

by Patricia Nanoff

**L**ight a candle at the center of your group as a symbol of Christ in transfigured glory.

**LEADER:** I lift up my eyes to the mountains. From whence does my help come?

**ALL:** My help comes from the Holy One, who made heaven and earth.

**LEADER:** Let us invite into our minds a moment of glory and revelation. *Pause.*

**ALL:** We come to share our stories of transforming grace.

**I** am a collector of stories. My research documents the life journeys of long-sober alcoholic women. Sobriety stories are transfiguration stories with a twist; they describe walking the labyrinth of suffering (how it was), awakening (what happened), and redemption (how it is now). Each week people in 12-step meetings gather to tell their stories, to listen for the whisper of the Holy Spirit in the stories of others who have achieved sobriety.

Newly sober members learn to craft their stories by attending to the stories of those who are farther along the path. As they grow in sobriety their accounts of “how it was” become shorter and a new awareness of the reconciling spirit of God is evidenced in stories of “what happened.” As they journey toward long-term sobriety, accounts of “how it is now” offer solace and hope to those who are new to the path.

Sobriety stories are essentially Lenten journeys, instructive

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# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY

because they represent God’s healing, transforming presence in the bleakest situations.

**PJ**, a recovering alcoholic woman with 33 years of sobriety, tells how it was.

*I never realized I was an alcoholic. I lived a life of quiet desperation and when I went to bed at night I really hoped that I would never wake up. I was raising four kids and it was very difficult for the whole family. But I was a functional drunk. I paid the bills, I cooked the meals, I did everything during these blackouts.*

*I called AA in a blackout; it was during the end of a ten-day blackout from drinking. I barely remember two lovely ladies coming to see me. One of*

*them even washed my hair and fixed me all up.*

*That night they came back and took me to a meeting; no, I drove myself to the meeting because I remember I stopped by a bar and had a couple of drinks before I went to the meeting. That’s the only way I got there. They tell me—there are not too many people around now that were at my first meeting—but the ones that were tell me that they had to hold the table down because I shook so bad. I don’t remember anything about that meeting except feeling there was some hope there, that if I came out and said that I was an alcoholic that I could be helped. And so I did.*

*I came home and I had some beers left; I used to hide them in a suitcase in a garage. So I drank them, went to bed, and never had another drink afterwards. The urge to drink was almost immediately lifted from me. I never had any religious education but I did know that my Higher Power was working for me even when I couldn’t work for myself.*

Transformation begins in hitting our limits.

● **What experience do you have of hitting your limits?**



# GOSPEL

## Jesus' friends glimpse his divinity.

**NARRATOR 1:** Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James, and his brother John and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. He was transfigured before their very eyes.

**NARRATOR 2:** His face became as dazzling as the sun, his clothes bright as light. Suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared to them, conversing with him.

**PETER:** Lord, how good it is for us to be here. With your permission I will erect three booths here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.

**NARRATOR 1:** Peter was still speaking when a bright cloud overshadowed them. Out of the cloud came a voice.

**VOICE:** This is my beloved Son, on whom my favor rests. Listen to him.



**NARRATOR 2:** When they heard this, the disciples fell forward on the ground, overcome with fear. Jesus came toward them and laying his hand on them, said—

**JESUS:** Get up. Don't be afraid.

**NARRATOR 1:** As they went back down the mountain, Jesus ordered them—

**JESUS:** Do not tell anyone of the vision until the Son of Man rises from the dead.

Matthew 17:1-9

## God's grace moves us into mystery.

Matthew's account of the transfiguration is the preeminent story of transformation. Just a few verses earlier Jesus tells his followers for the first time that he will suffer, die, and rise on the third day. Then he leads Peter, James, and John to a place away from the others to show them what it means to walk the path through death to resurrection.

In his transfiguration we see Jesus as both divine and vulnerable, belonging to both heaven and earth, residing in both ordinary and extraordinary worlds.

His transfiguration terrifies his followers, but Jesus touches them gently and tells them not to fear.

This awakening to Jesus' suffering moves the disciples from ordinary to sacred time. This vision disturbs their lives. The solid ground on which they stand shifts. Jesus' transfiguration is a crossroad event for Peter, James, and John that casts new light on Jesus' place in Israel's history and their future as his followers.

● **When has an awakening transformed your past and future?**

I have seen the awakening process at work in the lives of sober alcoholic women. One of the fruits of this dynamic spirituality is the recognition of God's grace within the terrible experience of alcoholism. God's consistent loving presence unifies the shattered self.

These transfigurations happen not on mountains but in deep valleys of despair and longing. Awakening is a painful process. KP, who had 54 years of sobriety at the time, gives the following account of her move from suffering to reconciliation.

*I set about to drink myself to death. I drank straight for about six weeks. I never ate when I drank because I didn't want to put the fire out, and besides when I would sober up, I couldn't eat so I would have to have another drink just to keep going. And by this time I was just wanting oblivion—not to feel, not to think, not to even be there.*

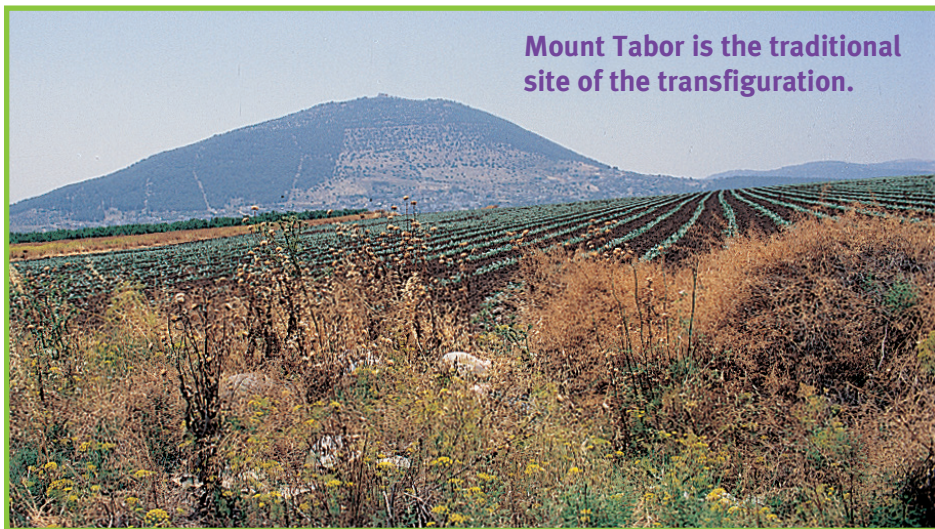
*I was so miserable, and so desperate, and so in despair; twenty-three years old and just in despair. That was when I asked God for help. And surprise, surprise, He answered my prayers. He gave me such a peaceful feeling, so much serenity that I never knew in my life. And I knew that there was a God and that He did love me and that I was going to be ok.*

*Later that afternoon, this lady that I knew in AA... I could hear her voice out in the hallway. I thought, "Oh God, I'm hearing things again." Why would I think it was her out there talking to the bellhop? So I called down to the desk and asked if she lived there. I asked them to ring her room and they said that she was moving into*

*the room right next door to me! God works in wonderful ways!*

*I talked to her and told her what had happened to me and about this feeling I had. She dropped everything and came over. She talked to me—I was so weak from not eating for so long. She fed me and she stayed with me all night. Now for someone to put themselves out so much for someone like me, who didn't deserve to be treated as well as she was treating me—*

*That's what I felt about myself. I had done so many terrible things, how could anybody want to help me? You know you get that old guilt feeling.*



**Mount Tabor is the traditional site of the transfiguration.**

*We're harder on ourselves than anybody else could ever be. But she did that for two or three days until I could go downstairs by myself and get my own meals.*

**T**he power in KP's story rests on the image of God contained within it. The woman who moves next door and helps is anonymous yet clearly a person of luminous presence. She shifts the focus from the terror of alcoholism to the promise and possibility of redemption. The company of the woman next door becomes a crossroads experience for KP, transforming her past and future.

● **Identify a crossroad experience in your life—a peak or valley.**

● **How did this experience challenge your beliefs?**

● **How did your experience change your understanding of God's reconciling grace in your life?**

**L**ike the gospel account of the transfiguration, KP's transformation takes place under the radar of the mundane world. Long-sober women are rather like shadows in our communities—they give and heal and make the presence of

God manifest without ever really calling attention to themselves. Yet their healing actions are felt in the communities in which they reside.

The presence of long-sober women is a transformational presence—they express love and support and God's healing grace through their faithfulness to those who still walk the Lenten path toward reconciliation.

● **Whose actions have healed you?**

● **To whom have you brought God's healing?**



## **God's promise creates a people.**

**I**srael's history begins with God calling Abram and Sarai to become a blessing to all the communities of earth. Their willing response transforms not only their lives but the lives of their descendants.

God calls Abram and Sarai to leave the land of the familiar and be remade as God's people. God's grace sustains them in the journey from wilderness to new life, new identity, new community. This is a passage of hope and promise.

Long-sober alcoholic women express this kind of journey when they tell stories of awakening. MB, who had 43 years of sobriety tells this story of being called to a land that God showed her.

*Finally the symptoms got so bad that I began to want to strike out at people. It got to the point that if my little girl would come into the kitchen and I was peeling potatoes, I would have to throw that knife on the counter because that was how afraid I was.*

*It was at that point that God came into my life because I had become teachable. It was that little momentary crack in that shell which gave me that momentary insight where I was able to say it isn't what happened to me, or to my mother or father, whom I hated and was obsessed with every day, and it isn't my husband or my little girl. It's*

*the alcohol that is doing this to me. And it was just that little moment of insight.*

*It was at that point that God placed sober members of Alcoholics Anonymous right in my path. They led me through my first meeting and the miracle happened. They had the tradition that the primary purpose of an AA group is to carry the message of Alcoholics Anonymous—and that is exactly what they did.*

*They gave me these one-liners, “Any idiot can stay sober for one day,” and “All you have to do is say please in the morning and thank you at night” without any explanation around it. It was the idea of 24 hours that really saved my life. You see I had an awful time getting out of the past because I was so obsessed with what had been done to me and so it was good for me to have the structure of a miniature lifetime. I thought of each day as a lifetime.*

*They worked and worked and worked on me to get into today and to stay in today. I memorized that little saying, “There are two days of the week about which we should not worry. One is yesterday with all its pain....” I had it up on my mirror and memorized it one line at a time. It was a wonderful tradition for me to get into today. And of course not worrying about tomorrow because it is not here yet; it has not dawned yet. All we have left is today. They kept on and on with that. And they began to teach me how to live without picking up a drink today.*

*I was a daily drinker; I was not a falling down drunk like my mother, I was a daily drinker who was constantly under the influence of*

*alcohol and I had to drink to make any decision, to iron, to decide what to cook for a meal. You know for the first few months of a person’s sobriety we have to guide them step-by-step, day-by-day. There are layers of the onion and it takes years to really see ourselves and learn how to live sober.*

*We say that getting sober and having the fullness of this program takes a long, long time because we don’t feel God when we come into this program. I certainly wasn’t feeling this. It took a long time for the shell to begin to crack. And so I began that walk with the steps that have continued to this day.*

**T**he experience of long-sober women represents one example of how God continuously makes new community with us. Long-sober women enter into a new life crafted out of the wreckage of the past. They develop the capacity for a deep relatedness that can absorb and heal the injuries of shame so painful to new members.

These women model methods of confrontation that do not further the injury already done by drinking. They freely offer the hope found in a profound appreciation for the absurdities of life. They never, never take the blessings of new life for granted.

Long-sober women are like living sacraments, expressing love and support and God’s healing grace through their faithfulness to those who still suffer. They have risen from the dead and now walk among us.

## God’s call to Abram

The Holy One said to Abram and Sarai: “Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and your parents’ house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you.”

Abram and Sarai went as the Holy One directed, and their nephew Lot with them.

Genesis 12:1-4.

- What attitudes, beliefs, emotions, behaviors have you left behind because you entered the place God showed you?
- Who has been a blessing to you in your journey?

# PRAY

**LEADER:** Holy and Gracious God, bestow upon us the courage and steadfastness we need to continue our Lenten journey of faith toward you.

**ALL:** Help us to build a global community of love upon our earth.

*Patricia D. Nanoff, DMin, is the author of Rising from the Dead, Stories of Women’s Journeys to Sobriety.*

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