

Finding Hope

Finding Hope

Stories by Teenagers 3

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Preface

“Once upon a time . . .”

“Did you hear about the time . . . ?”

These phrases immediately attract our attention because human beings love listening to and telling stories. Storytelling is as natural as breathing, and as ancient as the cave dwellers’ bragging and miming about the kill of the day around a campfire. We tell stories about the most serious events in our life, and the most wacky. We love stories for a lot of reasons:

Stories tell us who we are. When we tell other people a story, we reveal a lot about who we are—not only to them, but to ourselves. The poet Robert Frost says this about writing, “For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn’t know I knew.” In the hurry of life, we may have missed the importance of an event when it happened. Telling the story of the event helps us realize what the event really meant—even years later. So when we tell our story, we discover ourselves in new ways.

Stories help us feel less alone. As we listen to and tell stories, we realize that our story is a part of the great human story, that our feelings and experiences—while new and significant to us—are part of the universal human experience. We are not alone. Other people have felt as we do. Our story can affirm other people; their story can help us understand life better.

We encounter God in our stories. Many times when we tell stories, we begin to realize that life is filled with mystery. What we expect to happen does not happen; what does happen is unexpected. And frequently we begin to recognize the mysterious ways God has acted in our life.

We also listen to stories because they provide entertainment, because they are an outlet for our feelings and desires, and because they can make a point in an interesting way.

Stories by Teenagers

Teenagers enjoy telling their stories as much as anyone. Unfortunately, young women and men have few avenues for sharing their experiences and insights.

Saint Mary's Press has dedicated itself to sharing the Good News with young people. In the process, young people have shared their insights, courage, generosity, kindness, wisdom, patience, justice, and honesty—the Good News—with us. In 1995, we decided to invite students throughout the United States and Canada to share their stories in a more formal way.

I Know Things Now: Stories by Teenagers 1 was published in May 1996. *Friends: Stories by Teenagers 2* came out in May 1997. Both books have been enthusiastically received by teenagers, parents, teachers, and others who work with young men and women.

Student writers could withhold their name, or use their initials, their first name, or their full name. We wanted to ensure that students could be honest in telling their stories. I think that you will find the stories in this third volume to be honest and insightful, just like those in the first two volumes.

Finding Hope: Stories by Teenagers 3

Teenagers have good hearts and perceptive minds. Untold thousands of teenagers serve needy people as volunteers. They learn from and are inspired by good people, and they are the source of hope and inspiration for other people. For this volume we asked teenagers to share their stories about where they find hope and inspiration. Hope is the anchor that holds us together

when life becomes hard to cope with. Hope helps us to see in the present the possibilities for a brighter future and to put our energies into creating that future.

In response to our question about where they found hope and inspiration, wonderful stories by teenagers came in from all over. After an initial sorting, I asked six students to help make the final selection: Tim Farrell, from Cotter High School; Rachel Dahdal, from Winona State University; and Tracy Klassen, Brian Maschka, Rebecca Sallee, and Matt Stier from Saint Mary's University, all located in Winona, Minnesota. After reviewing hundreds of stories, we selected the ones in this book.

Thanks

Great thanks is due to all the students who allowed their stories to be submitted for consideration. The only unpleasant aspect of editing this book was having to omit so many excellent stories. They just could not all go into the book. We thank all of you for your contributions and understanding.

Thanks also goes to the religion and English teachers who sent in the scores of stories received. Your cooperation made the book possible.

The stories contained here are fascinating and moving. They make inspiring personal reading, will serve as excellent discussion or reflection starters, and will find a welcome spot as readings for prayer services. They might even stimulate someone to write his or her own story. Each story shows where and how teenagers find inspiration and how they hold on to hope. We feel confident that all who read these stories will be reminded of their own sources of inspiration and hope.

Inspiration

Inspiration. It's sleeping in the ground. Its residence is the deep end of the pool. Only the ones who can hold their breath until they see darkness can reach it. Sometimes these travelers catch inspiration. Sometimes I do too, but only when music is playing and the sky becomes playful with dancing stars.

It's 12:40 a.m. I can't sleep. It's a weekend, and the rain slowly drizzles down in warm sheets over the land. The blinds on my window let in little lines of dim moonlight. They sleep on my carpet floor. Softly, the tears of rain tap my window.

And in the stillness of silence and whispering solitude, I hear inspiration. Its back is to my wall. It's leaning like a madman on the hard wall that shelters me. Its voice is violins, harpsichords, cellos, and trumpets. Its voice is unison and chaos. Its voice is music. My inspiration has a beautiful voice.

Through the thin blinds on my window, through the pale sheets of rain, I see the velvet cloth. I see the pearls on the cloth. It is the night sky. I see the pearls and their cosmic shine. The velvet looks soft and smoky. And I see the words, I see the colors. I see the brain that holds what I need. I see the beginning. My inspiration has a beautiful face.

Slowly I get up from my tomb. I remove my body from the crumpled sheets. Like a blind man, I feel for my pen and paper. Like a blind man, I feel for my friends to join together in mysterious union. In the night I await my beautiful inspiration.

I begin to remember. In the cool, rainy night, the mixture of music and silence, of rain and pure solitude, helps me to remember. Pictures and voices come back in a wave of memory. I remember the first time I learned what inspiration was.

I was about seven years old and living in a big city. It seemed like a storybook to me. The buildings around me were like castles, each one holding a story. I used to sit on a corner with my grandfather. We would watch people walk by and wonder what kept them going.

And then my grandfather asked me a question that would remain with me forever: "Where does your inspiration come from?"

I looked at him, but I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what inspiration was. That was the day he told me what his inspiration was. Inspiration was a huge puzzle to me. He helped me to learn the puzzle.

"I remember when I was young," my grandfather began. "I was walking through the village, and I was bored. Everything around me I knew already. I was searching for a new view."

"I was walking by a small house with an open door, and through that door I heard the most beautiful sound I've ever heard: a violin. Its notes raised my mind. I began to notice the shine of a window newly cleaned. I noticed how the sun shone on gasoline."

I listened closely. "It was all triggered by that music," he said in a whisper.

As I listened it became clear to me: Music was my inspiration. "And I remember that night in the village," my grandfather said, "I looked up at the sky and saw a falling star. I thought it was a tear from God. I then felt I knew something about the heavens."

We sat there on the corner together. I went over what he had said. I knew then that this was my inspiration. To me, inspiration is the sky and music. That rainy night in my room helped me to remember when my inspiration began. It began when I was seven years old, when a conversation occurred that changed me forever—true inspiration.

Matthew Luhks
La Salle College
High School
Wyndmoor, Pennsylvania

The Innocence of a Secret- Service Agent

A long day of school can be one of the most depressing experiences: a forgotten lunch, a test not studied for, an argument with a good friend—so many things can go wrong. Some days I come home and just feel like giving up, wondering if it is really worth all the effort. I would love to get up and say to the world, “I quit!”

But just when I am beginning to doubt myself and the rest of the world, a special person usually cheers me up and inspires me to go on for another day. He is my brother Sean, and every day, without knowing it, he reaffirms my faith in the future. His innocence and naïveté are admirable qualities, and I think that everyone can benefit from his example.

I love to hear about Sean’s dreams and aspirations, no matter how far-fetched they may be. Every week he approaches me with another goal, another thing to look forward to. Last week he wanted to be a secret-service agent, and he went around the house wearing dark sunglasses and speaking code words into an imaginary headset. This week it’s a professional sky diver, and he is constantly diving off the sofa into an imaginary stretch of sky. Next week it could be anything—an astronaut, a magician, a football player—no limits restrain his dreams.

It is fine for a ten-year-old boy to dream and aspire, but what would we think of a sixteen-year-old boy, or even an adult, playing make-believe? We would probably call the police

or dismiss that person as insane. Why? Why are we no longer permitted to dream? “You must be practical,” demand your parents and teachers, and the whole world is constantly reminding you of the limits of your potential.

Without dreams, we have nothing to live for. Everyone should try to be more like my brother. His dreams are his livelihood, and they allow him to look forward to the future. I look at him and hope that his dreams will never be taken away. But I know that they will be. All children grow up and become exposed to the harsh, cold realities of the adult world. We can tell ourselves that they are becoming more “practical,” but I know that “practical” really means “dreamless.” And without dreams, we have nothing to live for.

But as I see Sean leaping off the couch, I feel happy. I guess my own dreams are lived out through him. His puerile games are all that remain of my abandoned goals and aspirations. I wish I could still hold on to these dreams, but I know I cannot. I wish we all could still hold on to our dreams, but everyone grows up.

Sean will soon mature and become an adult and understand the impossibilities of his imagination. As I look at him, though, I can see life running through him, and I am inspired to go on trying one more day, to hold on, to dream.

A Legacy of Hope

Throughout my life I took my mom's father for granted. I remember him as the one who always had the video camera at birthday parties; Grandma's constant companion while attending daily Mass, watching *Matlock*, or playing Scrabble each evening; the one with the corny puns at our family gatherings; and the one who rescued us time and again in a financial crisis or a home repair emergency. A lector for daily Masses at church and an active volunteer with the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, my grandfather seemed "good" and ever-present.

My grandpa died on July 27th, three months before his eightieth birthday. It was not until after his death that I began to realize what a holy man he truly was. I discovered that he had kept a spiritual journal his whole adult life, which only my grandmother knew about. These journal entries were written during an hour of meditation that he made a habit of doing every day. He had a custom-made prayer book, typed on an old Royal typewriter. Its pages were worn from daily use over so many years. These prayers he said every day, asking God to make him a devoted husband, father, and Christian. One recently typed prayer asked for God's help in loving my dad, who had acted in very unloving ways toward my mom and our family. Knowing how angry my grandpa was with my father, I realize how hard it must have been for him to write that prayer. Also, since my grandfather's death, my grandma has discovered that

for several years he had donated about two hundred dollars a month to a number of different charities.

I also found out that my grandpa had studied and learned the Greek language so that he could make his own translations of the Bible and come as close as he could to the original word of God. He had carefully written programs on his obsolete Texas Instruments computer to help him with the translations. I was told that Grandpa taught himself braille so that he could serve as a volunteer for the Society of the Blind, teaching the blind and making audiotapes of books so that they could listen to them. These things he did without asking for praise and with only a few people knowing about them.

During the eulogy at his funeral, his six children, including my mom, recounted the times when he showed them unconditional love. My Uncle Chuck described my grandfather's strong reaction to my uncle's arrest in the 1960s, when he wanted to be a conscientious objector rather than be drafted to serve in the Vietnam war. Having served as an officer in World War II, my grandpa told Uncle Chuck that he disagreed with his decision, but then he hired a lawyer for Uncle Chuck and supported his decision.

As we packed the hundreds of books in my grandfather's study—ones on Teilhard de Chardin and Saint Thomas More, and his Latin books from grade school—I gained an even richer idea of my grandpa's deeply spiritual life. These discoveries made me rethink my view of my grandpa. The fact that he did all these things, which no one was even aware of while he was living, shows what a private, modest, and spiritual man he truly was.

Since my parents' divorce in 1994, my grandpa, Arthur J. Hallinan, has been the only significant adult male figure in my life. I am beginning to realize only now that his values, his spirituality, and his ministry have left me a legacy of hope and inspiration for the future.

Jenna M. Mancini
Country Day School
of the Sacred Heart
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania

Angel

Many times in my life I have wanted to give up. Often it would seem easier to quit than to try and then fail. But one person in my life has taught me that no matter how difficult something seems, nothing is impossible. My twelve-year-old sister, Nina, is severely disabled, but she never quits. Nina's amazing courage and strength have inspired me to push myself forward in times of trial and to never lose faith.

Nina has had many challenges throughout her life. She cannot speak or walk, and she was diagnosed with a seizure disorder. But despite these limitations, Nina continues to persevere, and her life is filled with joy. My sister has made me grateful for things that are often taken for granted. Tasks such as brushing her teeth and feeding herself, things that other people do automatically, have taken Nina years to achieve. Sometimes I am frustrated when I work with Nina on the same task for months, and even years. It would be easy to quit when the goal seems so distant. But every doubt that I've had about Nina's abilities has disappeared when I've looked at her face and seen such determination and hope in her eyes.

Nina understands very little, but at the same time, she knows so much. Nina loves every person without question. She doesn't know about evil; she can only understand love. Nina is an angel. Her soul is not tainted by the stains of sin because sin is inconceivable to her. Nina's world is full of laughter, hugs, and

kisses, and it is based upon unconditional love. It's ironic how a person incapable of so many things is exactly the type of human God intended us to be.

Nina's presence in my life has affected me remarkably. When I think about all that Nina has accomplished, I am amazed. She learned to feed and groom herself when many professionals did not think that could happen. Nina has exceeded the limitations placed on her by doctors, and she has taught me valuable lessons about life in the process. Because of Nina, I cannot give up. If my sister who has so many obstacles placed before her does not give up, how can I?

Nina is my inspiration. When I feel inconsolable or lost, I can look to my sister for hope. Nina has taught me patience and compassion that I might not have known otherwise, and yet she has done it all without saying a word. Sometimes words just get in the way.

Stephanie Jacobson
Arlington Catholic
High School
Arlington, Massachusetts

Harmony

I sit on the floor in my room, listening to the radio and humming along, tapping my pencil on the cover of my geometry book to the rhythm of the music. I hate geometry. The song ends, and the deejay comes on to take callers' opinions on a story in the news about a boy who was suspended from kindergarten for bringing a toy gun to school. I reach over and slam my palm down on the power button, annoyed at the topic.

I reach over and grab my guitar from where it's resting against my bed and begin to play. I sing to myself, "Too many lies, too many cries, too many days gone by, too many lives vaporized, all for a cause we can't find." My pick hits the bottom string, and I toss my guitar aside and grab a pen in an attempt to write down the lyrics before I forget them. I can't find a piece of paper, so I just scribble on the back of an envelope that doesn't look like anything important. I mess around with chords and notes, working on a harmony and a rhythm. After awhile my hand begins to tire of playing. I put the words on my desk next to a glass of soda, in a pile with a bunch of other random scraps. I lean my guitar back against its case, and I turn the radio back on.

I find my inspiration and hope inside my songs. I find hope inside myself—a hope that all my dreams will come true, even though for now they are just dreams. I find inspiration to pursue my musical dreams every time I turn on the radio, every

time I strum my guitar. I imagine what it would be like to do for the rest of my life the one thing that brings me so much joy. At times when I am playing my guitar, I find myself smiling for no apparent reason at all. It is as if the earth, the stars, and the planets are all in line. At that moment I understand my life, and an overwhelming feeling of happiness surrounds me in a flash. But that's all it is—just a flash—because no one can feel that intense level of happiness all the time, even though you may want to.

So while the radio blares in the background and the announcer reads the news in an unemotional monotone, I try not to think about all the bad news too much. I try not to think about the crime, poverty, and senseless acts of violence that occur in the world every day. I try to sing about them instead, because we as humans have the power to change the world. And if some people out there feel that they have the power to take a life, then I know I have the power to make one life great, and then maybe even be inspired to write a song about it.

The Best Five Weeks of My Life

We turned and went our separate ways. She passed through the automatic revolving doors to the rest of her life, and I was carried down and away by the escalator. I felt choked, and a stream of tears flowed uncontrollably as I walked to the flight gate. I attempted to shift the cumbersome weight of the fan I was carrying in order to get comfortable, but it was no use. I stepped onto the moving walkway with the cautionary female voice, and all I could do as it carried me away was impotently watch the world pass before my eyes.

Standing before a wall of Plexiglas overlooking the runways, I tried to regain some semblance of dignity and self-worth. Seventies' dance music blared through my headphones as I attempted to drown my sorrows with images of disco balls and polyester leisure suits.

A litany of memories and emotions cascaded through my mind to the rhythm of the bass chords. I tried in vain to remember each day of the past five weeks. A smile spread over my face as I recalled how we met. Our time together was so wonderful. She and everyone else at Governor's School had such a profound effect on me that I was heading home an entirely different person from the one who had left. I wished that I could stay, but I had no choice.

As cliché as it sounds, my time at Governor's School was the best five weeks of my life. Before I went away, the only

purpose to my existence was to score high on tests and dream of future vindication for my toils. I had no friends, no one on whom I could vent my problems or from whom I could seek advice. My life was socially empty, and I had resigned myself to the disillusionment that this was the way my life was supposed to be. However, all that changed when I went to Governor's School.

I was finally in my element. Everyone had interests, personalities, and goals similar to mine. It was such an exhilarating and uplifting feeling to know that people existed in this world who were like me and who accepted me for who I was. It felt as if I had been raised to a higher level of consciousness. I could finally feel that I fit in somewhere. I had friends.

At the same time that I was reveling in the fact that I was no longer an anomaly, I was also exploring the diversity of these people who were simultaneously similar to me and yet so different. My fellow "Govies" were the most diverse group I had ever encountered. They were of every color, creed, and culture imaginable. At first I was a little worried that I wouldn't be able to relate to these people, but I soon realized the simple truth that had evaded me for far too long: regardless of outward appearances, all people are the same beneath the surface.

In the same way that my fellow Govies changed the way that I looked at the world and my place in it, she changed the way that I viewed myself. I don't know how it happened that she changed me so much. She somehow energized me and gave me a new perspective on life—one in which I saw true happiness for the first time in many years. She made me feel important and needed as a person, not just as someone to ask for help in science class. She gave my life purpose and value.

In retrospect, it's rather ironic that I went to Governor's School intending to learn about the scientific and concrete aspects of our world, but ended up having the most transcendental and metaphysical experience of my life. I will always remember those five weeks as a turning point that awakened me to the fulfillment that life can offer and opened my eyes to the value and necessity of cultural diversity.

Patrick O'Brien
Cretin-Derham Hall
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Terry's Road

My father and I suit up for a snowmobile run down "Terry's Road," the road named after my late uncle, who enjoyed hunting in the endless pine forest that the road cuts through. In reality the road has no name to the public. It is just another logging road that cuts through the beautiful land, like a highway to the places on earth no person outside of the rural town of Warba, Minnesota, has ever seen. In the late winter, the countryside is the most beautiful scene anyone could wish to see, like the cover of a Christmas card. We head down the county road that runs in front of our little red cabin. The cabin is simply four walls and a roof, with no electricity or running water, but I would never change a thing. Zooming down a snow-covered gravel road at fifty miles an hour on a machine half the size of a small car with no roof is quite an experience, but doing it at two o'clock in the morning is pure terror. It took us a little under five minutes to make a trip that I know as an all-day walk.

When I looked at the huge snow mound the county plow had made at the beginning of the logging road, I remember thinking how glad I was that I didn't have to shovel it. The mound was taller than I was, and no cars had been down the road in at least two months. The snow was twinkling the starlight back on my face, and the whole scene was so beautiful, I forgot about the cold for a little bit. My father decided to lead

the way on his more powerful machine, so he could cut a trail through the three feet of powder that lay ahead.

As we went over the six-foot berm and crashed into the untouched powder on the other side, I was in a state of mind I wish I could bring back on command. I was nearing the end of my eighth-grade year, and I had no worries except what to do next. As we headed on, I couldn't see into the woods on either side of me or behind me, so I just concentrated on the driving. If you have ever snowmobiled, you know that the vibration of the machine can make you almost daydream while on long trips. Well, I was practically asleep when I remembered that my father was ahead of me, and that I could rear-end him if he stopped. We were only traveling at about fifteen miles an hour by then, but I didn't want to have to explain the daydream. Then we entered a really familiar area. I like to call it Blueberry Valley because one summer we found the mother lode of wild blueberries there, hidden from even the wild black bears that frequented the other berry bushes.

Around this time I started to daydream again, and I was overlooking the valley below. The stars were reflecting off the snow, the trees were white with snow, the air was cold and brisk, and for a while I don't even remember breathing or driving or thinking; I don't even recall the roar of the engine. All I do remember is a sudden stillness and extreme peace like I have never felt before. I remember breathing the cold northern air into my body and being in total harmony with life. I had no worries, no questions, no thoughts. I felt warm inside and loved all around. Although the drive past the valley lasted no more than a minute, I felt like the world had stopped.

You may be able to recall other times like this, and so can I, but this one seemed more powerful than all the others I have experienced, read about, or been told about. At that time I felt closer to God and to my Uncle Terry than I have ever felt before. Whenever I think of that time, I know that my uncle was there in spirit with God, and that all my dreams had come true. In my mind, heaven is right there on Terry's Road. I can't explain what it feels like to be able to visit heaven whenever you want to, but I can say that I don't fear death at all, because I will spend eternity with Terry in Blueberry Valley.

(Patrick's Uncle Terry died in the Vietnam war.)

Rory Murphy
Mount Saint Joseph
Academy
Flourtown, Pennsylvania

On the Job

"203622176, Enter, Start Work, Enter;" I repeat to myself as I clock in for another fun-filled day of work.

"Good morning, Rory, how was the party?" I hear a voice from behind me ask. I know, without even turning around, that it is Paulie. I can tell by the New York accent.

"Great, why weren't you there?" I ask.

"I'll tell you at break. I don't want to be late," he answers.

Paulie, my coworker, comes from the Bronx. He wears designer jeans and seven chains around his neck. He spikes his short black hair. When I first met him, I thought he looked kind of dumb. It wasn't until I actually talked with him that I found him to be quite the opposite. He works three jobs in order to pay for community college. He listens to classical music and aspires to be a pianist. He is musically brilliant—at least I think so—and I love listening to him play.

I go to the front, open my register, and begin my work as a supermarket cashier. "Why did you wear these shoes?" I question myself. I just got to work and already I'm complaining. I look over at Bill and can't help but feel ashamed. Bill is an eighty-five-year-old man with the same job as I have, but he has about ten times the energy and vibrance. Each time I glance over at him and see the smile that accompanies his service, I can't help but smile myself; his happiness is contagious. I throw on a grin, take a deep breath, and go back to checking.

At break I sit down with Tony, one of my closest male friends. We met through a mutual acquaintance, and we just clicked. I have spent practically every day of my summers with him since then. Tony is quite the character. He has the type of personality that is impossible not to love, but he also has one major problem: a strong affinity for trouble. He cannot seem to steer clear of it for too long. It always seems to be waiting out there for him. He has spent some time in jail for his behavior, but in the past year he has changed a great deal. He has finished rehab and is now a recovering alcoholic and proud of it.

Being so close with Tony over the years has taught me a great deal. He has helped me to come to the realization that anything can be accomplished with determination, and that the strength of one person's will is truly unconquerable. We talk until his shift resumes, and he promises to come over after work. I watch him as he exits into the produce section, and soon I see Paulie strutting in to talk with me.

"Hey ya, cutie, do ya wanna hear the story now?" he asks.

"Of course," I answer. He tells me some wacky tale about how this new girl he is seeing kept him "preoccupied." I know that it is simply a fabrication. He was probably too tired after running from work here to his job at 7-Eleven. I just laugh it off as I always do, while trying to drink as much coffee as possible to ensure that I will remain awake for the next three hours.

After break I finish my shift and punch out. I leave exhausted, but in some way I am refreshed. It isn't until I am walking home and reflecting on my day that I realize how immensely these three individuals have affected me. Each one has taught me a different lesson about life, but all the lessons have something in common: they all have inspired me. From them I have received a new sense of hope for the future.

In Bill I have discovered the beauty that lies in having a lust for living. The simple gesture of smiling really changes a person's attitude, and if by that small action I can make one person happy, think what I could do if I wore a permanent grin. I have discovered how easy it is to accept people for who they are, and I have a renewed sense of confidence in people, because if one person can surrender their prejudices, ten can, and if ten can, I do not see why ten thousand cannot.

Paulie has given me the inspiration to dream even the most impossible dream, because dreams are our reason for living.

Tony has given me a renewed sense of hope in our generation. We are not all sex-crazed, drug-addicted juvenile delinquents, and even those who are can change, and perhaps that is the most important thing.

As I walk home, my mind races with thoughts and emotions. I take off my shoes as I continue my journey. Despite my fatigue I look forward to tomorrow with uncontrollable zeal and to the many lessons I have yet to learn from the employees of the Sea Isle City ACME.

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