thimbleful of fuel, they couldn't have stayed in the air even a few minutes more.

At that time, pilots usually were encouraged to take a shot of brandy upon landing to calm their nerves and help them sleep, but Sunny didn't take the elixir that night. He went straight to his tent. There was always someone to talk to in the tents, but when he arrived, he found the place unusually quiet—which was good, because if someone else had been there, he probably wouldn't have done what he ended up doing. He was, after all, a whiskey-drinking, cigar-smoking, hell-raising pilot with an image to protect.

But he was alone, and it occurred to him that none of this had happened by accident. Stubbornly demanding extra gas for no reason, not taking a routine tail bearing, having the weather knock out their

navigation systems, receiving help from a base a thousand miles away on a short range radio, and landing with only the fuel in the lines—too much coincidence to be a coincidence. Someone was trying to get his attention.

He remembered the New Testament his mother had put in his duffel bag and went to see if it was still there. It was. He lit a kerosene lamp, sat down in a wicker rocker and began to read. Before long, a supernatural peace came over him, the likes of which he'd never known. He dropped to his knees and, not really knowing how to pray, called out to God using a few expletives and said, "God, if You get me out of this *blankity-blank* war alive, I'll serve You the rest of my life."

It may not have been the usual response to the preaching of Billy Graham, or a waltz down the aisle with George Beverly Shea singing "Just as I Am," but surely the angels sang out a new name in heaven as this sinner came home.

Sunny crawled into the sack and slept like a baby. He eventually made a hundred trips over the Hump, earning a Distinguished Flying Cross, two Air Medals and a Citation from Chiang Kai-shek himself, and he never had to ditch a plane. That in itself was a miracle. Thank God for praying moms.

Sunny got home determined to honour his commitment. He returned battle-weary, a different man than when he left, to Norma, a woman he hardly knew.

But God had uniquely placed these two together. Both had accepted the Lord at a young age, and both came from unchurched backgrounds, so they had that in common, and God promises never to leave or forsake His own. Sunny and Norma never discussed religion before they got married, but now, the two of them set out on a journey to find God together.

The command to be fruitful and multiply was observed after the war as parents everywhere sought to replenish that which was lost. It wasn't long before they had three lovely children, Kathleen, followed by Keith (that's me) and then Christine. They were the perfect church-going, Bible-believing, Christ-centered family. Sunny, with his engineering

background, worked in aerospace as the world raced for the moon, and Norma set up housekeeping in suburbia where it seemed new inventions to make life easier were being invented every day—a television with color pictures, can you imagine? About the biggest concern they had was that they might miss an episode of Bonanza on a Sunday night—when Christine suddenly fell ill.

The entire family was about to be given a glimpse of how God imparts faith to mothers.

For two days, Christine lay curled up in her bed holding her stomach. Sunny and Norma took her to the doctor, but she was only three years old, just a bitty thing, and couldn't explain what ailed her. All they knew was that she was listless and wouldn't eat. The doctor sent them home with medicine for the flu.

They waited another two days before they insisted on seeing the doctor again. He opened his office to them on a Saturday, but 50 years ago they didn't have the tests we have today, so he had no way of determining what was wrong. Nonetheless, since Christine hadn't eaten anything in several days, the doctor admitted her to the hospital. He knew the problem was internal. There was nothing he could do but go in and take a look, and what he found was that her appendix had burst and she was filled with gangrene. Sunny had lost a sister to appendicitis when he was a young boy; now he faced losing his daughter. Back then, appendicitis was the number two killer of women. And the complication of gangrene made it worse.

They removed Christine's appendix, but her vital signs were weak, and infection had spread throughout her body. The doctor gave her as many penicillin injections as possible (so many her bum looked like a little red pincushion) but it had no effect. Nothing they tried seemed to work.

The doctor counselled the couple to go home and prepare for the worst, but they refused. They stayed at Christine's bedside for two days praying as her health continued to deteriorate. By the third day, they'd all but abandoned hope.



Sunny had walked every hall in the hospital and couldn't take it anymore. He decided to go into his office and make a few calls, just to get his mind on something else, and he convinced Norma she needed to rest. After dropping her at home, Sunny went on into work, but he was too distracted to get anything done. It wasn't long before Norma called and, with the anxiety of a worried mother, insisted they return to the hospital.

Now, they'd both prayed the whole time they were with Christine, but for some reason God chose this moment to assure Norma everything would be all right. As she knelt by her bed waiting for Sunny to drive back from the office, you could almost hear the angels sing, "When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrow like sea billows roll..."² Norma opened her Bible to a passage where Christ was healing the sick, and all of a sudden she rose to her feet filled with what she describes as "perfect peace" (the same thing Sunny felt that night in his tent thanks to another praying mom). Somehow, Norma knew everything would be all right. She started doing the laundry.

Sunny arrived home to find his wife singing and hanging clothes on the line in the back yard. To say he was unnerved by her calm would be an understatement. She should be weeping, or praying, or *something*. She'd called *him*, for crying out loud. Shouldn't she be insisting they return to the hospital at once? He was confused and angry, but Norma just kept singing and putting clothespins on those socks, content to wait until the laundry was done.

Today when they tell this story, Sunny is honest enough to admit his wife's faith tested the limits of his patience. What made her so sure everything was okay?

But when they entered Christine's room, they found the oxygen tent had been removed and the nurse was gushing with excitement. "Your daughter's eating again," she exclaimed, and when they looked into the crib, Christine reached up and wiggled her fingers, begging to be held.

Don't you just love happy endings? By the way, when asked what time she'd first noticed signs of improvement, the nurse gave the exact hour Norma had risen from her knees and felt that perfect peace.

How about that?

And those are only two of many stories I could tell.

I'm reminded of that grand old hymn, "Faith of Our Fathers,"³ in which the refrain rings out, "Faith of our fathers, holy faith!" It's a great song with a fantastic message, but I can't help feeling it leaves our mothers a bit short-changed. Anyone with a praying mom knows the faith of our mothers is a "holy" faith as well.

1. Rough metric equivalents for U.S. measures used in the story:

1 mile = 1.6 kilometres

1 gallon (32 ounces) = 3.8 litres

1 pound = 454 grams or .454 kilogram

2. Hymn "It Is Well with My Soul," Horatio G. Spafford, 1828-1888. Public Domain.

3. Hymn "Faith of Our Fathers," Frederick W. Faber, 1814-1863. Public Domain.