



In Ann Sothorn's 1956 cover story her struggle was with fear, but her greatest struggle was yet to come.

After the Accident

by Ann Sothorn

I came across an old copy of *GUIDEPOSTS* dated September 1956. My picture was on the cover, and next to it was the title "My Struggle With Fear."

I sat down and reread it, reliving the time when a severe attack of infectious hepatitis had left me emotionally broken and tortured with self-doubt and fear. I had felt certain I could never again make normal decisions, much less face the cameras. In the article, I told how I overcame my fear. Instead of relying on my own limited strength, I learned how to reach out to God, "drawing from my Father's inexhaustible spring."

Resting the magazine on my lap, I thought of what I have lived through in the years since. It's not fear I've struggled against—I won out over that. It is pain. Physical pain. My ever-present companion.

Since that article appeared, my career continued with the *Private Secretary* television series and *The Ann Sothorn Show*.

And my daughter, Tisha, the little girl pictured with me, had grown up into her own acting career. But as Job says in the Bible, "Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward" (5:7, NIV*).

The sparks flew for me on opening night of a play called *Everybody Loves Opal* in August 1974 in Jacksonville, Florida. In an early scene the ceiling was supposed to collapse. And it did, but accidentally at the wrong moment. I could not get out of the way quickly enough. A piece of heavy stage scenery, actually an 18-foot-tall tree trunk supporting the ceiling, crashed down on my lower back. Fortunately no one else was hurt, but I lay face down, gasping.

The house lights flashed on. "Is there a doctor in the house?" was shouted. A physician rushed up, carried me to my dressing room and proceeded to tape my body with heavy silver gaffer's tape. In shock, I returned to the stage and finished the play sitting in a chair.

*New International Version



Ann and her actress daughter, Tisha Sterling, who played Ann's younger self in "The Whales of August" (far left); Ann's 1956 *GUIDEPOSTS* cover; Ann and Tisha in 1956.

The next morning as I started to get up, white-hot pain seared my back. I grabbed the bedpost to keep from falling. *I'll be all right if I just rest*, I told myself. After all, I was an athletic person; I'd taken good care of myself. I'd danced professionally, skied in my Idaho mountains, played golf and tennis, shot skeet and swam. I knew I would recover. "Indestructible Annie" I called myself.

But the pain persisted. To stand, I found myself clutching the back of a chair, breathing deeply against the ache. Walking was almost impossible; for some reason I could not feel my feet.

Orthopedic surgeons found that the nerves in my spine had been smashed and the fourth vertebra had been fractured. My doctor's face was grave as he sat down by my bed. "You may never walk normally again, Ann," he said. "You have what is called a 'drop foot,' which is why you have little control over your feet." He would not guarantee an operation. The vertebra would heal, but the nerves were beyond repair.

Hospital treatments began, but nothing seemed to help. The pain would subside a bit and then come back with a vengeance. And so began an endless-seeming series of hospital stays—and my long struggle with pain.

I lay in bed with 100-pound weights pulling on my legs in an attempt to relieve the pressure on my spine. I grew impatient. Frustrated. An acting career was out of the question. Always impatient with illness of any kind, I became short with my nurses and doctors. The day-to-day sameness of baths and bland food was bad enough. But my real horror came at night. Night after night, in the solitude of the dark, I would writhe in agony, watching the hour hand creep with maddening slowness toward my next pill.

And then came the night of revelation. When the pain had become so piercing that I cried out to Him in anguish, God answered. He gave me a vision of the One Who had suffered most of all. I saw Jesus on the cross, hanging from impaled wrists, bearing down on spiked heel bones in a struggle to lift His body

to keep from suffocating. I saw Jesus in agony, lacerated, thirsting.

Looking up from my hospital bed, I felt a companionship with Him. Since He had endured His pain for me, I asked myself: *Can I do any less for Him?* Through my own pain, I acknowledged His sacrifice with the purest gratitude I have ever felt.

And then—knowing that Jesus, Who shares our misery, and grieves with us in it, asks us to give Him our burdens—I passed to Him all my pain along with my sins and shortcomings. Feeling closer to my Lord than ever before, I fell into a deep slumber.

Of course, there were other times when the pain would not let me sleep. I learned to escape by picturing Jesus as a gentle shepherd standing before me with outstretched arms. And I, like a frightened lamb, would nestle in them.

I often visualized Jesus gently rocking me, and I would relax. This helped me more than I realized, for as my therapist later explained, the more we fight pain, the worse it becomes.

So began a long journey in which I learned to make pain my companion, my friend. Pain stretched my understanding of life. I found myself becoming more sympathetic to others. I lost my impatience with the nurses and doctors, who had their own pressures to deal with. I began to experience the real sense of the word "compassion," which is derived from the Latin roots *com* and *pati*, meaning "to suffer with."

Once, I had winced at the moans of other patients; now I found myself praying for them. And in doing this, I began to forget my own pain. Now I understood what Saint Paul tells us in Second Corin-

thians: God "comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received" (1:4, NIV).

In the 14 years since the accident, I have learned to live with pain. So far there has been no cure for it. But as the writer Merle Shain says, we can approach it "as a victim or as a gallant fighter," and I much prefer to be the latter.

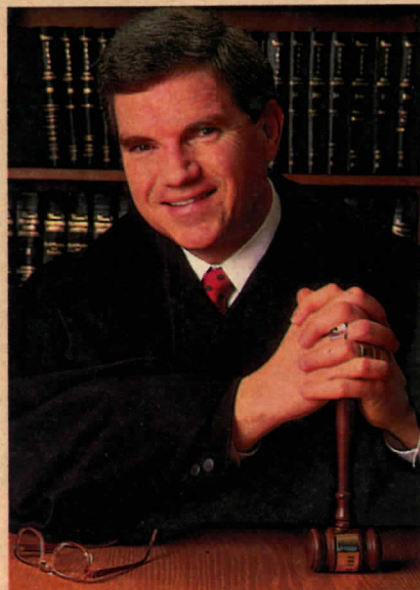
Pain has also helped me to appreciate the world God has given us. On my first tottering steps as I left St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica, I had to depend on a cane, the one I use today. But I'll always remember the beauty of that moment, the fragrance of flowers, the emerald brilliance of the lawn, the warmth of sun on my back. I felt grateful.

In 1986 I was offered a role in the movie *The Whales of August* along with Lillian Gish, Bette Davis and Vincent Price. It was to be filmed in the autumn on a rugged, desolate island off the coast of Maine. Friends warned me of the dangers: the precarious rocky footing, the wet, stormy weather. But the script told me it was a story of survival. And I am a survivor. Aren't we all?

Of course, I wanted to act again. The two months of filming *were* difficult, cold and stormy. But, oh my, how grand and glorious it was, doing what I felt God put me on this earth to do.

Perhaps someday I shall be free of pain. But who of us really is? It is a small price to pay for living. Recently I read that the pain most often mentioned in the Bible is that suffered by a woman in giving birth. But out of her travail comes new life. I like to think that out of my pain, I too have found new life. ◀

THE QUIET



With its shelves of Bibles, concordances and atlases, the library at Grace United Methodist Church in East Dallas, Texas, doesn't look like a courtroom. And the man who sits at one table doesn't look like a courtroom judge. He wears no robes, he doesn't give instructions to a jury, he doesn't even get paid. And yet the decisions Merrill Hartman makes here on Thursday nights are as binding as any he makes during the day in the 192nd Civil District Court.

Judge Merrill Hartman—that's right, he's a real judge—started this unusual night court in a roundabout way. Five years ago he was an attorney with a small practice specializing in trial law. He was representing a client in Puerto Rico when the sight of needy children there pricked his conscience. He thought of children like them that he'd seen back

PEOPLE

"Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee..."
(Matthew 6:2)

home in Dallas. What could he do for them and their parents?

Back in Dallas, Hartman began visiting a poor section of the city, where he and two other lawyers started a clinic, offering free legal help to the people there. Soon other lawyers joined them, and more legal clinics sprang up.

Then in 1984 his career took a big change when he ran for judge. Once elected, however, he was not able to volunteer at the legal clinic, for judges are not allowed to practice law. How could he continue to serve the poor?

Several months after his election, Hartman was asked by a local reporter how he planned to help the legal clinics. Without having ever thought about it before, he announced, "I'm going to hold court at them."

And so one evening a week, that's what he does, sitting in a church library to hear uncontested family-law matters. Because this court is in session at night, volunteer attorneys are easier to find; these cases don't take them away from the office during the most productive hours of the day. Similarly, clients usually don't have to miss work.

Hartman now shares his "bench" with three other volunteer judges. It is a unique concept in American jurisprudence, and it all got started because Judge Hartman sought a way to serve God. "The gospel is about justice for the poor," he says, "and this is something God has equipped me to do." ◀

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