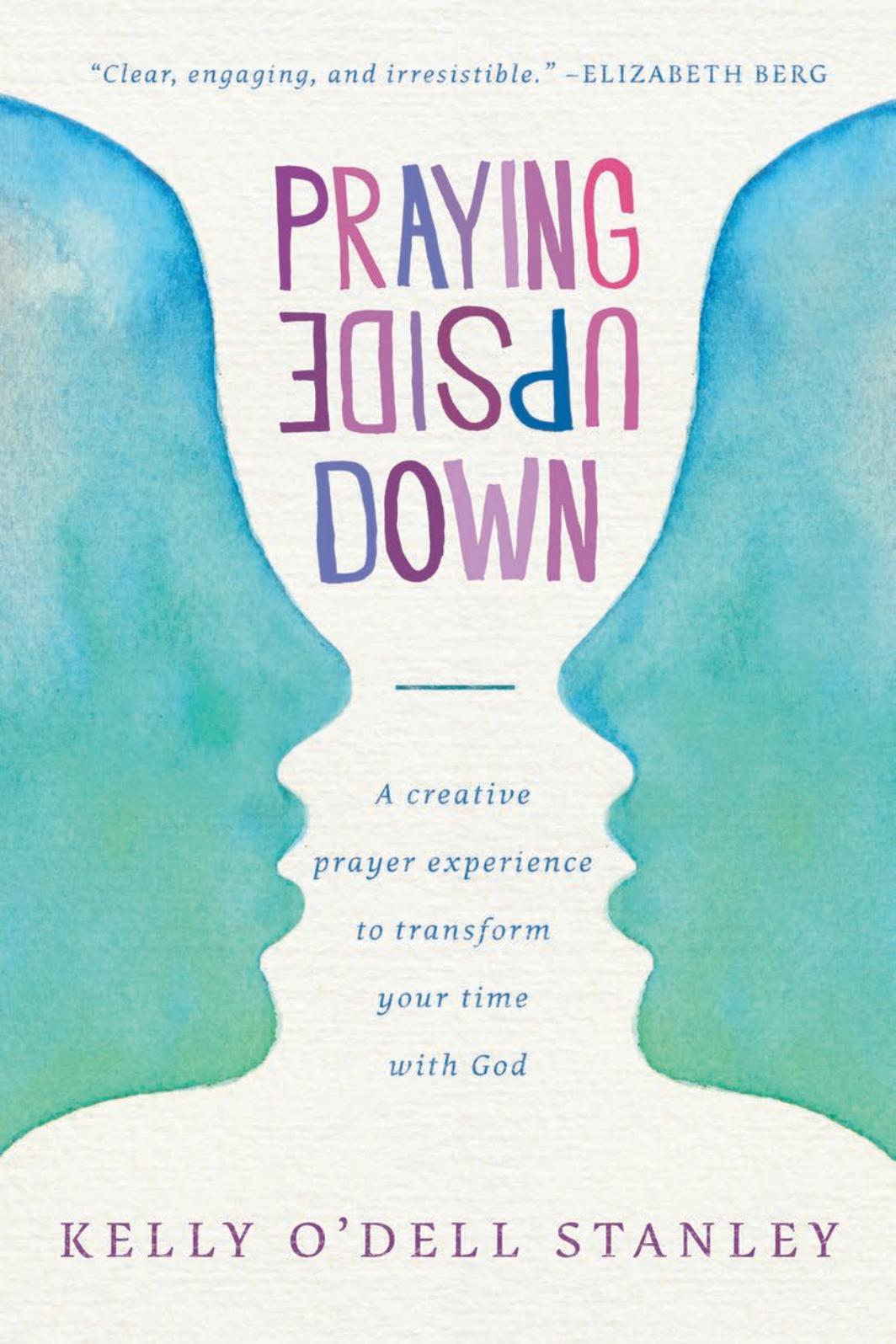


"Clear, engaging, and irresistible." –ELIZABETH BERG



PRAYING UPSIDE DOWN

*A creative
prayer experience
to transform
your time
with God*

KELLY O'DELL STANLEY

I love to learn from people who are willing to let God pull back the curtain from their lives and reveal His startling perspective. Kelly O'Dell Stanley does that and invites us to see and pray through God's right-side-up/upside-down view.

STASI ELDREDGE

New York Times bestselling author of *Captivating* and *Becoming Myself*

Like the books of Anne Lamott, so full of honest and soulful searching, Kelly O'Dell Stanley's *Praying Upside Down* takes as its launchpad the precepts of the Christian faith. But what is offered here can apply to anyone, regardless of their faith—or lack thereof. What this book does is offer ways to learn and practice a humble kind of self-inventory, leading to forgiveness and generosity toward others as well as toward oneself. I found Kelly's spiritual journey compelling and her voice clear, engaging, and irresistible.

ELIZABETH BERG

Author of *The Handmaid and the Carpenter* and *The Dream Lover*

In her book, *Praying Upside Down*, Kelly O'Dell Stanley brings something entirely new for the soul to consider: What can the elements of art teach us about faith, prayer, and God? Through personal stories on family, grief, and vocation, Kelly doesn't introduce a new kind of praying as much as *a new kind of seeing*, which is what my faith really needs. This is unlike any book on prayer I've ever read.

EMILY P. FREEMAN

Author of *A Million Little Ways*

It requires no spiritual sensitivity to see God at work in a miracle, but to see God work in the everyday circumstances of our lives is another matter. *Praying Upside Down* gives us eyes to see and ears to hear the Divine Presence in the ordinariness of life. A spiritual primer on practicing the presence of God.

PHILIP GULLEY

Quaker pastor and author

In *Praying Upside Down*, Kelly O'Dell Stanley offers us a fresh perspective on not only our prayers, but also the God who answers them. Art has a way of moving and stretching us. Of making us consider our

experiences in a new light. Stanley utilizes her firsthand knowledge of the artistic process to shine new truth on what it means to commune with God and the full spectrum of ways we can see His answers manifest in our lives, if our eyes are open. *Praying Upside Down* will rejuvenate any prayer life, and I believe this work is truly a gift to the Body of Christ.

SARAH KOVAC

Author of In Capable Arms

As a person who has always struggled with prayer, I am so grateful for Kelly O'Dell Stanley's fresh perspective, honest confessions, and grace-filled invitations. Prayer as a kind of art? What a beautiful concept.

ADDIE ZIERMAN

Author of When We Were on Fire

Kelly does an amazing job in *Praying Upside Down* of drawing from her rich background in graphic design and art to offer the reader fresh perspectives on an intimate relationship with God . . . perspectives that will, I believe, make us want to pray. Each chapter is wrapped around personal stories from her own pilgrimage in prayer that demonstrate great vulnerability in asking the hard questions and will inspire confidence in the God who is always with us. Each chapter ends with very practical advice that will add vitality to and increase faith for our communion with God. I had to set the book down on several occasions and marvel at the wonder of a God who offers immediate access for us all, in every circumstance of life, and welcomes us into an intimate and dynamic relationship through Christ Jesus.

DR. ALEC E. ROWLANDS

Senior pastor, Westgate Chapel, Edmonds, WA; president, Church Awakening; and author of *The Presence*

This book is CPR for your prayer life. Kelly's upside-down approach to prayer is—in all the best ways—right-side up, by pointing you straight to our sovereign God. This book will help you unleash the power of heaven in a fresh, joyful, invigorating new way.

JENNIFER DUKES LEE

Author of Love Idol

This book is an invitation to pray so much more richly in so many new ways. Kelly O'Dell Stanley expands our horizons about conversing with God not with more instructions but through one experience after another. If you are an artist-type, you will quickly find that she speaks your language. Even if you do not consider yourself an artist, you will be opened up to the Master Artist's point of view, which, in Kelly's words "is quite a view!"

TIMOTHY R. BOTTS

Calligrapher and author of *Doorposts*

Prayer. It can seem so . . . burdensome, time-consuming, one-sided, and complicated with all those flowery, eloquent words that we think should be the launching pad in our conversations with God. So, we choose not to pray, going through our days mute to the One who desires to, not only hear from us, but also speak to us. But in her book, *Praying Upside Down*, Kelly O'Dell Stanley takes us by the hand and challenges and equips us to see prayer from a whole new perspective, erasing what we thought prayer to be and painting a beautiful picture of what it's meant to be.

JENIFER JERNIGAN

Bible teacher and author of *Dive Deeper*

Praying Upside Down offers an invaluable antidote to the prayer life that has gone stale. We can forget the one-dimensional prayers we have been praying before bedtime all these years. Kelly O'Dell Stanley literally turns prayer on its head, transforming it into a fresh, vibrant act of creativity that refreshes the spirit. Take Kelly at her word, and you will never look at prayer the same way again.

MATT APPLING

Teacher, pastor, and author of *Life after Art* and *Plus or Minus*

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KELLY O'DELL STANLEY



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*Portrait of Igor Stravinsky by Pablo Picasso turned upside down,
as it was used in Betty Edwards's drawing experiment.*

INTRODUCTION

PRAYING UPSIDE DOWN

*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking
new landscapes but in having new eyes.*

MARCEL PROUST

I like to pray upside down.

Praying upside down doesn't involve swinging from your knees on a jungle gym. It doesn't require an inversion table or a bungee harness. In fact, it's much scarier: It's all about asking God to let you see. Truly *see*. To see Him at work, see Him in action, and let go of expectations. It might mean He'll throw your world out of orbit, turn your thoughts topsy-turvy, and change you from the inside out. It will *definitely* mean your perspective will never be the same again.

Through the years, my prayer life has run the gamut, starting with a checklist written on graph paper when I was fourteen, carefully including every item mentioned by my Sunday school teachers, camp counselors, and grandparents.

Tell God "good night" just like you do your parents. Say the Lord's Prayer every single day.

I recited prayers of penance when I entered the Catholic church in my early twenties. I offered wordless prayers of humble thanksgiving when I held my newborn children. I've raised my hands in praise and jubilation. I've sobbed on the floor in an empty church, too distraught to form coherent words. I've prayed silently on my knees, alone at home, and I've prayed out loud, in a jumble of voices as the whole congregation gathered at the altar of my church. I pray by using other people's words and I pray with my own.

But my favorite way to pray is upside down.



Before you can pray upside down you have to learn to *see* upside down—or sideways or backwards, from other angles and vantage points. This discipline trains your mind to examine things from a new perspective, much as an artist does, to see what is really before you.

As an art major in college, I learned that you'll achieve better, more accurate results when you turn the image you're copying upside down. This phenomenon was first noticed by an art teacher in California named Betty Edwards. Frustrated that her drawing students couldn't recreate what she put in front of them, she impulsively turned a Picasso drawing upside down and asked them to copy it. They did—successfully.

Separate research being done at that time on left-brain/right-brain theory explained what Betty discovered in her own research. When you and I look at something, the right side of our brains identifies what we see, names the object, and makes assumptions about it based on our years of experience and observation. We might notice that one woman has a larger nose than normal or that a man's hairline is receding. But if we were asked to draw that person, we'd reach into the catalogs in the archives of our brains, pulling up a cartoonlike outline based on our general knowledge of human appearance.

As Betty Edwards explains in *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, the revolutionary book she published in 1979 about this concept, turning an object upside down changes everything. When we literally flip the image on its head, our brains shift out of right-brain (or language) mode into left-brain (or visual-perceptive) mode. This changes an object from familiar to unfamiliar. Minus the advantage of assigning a top, bottom, and sides in their normal orientations, our brains no longer name or quantify the image. Preconceived ideas are discarded, which allows our brains to "see" the actual shapes that we might have missed when the image was right-side up. This is why doctors sometimes read X-rays upside down: Abnormalities are more apparent when the anatomy is oriented at a different angle.

Whatever we're viewing, once it's inverted, we become more aware of its nuances—the shapes of the dark shadows, the space

between the edge of the object and the side of the page. *We see it for what it is.* The goal of reproducing the image hasn't changed, but the end result of the upside-down drawing is more accurate. We just have to try this unusual method to get there.

I was always intrigued by this idea, but it wasn't until God flipped my prayers upside down that I began to apply this concept spiritually. When my husband, Tim, and I owned two houses for two years because we couldn't sell the first one, I prayed for the woman who would buy it, whoever she was. As God seemed to open one door after another for us with the new house, but didn't provide a buyer for the old, my faith plummeted in proportion to the skyrocketing bills. Until I prayed for her—the future buyer—not me. I asked God to let me be a part of what He was doing, believing there was more at stake than my immediate financial needs.

When the house finally sold and I had processed what happened, I saw that God did amazing things during that topsy-turvy time. In spite of the frustration and uncertainty I felt, as I trusted God and let go of my worries, I discovered peace.

Some people talk about a single defining moment. My “moment” lasted for two years, but it permanently transformed the way I saw God and prayer. If you will begin to pray in the ways shown in the chapters to come, I believe these ideas will change the way you treat prayer and approach God. You will learn to notice answers you might have missed before. You will be surprised by His presence and participation in your daily life. And as you see evidence of His active role in your life, you will trust Him like you never have before.

Walk with me as I tell you my stories. We'll explore other artistic ideas too—things like white space, perspective, sketching, and more—and see how they relate to prayer. The Prayer Palette at the end of each chapter offers practical ways to implement each idea.

They're yours to use however you will. Don't feel you have to follow them to the letter. They're guidelines, not rules, to help steer you down a new path of exploration.

As we start walking, prepare to let go of your traditional compass that points left, right, or straight. Because if there's one thing I've learned about inviting God to be part of my journey, it's that "upside down" is a valid direction, although it's both unexpected and exciting. And it's one of God's favorite directions to go.



Juggling two houses at once was not my definition of fun.

CHAPTER 1

MY FIRST UPSIDE-DOWN PRAYERS

*Creativity comes from looking for the unexpected
and stepping outside your own experience.*

MASARU IBUKA

When my husband and I put our house on the market, we'd never heard the term *upside down* applied to real estate. To tell the truth, it wouldn't have changed a thing if we had.

We hadn't planned to move. The house we were living in was built in 1837 and was one of the oldest homes in our town. Perched on a prime corner, it was elegantly designed with twelve-foot ceilings and crown molding. Windows stretched nearly floor to ceiling with the original wavy glass. A curved walnut banister beautifully accentuated the staircase. Our family had grown in the nine years we'd been there, and the five of us, along with my home-based business, no longer fit well in the three-bedroom house. But the rooms were large, and we weren't unhappy there. Besides, we didn't have the time, money, or energy to undertake a move. We'd made a conscious decision to stay put indefinitely.

My sister, Kerry, her husband, Doug, and their kids, Reilly and Luke, lived around the corner from us in a historic brick house (also built in 1837). One day I walked into Kerry's kitchen and she said, "Hey! My neighbor just put her house on the market. Got a minute? I want you to see it."

"Sure. But we're not going to move."

"I know that," Kerry replied. "But I think you'll like this house. Just take a look."

Looking from the outside, I wasn't all that impressed by the pale mint-green siding. When the owner gave Kerry permission to take me through the house, I didn't think the house was all that pretty on the inside, either. June, a widow in her eighties, had been in the house for thirty years. When she and her husband had moved in, they put their own decorating touches on the house but didn't update again after that. Drab, quaint pastoral scenes covered the faded, golden wallpapers. Sculpted shag carpet, also gold, filled the living room. Everything else was painted mint green. *They must have bought an industrial-sized tub of it*, I thought as I

imagined the colors I would choose to cover that prolific pastel. As a graphic designer, I couldn't look at a home without mentally redecorating.

In the dining room and bedrooms, you could see the hardwood floors. *Yes!* Busy patterns consumed the walls, yet if you stood back and squinted just so, you could see the classic (though somewhat crooked) lines of the doors and multipaned transom windows. Eleven-foot ceilings. Built-in bookcases. Brick fireplace with a wooden mantel hiding behind an ugly striped couch.

With my love for old homes and my creative streak, I started to get excited. This house could be arty and eclectic and comfy and just right for our family. It was perfect.

That is, if we were going to move—which we weren't.

This decision was reinforced when we walked into the kitchen with its acoustic tile ceiling, homemade cabinets, yellow Formica countertops, and gray paneling. Not to mention the strange placement of the appliances (stove next to sink, conspicuously absent dishwasher). On to the bathroom: No amount of bubble bath could convince me to take a bath in there. Den: not bad if you like a faded golf trophy pattern adorning your curtains, dark fake wood paneling, and a dirty mottled brown shag carpet. The big front room with a separate entrance would make a great office, but the former efficiency apartment was painted the familiar mint green with indoor/outdoor teal carpet, a kitchenette that might have been cute under the grime, and a stall shower. Upstairs, the rooms weren't so bad—plain, a little drab, more shag carpet (orange, this time).

But by the end of that walk through, I'd forgotten that we didn't want to move. I was hooked. Although I saw the flaws and all the time and energy this house would need, I also saw promise. I could picture our family there. *Maybe we could make it work.*

So Kerry and I dragged Tim, my resident handyman, over for

his opinion. He quickly pointed out the exposed wiring, crooked plaster walls, and leaky windows. Tim exhaled his signature sigh, knowing he would have a lot of work cut out for him, but he also saw the potential. The house was a bargain. And after sixteen years of marriage, he knew when I had my heart set on something.

Although the new address needed a complete overhaul, there were definitely some strong selling points, too. Like the fact that the home shared a driveway with my sister's house, and our kids could play together in the adjoining yards. Once the renovations were complete, we'd have a great place to call home—same square footage as our current one but with more rooms, a smaller mortgage, and really great neighbors.

Next Hurdle: My Parents

My parents always believed I was capable of practically anything, but they disapproved of how many of those things I tried to squeeze into my schedule. I didn't need more chaos, commitments, or excuses to spend (more) money. So when I called Mom and Dad to come look at the house with us, I flinched in anticipation of their response. My worries were needless; they loved it and jumped right into planning mode with us.

I wanted one more person to see it—my grandmother, Mah. At ninety, she was strong, outspoken, and slow to accept change. Yet she saw that this house would make “a good family home” and offered to loan us money to buy it. “I don't want you to carry two mortgages at once,” she said. “Once you sell your current home, you can pay me back.”

A few weeks later, Mah amended her offer; the money was a gift, not a loan. There was just one stipulation: “Don't you *ever* borrow money against this house.” Agreed.

We were giddy. The proceeds from the sale of our old house would more than cover the remodeling costs. We felt grateful—and

a little embarrassed about how spoiled we were—as everything fell into place. *This has to be God*, we thought, as one door after another flew open. *God is so good to us*. We knew the economy was slowing down, but we tithed. We went to church faithfully. In our heart of hearts, we smugly believed God would take care of this for us.

It didn't matter that big old houses tended to stay on the market for a long time, or that the house we were selling had sat empty for six months before *we* bought it. We'd loved it, and so would someone else. We were excited to see how God would accomplish this sale and couldn't wait to testify about the mighty ways God had moved in our lives.

We bought the house.

Out with the Old, In with the New

My husband and I spent that summer running over to the “complex,” as my mom dubbed the section of the block occupied by her two daughters. I own my own graphic design business and work from a home office, so I interrupted my work several times a day to supervise the electricians, apply another coat of paint, sand kitchen cabinets, tear out carpet, and measure for curtains. Our bodies ached from the hard work and it felt like we didn't sleep for months, but at least we didn't have to live in the middle of this construction zone, surrounded by dusty sawhorses and piles of debris. At the end of each day, we crashed in our old house—a (relatively) quiet, clean place. With three kids, our living quarters were chaotic but livable.

As wonderful as the situation was, it wasn't completely ideal. We'd had the dubious pleasure of putting our house on the market right before the housing market dropped. *Bottomed out* is more like it. Six months into the project, we were struggling. We'd spent all the money we had and were going into serious debt, too far to

be comfortable. But years of faithful prayer about many things had taught me that the answers I sought were sometimes a long time coming and often required quite a bit of work on my part. It was way too soon to give up hope.

In the eight years leading up to this point, I'd drawn closer to God until He had become everything to me. I went from feeling generous when I threw twenty dollars into the offering plate, to giving larger offerings, to tithing on my net income and before long, on every single thing that came in the door. I saw God provide for the needs of my husband, our kids, and my growing business. He taught me about the power of prayer. He revealed Himself in unexpected ways. I watched as my husband moved into new roles, becoming a Sunday school teacher, children's church leader, and worship singer. We were "all in," blessed beyond measure.

Years of faithful prayer had taught me that the answers I sought were sometimes a long time coming and required work on my part. It was way too soon to give up hope.

It was just a matter of time before God would come through for us again.

So I acted in faith, anointing the old house.¹ My friends joined me in prayer, fervently interceding on my behalf. We dabbed olive oil on doorposts and prayed that those who

entered the house would feel the presence of God. We had already hired the best realtor in town, and I put my marketing skills to work. I created a sales flyer, complete with descriptive captions pointing out the best features. I even made witty yard signs to attract drive-by traffic. And yet in all those months, nothing happened. Nada.

One afternoon, I was cleaning the old house, preparing for a rare showing, only the second or third at that time. As I vacuumed the bedroom, doubts flooded my thoughts. *Lord, please let us sell*

this house. Things are getting serious. Please. Tears trickled from the corners of my eyes. We were broke and had been charging things like we had the money to pay it all back. My largest client had recently filed bankruptcy, owing me more than \$8,000 that I'd probably never see. *Lord, what are we going to do if the house doesn't sell soon? We're in deep trouble.*

Then a still, small voice—powerful yet quiet at the same time—said to me, “PRAY FOR THE WOMAN WHO WILL BUY THIS HOUSE.”

It wasn't an audible voice, but it was one I recognized. The few times I'd experienced this sort of whisper, I knew I was hearing from God. The words were infused with layers of meaning that went beyond the individual words that were spoken. I turned off the vacuum and sat on the edge of my purple quilt, overwhelmed by the holiness of the moment. I soaked in the deafening stillness, newly aware that this predicament was, indeed, under His control.

So I prayed for the situations in this as-yet-unidentified woman's life to line up so that she'd be ready to buy. *Move her. Set things in motion. Prepare her. Bless her. Touch her. Be with her. Guide her. Speak to her.* I didn't know if I was praying about work (a new job or a transfer for the woman or her husband) or financial difficulties or getting pregnant or aging parents needing care or finishing a degree to get a job. All the while, though, I was thinking, *Okay, this is cool—even if it is a little bit backwards. Take the focus off me, Lord.*

That night I wrote in my journal, “Maybe I need to quit worrying about my house selling or my financial situation and pray for someone else. I can do that. She (whoever she is) needs the prayers. . . . If I have to wait, I have to wait.”

Redirecting my prayers helped. I was tired of praying for myself. Tired of thinking about money. Tired of calculating and recalculating square footages and installation costs and how much we'd owe on credit cards once the house finally sold. Instead, I fell

to my knees for the family that would someday fill this home with their furniture and clothes and line the historic stairway with family photos. Every time I prayed for *them*, though, I felt a correction, a little hitch: *her*, not them.

Okay, Lord, I'll pray for just her (but I kept sneaking in little blessings for her husband, because there was no way a single woman would tackle this big, high-maintenance old house on her own).

The showing the next day yielded a second one. The family who was looking at the house had narrowed it down to two finalists. I rejoiced—this must be it! But then Rusty, our realtor, called. Bad news. The family chose the other house. He was so sorry.

What is going on, Lord? I don't understand. I thought You were finally answering.

“PRAY FOR HER.”

My panic eased momentarily, but I wanted *my* prayers answered too. Since I was self-employed and sometimes had to wait six to eight weeks between checks, I'd already mastered the art of juggling funds, moving money back and forth between my business and our personal checking as needed. But I wasn't able to make everything balance anymore. I was having to make choices—pay one bill or the other, but not both—and getting farther and farther behind.

Each month, when our mortgage was due, I quieted the anxiety in my gut. I wrote the check and mentally lifted it up to God. *This is my offering, Lord. This is for her. I can hold on just a little longer to help someone else.*

The rooms in the new place slowly came together as my family pitched in. Our son, Bobby, and his six-months-older cousin, Luke, sat on top of the cab of the pickup truck, examining the debris we piled into it. Dad yanked out the drop ceiling and warped wallboards of the kitchen while I steadied the ladder and ran after tools. We hung and painted crisp white wainscoting. My

niece, Reilly, learned how to use a cordless screwdriver and helped attach the new hinges and handles to the cabinets that Dad and I rebuilt, sanded, and painted. In between tasks, we'd step inside Kerry and Doug's air-conditioned kitchen and gulp down some cold water. Finally our do-it-yourself projects were complete and the outside contractors came in to install new flooring, lighting, and countertops.

When I was alone, I prayed as I worked, filled with a peace I'd never felt before, a holiness in the hush of the empty house. *God, You're here in this place.* One weekend, after the carpet was installed, we carried our sleeping bags from the old house to the new one, plugged a movie into the DVD player connected to the television we'd already installed, and camped out on the living room floor. I remember giggles, microwave popcorn, and not caring that I was too old to sleep on the floor. Other than my back protesting, the night was perfect.

Eventually, the renovation was complete. Spiritually, I still had some distance to go. When my friend Vickie joined us in praying for the house to sell, she envisioned me dancing through the old house with a feather boa to celebrate the sale. So she brought me a boa, and our prayer group gathered in the vacated living room, begging God to intervene, filling the empty rooms with our pleas. I knew He would answer. But *when?* I kept trying to shove fear out of my thoughts and instead love the future buyer the way God must, since He was making the sale of my house revolve around what she needed. My heart felt simultaneously overlooked—why did this woman matter more than me?—and buoyant, because God had given me enough nudges that I believed He was working on the resolution.

I just couldn't figure out what was taking Him so long.