

SHE MADE ME LAUGH

Mother Teresa and the Call to Holiness



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STEPHANIE EMMONS



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She Made Me Laugh: Mother Teresa and the Call to Holiness

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To

Catherine and Loi, the lights of my life. Thanks for your patience and understanding these past few years when I often had to divide my time, energy, and attention between you and the book. Thank you for helping me find joy in the present moment and for making it easy to laugh at myself.

And to

Miriam Browning . . . without you this whole adventure never would have happened! Thanks for making me laugh.

INTRODUCTION

In January of 1996, when my friend Miriam and I were in our twenties, we followed our mutual dream and traveled to India. Our aim: to help the poor in Calcutta and, hopefully, to meet Mother Teresa.

We had wanted to see her community, the Missionaries of Charity, in action and hoped they would let us roll up our sleeves and jump in alongside them. So, once we got settled in Calcutta, found out Mother Teresa's address and mapped out our route, Miriam and I just walked over and showed up at her door.

As we had hoped, the sisters were gracious and happy to have us. They ushered us right in and we got to meet Mother Teresa that very day. And it was just that simple. I'm not sure what I had expected. But I do recall hoping that, if we did get to meet her, we might witness some really cool saintlike quality or manifestation—something. But she didn't levitate. No glowing halo crowned her head, no great throng of followers hung on her every word. There was nothing like that. And though she must have received thousands of visitors over the years, Mother Teresa was patient and welcoming to Miriam and me when we met her.

What has stayed with me all these years is the kindness in her eyes. But there was something I didn't expect: her sense of humor. She made me laugh. Not just once, but every time we met her. It seemed to come naturally—an easy kind of joking around. I remember thinking that aside from her being a living saint, I liked her as a person. She didn't seem self-conscious or shy. She was the kind of person who puts you at ease and makes you want to hang around, even if it was just to shoot the breeze. She was just there—simple, funny, intense. And perfectly ordinary.

This book shares some parts of the travel journal I began during the trip, letters I sent home, and reflections I've written in the years since. And while there are plenty of, "Wow! We're in India!" moments, I also talk about some of the darker parts of the trip for me. I had wanted to go to India since I first learned of Mother Teresa when I was a kid. But once I actually got there, things took a downward turn. I was overwhelmed by pretty much everything.

In the years following Mother Teresa's death in 1997, some of her private writings surfaced. They told a story of a woman in love with God, but a woman who also knew great spiritual pain. As I had naturally assumed that Mother Teresa's life was pretty much one of profound, unbroken closeness to God, I, like many others, was flabbergasted. I came across an article in *Time* magazine which did this big exposé. They titled it "Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith," which effectively turned the world on its ear. One of the people they interviewed, Father


James Martin, SJ, echoed my own feelings when he asked, “Who would have thought that the person who was considered the most faithful woman in the world struggled like that with her faith?”

I’ve had a hard time coming to terms with all of this. Even more surprisingly, though, was the discovery that that playfulness and good humor I had seen, and the pain she described in her letters—these could be present at the same time. It wasn’t necessarily one or the other. In fact, apparently, it’s a very real aspect in the spiritual life, this both/and theme—one that mystics and saints have long been acquainted with. I came to learn that maybe there’s much more to her story—and our story—than might be discernible at first blush.

But I’ll start at the beginning, back in the peculiar days of pet rocks, bell bottoms, and peace symbols: 1979 . . .



1 SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

he year was 1979. My grade six buddies and I, sporting our polyester seventies wear, were chatty and excited. It wasn't every day we got to watch a film at school. Our teacher had said that this one was called *Something Beautiful for God*. We were all sitting cross-legged on the orange shag carpet in the library at Pope John XXIII School in Ottawa, Canada. My friend Lisa and I sat with our knees touching; we were always together. Then someone turned out the lights and the show began.

I saw the image of a small woman with dark skin and a white outfit. "Who's that?" I asked, looking up at Mrs. McGetrick, the school librarian who was standing beside me. "Shh . . ." she said slowly with a little smile, a straight index finger pressed to her lips. Then in a whisper, "You'll see." What I saw on the screen over the next hour struck a strange chord in me. The music was sad, and the woman was slowly walking toward the camera, holding a scrawny child by the hand. Neither of them looked too cheerful. I didn't understand what was going on, but I was spellbound. There was something about her.

The narrator said that her name was Mother Teresa and that she was helping the poor and the sick. There were kids in the streets, people in beds, babies in cribs, and more ladies in white. When it was over, the lights came on and everyone started chatting noisily. I remember looking around to see if anyone else looked like they were about to cry. Mrs. McGetrick said that Mother Teresa must be a very special nun to have given her whole life to God and to helping the poor people.

The poor people? I wondered. Why were they poor? How come they were living on the streets and in the train stations? Who were these kids, and why weren't their moms and dads looking after them?

I can still clearly recall the look on Mother Teresa's face, and I could have sworn she was looking right at me. There was so much on her face. At times she looked warm and kind, but at other times, a little scary. She looked almost angry. I tried to make sense of this. But then, our teacher told us to line up and we headed back to class.

I couldn't stop thinking about it—the film, the children, and their sad faces. And her face. I couldn't stop thinking about Mother Teresa's face.

Soon after seeing that film, I had a dream I was in India talking with her. She smiled her kind smile at me, and I felt her warm presence. Then I was back at home, alone in my room, dreaming I was talking to God: "I want to meet her! I want to join them and help the poor people! But how will I ever get to India? How can I explain this to Mom and Dad? Will they even

let me go?” God then replied, “You’ll know when the time is right, but you have to wait.”

Waiting is hard at any age, but it is especially so at 11 when you suddenly know exactly what you’re meant to do. Frustrated, but undaunted, I continued, “God, why did you show me this and make me want to go there so badly if all I can do is wait? How long?” I demanded. Then, gently, “You’re young and you’re not ready. You’ll have to wait, sweetheart.” With all the grown-up conviction I could gather, I shot back, “I’m ready! I really am, Father.” He spoke again, this time with a little more conviction: “Stephie. It’s not time yet.” And with that, I woke up.


It seemed so real.

I was exasperated. I simply could not imagine why He wouldn’t just make it happen right then and there. I was good and ready and felt sure I would make a very good nun.

Sixteen years later, I stood in front of her for real, and her smile was just as kind and her presence just as warm as I had imagined. . . .



2 THE TRIP OF A LIFETIME

ne sunny day in August of 1995, when I was 27, I was at my best friend Margie's apartment having coffee. We had both lost someone very special not long before: Margie, her mom, and me, my Grandma Emmons. We were both still getting over the shock, coffeering our way through our grief together.

The phone rang. It was our mutual friend, Miriam Dowd. We had met Miriam about six years earlier through Challenge, a Catholic youth community we all belonged to in Ottawa. I could tell from Margie's side of the conversation that something was up. Margie had long known of my affinity for Mother Teresa and was smiling and nodding, stirring my curiosity.

"Hmmm. Hang on a moment, okay, Miriam?" Margie said.

Then, Margie turned to me. "Steph, Miriam is planning a six-week trip to India next January to work with Mother Teresa and she's looking for someone to go with her. Can you think of anyone?"

After pondering the question for about ten seconds, I said, "Yeah, okay!"

It was no more notable than if I had just accepted an invitation to go to the movies. And so, after a few weeks of pinching myself to make sure it was real and convincing my poor family that I had not lost my mind, we got busy making all of the preparations, getting the required shots and arranging the travel.

A few days before our departure, Miriam's brother, Father Thomas Dowd (now a bishop), celebrated a cozy send-off Mass at their parents' home for us. There, I took Father Tom aside and told him not to worry, that I would look after his little sister. He smiled and said, "Oh I have a feeling she'll be looking after you." How right he was.

When the big day arrived, January 7, 1996, I went to Mass by myself in the morning at St. Maurice Church. During the homily, our pastor told the congregation about our trip and pointed me out. He asked them to reach out and pray a blessing on me, and with that, every one of them extended a hand toward me, praying for my safety and wellbeing. My whole parish. I felt peaceful the rest of the day. Meeting up with Miriam and our family and friends who had come to wish us bon voyage, I set about the difficult business of saying goodbye to my mother and my brother Rob who had come to see me off. They were understandably concerned, reluctant to see me heading so far away toward the unknown. Ultimately though, they supported me and wanted me to do what made me happy.

At long last, we were in the air heading from Ottawa to Halifax. We giggled an awful lot during the first movie. It was *Babe*—the one with the talking pig and the dancing farmer.

Three little blind mice kept appearing, and the sight of them sent us both into peals of silent laughter. (You can only laugh so loud and so long on a plane before your fellow passengers start to get perturbed. . . .) We didn't dare make eye contact for fear of setting each other off again. We were both giddy and emotional, as the enormity of what we were doing started hitting home. Besides, the weeks leading up to this day had been busy and nerve-wracking, so this bit of comic relief was welcome.

Eventually, we each settled into our own solitude. I thought about the days and weeks ahead, trying to somehow prepare myself for what was to come. But how do you do that? This was India. I'm from Canada; there was no frame of reference. And other than Miriam, I wouldn't know a soul there. I was nervous, for sure. But more than that, I was thrilled. This was the trip of a lifetime! Every moment would be entirely new and different, and I was keen to get at it.

Before long, however, I started feeling very unwell, thinking maybe a migraine was coming on. There was sharp pain in both my ears, right down into my throat. I was almost in tears when we called for the flight attendant to ask for help. This must happen to other people, as they knew just what to do. They gave me two small white plastic cups with hot moist paper towels inside them to hold over my ears to relieve the pressure. I guess I had a bit of a cold and the change in pressure bothered my ears and sinuses. Miriam, though very sympathetic, couldn't help giggling at the sight of me. In her defense, I'm sure I did

look silly, maybe like Yoda with round white plastic ears, but I didn't care. The warm towels really helped.

By the time we stopped in Halifax, I couldn't hear out of my right ear, but I was just glad the pain had eased. On the second descent, this time in Amsterdam, I had an even rougher time than the first. My ears hurt so much that I was crying. Once we landed at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, I bought some nose drops and used them several times during the next flight. I also bought some ibuprofen and made sure to take it before our descent. Thankfully I was okay. I just kept chewing gum, yawning, swallowing, and praying, and I was okay. It was a long, long day. But *so* worth it.

We arrived in Bombay Airport and were funneled into a large room where we lined up with a throng of others to show our passports and go through customs. The baggage retrieval area was crazy. A crush of travelers, luggage handlers, and people begging swallowed us up as we slowly made our way to the front. It took a good half hour to find our bags, and we then proceeded through an X-ray machine. Then we found our way to the Indian Airlines gate—one staff person with one phone sitting at a wooden desk. We asked about our flight to Cochin—the final aerial leg on our trip!—and he told us to go outside and walk through the parking lot to the bus marked Indian Airlines. It was 3:30 a.m. and very dark. As we walked out to the parking lot, cabbies approached us hollering “taxi!” at us over and over. It was unnerving. We reached the bus and climbed aboard. The driver, two men, and a young couple

all stared at us as we stood there awkwardly at the front. The driver asked to see our plane tickets, gestured toward the seats and stowed our bags. All around us nothing stood still—old style taxis, zippy motorized rickshaws, noisy buses, and just so many cars. This was our first experience of the chaos. We took our seats and waited quietly in the rickety old bus for about twenty minutes.

Then we left for the other terminal where we would catch the flight to Cochin. I felt weird and a bit frightened. My stomach was in knots. Now it was 4 a.m., which is a sort of dark and scary time to begin with. We were so alone on a strange bus in a very strange city with a very bad smell. We passed numerous shacks by the side of the road in Bombay, most made with cardboard and rusty tin siding. People, we realized, were in those shacks—whole families—sleeping. Miriam and I glanced at each other, and then we just stared out the window in silence the rest of the way. That bus trip somehow made me sick—soul sick. It had begun.

Almost thirty hours had passed since Miriam and I had first left home. The endless hours spent sitting in airports, on tarmacs, and in the air had hardly given us a chance for any decent stretches of sleep. We were beat. Here's a letter I wrote to my best friend, Margie, while waiting in the Bombay airport: