

The Secret of Surrender

Molly Kelly

I grew up in a Catholic family with five brothers and a sister, and Mom and Dad loved us very much. Not everything always went right, but love was the glue that bound us together. I went off to college...and met the love of my life: Jim, a handsome young medical student at Georgetown. Jim and I started to date when I was a sophomore, and we married the year after I graduated. Ours was a marriage made in heaven, as they say. He loved me, I loved him, and because of our love for each other we decided to allow God to be our family planner. And what a generous God he is. We were blessed with eight children in eleven years!

Then one day twenty-two years ago my life changed forever. Jim and I were away for the weekend with three couples who were our best friends. It wasn't easy to get away because of Jim's schedule at the hospital, and because of our eight young children. So we were very excited. We were going to spend the weekend at a winter resort in the Poconos. But let me now fast-forward you to the event that catapulted me into an unrest and sadness that permeated every fiber of my being and remained there for years, until I let God come and set me on my journey toward peace and joy.

I was at the top of a sled run, chatting with our friends, when I noticed a commotion at the bottom of the slope. Jim had just gone down the hill on the sled, but I hadn't watched him so I didn't know it had anything to do with him. I saw several people waving to us, and I wondered what was going on. Then someone yelled for me to come down quickly because Jim had been hurt. I ran the whole way down the hill, slipping and falling and getting up again, and when I arrived at the scene there was a crowd around Jim. They stepped aside and made room for me, and I knelt at his side. He was semi-conscious and bleeding profusely. I'll skip the details and get to the end. Jim died.

I was devastated. Jim was my best friend, my pillow-talk buddy, the father of our children, the builder of our dreams. I couldn't begin to fathom life without him. I will never forget going home and hugging each one of the children, who had already been told that their dad had died. Our eldest, Jim, was twelve, and our youngest, Dan, was fourteen months. The older ones were pale, sad, and clinging to each other. The younger ones weren't sure what was going on. The house was filled with people, noise, and lots and lots of food. (It's interesting how people bring food to console a grieving family.) God was compassionate and shielded and surrounded me with family and good friends, and I was grateful for the outpouring of love, but I was too hurt to thank anyone. I was wounded and bleeding just like Jim, and no one could fix my wounds either, so they seeped and festered for years.

I was able to go on as far as taking care of the kids because I loved them so much, and because I promised myself I would never dishonor Jim's memory by doing a shabby job of raising our children. I still had two in diapers, and because children want things to be better quickly, the rest of them went back to playing football in the living room, making a playhouse out of my couch cushions, and making demands on my time and patience. Time I had; in fact it weighed heavily

on me, even though I never seemed to get done all that I had to do. Each day dragged on, and I couldn't wait for bedtime so I could go to sleep and forget for just a little while that Jim had died. I was short on patience.

I was never alone, yet I was lonely beyond belief. It was only later, when peace came, that I discovered the difference between loneliness and being alone. I still dread loneliness, but I have come to cherish times when I am alone with myself and God.

Sometime after my husband's death, I took up an issue that had concerned him greatly: abortion. As a Catholic physician who believed in the sacredness of all life, Jim was an ardent opponent of Roe v. Wade, and I felt the same as he did, although I had never talked about it publicly.

In fact, I had never spoken in public before, period, and I was scared to death to do so now, but I said to myself, "You've survived the worst – Jim's death. How bad can public speaking be?"

I began by addressing the issue in classes at local Catholic high schools, and within a few years I was speaking quite a bit. I arranged my schedule so that I would be home when the kids got back from school in the afternoon.

After a while I realized that I wasn't getting to the heart of the problem. I realized I needed to talk about the root of abortion, which had to do with unwanted pregnancies, which had to do with casual sex. So I began to speak about sexual responsibility, which I call chastity. That was the beginning of resurgence in teaching abstinence, and the invitations to speak came pouring in. I was asked to speak in so many schools and so many other venues that I became overwhelmed and didn't know where to turn.

Friends suggested that I cut down on my speaking, but I felt God had called me to this mission of public speaking, and I wasn't about to give it up. Still, something had to give. It was then that I realized that what had to give was me. I had to give it all over to God, to surrender, and I wasn't used to that.

I liked to be in control. I was the mother of eight children, and I ran a tight ship. I bought the food, I made the dinners, I washed the clothes, I helped with the homework, I went to the plays and ball games, I was home and school president. The word "surrender" was not in my vocabulary. What I didn't realize was that surrender to God does not mean giving up so much as it means giving over. I had to give over my control, my unrest, my loneliness, my being overwhelmed—even my children – to God. And in each area of my life where I was able to do this, the tangible peace I experienced was almost instantaneous.

One thing that happened was a new awareness of the Holy Spirit, for the first time since my confirmation. I had grown up praying to God and picturing Jesus, but the Holy Spirit was just someone who flew in and out for the occasion of my confirmation. In surrendering myself to God (and let me say here that it takes a daily effort) I began to realize that Pentecost, the descending of the Spirit into our lives, is an ongoing happening.

Since then I've spoken to more than a million teens – they're my favorite people in the whole world – and to thousands and thousands of parents. Recently I addressed a gathering of six thousand priests in Rome, and a meeting of fifty cardinals and bishops in California.

My schedule can be overwhelming, but it no longer overwhelms me. My peace is deep. It's a serenity that seems to have settled in for the long haul, for as long as I keep renewing my surrender to God. I say yes to speaking engagements when I can and when I think God wants me to, and I say no when I can't. Am I always right? I doubt it. But I have confidence in knowing that God never takes away his gift of peace if we continue to give our lives to him, even when we fail now and then...

I have come to realize that it is only in surrender that true peace will come. Surrender in war means losing, giving up. Surrender to God is winning and giving over your life to him. I start out each day at Mass asking God to help me be him to everyone I meet during the day and, even more important, to see him in everyone I meet. But then I get out my white flag that only God can see and boldly wave it back and forth, letting God know that today I am surrendering, once again, to his will. It's a daily exercise that firms up my spiritual life; and believes me; he always gives me his joy and peace.

A well-known author and speaker on teen issues, Molly Kelly wrote this piece in 1998 for inclusion in Johann Christoph Arnold's book Seeking Peace: Notes and Conversations. In 2001 she suffered a cerebral hemorrhage which left her in a coma for weeks. She recovered with time, but has greatly curtailed her public speaking schedule and her traveling. In 2002, she lost her oldest son, Jimmy, when he unexpectedly died in his sleep. Molly lives near Philadelphia, PA, where she is still active in the local pro-life movement.