

FAITH AND POWER OF AN UNBROKEN WOMAN

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I am outside running, playing, and dancing to musical beats from our neighbor's house. It is a bright sunny day, and, just as on other beautiful days, I am on top of the world, where the wide expanse of the earth is all mine. My arms spread out, eyes closed, a big smile on my face, and feet firmly planted on mother earth, I am swaying to the melodious music. Suddenly I feel a gentle shake, but I struggle to open my eyes, not wanting to break the beautiful spell. I feel another shake, followed by a soft voice calling my name. With great difficulty I open my eyes halfway and see my sister standing by my bedside, waking me up for scripture reading. I slowly drag myself out of bed. The air around me is chilly, so I pull the blanket tightly around me as I half-sleep and half-stumble to the living room. We all gather around and take turns reading scriptures. As we continue reading and my sister and brother-in-law—my guardians—explain the scriptures to us and relate them to our lives, a warm feeling spreads from my heart to the rest of my body. Looking back at those experiences, I realize now that they planted a seed in my heart. The good word of God planted and nourished an acorn of faith that would grow into an oak tree.

An oak tree can grow nine feet in diameter, with branches reaching up to 135 feet in length. Its root system almost mirrors its height, growing as deep as the tree is high. They have the capacity to withstand incredibly strong winds and storms: even when stripped of their leaves, oak trees survive because of their strength, curvy branches, and their incredible root system. An oak tree also adapts to different conditions, growing easily where there is sunlight, nourishment, water, and space.

Love from my family was like sunlight to me. The many opportunities I had to serve at home, church, and school nourished me. I grew strong, well-prepared, and ready for life's challenges. My roots grew deeper and my branches reached out wider. I felt a purpose in my life, and I had a relationship with Jesus Christ. I understood that Christ served without any prejudice, as no respecter of people. He embraced all who came unto him. Spiritual empowerment lifts us from our lowly states to the top of the highest branches, where we bask in the Savior's love and draw strength from his word. All of this gave me power, so that when the storms of life happened to me, even though my leaves were stripped away, I was still able to stand and move forward with confidence.

When the time came for me to leave the protection of my loving family, I walked right through life's door to a new beginning. Their love was a great source of courage, and so as I walked, I felt the gentle breeze on my face, excited about what life had in store for me. Even though I was far from my family, I still felt their love for me as they continued supporting and praying for me. I also felt the love of my Heavenly Father as he guided and protected me.

In my new beginning, I married someone from another country and moved far away from my own family. Knowing the power of service, I quickly got involved in the Church and labored in the Lord's vineyard, helping the Church grow. Two years later, when clouds started gathering and the sky grew dark, the gospel was my main source of strength. The early days of my marriage were happy, but things changed after my son was born. My husband expected me to stay home and take care of my baby. It was a good idea, but this frightened me because I was the breadwinner in the home and there was no other source of income. I prayed to Heavenly Father to know what I should do, but the answer was the same prayer after prayer: that I should go back to work. My husband wasn't happy with my decision, but I prayed and hoped that his feelings would change. Things did not improve, and when my son was

nine months old, my husband started demanding that we have another baby. He argued that a woman's place was in the home taking care of the home and children, not working outside the home. He quoted Ephesians 5:22–23, which says, “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church.” He demanded full submission from me. He restricted me from talking to other people and became verbally abusive. When my son was two years old, I decided to try for another baby, hoping that this would help lessen the verbal abuse, which was reaching a breaking point. A year later, I had a beautiful little girl, but instead of finding relief, the problems at home compounded. The baby cried nonstop, seemingly for no reason. I found out later that she cried because she was unable to breathe through her nose, but she was too small for the surgery that could alleviate the problem. With a toddler, an endlessly screaming baby, and a husband who continued to heap abuse on my head, my mental health quickly deteriorated.

Having another baby did not change the state of things at home. My children's father had very little interest in them. He started coming home very late, then after a while he started spending nights away from home. Most painfully, he started criticizing my body and comparing me to his young female college classmates. I think this hurt the most because of the insensitivity to what pregnancy and bearing children had done to my body. I endured both emotional and psychological abuse. It was hard, but I felt that I had to endure all for the sake of my children.

The verbal abuse I endured whenever he was home started to wear me out and break me down. He never missed an opportunity to remind me how stupid I was, and, unfortunately, I started believing his words and questioning my intelligence and mental state. I lost confidence and blamed myself for what was happening to me. During all this, I prayed fervently for a window of calm, but the storm raged on in different forms: verbal abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and psychological abuse. Unfortunately, my little children were also caught in this

dangerous, cyclone-like storm. They too endured verbal and physical abuse, in most cases over nothing. The gusts of wind hurled against me, stretching me further than I thought I could endure. The only respite we got was when I was at work and my children at school. Going home after work always terrified me, but I had to be there to protect my children.

On two occasions we had to run for our lives, and we stayed with dear friends who were willing to take us in. During those times my son would unconsciously take on the responsibilities of looking out for his little sister and vigilantly watch out for her, lest their father show up at school to take them away. I was only aware of the huge burden my son carried when he asked me for some extra change, just in case they needed to run away from their father. After these times of leaving, we always ended up going back home.

In August 2006, one moment changed everything. It was not the calm of the storm but an extreme surge, an experience of abuse worse than anything that had come before. My husband grabbed me so fast and unexpectedly that I didn't have time to jump off the bed and out of his reach. He straddled me, pinned my body down, and started strangling me. I struggled to get out of his grip, but his 250-pound body held me down. His legs held my lower body in place, and he grinned as he tightly wrapped his hands around my neck. The more I struggled, the more he tightened the grip. Any attempts to free myself did nothing but drain all the energy from my body. The tight grip constricted my windpipe, making it hard for me to breathe. My eyes wide with pure terror, my heart pounding, my veins bulging and making my head feel like it was going to explode, I thought that I might die and no longer be able to protect my children. All I could do was pray that I would get out from under him alive. I was at a point where I had no energy to struggle—all previous attempts had yielded nothing but more pain and tighter strangulation. Praying was all I could do; it was the only powerful weapon I had in that situation. It was the only thing he could not

stop me from doing, and as that thought came to me, I knew that not all was lost. With hope and gratitude in my heart, I fervently prayed that I might live to raise my children. It was at that time that I felt peace in my heart, then heard a quiet voice telling me to relax. As I trusted that voice and ceased struggling, he slowly loosened the grip, then finally let go of me. He had an air of mission-accomplished about him; it was victory. He did not understand that having power over my body did not mean having power over my mind, heart, and soul. He could not stop me from praying to my God, who had literally saved my life in that moment.

It was this event that made me realize that nothing was going to change and that I had to find a way to remove myself and my children before something worse happened. I spent the rest of the night in my children's room with all the furniture pushed against the door, just in case he tried to come after us. We didn't sleep that night.

The next day we sought refuge at our bishop's home. I knew that a long, rough road lay ahead of us and I knew that we were not completely out of danger. But I also knew that Heavenly Father would see us through it all. I could now see light at the end of the tunnel. It did not matter that my children and I had nothing but the clothes on our backs—what mattered was that we were together. The love that bound us together and the will to live as free people drove our resolve and empowered us. With determination we looked forward to a new beginning, out of his controlling grasp. Of course, he did not give up on his quest to break us. He stalked me, threatened me with legal action, and finally resorted to verbal abuse and threats of physical harm. But there was no stopping us from getting our freedom. I knew at that point that living in that country was not an option for me and my children anymore.

The next period of my life was hard. I left my children with my sister and came to the United States for studies. Many were skeptical about how I was going to make it financially, but I had a mustard seed

of faith on which I could rely. I did not doubt that the Lord would make a way for us. I was a giant oak tree, planted by the love of my family and nourished by the word of God. I knew the words of Matthew 17:20: “If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.” This scripture is the definition of power. By faith I went to a two-year college, then a four-year college, and finally graduated from graduate school. During that time, the Lord guided me, and good people sustained me. These earthly angels in my life helped me reunite with my children after being apart for five years. Through the Lord’s help, I was able to overcome the great hurricane of my life.

Irrespective of our circumstances or background, we all face different challenges at different times in our life’s journey, but we have all been endowed with amazing abilities, capabilities, and strength beyond what we can ever imagine. And so was my life’s journey: though battered and bruised, like the oak tree I stood, and over the years, everything sprang back into place with renewed energy, ready for new growth, empowered by the experiences of faith and power of an unbroken woman.

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