



Victory Over the Thirty-Foot Pole

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The thirty-foot pole stretched straight up like a telephone pole, tall and intimidating, and we were told to climb it. Why would I climb a pole if I didn't have to? The truth was, I didn't want to. But this pole stood in my way, representing a barrier between God and me, between the world and me, and perhaps, between me and the rest of my life. It was a choice between defeat or victory—much like the struggle of grief.

I had just completed a class that encouraged individuals to move from their comfort zone to their stretch zone. The lessons we learned in the classroom were now going to be applied experientially. The end result reinforced a concept that could create a model for life. It was labeled, “challenge by choice.”

An intimidating thirty-foot pole occupied a notable spot on the challenge-learning course. The facilitator explained that we were to climb the pole. The pole was manufactured with heavy metal staples that created a “ladder” effect. Once we reached the top of the pole, we were supposed to mount the disk that was attached at the top, stand, turn to face the group—and then, jump!

We would wear harnesses. Trained course technicians would manage the belay lines attached to the harnesses that would control our suspension. Our fellow team members were responsible for operating the belay ropes that would lower us safely to the ground after our jump. Our instructor reminded us; we could stop at any point. The purpose of the exercise was to challenge us to take just one step more than we felt comfortable taking in a normal situation.

For whatever reason, I was willing to give it a try, knowing I could stop at any point. For me, climbing the thirty-foot pole was the easy part; it took only seconds. But as I approached the top, I saw the disc mounted there was only the size of a pizza pan. Surely this was a mistake. My feet were bigger than that!

Just two more steps; my hands reached for the disk above me; reality took on a new dimension. My leaden feet felt glued to the staples; I couldn't seem to lift them. My team members yelled encouragement. "You can do it!"

I cautiously tested the disk. My instinct urged me to kneel, and then rise to a standing position. But the platform was too small. My coach called to me, "Don't kneel. You have to stand."

Fear set in. How could I stand? There was nothing there to support me!

Minutes passed. My coach yelled out again, "You've got to let go in order to stand."

"Let go?" I yelled back. "You want me to let go?!"

I suddenly realized that this moment in time was no longer about "challenge by choice." It was something far greater; it was a chance to rise above my fears. If I could do this, then just maybe I could overcome the other obstacles in my life that were holding me back. My mind raced thinking about those obstacles: insecurity, uncertainty and the great unknown that lay in front of me after the death of my son, Chad. My faith was bruised. I wanted to cry out to God, "You've given me this mountain. Now teach me how to climb it! Show me what to do!"

I looked down. My support system was in place. My team members cheered, urging me to take the next step. The chorus of encouragement rang in my ears. But I was afraid, truly afraid. I could turn back now. I had already gone one step beyond what was comfortable for me. I didn't have to prove more than that. It was my choice.

In that moment of indecision, a sudden wash of supreme peace swept over me, surrounding me with a loving embrace. I felt as if my son had reached out, hugged me and said, "You know you can do it, Mom." The feeling lasted only a moment, but it was long enough to give me the courage I needed.

Fearfully, awkwardly, I reached my arms out into empty space. I felt as though someone literally lifted me up. The pole swayed back and forth, and my breath caught in my throat. But in that moment I felt warmly secure.

I let go and lifted my feet on to the platform, and found that I could stand! I stood as high as the treetops. I surveyed the golden colors of autumn around me, awestruck by infinite beauty. My heart swelled with euphoria; a wonderful sense of accomplishment. Surely God was there with me, and so was Chad!

The pole continued to wobble as I turned 180 degrees to position myself to jump. Oblivious to the echo of my team members' cheers below, I was aware only of God, my son, myself, and my choice. I reached for the sky, and jumped. Y-E-S!

Words cannot describe my sense of elation in that brief moment of flight before my body was caught in the security of the belay lines, and my teammates lowered me gently to the ground. I'll never forget it. (In fact, I have it on video to remind me!)

Looking back, I realize now that the climb and jump were much easier than the challenge I'd been facing every day since Chad died. Climbing upward through my grief was much more grueling than climbing the thirty-foot pole. Some days, lifting my legs to walk forward was the biggest accomplishment of the day. Moving, just moving, was an accomplishment! No plan; no destination; oblivious to the world. Carrying out the tasks that we as survivors carry out because we have to, with very few people cheering us on.

Climbing the pole was nothing compared to what I knew now was my primary task: finding the courage to live again. My position on top of that pole paralleled the personal crisis in my life. To move forward, I needed to overcome my fears. I needed to face my predicament, make a decision and let go of my fear. Let go of my grief. Letting go doesn't mean forgetting; it means cherishing the memories. It doesn't mean ignoring the past; it means accepting the challenge of living in the present. Letting go is a choice that can lead to peace and purpose.

I made that choice on top of that pole one fall day. Victory over the pole! Victory over the sting of death!

Victory

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