

COME BACK,
BARBARA

A FATHER'S PURSUIT
OF A PRODIGAL DAUGHTER

COME BACK,
BARBARA

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BARBARA MILLER JULIANI


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To our family
who always welcomed Barbara:
Rose Marie, Jim and Roseann, Jim and Ruth,
Paul and Jill, Angelo, Bob and Keren
And to the larger Christian family
who prayed for her so faithfully

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FOREWORD

THE CALLS AND emails still come—anxious parents track me down because they are worried about a straying child. Is there anything harder? Perhaps, but it is excruciating to watch much-loved children make choices that hurt themselves and others. Sometimes when parents contact me, they ask if I am still a Christian (I am). Most think that *Come Back, Barbara* was written recently. I laugh and say, “It’s a timeless story of God’s grace for prodigal parents and children.” My dad and I wrote this together more than thirty years ago. He went to be with Jesus over twenty years ago. My husband Angelo and I have been married more than forty years. We have four children, all of whom are married, and at last count we have ten grandchildren with one more on the way.

When I talk with parents, I tell them what my parents found out many years ago and what I have realized in my parenting: there is no formula for saving your child—but there is Jesus. There is also no formula for saving yourself—but there is Jesus. In our story, transformation flowed from Jesus through my parents and then to me and Angelo.

At the beginning of our book, you will meet an out-of-control young woman who wanted to go her own way

(thus the label *prodigal*). But, if you read carefully, you will also meet a prodigal father and mother. My parents believed in God. They knew that Jesus was the only way to heaven, but they didn't understand how dependence on him should shape their everyday lives. Instead, the functional Miller family gospel went something like this: *faith in God plus hard work will equal God rewarding you*. One reward my parents expected from all their hard work was children who were Christians.

God used the unexpected disappointment and grief caused by my flight from God and home to show my parents their daily need to turn to Jesus for forgiveness, hope, and help. That's the Christian life, and God used their prodigal daughter to teach them the basics. The amazing result of their learning humble reliance on their heavenly Father was that I finally got a true picture of what it meant to live by faith. I had always thought that becoming a Christian meant I had to be good (I also thought it meant going to potlucks, wearing donated clothing, and having a house full of books—but that's a whole other story). I knew that I wasn't a good person (inside or out), so I knew that Jesus wasn't for me. Even as I write that, I think it's so sad that we all got the gospel exactly backward. Because Jesus came for sinners. He alone is able to save sinners. But of course you have to know that you are in need of saving. My rebellion showed my parents how far they were from God and how much they needed Jesus. They learned to live by faith in the most disappointing circumstance.

As my parents lived the gospel in front of me—asking for forgiveness, being transparent about their sins and weaknesses, and not giving up on loving me—I saw that being a Christian might be for me too. The true gospel met my need exactly. Eventually I didn't see how I could live

without it. But this book (and the gospel of Jesus Christ) is about more than solving a difficult relationship. It's about the power of God to change the hardest of hearts and how that change spreads from person to person so that eventually the bright hope of the gospel spreads through the whole world. It started out small—my parents were humbled and learned to rely on Jesus. Then I became a Christian, Angelo became a Christian, friends and family became Christians. And God has used all of us to tell others about him all over the world.

When you finish this book, it may seem like our story was wrapped in a neat bow. But really it was just beginning. God invited me, called me, and made it impossible for me to refuse to enter with him in a grand adventure. Like all adventures, it has had many highs, where we were privileged to see God at work in amazing ways. It has also had many lows, some so sad that they are impossible to speak of. But through it all we have seen God weaving a web of glory. We see today (just as we did many years ago) the power of God to save prodigals of all kinds. We still need Jesus as desperately today as we needed him when we first turned to him for forgiveness—perhaps more. Our faith has been tested and tried. But we look to Jesus. And we look forward to the grand day when, in the words of Julian of Norwich, “all shall be well, and all manner of things will be well.” We know it's coming, and we can't wait.

Barbara Miller Juliani

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

THE STORY is essentially told by C. John Miller, with Barbara Miller Juliani responding to each chapter with her account of events and her view of them. Each of us tried to tell the story as we felt it at the time, keeping hindsight to a minimum. It should be evident that we often had different views of the same incidents, but that is what the book is all about. The purpose is to show how a father and a daughter with conflicting values came to have a wonderful reconciliation through Christ's working changes in both of us.

A FATHER'S INTRODUCTION

AS WE RAISED our five children, my wife and I believed that each was a gift from God, that all of them were special. We were convinced that God had given them to us for an important purpose, and as an expression of that faith, we made our children into our close friends. The story that follows is the journey we made with one of those friends, a friend who was even to forsake us for a time—our daughter Barbara. This is a story of intense sorrows, with us as parents being crushed many times by events beyond our control. But we always were Barbara's friends—no matter what she did; and for her part she always saw us as *her family*. Paradoxically this was true even when she bitterly rejected us and our values, and blamed us for her problems.

Now comes the hard question: if our home had such faith and love, did I fail Barbara as a father? If so, how? This book tells the full story. Although I do not believe that my child's flaws are always mine or are caused by me, I also know that I failed Barbara in ways too numerous to mention. I suspect every thinking parent knows that he or she blunders. But in my role as Barbara's father, there was a particular serious flaw that I now see, though I did not see it when she was an adolescent. It was a sin of omission more

than of commission. In brief, my friendship with Barbara was inadequately cultivated when she entered the junior-high years. I did not work to *touch* her inner life when she came to the crisis period that begins for most American youngsters upon entering the seventh or eighth grade. And I was blind to my failure.

But my tragic mistake is only the jumping-off point for the grand adventure that unfolds here. However inadequately I tell it, the events narrated in this book are beautiful in spite of their pain. Even before Barbara begins to change, you will see how I lose control of the situation and eventually lose my need to do so. Therein lies the divine paradox. I lose battle after battle. Some of it goes down hard. Repeatedly I get the stuffing kicked out of me in the conflict with my daughter. I did not like to live year after year with the tension of the battle and the constant feeling that things were completely out of my hands. But at the end of the story you discover that Barbara's change was not a fluke, a lucky turnabout. It came about because God was weaving a web of love around us all, and an important part of that web was his working through my being humbled.

At the end, I was as much a wayward father as Barbara was a wayward daughter. And of course, it was not my victory but my Father's. In his triumph I received back my daughter. She and I now walk together in sunshine after the storm that cleansed the air.

This book, then, is meant to encourage parents who may be walking in the shadows of failure. Some anxious parents with younger children are already anticipating failure, as they face the teen years with dread. They expect the worst. Other parents feel that the worst has already happened, seeing themselves battered and bruised by a rebellious adolescent.

The theme of the book is simply that if God could help

someone like me—with all my sins and weaknesses—then he can help you and your family. Bringing up children is simpler than you or I ever thought. The master principle is simply this: confront the conscience—and don't be impressed by outward conformity. But even if you have failed at this, the power of God's grace is so much stronger that you need never despair of your children, no matter what state they are in. This is as true of the nonconformist rebels as it is of the conformist rebels.

In this book you will also discover that God has a healing sense of humor. It makes me smile to think that he was seeking the rebellious father through the rebellious child. Obviously he wanted to change me right along with Barbara, and he worked at it by sending me a series of humbling defeats that lasted almost eight years. But the upside-down, queer thing is that the more I lost the more I won.

A DAUGHTER'S INTRODUCTION

I STOOD BEFORE my fellow students and nervously introduced the poem I was about to recite. “This is a poem,” I said, “about a man who flees from God, but everywhere he turns he meets him. Finally he has no choice but to accept God’s love for him.” Then I recited Francis Thompson’s “Hound of Heaven”:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

There I was, a skinny little eighth grader with no idea that I had just given a short summary of the next dozen years of my life. I hadn’t even picked this poem; my father suggested it. I felt uncomfortable reciting it before my rowdy junior-high friends, but I never forgot the poem. Years later, after learning of God’s love for me, I reread it with tears.

In those days I was a Christian—on the surface. I did all the right Christian things, like going to church and

Christian school, but the reality—beneath the surface—was far different.

Sometimes reality broke through. For instance, during that year one of my teachers called my dad in for a conference. As we sat in the small office, my teacher used words like *dishonest*, *not working up to her potential*, and *deceiving* to describe me. Afterward, when my dad asked me some questions about my honesty, I put him off with vague half-answers.

The reality was that I was a rebel in disguise. At eighteen I put off the disguise. It's a familiar story, one that has occurred many times in countless homes, for many people have had bad relationships with parents and have acted in destructive ways. There is nothing out of the ordinary in the bad judgment I showed in ordering my life. What makes this story stand out is that God used my parents to pursue me and to teach me about his love. Through their love, the Hound of Heaven was able to find me, and that is what makes this story worth telling.

1

“COME BACK, BARBARA”

Jack

WE ARE NOT a family of shouters. We don't raise our voices or even argue much, except in a joking way. And it certainly isn't our style to lose our tempers.

But this day was different. It was late July 1972. The place: Cuernavaca, a lovely paradisaical city located on a high plateau about sixty miles south of Mexico City. The setting was a room on the second floor of Chula Vista, the gleaming white main building of the Alpha-Omega center for missionary outreach. It was midmorning. My eighteen-year-old daughter, Barbara, slender and darkly tanned, sat on a low single bed diagonally across from my chair. Near her on another chair was Rose Marie, her mother. Rose Marie is blue-eyed and blond, and at that moment her eyes were blazing.

“Mom, Dad,” Barbara shouted, “I don't want your rules and morals. I don't want to act like a Christian anymore! And I'm not going to!”

“Barb,” cried her mother, “stop it! Stop it right now!” Rose Marie left her chair and shook Barbara by the shoulders. “You're acting crazy! Listen to me! Do you know what you're doing?”

At that point I joined in with my own raised voice. It

was ineffectual. I felt stupid and embarrassed. Then we all began to weep, Barbara with anger and frustration, and Rose Marie and I out of anger and fear for our daughter.

The source of the tension had been Barbara's insistence that she had a right to "personal freedom" in her relationships with men. She was not giving an inch and neither were we. The next moment an angry Barbara bolted for the door and slammed it behind her with a defiant bang.

"Barbara Catherine," her mother called, "come back, come back!" The same words were in my own heart and on the tip of my tongue. But we might as well have saved our breath. Barbara was already downstairs, heading for the swimming pool shimmering in the subtropical sunlight. She had won the battle. We were stunned and felt like fools in our powerlessness.

Rose Marie looked pale in spite of her tan, and I was sick at heart. Everything seemed out of control. I felt that I had been the victim of invisible powers, like Oedipus hastening to his doom under the guidance of an iron, unfriendly fate. And I knew that I had somehow unwittingly contributed to my own defeat.

HOW HAD THIS crisis come about?

About a week before our son, Paul, had called us from our home in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, to say that he was deeply concerned about Barbara. Since he was close to Barbara and knew her well, he felt that she had been spending too much time with some of her non-Christian friends and that they were having a harmful influence on her. He urged us to invite Barbara to Cuernavaca immediately. So after a phone call from us, Barbara agreed to fly down.

At first things appeared to stabilize. Juan, one of the fine young men working with Alpha-Omega, escorted her

around Cuernavaca, unintentionally acting as her chaperone. But the bottom fell out the evening the three of us attended a Mexican wedding without Juan.

It was a magic night with the scent of a thousand flowers in the air. The fast beat of the mariachi music, the laughter, and the gaily dressed couples brought out Barbara's innermost longings. It quickly became clear that she couldn't wait to ally herself with some non-Christian man. The way she looked, the way she dressed, and the way she walked sent a clear message to the men around her: Barbara was ready to experiment with the world.

Soon a young man picked up the signals from the pretty señorita. As she sat at his table, I kept a fatherly eye on her, a thing that I did not like to do since our family had always operated on the basis of trust. Nothing particular troubled me, but I had the vague feeling that at the first opportunity she would jettison our family's moral values without a second thought. What so appalled me was that a "new Barbara" seemed to be emerging. What had happened to my friend and daughter? Inwardly I shuddered.

That evening was a terrific strain, even more for Rose Marie than for me. But what could we do?

We tried what most parents do. Early the next day, in that small hotel in Cuernavaca, we talked to Barbara and tried to reason with her. It didn't do much good. So Rose Marie and I went to our room and prayed. When we returned once more to talk with her, as I described at the beginning of this chapter, the whole scene went off like a bomb. Our words only made matters worse.

After Barbara slammed the door, we sat there in shock and confusion. We didn't say a word. We had always assumed that we had good communication with Barbara, based upon a shared faith. We had always thought of her as a Christian,

at least since she had joined the church at the age of sixteen. But now, while we knew she was not acting like a Christian, we still tried to treat her like one. Perhaps this was only a temporary lapse, we thought.

As parents, we were like two people working on a jigsaw puzzle who suddenly discover pieces in the box that do not seem to belong. It just didn't fit together. On the one hand, Barbara was acting like a pagan who couldn't wait to get out in the world "where the fun really is." On the other hand, we remembered her statement of faith when she became a full member of the church. She had spoken with seeming sincerity about Christ's having changed her life, and she had told us in a moving way what he meant to her.

Had she faked it? It just didn't seem possible. Her Christian life seemed to have been more than mere words. She had had a prominent part in helping a number of people become Christians. In doing so, she had certainly convinced them that she was a Christian. For instance, Jill Hebden, a high-school classmate now engaged to marry our son, Paul, had become a Christian largely through Barbara's example of Christian living among her peers in the local public high school.

Drugs had begun to enter the high school when Barbara was in the tenth grade, and Barbara had spoken out strongly against their use. In fact, her stand against drugs was so strong that it even prompted a school authority to call us and suggest that Barb was creating something of a myth about drugs in the school. In reflecting on Barbara's strength of character, Jill later said, "You certainly could've fooled me. I thought she was a Christian. She read her Bible regularly, and I know she turned down drugs."

So naturally we were taken aback by Barbara's claim that she was rejecting Christianity. But more importantly, we also thought she was implying that she had never been

a Christian. It was muted but it was said. Still, we were not prepared to believe it.

In other ways, Cuernavaca was a high point in my life. I had prayed for an increase in my love for God, and although I became ill with dysentery not long after that prayer, still, during that sickness I came to experience God’s love in a new way. The fruit of this new knowledge of him turned into a book that I wrote during that time. In a little over two weeks I wrote *Repentance and Twentieth Century Man*.

As I deepened in my experience of the joy of repentance, it just did not make sense that anyone would want to trade the fulfillment to be found in Christ for the short-term pleasures of the world. The whole thing just sounded crazy to Rose Marie and me, a nightmare that we hoped would vanish in the morning light.

Unfortunately, we were ten years too late to help Barbara. When our daughter was eight, we should have tried harder to face up to the truth about her inward life. But we could not help her now, not through persuasion and certainly not by our losing our tempers.

Barbara wanted freedom—freedom from all constraints, from parents, from church, from God. She was after the happiness that she sensed was to be found “out there,” apart from home and Christianity, and she wanted to be happy now. To become happy she opted for the fast lane, determined to step on the gas and pay no attention to cautionary road signs. Like the younger son in the parable of the father’s love, she wanted freedom from the parental home via a trip to the “far country.”

Unfortunately, I was not like the father in the parable, nor were Rose Marie and I ready to let go of our child and entrust her to God. This unwillingness generated a lot of tension in our minds and made us slow to accept the idea

that maybe Barbara had indeed faked many things during her adolescence. Who wants to admit to having been fooled by one's own child? But after Barbara slammed the door in Cuernavaca, we began to realize that it was too late, that she would have gone anyway, and that no one could have prevented her from "wasting her substance on riotous living."

In looking back on that morning, Rose Marie later said, "When Barb announced that she was 'not a Christian and didn't want to be one,' my world came crashing in on me. I reacted with anger and fear. I simply couldn't handle it. My own barriers were too high for me to be able to open up and deal calmly with what she was saying. I felt humiliated and betrayed."

Later that day, when all of us cooled down, our family's habitual dislike of conflict reasserted itself. Rose Marie and I sought out Barbara and invited her to come with us and her younger sister, Keren, on an expedition to the center of Cuernavaca. Beneath the surface the conflict was still there, but we managed to treat each other almost normally as we walked the half mile to the city center.

There we seated ourselves for lunch at an outdoor cafe. Our sense of humor even returned, at least momentarily. A young boy, probably around nine or ten, saw us. As he headed toward us he quickly transformed himself from a healthy youngster into a beggar with a twisted arm and leg. It was great acting. If I had not seen this little faker walking normally just a moment before, I would have been fooled, but I had seen him walking along the sidewalk and happily talking to his companions, and so had the whole family. So we greeted his performance with applause—but no money. He grinned sheepishly and departed.

Looking back, I can see that his game had in it a certain appropriate symbolism. Do we not all have our little games

we play on one another and even on ourselves to get what we want? In our family relationships, don't we often transform ourselves into cripples to get our own way? At that time I sensed that maybe a game was being played in our family, but I was too emotionally drained to learn the rules.

On a profounder level I also sensed that our family was under attack. Dark powers seemed to be ranged against us. As much as I loved subtropical Cuernavaca—with its sharp, clear air in the morning, its brilliant radiance at noon, and its evenings suffused with soft air—all that now seemed secondary. I felt the tread of evil walking the earth, laying traps for my feet, and whispering words of despair to my heart: "Give up on Barb, that ungrateful child." But I refused to accept her renunciation of Christ as the conclusive victory of Satan over Christ in her life. I felt I ought to give up, to reject her the way she was rejecting us, but vaguely I felt this would be to play her game. So inwardly I determined to wait on God, to lean on him in the midst of my fears and sense of defeat, and indeed I found a measure of release in this preliminary surrender of the situation to him. I could not call it full peace, but it had in it the beginnings of a quiet acceptance of his will for Barbara.

As we flew home to Philadelphia in August, we were aware that Barbara was still alienated from us, though outwardly she was civil. As we went through customs in Atlanta, I was still wrestling. My hope was that Barbara, in spite of herself, was still a Christian, that she was simply going through a time of temporary backsliding. But I also suspected that that was my own little game, my own private fable that Barbara had never deceived us about being a Christian. What made it so hard was that I had been deceived by a good friend—not just a daughter. I felt betrayed.

At home in Jenkintown, Barb was eager to get out of

the house and spend her time with those friends who had become her new models of conduct, in fact, the very friends that Paul had been concerned about before. Barbara didn't even seem to take seriously her preparations for her first year at Dickinson College. Rose Marie was upset by Barbara's new pattern of escape. Rose Marie needed Barbara to help her with the care and cleaning of our large house with its thirteen rooms. Rose Marie, weakened by major surgery that had taken place not long before our sojourn in Mexico, felt abandoned. As she said later, "I felt Barbara should stay home and get things in order for school, and I told her so. My saying it to her didn't help things. I guess this was the last time I had any conflict with her—there were hurts that went deep—and I don't believe I was open enough at that time to help her with her hurts."

As I sorted through my thoughts that August, I came to more definite answers to the questions that had haunted me. One question that would not go away was this: why had I let myself be so completely deceived by Barbara? The answer, I thought, was that family pride had blinded me to what she was really like.

More than once when she was growing up I had caught Barbara in deceptions. For instance, there was the time when Barbara was eight and was caught lying about brushing her teeth. At the time we lived in Redwood City, California. To help organize our family responsibilities while I did research on my PhD, I made up a hygiene-and-duty chart for the family. Every day each of our four older children was expected to check off the tasks completed. Barbara's chart showed that she had faithfully brushed her teeth every day during the past week. But one day Paul and Ruth presented Barbara's toothbrush to Rose Marie and me. It was as dry as a bone. Acting as self-appointed enforcers, they had been

examining her toothbrush for almost a week, and though she had checked the chart, the truth was that she had not brushed her teeth for a long time. What was even worse, Barbara, in spite of persuasion and discipline, would not admit that she had lied. She proved to be extremely stubborn. It was a powerful indicator of something wrong in her inner life, and it was also a call for us as parents to reexamine our approach.

But the truth is that we cooperated with our own deception. We failed to look the unpleasant truth squarely in the eye and do something about it. Most of the time Barbara conformed outwardly to the standards of the family, and we were too easily satisfied with that. We avoided the conflict that would have occurred if we had asked Barbara more probing questions about her values and motivations, what you might call her real wants. In fact, by accepting her superficial performance, we kept her from seeing what her real heart hungers were.

Facing up to this was unpleasant for me. But it was also healing. There were plenty of mysteries in the whole situation and to some extent there still are. But these were tangible truths that I could use in changing my own life. I sensed I needed to humble myself and acknowledge my failure as a parent. This helped clear my mind, and this acceptance led to a new release. I did not want to be emotionally crippled by my failures. Once I had identified them I asked God's forgiveness, and knowing I was forgiven renewed my confidence that he was present and working in our situation.

I cannot stress enough the importance of honest confession for parents who carry a burden of repressed guilt. There is nothing worse than wallowing in failure and enjoying the self-torture generated by it. In that state I am no help to anyone—not even myself. In fact, I am like the Mexican boy, pretending to be a cripple.

So it was not destructive to find out something of my weakness in bringing up Barbara, to admit the wrong and find God's pardon. Released from that burden through repentance, I was, with God's help, able to accept more of the truth about Barbara and to deal with her more honestly. This truth hurt, but it was like the pain of childbirth. I had to accept that our hard work and love had failed in Barbara's case. She was not just our "dear Barbara, with the tender heart," but a first-rate operator, a talented counterfeiter. But she too was being unveiled. Coming to the surface at last were her pugnacity toward us and her determination to turn her life into a disaster.

It was ghastly but it was the truth, and we needed to face the truth. There is no worse evil than to deny evil, to pretend that it is not there. I am not ignorant of human depravity, but I had long denied that it could exist in our family. We are orderly, hard-working people; our home is a place where we feel understood and affirmed. We paid our dues for all of this by succeeding in life. Our unspoken motto was: "Work hard and success will follow."

What we failed to account for was that outward conformity to an orderly family life proves nothing. A child can put on all the external forms of Christian life and good order and not be near God at all. For the parent to fail to look below the surface and to pass lightly over inner motivations is often to let the child put a veneer over life. The inward person is left untouched, and when that happens the inward self can easily become hardened and embittered.

As parents, our grief during this time was intense. We had lost the battle and knew the humiliations of exposure and defeat. But from our present vantage point we can see how it was also entirely under the perfect plan of God, the beauty of which we were not able to see at that time. Then it

was like walking through a dark forest on an invisible trail. We could see nothing of what lay ahead, but we made our way along the path with fear and trembling. Yet because our hands were held securely in the hand of our heavenly Father, we could trust the way to his eyes.

But even then we felt God had a purpose in it all, as he stripped away our facade of self-sufficiency. We had placed great confidence in Christian nurture in the home and in Christian private schools. But no one grows into grace through a Christianized environment. No one gets to God by moral self-improvement. You only get to God by being transplanted from your natural soil into the life of Christ by a personal faith in him. In our nurture of Barbara we had unconsciously forgotten these foundational truths.

We were also beginning to learn that we were entirely dependent on God to change Barbara and that eventually he would renew her heart and life. Rose Marie put it even more personally: “At that time I was in danger of complete despair. What kept me from giving up was the knowledge that Barbara did belong to God and that in his own time and way he would bring her back.”

We were slowly learning what Paul so eloquently expresses in 2 Corinthians 1:8–10: “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us.”

Barbara

ACTUALLY, NOBODY IN our family is a shouter—except me. The summer I graduated from high school I did a lot of

shouting. Mostly I worked on getting my own way and staying as far away from my family as possible. Even when I flew to Mexico to join my parents, I was still determined to be as separate as possible from them and their lifestyle.

My first opportunity came at the wedding we were invited to at a luxurious country club in Cuernavaca. The setting was beautiful, the band was good, and there were quite a few young men eager to dance with me. I was flattered by the attention. I danced, strolled in the moonlight, and finally ended up eating at another table with a young medical student. I could tell that my parents didn't approve, but I was having fun and was too embarrassed to tell my new friend that my parents wouldn't allow me to dance or sit with him. As we communicated in stumbling Spanish and English, I used up my stock phrases to tell him that I had a sister and I gave him the name of our hotel.

I left the wedding happy to have been able to flirt but sure that I would never see the medical student again. Imagine my surprise when my "paramour" showed up at the hotel the next day with a friend who wanted to double date my sister! I informed them in broken Spanish that my sister was twelve and that they had to leave immediately before my parents saw them. They left, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

By the time my parents sat me down to talk about my conduct at the wedding, I was feeling pretty self-righteous. I thought of the whole thing as a harmless flirtation, and when the guys had shown up at the hotel I had quickly packed them off. During the discussion with my parents I was in the enviable position of being able to say (again and again in injured tones), "But I only did . . ." My argument was that I had done nothing wrong and that they were overreacting. In a sense this was true—they did overreact to the situation. But at the same time, they had begun to read

my spirit correctly. Before, I had always taken pains to conceal anything about myself that I knew my parents wouldn't approve of. But now I was sick of being a hypocrite, and my true self was emerging. That is what actually upset them.

That time in Mexico was one of the most painful experiences of my life. It was even hard for me to read my father's account of it. I can still see the three of us sitting on the balcony of their hotel room. The warmth of the sun, the bright pink of the azaleas, and the green of the trees shading us were all lost on me. I was spending my time measuring the distance between the balcony and the ground, and wondering if I could possibly jump safely to the lawn below.

What made this confrontation particularly painful was that when my parents started to understand what I was really like, they reacted with fear and anger. I had long concealed my real desires because I did not want to risk their disapproval and the loss of their good opinion. Now my worst fears were being realized. I felt helpless. I did not want to live the way they wanted me to, and in fact, I could not. While I had made resolutions to act like a Christian at various times in my life, I always ended up frustrated by my failures. I thought that my only option was to just accept myself for who I was and hope that my parents would too. My parents did not know it, but they were asking me to do the impossible—to be a Christian when I wasn't. And I had no way of becoming what they wanted me to be. All of my hopes and desires were taking me in the completely opposite direction.

In Mexico I decided that being myself meant distancing myself from my family. It seemed too painful to be around each other—painful for me and, I was aware, painful for them.

Discussion for Chapter 1

1. Compare Jack’s and Barbara’s accounts of their conflict in Mexico, and describe their different perspectives on the same situation.
 - a. What emotions did both of them share?
 - b. What do you think was keeping them apart?
 - c. Think of a conflict in your life. What might be the differing perspectives in that situation?
2. Jack says that he had been unwilling to face some truths about Barbara’s character. Why do you think that might be?
 - a. Read Romans 4:18–21. Why was Abraham able to face unpleasant truths? On what was he depending?
 - b. What are some of the reasons that we might have difficulty facing the truth about someone we love?
 - c. How does not “facing facts” in a relationship impact that relationship?
3. How did Jack’s willingness to repent of his failures as a parent free him in his relationship to Barbara? Can you apply this to any relationship in your life?