

A child will lead you

S. Lesley Sacouman

“Be not afraid.” Impossible. Jesus experienced a crippling fear that ripped apart the core of his being and left him on the verge of despair. The servant is not greater than the master. So who are we to expect anything different?

Fear has been my lifelong companion. For forty years, I lived and worked alongside inner-city children and youth. Fear skulked around, darkened my days, and split open my nights. Love alone conquered Fear. Love drew me close to the broken hearted, those who bleed, who stink, and who talk back. Love dared me to hear their cry and to taste their pain. Love whispered, “See their goodness. Touch their joy. Be not afraid.” Slowly Fear recoiled and life became a daring adventure. Today Fear and I are on pilgrimage together. Cords of loving kindness bind us with a peace beyond understanding, a peace that disturbs profoundly and that threatens resurrection.

In 1970, two Holy Names sisters and I moved into the inner city of Winnipeg. Our move was a direct response to God’s invitation, “Come and see.” We saw single parent families, bent over and broken, struggling against terrible odds just to make ends meet. We saw sexually exploited youth skipping school, stealing, selling drugs, and raising havoc in the neighbourhood. We heard children crying in the night, abusive language, and sirens. We heard silence, a silence that pierced the darkness and screamed, “I can’t take it anymore.”

All of this affected us deeply, but it did not transform our lives. What seized our imagination and made all the difference was the resilience and courage of the children and youth. They appeared so hard-edged, yet they melted with the smallest act of kindness, a simple hello. Their prophetic smiles enlarged our hearts and goaded us, “If you have come here to help me, then go home. But, if you have come because your liberation is tied up with mine, then let’s work together.” That challenge shook us to the core and put our integrity on the line. Would we walk away, or would we stand up and be counted simply because it was the right thing to do?

Living in the Core Area and learning from the neighbours was pure gift. Our lives bubbled with meaning and adventure. However, over time the physical and emotional violence began to take its toll. One night I

woke up to the sound of screaming and swearing in our backyard. I jumped out of bed, looked out the back window, and saw some guys swinging baseball bats and attacking each other. Immediately, I called the police.



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The attendant just kept asking me these inane questions: “How do you know that someone is going to get hurt?” I lost it and yelled, “Just get a car here fast before someone is killed.” This was one of many sleepless nights I spent sitting stark upright in bed waiting for the obscenities and hostility to end. Soon after, I began to wonder how much longer I could handle this and whether I needed to move somewhere else. This question brought me to my knees. “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change

the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

A few months later, God answered my prayer: “Lesley, be not afraid. A child will lead you.” That child’s name was Sheila Sunshine. Sheila died this past summer. Her obituary read, “Sheila Sunshine passed away on July 18, 2018.” Her life deserves more.

The spirit of the Lord is upon you, Sheila.

You are God’s mystery, God’s chosen treasure.

God has anointed you to bring good news to the afflicted.

Sheila was my mentor. She nourished my heart, stretched my thinking, and challenged my values. She burst the barriers of my comfort zone by unmasking the lie and uncovering the scandal. Sheila taught me some raw and basic lessons. No child should ever have to steal to eat, break and enter to sleep, or be sexually exploited to survive. “No child who does not want to be alone should ever have to be.” Each segment of our journey shook me, sifted me, and spun me into uncharted waters. All Sheila ever asked was that I not run away. And with each step, doors opened. Changes, surprises, and God made them all.

Sheila was eight going on thirty. She was a spunky child with long black hair and flashing brown eyes. She lived nearby in a dilapidated house with her addicted mother and three younger siblings. At three o’clock one morning, Sheila appeared at our door, clutching her baby

brother. The dark circles under her eyes betrayed the pain and horror of the night. Her two younger brothers, ages four and six, were glued to her side. Slowly, they entered the living room, settled down in front of the television, and soon fell sound asleep.

*Be not afraid, Sheila.
I will be with you, howsoever, I will be with you.*

By the time Sheila turned eleven, she had quit school, was sniffed up constantly, and had become a chronic runner. Hurt and frightened, she lashed out at her workers. When alone, she was withdrawn and would cry for hours. Elizabeth Barrett Browning warns us, “The child’s sob in the silence curses deeper than the strong man in his wrath.”

*Blessed are you, Sheila,
you who mourn and weep in lamentation.
Nothing can separate you from the love of God.
Nothing, Sheila!*

When Sheila reached the age of thirteen, the group home system washed its hands of her, exercised its legal revenge, and locked her up. Sheila was not wanted; she didn’t fit in; she was disposable. Refusing to be shackled, she escaped and took to the streets. Hunger and fatigue became her constant companions. Because she was young, the pressures great, and her resources few, she buckled under the weight of hopelessness. Lost and confused, she spent her time scheming on how to attain drugs, alcohol, sniff, anything to help her cope with the night ahead. The threat of HIV or of impending death did not scare her. The bottom line remained; who cared anyhow?

*Sheila, you are precious and honoured in God’s sight.
You are carved in the palm of God’s hand.
God cannot and will not forsake you.*

At eighteen, Sheila stood in a court of law, her head bowed in shame. The judge demanded she show some respect and look up at him when he was sentencing her. Then, in front of everyone, he condemned her, “You will never amount to anything.” The judge’s harsh words were cemented forever in Sheila’s mind. They confirmed her absolute worst fear. She hadn’t committed a crime; she was a crime.

*Blessed are you, Sheila,
when people persecute you and revile you.
Trust not those who know not God's Spirit,
or yours or even their own.*

Sheila had no fixed address and lived her young adult years in degrading hotels where she was forced to perform sexual favours in order to pay her rent. These hotels were repulsive. The stairs and hallways reeked of stale urine. The windows were shattered, and bed springs protruded through the mattresses. When I visited her, my whole being recoiled. I wanted to take her home, but she refused. The burden of love was too heavy for her to bear.

*God, you have called Sheila by name.
She is your beloved child.
Please, be her rock, her stronghold.*

One bitter December day, I took Sheila and Gerry, her boyfriend, out for pizza. Later that evening, she experienced terrible abdominal pain and thought she had food poisoning. In truth, she was going into labour. Not having a cell phone or even a quarter to use a pay phone, Sheila and Gerry headed out on foot to the hospital. When the contractions became too intense, Gerry took off his jacket and lay it on the freezing snow so that Sheila could sit down and regain her strength. No one stopped to help. I wonder what people were thinking as they drove by and surveyed this scene?

*Sheila, in your flesh and blood you bear salvation.
The source of all life can live in you.*

As soon as they arrived at the hospital, Gerry phoned, and I rushed over, told the receptionist I was Sheila's mother, and proceeded straight to the delivery room. One hour later, baby Gerry was born. After his birth, the doctor drew me aside, slipped three hundred dollars into my hand and whispered, "Get something special for Sheila and Gerry." I wouldn't be surprised if his thoughts were with another couple who gave birth over two thousand years ago.

The next day Sheila was discharged, and baby Gerry was left behind. Child and Family Services would not allow her to keep her child. Sheila and Gerry blamed and hated themselves for this. Nine months later, unable to face himself any longer, Gerry drank oven cleaner and died. Sheila

was devastated, having lost her child and now her partner in less than a year.

*Who could imagine Sheila's future?
She was struck down, cut off from the land of the living.*

Years later, on Christmas day, Sheila arrived at our home in a Safeway shopping cart pushed through the heavy snow by Mike, her new friend. Sheila's chronic sniffing was stripping her of her ability to walk. We were glad to see Sheila and had presents for her and Mike under the tree. About six o'clock, we sat down for a delicious meal with all the trimmings. Within ten minutes, Sheila had gulped down her food, jumped up to clear the table, and washed the dishes. We all sat there wide-eyed, for we had barely touched our food. Still, our hearts overflowed with gratitude for Sheila's precious gift of herself to us.

*Yours is a special benediction, Sheila.
Each time you visit and break bread with us,
God meets, greets and touches us with peace.*

Years passed. Addiction and street life were damming Sheila and Mike. Death lurked around every corner if something drastic didn't change. Together, they quit sniffing and moved to Saskatoon, hoping to begin life anew. For a few years they did well. They had two healthy boys whom they loved and were determined to shield from the trauma they themselves had experienced. But in the end, violent, systemic poverty that had brutalized Sheila and Mike all their lives won out. Both boys were taken and put into foster care. Sheila's final years were sad. She was beaten, crushed, and humiliated.

*God, please!
As a mother comforts her child,
hold her to your breast; give her a drink.*

Fear overshadowed Sheila's entire life, yet she was never afraid. Sheila was the keeper of her own heart, and no thief in the night could steal it from her. Her spunky spirit in life and in death defied despair. Sheila loved at great cost and right until the end.

*Blessed are the merciful.
Blessed are you, Sheila.
You who place no limits on your yes,*

*who share your scraps of food,
your toilet paper, your sniff, and
everything and anything else
your heart has managed to salvage.*

Not one of us wants to face Sheila, nor look into her piercing, dark eyes.

*Like a sapling, she grew up in front of us,
like a root in arid ground,
a thing despised and rejected,
a child of sorrows,
a young girl to make us screen our faces.*

Sheila does not condemn us for our negligence, our harsh judgments, our apathy or abuse, but her life does uncover the scandal, and it unmasks the lie.

Sheila Sunshine passed away on July 18, 2018. Sheila shattered my fearful heart and unleashed hope. This prophetic woman was true to her name, Sheila Sunshine.

*Peace is Jesus's legacy to you, Sheila,
peace that surpasses all understanding,
peace in fullest measure, pressed down and running over.*

My hope in entrusting Sheila's story to you is two-fold. First, I pray that her life challenges and leads you to take Christ down from the cross today and eliminate structural poverty. Second, when you meet Sheila on the street, in McDonald's, in the hospital, or in your office—and you will—be not afraid. Please stop, take off your shoes, and say, "Hello," for the ground on which you stand is holy.

May the peace of Christ continue to bind up our fears and threaten us with resurrection so that future generations will be left a legacy of hope.

About the author

S. Lesley Sacouman, SNJM, is founder and executive director at Holy Names House of Peace, a home in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where hope empowers eighteen newcomer women to live life and begin anew. In 2004 she received an honorary doctor of divinity degree from the University of Winnipeg, and in 2017 she received the distinguished alumni award for community service from the University of Manitoba.