

**Every Step  
of the Way**

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# **Every Step of the Way**

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**Stories by Teenagers 4**

**Edited by  
Michael Wilt**

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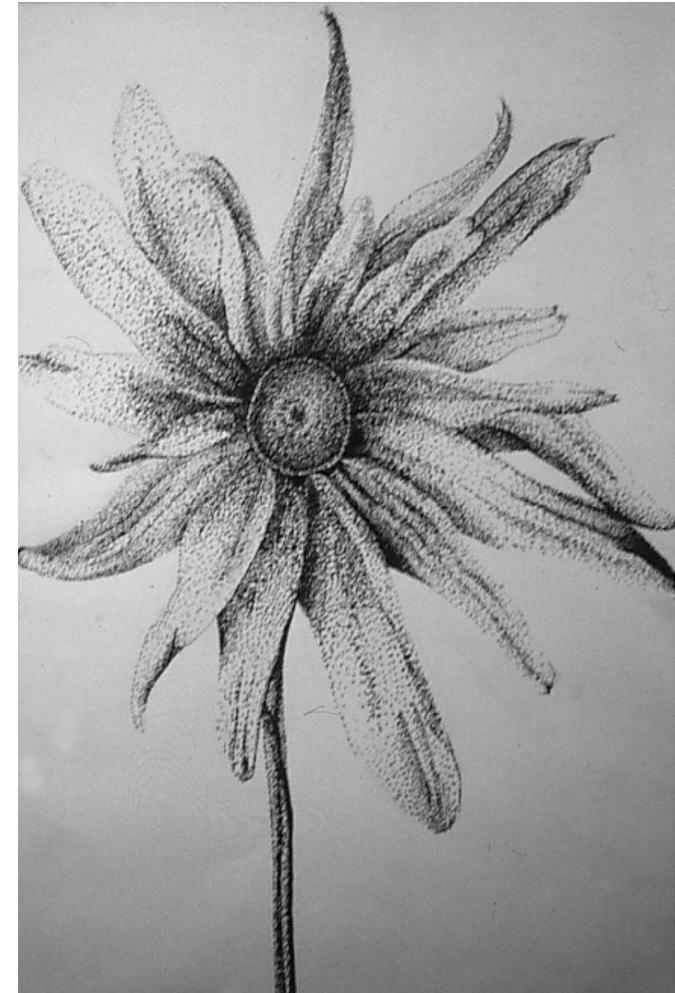
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Michael Wilt  
Editor

# Preface

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## Storytellers

We are all storytellers. We can hardly get through a normal day without telling a story or two, and for each one we tell, we are bound to hear one from someone else. Our stories may be simple or ordinary—something we did over the weekend. They may be profound or important—the story of a grandparent or great-grandparent we never knew. Some of our stories are just for fun—made-up jokes or stories of true events that cause laughter. Long before television started presenting hour after hour of “funniest videos,” people told stories, over and over, about the wedding cake that toppled over or the toddler who covered herself with shaving cream. A thousand words, accompanied by tears of laughter, often were worth far more than pictures.

By telling stories we entertain and inform, but we also grow in self-understanding. Sometimes such growth happens simply through the telling of the story: After hearing ourselves tell our own tale, we see or understand what happened in a new light. We say “Aha!” or “Now I get it!” Sometimes we tell our story to someone else in the hope that they will help us interpret our experience from a different perspective. If we feel stuck about a particular issue or aspect of life, we are often inclined to find a good listener and talk about it with him or her. We swap stories.

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## Stories and Faith

Matters of faith also lend themselves to the telling of stories. This is not surprising—the sacred writings of the world’s religions, after all, consist in large part of gatherings of stories about key figures of the particular faith. In Christianity the Gospels tell stories about what Jesus did and taught. Jesus himself used stories, parables, to illustrate his teachings.

The use of stories in religion doesn’t stop with the Scriptures. Faith is shared from one generation to the next by word of mouth. Parents tell young children the stories of Jesus’ life, death, and Resurrection, and the children’s understanding of these stories grows and changes as they mature. Faith is shared among peers as well, as schoolmates tell one another the stories that best explain faith for them. Experiences of loss, gain, and doubt become the new stories that help us find our way in our journey of faith.

*Every Step of the Way: Stories by Teenagers 4* is the latest volume of stories written by teenagers and published by Saint Mary’s Press. For this volume we asked teenagers to submit first-person, true stories that address the question, “What has been an important experience for you of God’s presence or absence?” The forty-seven stories collected here were selected from hundreds of submissions from all over the country. Many of these stories have probably never been told before—the subject matter has a highly personal nature, for God’s presence (and absence) is often experienced in the course of circumstances and events that are quite private. We thank all our student writers for bravely shaking off any inhibitions and allowing us a glimpse into their lives.

In these stories we are privileged to witness great losses that lead to enrichment and faith. We witness the receiving of gifts that are so fulfilling that the recipients can imagine only one possible source, a loving God. For these writers God is present, whether in despair or in joy. We also witness pain and loss in which the writers can find no evidence of God’s presence, leading them to be angry with God or to deny God’s existence entirely. Throughout this collection our storytellers face challenging moments and grasp them as opportunities to learn and

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grow, always aware that learning is not easy and growth can be painful.

## Hearing Others’ Stories

For readers, these stories may strike common chords. They may call to mind similar experiences or feelings we have had. They may reveal a positive path through pain or loss that has otherwise gone unnoticed. They may affirm the readers’ feelings of gratefulness for gifts received, or demonstrate that we are not alone when our pain is sharp or our anger unresolved. The key is to hear the stories with care and attention. By reading each story as if it is being told by a best friend, a sister or a brother, we receive the most we can from it.

William Carlos Williams, one of America’s great poets, had useful advice about listening to other people’s stories. Williams was also a full-time physician. As a doctor he believed in the importance of stories. He reminded student doctors that much of their lives as physicians would be spent listening to other people’s stories and then trying to help each of them understand the meaning of his or her story. Williams said, “Their story, yours, mine—it’s what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them.”

## About This Series

Saint Mary’s Press, as part of its mission to share the Good News with young people, recognizes that young people have much to say about faith. To hear more clearly what young women and men have to say, we initiated this series in 1995 by inviting submissions from students in the United States and Canada.

The first volume, *I Know Things Now: Stories by Teenagers 1*, was published in 1996, followed by *Friends: Stories by Teenagers 2* and *Finding Hope: Stories by Teenagers 3* in 1997 and 1998. To encourage writers to be as honest as possible in telling their stories, they could elect to have their stories printed with their full name, their first name only, or their initials; or they could withhold

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their name altogether. Those options were also available for this volume.

The range of this collection is remarkable. Through stories of illness, death, and birth, students have clearly and beautifully related their experience of God's presence or absence. Many also sensed God in more commonplace moments and events. But whatever the experience, the writers have expressed themselves courageously, and for this they deserve our heartfelt thanks.

It is a difficult task for an editor to be faced with a wealth of fine material, only to have to put some pieces aside in favor of others. Thanks are also in order for all the students whose stories could not be included here. No story was put aside lightly, and each was read and reviewed with the utmost respect for its writer.

Thanks, too, to the many religion and English teachers all over the country who facilitated the submission of stories from their schools. This book would not have been possible without your help.

Turn the page now and enter the stories—the wonderful, sad, touching, funny ways in which teenagers have come to experience God's presence, and the hard and tragic ways in which some have come to believe that God is absent. Read them alone or with a group; ponder and discuss them; write a story of your own. May these stories remind you of the ways that you, too, can grow in faith.

Katie Luzi  
Villa Maria Academy  
Malvern, Pennsylvania

# Every Step of the Way

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Several years ago I experienced something that I don't tell many people about. It's something close to my heart that has had a great impact on my life.

I was a typical thirteen-year-old girl, loving life and thinking that my loved ones and I could never be hurt by the world around us. I had always prayed, but before this time I prayed only when I needed something or when I had a special intention. And to tell you the truth, I was not placing God first in my life. I had a great boyfriend who promised the world to me. He was my "everything." Friends and popularity also ranked very high. I guess that's a common teenage mistake.

But things began to change. My best friend of eight years started down the wrong path—a path of drugs and destruction—and she got to the point where guys ruled her life and took advantage of her. It felt as if someone had stabbed me in the heart. Seeing her fall apart this way hurt me deeply, but I felt an obligation to stand by her and help her through this tough time.

I knew I had to get out, though, when she began pulling me down with her. I was not about to throw my life away. I was raised to believe in myself, and whenever things got to be intense, I could rely on my family. But things were different this time. I was in denial about the changes going on between my best friend and me. We were supposed to be soul sisters,

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connected at the hip, but I knew deep in my heart we could never go back.

While all this was going on, I had one person that I fully trusted and loved more than anyone, my boyfriend. He listened, understood, and made me smile when things got bad with my best friend. One day he sat me down and told me he had something very important to tell me. I became scared because I could tell he had been crying. The words that came out of his mouth changed both our lives forever. His dad had just been diagnosed with a brain tumor and had a few short months to live. To make things worse, my boyfriend had to move out of state because his parents wanted to be closer to family during the trying months ahead.

My world changed instantly. I was no longer that happy-go-lucky girl who believed that she was indestructible. For a while I blamed God for allowing my boyfriend's dad to get sick, for the problems between my best friend and me, and for tons of other stuff that wasn't going right. In my eyes my world was falling apart. My grades began to slip, and my parents and I were fighting constantly.

One night it all became too much. I had tons of homework, dance classes all night, I'd just had a fight with my mom, called it quits with my best friend, and my boyfriend had moved away. I felt entirely alone. I ran up to my room, turned off the lights, and lay in my bed, just sobbing and sobbing. I had hit bottom. I said to myself, "I just can't go on like this, it's not worth it." I was feeling so depressed and alone, and I couldn't handle it.

Then as I lay there, I felt a hand on my shoulder—it wasn't a physical hand, it was a force pushing me to sit up in my bed. And as I sat up, I heard a voice in my head say, "It's okay, you can handle it, you're strong." A feeling came over me unlike anything I've ever experienced before—a sense of calmness and comfort that gave me the strength to get out of my bed and deal with my problems slowly and effectively.

I sincerely feel that the force I felt was my guardian angel and the voice was God's. God was telling me that I'll never be alone and that he'll never give me more than I can handle. I have since come closer to God. I can live each day knowing that

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God is one of my best friends and will protect me and love me regardless of what happens in my life.

Everything was patched up, and my best friend and I have now gone our separate ways, but I know it's not the end of the world. I have great friends now who support me and love me. Life does go on—I learned that. Life will get hard, I know it will. Some of the hardest years lie straight up ahead, but I know that God will always be there for me, to shine a light on the path I am to follow. As long as I stay true to myself, God will be with me every step of the way.

**Megan Smith**  
**Saint Agnes Academy**  
**Memphis, Tennessee**



**Joseph J. Omlor**  
**Kennedy-Kenrick Catholic**  
**High School**  
**Norristown, Pennsylvania**

## **A Deer in Grandpop's Woods**

About a year ago, my grandpop passed away very suddenly of a heart attack. He was seventy-two years old. This was very hard for me to understand. For a while I was mad at God and wanted to know why he took my grandpop, whom I loved very much, away from me. I wondered if I had done something wrong and God was punishing me for it, or if God wanted to test my faith, to see how much of a believer I was. Or maybe it was just time for my grandpop to go to heaven. I don't know.

Grandpop and I were very close. We loved to go fishing and hiking in the woods. He lived in a wooded area; his house had a river right next to it, which is where we did all our fishing together. Grandpop loved to sit on his dock all day catching fish, and even on days when he didn't catch any, he didn't care. He would just go back the next day and try again.

A lot of animals lived around his house. I used to love walking through the woods with Grandpop; we would spend hour after hour looking at all the animals and trees, all of whose names he knew. I would go and visit him once or twice a week, and I would spend all day there Saturday and Sunday. We talked about everything—girls, cars, sports—whatever either of us brought up. He would tell me all about how different things were when he was my age, and how different they would be for me when I got to be his age.

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I never got to touch Grandpop or tell him that I loved him before he died, and that made it even harder to understand why he had to leave me. If he had been sick and expected to die soon, that would have made his death easier for me. I would have been ready for it. But because it was so unexpected and no one knew it was going to happen, it was so much harder to understand.

One day when I was visiting his house after he had died, I went for a walk through the woods to see all our favorite places. As I walked I saw a very big deer. I stood still for a while and looked at the deer, and he looked back at me. Then he started to walk toward me. At first I got scared and was about to run, but then I realized that the deer wasn't going to hurt me; he was just seeing what I was doing in his woods. As he came closer, I extended my hand and actually touched the deer right on his head. I rubbed his head for a few seconds, and then he darted off into the woods.

This reminded me of my grandpop, and I felt that God had sent that deer so I would be able to touch my grandpop one last time forever.

Stephanie Pete  
Cabrini High School  
New Orleans, Louisiana

# A Little Gracious Gift from God

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My family seemed complete eight years ago, with two dogs, my little brother, my mom and dad, and of course me, the princess of the household. What else could we ask for? So needless to say, I couldn't understand why my mom was so ecstatic when she announced that she was expecting another baby. At least I couldn't understand it until she burst into the house one day with a picture of the unborn baby. She had had an ultrasound, and the nurse gave her a picture of the baby. Seeing this unborn baby was unbelievable and amazing. My mom exclaimed, "It's a boy!" Now I was so excited to have a new baby brother on the way. I couldn't wait for him to be born. I watched the calendar, hoping that July 3, 1990, would hurry up and get here.

In February, though, the preparations for the new baby were put on hold. My mom wasn't feeling well, so my dad brought her to the doctor. They were gone a long time. My dad finally came home with the glum news. He sat my brother and me on the sofa and started to tell us the bad news. "Your mom's water bag broke and the baby will probably die." I was only eight years old, and my brother was only five, so we didn't quite understand. My dad explained that if the baby was born now, they would not attempt to save the baby. My mom was only twenty weeks pregnant, and they do not attempt to save babies until they are at least twenty-four weeks. This was very upsetting to my parents, because on the ultrasound you could see a

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very active, fully formed baby moving around. The doctors told my mom that she would deliver within forty-eight hours and that the baby would die. They tried to persuade her into aborting the baby at that moment. They thought this would be the easiest way to go. But she refused. I guess the doctors didn't know my mom's faith in God and her strength to conquer anything that faces her in life.

My mom was in the hospital for eight weeks before she started to have contractions. Every day the doctor would come in and shake his head in disbelief. At twenty-eight weeks the baby was born, and he had a chance to survive. The doctors told my parents that the new baby would not cry because his lungs would not be mature enough, but they were wrong. The baby cried so loud that my parents could hear him from the other room. They had to put him on a ventilator to help out his lungs. After two hours a nurse went to my mom's room and said that although their new son had a big mountain to climb, things were looking good. We all kept praying and thanking God for our miracle baby.

My mom was able to go home two days later. But before she could leave, they had to choose a name for the baby. A nurse brought my parents a book of names and meanings. They decided on the name "Paul John" because Paul means "little" and John means "God's gracious gift." We all agreed that he was a little gracious gift from God.

I recall visiting Paul in the hospital. He looked so small, especially with the tubes they had to put in him. I couldn't wait till he would be well enough to come home. They said he should be able to come home in July. Well, Paul John climbed that mountain very quickly. He had his share of problems, but he conquered every one of them and was able to come home on May thirtieth, much sooner than anticipated.

He weighed only four pounds when he came home. I was so excited. We passed this tiny child around from person to person. I can still remember dressing him up in my baby-doll clothes. Having another baby brother was great. Paul was always the happiest baby. He laughed and smiled all the time. He learned and discovered new things. He even discovered the

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scar where he'd had a feeding tube in his belly. He thought it was his second belly button.

Although Paul John slipped on many rocks on his way up, he has made it all the way to the top of the mountain. God was with Paul every step of the way. My mom always says, whenever Paul runs into an obstacle, that God put him on this earth for a reason. I know that God, through his presence in Paul, has given this family more than anyone could ask for. He is our reminder that with God by our side, we can conquer anything. When we forget the important things, we step back and take a long look at our little miracle.

My family is complete now with three dogs, one cat, my two little brothers, my mom and dad, and of course me. I am now queen of the family. Paul is seven years old, and he shows off his second belly button to his friends. Paul John Pete is a miracle baby and is our family's little gracious gift from God.