

Epilogue

We look at the blank page before us... life has changed so much since we turned that page. It's amazing what can happen even within one year!

As we stand at yet another crossroad, we are struck by the reality that the rest of our story, the years left to live, will be much shorter than the pages already written. At the same time, our first Encounter God retreat has certainly placed an assurance in us that this is the path God has laid out. We know the full breadth of our ministry experience has prepared us for this, and we also know that the values written on the earlier pages of our story have lain the foundation that now enables us to face new challenges.

We invite you to continue your journey with us for another year! Allow God to meet you, as He has met so many who have felt the love and healing touch of Jesus at an Encounter God Retreat. The setting is a camp situated on the edge of a beautiful lake. We have dormitory housing with bunk beds in each room. It is totally a camp setting, yet the food is amazing and the environment peaceful.

In the quiet of this place, we can hear God's voice. We are reminded of Jesus' life and ministry. He modelled the importance of retreats for us... it was normal for Him to go to a quiet place, away from the crowds, to be with His Father. Luke 4:42 says, *"Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness for prayer"* (NLT). It is in this quiet that we can hear His voice, speaking affirmation and

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bringing healing to the broken places in our lives. He speaks His love into the depths of who we are! We come from those places more deeply in love with Him and knowing hope for tomorrow.

The meeting begins. Worship moves us to a place of expectancy; something will happen in this place. Then the question is asked: “What would you like Jesus to do in your life this weekend?” We stop to pray, expecting Jesus to respond in the depths of our hearts.

John and I look across the audience. We see an entire family sitting together, we see couples and singles crossing an age demographic of youth to grandparents. We have heard most of their stories, and truly from young to old each one is on a search for something more in their spiritual journey. The background of each person varies as much as their present place in life... denominational leaders, church leaders, church attendees, and those who have given up on the church. Gathered in one room, this diverse group of people has made a defining decision—the status quo is over and authenticity is in. They are committed to meet Jesus. And that is what Encounter God is about—meeting Jesus and allowing His love to flow into and through our lives.

The first presentation begins, and we know Jesus is there. We sense His presence and know the prayers of our team are being answered. People lean forward to catch every word, yet the message isn’t new. Session by session, we see barriers drop and expectations rise.

A rough-hewn cross stands at the front of the room, and quickly we recognize that as our focal point. The cross where Jesus paid it all! Throughout the event, we see participants kneeling at the cross or laying prostrate, allowing Jesus love to wash over them. They meet Jesus there.

On Sunday morning, just before we move into the last session, retreat participants are given the opportunity to tell their story, but the guidelines are clear. Comments are to relate only to this retreat and how Jesus has met them and is bringing healing into their journey. A deeper journey has begun for many, but for others, the story of life change may only unfold over time. But we can tell, the deeper work of Jesus has begun.

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The final presentation of the retreat concludes and the prayer team ministers into the early hours of the afternoon.

Jesus is the counsellor throughout the weekend. It is profound and amazing to hear Jesus speak. The words from John 10 come to life—“My sheep, hear my voice.”

In the midst of the conversation and prayer, Jesus showed us something else. It was about Byron. Because we were unable to get respite for the second retreat, Byron joined us. At about his bedtime, we offered to help him to his room so that he could go to bed. He refused to leave, and then we noticed the impact of his presence there. One pastor, sitting next to Byron, asked Byron to pray for him. Of course, Byron’s prayers are not audible, but he bowed his head and did not lift it again until the room had cleared. And that became Byron’s role—to pray throughout the weekend. Byron is now a member of our prayer team, and we will never again look for respite. God shows up when Byron is there.

When the event concludes, we stand for the closing prayer. Across the room are people who have experienced the love and healing touch of Jesus. We have all begun a journey together, and we still need each other to continue the journey.

We announce the Encounter Village, the weekly gathering of those who attended the retreat, to begin the next evening. At the Village, we will continue the authentic journey we have begun together. Truth has been spoken into the lives of many who before had come to believe the lies of the enemy. The past no longer need hold them captive; Jesus has brought freedom! Now, together over a potluck dinner, we share our week’s journey. We see Jesus continue His work of love and healing. We journey together, enjoying the reality of authentic community, accepting each other regardless of our pasts, and imparting grace even when we experience setbacks. Everyone shares the expectation that there is hope for the greater dream—for all of us!

After one recent Encounter Village prayer time, one team member made an astounding statement. Reaching out cupped hands, he said, “This ‘thing’ we are holding and nurturing doesn’t belong to us. It belongs to the church.”

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That had been our original dream for Encounter God. We didn't want to just exist alongside the church; we wanted to be fully enveloped in the essence of local churches everywhere. We wanted to fully and completely be *part* of the local church!

Our team member's statement reminded us again that God's call on us is for the church. Recently, we have found ourselves working with leaders of churches. This often leads to invitations to connect with whole staff bodies. Now we are moving from holding retreats at offsite locations, where we've had to invite people to attend, to being booked to hold retreats right in local churches as part of their overall community.

That growing hunger for more of Jesus continues to propel us forward. Since finishing *Unwritten*, our journey forward has not slowed down at all. Our next steps are already clearly laid out:

- Brent and his wife Sabrina are moving their family to Steinbach, Manitoba, for one or two years of intense on-the-job training geared toward preparing them to serve in the national leadership of Encounter God. The church team they will be joining is the place where this journey first began. This church has become a wonderful support and resource base for us, and we are delighted that Brent and Sabrina will be missionaries-in-training there.
- John and I will continue to connect with church leaders across the country, sharing the stories of the significant life changes we've witnessed through Jesus' love and healing touch at Encounter God. As this conversation continues to grow among church leaders across our nation, we want those who serve in local churches to see how effectively Jesus can still work with people who reach for Him.
- Byron will continue to journey alongside us as we move forward with Encounter God. He most often sits in the front row, head bowed as people all around him move into prayer.

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He usually refuses to leave the meeting room until everyone else has left.

Byron continues to teach us a great deal about our own relationships with Jesus. As an adult in his thirties now, he still deals with significant issues. A lack of peripheral vision means that things we take for granted can become big challenges for him—standing at the top of the stairs, trying to build up his courage to step forward and down even though he’s in the middle of a black void, can become overwhelming for him. Many times, I’ve seen him hesitate and heard him say, “No, no...” Then I reach out to help him and say, “Byron, when you can’t see, you have to trust.”

As John and I press forward with Encounter God, as we wrestle with knowing what to do next, I’ll hear that same phrase echoed back to me as God whispers in my ear, “Lorraine, when you can’t see what’s ahead, you have to trust.”

Trust. That’s the life we’ve come to embrace. That’s the thing about our unwritten pages of tomorrow... we have to continue trusting in a God who can see the way ahead. He is faithful to take our hand and lead us forward.

That’s where we’re at since finishing *Unwritten*. We’re still walking one day at a time, learning what it means to Encounter God afresh every day, and seeing John 14:12—“Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these” (NIV)—come to life on each fresh and unwritten page.

What’s next for you?

Musings

