

A woman with long, wavy brown hair is smiling and standing on a sandy beach. She is wearing a light pink, long-sleeved, tiered dress with a V-neckline. The background shows the ocean waves crashing onto the shore under a soft, golden light.

Part of My World

What I've
Learned from
The Little Mermaid
about Love, Faith,
and Finding
My Voice

Jodi
Benson

WITH CAROL TRAVER

FOREWORD BY
PAIGE O'HARA

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Part of My World: What I've Learned from The Little Mermaid about Love, Faith, and Finding My Voice

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*Dear God,
thank You for my blessed life
thank You for my forever love, my husband, Ray
thank You for our incredible children, McKinley & Delaney
thank You for my loving family & my compassionate friends
but most of all . . . thank You for Your everlasting love!*

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FOREWORD

“Wait till You Meet Her!”

BY PAIGE O’HARA

Musical theatre can be a tough business. It’s mostly rejection, and the successes are few and far between. If you don’t have really good friends to lean on and help you get through the rough patches, it can be a real struggle. But sometimes God brings just the right person into your life, and when that happens, it feels almost magical.

Back in 1981, I was playing Ado Annie in a national touring production of *Oklahoma!* alongside a talented young performer named Ray Benson. Ray was a triple threat. He could sing, he could dance, and he could act. He was also funny, charming, and very good-looking, so naturally, every unattached girl in the cast was making a play for him. I was married, so I wasn’t looking. As it turns out, neither was Ray. He was head over heels in love with a girl he’d just met doing summer stock in Nashville. It was a tale as old as time—boy meets girl, boy gets part in touring production of *Oklahoma!*, boy leaves girl behind but can’t stop thinking about her. All throughout rehearsals, he kept going on and on about *Jodi*.

“Wait till you meet her, Paige,” he kept telling me. “Just *wait* till you meet her.”

A few weeks later, when we were performing in Toronto,

I finally got my chance. Jodi had come up for the weekend to see Ray on her way out to Los Angeles to start rehearsals for a Broadway revue. She was very pretty, very sweet, and initially very shy. But as soon as we started talking about singing and musical theatre, the floodgates opened, and we talked for hours.

We had a lot in common. We were both big beltors by nature (think singing in a 2,500-seat auditorium without a mic). We were both working on developing our lyric soprano voices because the more vocal ranges and styles we could master, the more opportunities came our way. I had just started working with a voice coach, but Jodi could sing any style—operatic, jazz, folk, gospel, pop—and she could belt a C like nobody’s business. She was incredibly talented and eager to learn everything she could about the business and about honing her craft. Where we really connected, though, was our faith.

I remember telling her, “Look, there are going to be long stretches of times when you’re not working, and that can be really, *really* hard. You’ve got to be ready for that.”

Jodi just smiled and said, “Well . . . I have a strong faith, so I think I’ll be okay.” As we continued to talk, it was clear that Jodi’s faith meant everything to her, and that spoke volumes to me about her character. She had a quiet confidence about her, but she was also very humble. She didn’t see her vocal ability as a talent but rather as a gift she had been given, and she felt responsible for developing it and using it well. She just had an amazing attitude.

By the time Jodi left that weekend, I was every bit as taken with her as Ray was. Forty years later, I’m still one of her biggest fans, and I consider myself blessed to count her as one of my dearest friends.

Needless to say, when Jodi was cast as Ariel, I was beyond excited for her. When I called to congratulate her, I told her, “This is going to change your whole life.” Of course, Jodi being Jodi, she just kind of laughed it off like I was being silly. Between Howard Ashman, Alan Menken, Disney Animation, and Jodi, though, there was far too much talent involved in *The Little Mermaid* for it to be anything *other* than a phenomenal success.

The thing is, Jodi didn’t just play Ariel; Jodi *is* Ariel. She has that same adorable innocence about her—wide-eyed, optimistic, bubbling with enthusiasm, always believing the best about everyone, and seeing everything in a positive light. She really does believe that if she works and dreams and fights hard enough, she can achieve whatever she wants. And her career bears that out. She’s also one of the most loving, giving, and supportive people I’ve ever met.

When I was working with Howard Ashman during my audition process for *Beauty and the Beast*, he kept referencing Jodi’s work on *Mermaid*, so I kept trying to make my voice go up higher, like Ariel. But Howard told me, “I don’t want it higher. You’ve got Belle inside you. Just let her come through.”

I was so frustrated. I wanted to get it right—not only to make Howard happy but also because I loved Belle—we were like kindred spirits. I was always the oddball growing up. I was a total bookworm, and I quit cheerleading in high school to do theatre. While all the cool kids were listening to Led Zeppelin and Three Dog Night, I was listening to George Gershwin and Judy Garland.

I just could *not* figure out what Howard wanted. So . . . I called Jodi. After all, who knew Howard Ashman better than she did?

“I don’t know what to do,” I told her. “When I listen to the playbacks, I just feel like I sound too mature or . . . *too old.*”

Jodi didn’t even hesitate. She just jumped right in with words of encouragement.

“You’ve got to trust yourself, Paige. They want an old-soul quality, and you’ve got that. Stop trying to be someone else. Just be you, and you’ll be fine.” She also gave me a few helpful tips about working with Howard, which was incredibly gracious. That’s the kind of person Jodi is.

And you know what? She was right. When I went back in and sang with my natural voice, Howard loved it.

I can’t even begin to tell you how grateful I am that Jodi and I got to share that unique experience. We’re the only two Disney princesses who got to work directly with Howard before we lost him, and that’s such an incredible blessing.

Years later, Jodi and I got to share another distinct honor when we were both named Disney Legends. It was so much fun standing at the edge of the stage watching Ray and their kids beam with pride as Jodi received that honor.

Even more fun, Lea Salonga, who was the singing voice of Jasmine and Mulan; Anika Noni Rose, who voiced Tiana; and Linda Larkin, who was the speaking voice of Jasmine, were also honored that day, so Jodi, Lea, Anika, and I got to sing a medley together.

Now I should point out that our quartet wasn’t part of the original plan, but when you’ve got Ariel, Jasmine, Mulan, Tiana, and Belle together in one room, how disappointing would it be if they *didn’t* sing something? So I offhandedly suggested the idea to the folks at Disney, and they loved it! The next thing I knew, they had worked it into the program.

Here's the kicker: I have always struggled with horrible stage fright. And I mean *horrible*. I was usually okay once I actually started performing, but until that first note came out, I was a hot mess. Fortunately, one of the things I had always loved about performing with Jodi was that she would pray with me before we went on stage, and that always helped calm me down.

Anyway, we all got together to rehearse before the ceremony. Since Belle doesn't have a full song, I was going to sing a medley of "Belle," "Something There," "Beauty and the Beast," and "Be Our Guest." I made it through the opening part okay, but when I came to the final note of "Be Our Guest," which ends on an E, I had some trouble. Cue the nausea and flop sweat. I thought, *I can't do this*.

The next thing I knew, Jodi was walking across the stage. She leaned in and whispered, "Paige, sweetie, you're an amazing belter. Just take it down to a C." She had a point. I had been belting out Cs my entire career. Even when I'm nervous, it just comes naturally. All of a sudden my nerves settled, and I thought, *Yeah . . . I can do that*.

"Okay," I said. She gave me a quick hug and walked back off the stage. The last thing I heard before the piano picked back up was Jodi saying, "You've got this, Paige. Belt the C." And I did. It might not have been my greatest performance, but it was definitely one of my favorites.

I *still* love performing with Jodi. We don't get to do it as often as we used to, but stage fright or not, I will never pass up an opportunity to share the stage with her as she sings "Part of Your World." Even after all these years, her voice has not changed one bit. And neither has she. She's still the same happy-go-lucky, I-can-do-anything-I-set-my-mind-to

Part of My World

Jodi she was when we first met. Not that she hasn't had her share of heartaches or disappointments. No one is immune to those. But her faith has given her the ability to weather the storms and come out stronger on the other side.

In an industry where true lifelong friends can be hard to come by, Jodi has been one of the best, and it's been a privilege to follow along on her journey and get to know the woman behind the voice. There is so much more to Jodi than just *The Little Mermaid*, and I am so excited that people are finally going to get a chance to see that.

That lovestruck young guy from *Oklahoma!* was right. She really is something special.

Just wait till you meet her.

Paige O'Hara



A Quick Note from Jodi

Hello, sweet friend! Thank you so much for taking the time to read this book. I sincerely hope you enjoy it. But before you start, I have a quick confession to make: I never wanted to write a book. Never. As in “ever.”

I realize this may sound strange coming from someone who has performed in front of people her entire life, but the truth is, I’m not very comfortable talking about myself—especially in this season of life. I’m much more comfortable being a cheerleader for others. So when Tyndale approached me about sharing my story, it was honestly the last thing I wanted to do. Not only was it completely out of my comfort zone, but given all the mistakes I’ve made in my life, I also thought, *Who am I to give advice?*

But as a Christian, I do believe in being obedient and in following God’s call—even when I feel like He’s asking me to do something really uncomfortable, like this. Don’t get me wrong: I love, love, *love* sharing my faith with others. I’ve just never done it in writing before.

Add to that the fact that I suffer from what I call “BC (before children) brain,” so a lot of what happened before 1999 is—admittedly—a little hazy. It’s entirely possible

I may not have recalled everything correctly, and in some cases, I may have messed it up completely. I promise I did my best, though, so I am hoping you'll extend me a little grace.

I guess what I'm trying to say is . . . this hasn't been an easy process for me at all, and at times I've been very frustrated and have even cringed a little, wondering if I'm making it sound as though I have all the answers—because I definitely don't. The truth is, I've made more mistakes than I can count. But if by sharing some of them I can help someone get from point A to point C without having to suffer the pain and heartache of point B, then all of this will have been worth it.

Writing my story has also given me the opportunity to shine a much-deserved spotlight on some of the incredibly gifted people I have had the privilege of meeting and working with over the years. Many of them made it possible for me to even be on this journey, and that's another reason this whole thing will have been worth it.

Whatever you take away from this book, please know that the story you're about to read isn't mine; it's His. The path God has led me on has not always been easy, but I wouldn't trade it for a million anythings. Because the journey so far . . . has been kinda beautiful.

God bless,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jodi". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, elegant loop at the end.

1

“Maybe He’s Right”

Maybe there is something the matter with me.

Why can’t I get this?

“Sorry.” I shook my head in frustration and took off my headphones.

“It’s okay, Jodi. You’re doing great.”

I looked over at the control room, smiled, and mouthed “Thank you” to John Musker, one of our brilliant directors. Enshrouded in shadows, he was flanked on the left by our other director, the equally gifted Ron Clements.

God bless those guys.

It had been a long, frustrating afternoon. We had already recorded multiple passes of “Part of Your World,” and I *still* hadn’t nailed it. It seemed everything I did was too big, too loud, or—my personal favorite—too “Ethel Merman-y.” In other words, “too Broadway.”

I felt terrible, but I just couldn't help it. Up until now, my entire career had been Broadway and stage work—eight shows a week. Belting my heart out in front of 1,500 people at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre was all I knew. I'd never worked behind a studio mic before, and four hours and almost a dozen passes in, it showed.

Fortunately, John and Ron had been incredibly patient and supportive. Add in our composer, Alan Menken, and lead animator, Glen Keane, and I couldn't have asked for a better creative team. Each one of them truly was second to none. Well . . . maybe second to *one*—the “one” being the man standing just off to my left. The one staring at my sheet music with laser-like intensity: the captain of Team Ariel—Howard Ashman.

Howard was, in a word, brilliant, and his lyrics were absolutely amazing. The first time I heard him sing “Part of Your World” on a demo tape, it brought tears to my eyes. “Under the Sea” is simply phenomenal, and I would have given anything to have been a background singer on “Kiss the Girl”—maybe one of the frogs or a turtle—just to be a part of it. The harmonies, the rhythm—everything about that song is just incredible. The man was a genius. This movie was his heart and soul, and frankly, I felt like I was letting him down.

I looked over at Howard and, in an apologetic tone that had pretty much been my go-to since lunch, asked, “Am I still a little too loud?”

“No,” he assured me, his eyes never leaving his lyrics. “You're great.”

“It doesn't feel like it,” I confessed.

“No, really,” he insisted. “You're doing great. Just . . .” He closed his eyes and steepled his fingers together at the end of

his nose in his trademark “Howard’s about to have a breakthrough” posture.

Poor guy. I could practically hear the gears turning as he tried to come up with some way to keep me from bungling his beautiful lyrics. Because despite everything my wonderfully supportive team was saying, in my mind I wasn’t doing too great.

Of course, if anyone could find a way to make this work, it was Howard. He was the ultimate perfectionist—a master of lyrical nuance—and he was always, *always* right. I trusted him completely. We all did.

When he finally opened his eyes and looked at me, I was ready. No matter what he asked, somehow I was going to make it happen.

“Stop singing.”

Okay, maybe I wasn’t ready.

“Sorry?” I asked.

“Don’t sing. Don’t perform. Just . . . talk to Flounder, like you’re talking to me right now.” He said it very matter-of-factly, as though it were the most obvious solution in the world. I just stared at him blankly.

“Your performance is fabulous, by the way,” he quickly added.

Well, at least there’s that.

“You’re just oversinging it.”

And then there’s that.

“Don’t think of it as a song,” he explained. “Think of it as a monologue. It’s Ariel’s inner monologue spilling over. It just happens to be set to pitch.”

A monologue set to pitch. I liked that. I liked that *a lot*, actually.

“Don’t worry about singing every note perfectly,” he continued. “It’s not going to be a perfect pass.”

Okay, that I *didn’t* like as much. Howard wasn’t the only perfectionist in the room. As a Broadway singer, I’d been trained to sing every note to its full value, with perfect diction and full vibrato. Trying to sing a song “not perfectly” went against everything I knew.

But Howard was on a roll. “Don’t focus on the notes. Focus on the lyric. Focus on the story. Try to imagine what Ariel’s feeling at that moment . . . how much she loves her collection and how *excited* she is to be showing it off to Flounder.

“*Look at this stuff!*” he whispered excitedly. “*Isn’t it neat?*” People have to *feel* what she’s feeling. They have to believe it’s real.”

I tried my best to mimic what he had just done. “Look at this stuff! Isn’t it neat?”

Still too loud, I corrected myself.

“Try using less voice,” Howard suggested, “but more intensity.”

“Less voice, more intensity,” I echoed.

“Yeah.”

“So even *less* singing . . .”

“Exactly,” he said, nodding.

I don’t know if I can do this. I took a deep breath. “Okay, I’ll try.”

I slipped my headphones back on and nodded toward the control room so they knew to cue up the guide track. As the opening melody started to play, I glanced back up at Howard, his face illuminated by the tiny lamp on my music stand. He smiled at me and whispered, “You’ve got this.”

Stop singing. Don't focus on the notes. Just talk to Flounder.
I shook my head and stifled a laugh. *Maybe he's right.*

Of course he was right. When it came to interpreting lyrics, Howard was always right. Still, who would have thought the best musical advice I would ever receive would be “stop singing”? Actually, that afternoon in the studio, Howard keyed me in to a pretty radical truth—sometimes the real magic is in the flaws.

“Part of Your World” is a beautiful song, but it’s not perfect—at least not the way we recorded it. In fact, if you listen to it carefully, you’ll notice that a few notes are kind of pitchy. Some notes are a little too sharp; others are a little too flat. Sometimes there’s vibrato; sometimes it’s more breathy. And sometimes the words aren’t so much sung as they are spoken. It’s not a perfect pass, not by a long shot, and yet that’s exactly what makes it work.

Sing it perfectly and you’ll still have a beautiful song, but you’ll lose what makes Ariel, Ariel. And I just love her! I love how she loves life. I love how she savors every moment and delights in every experience. I love the way she sees the beauty in even the most mundane things. I mean, honestly, who else could get *that* excited about a fork? I love the way she holds nothing back, is open to everything, and believes the best about everyone.

All the passes we recorded that afternoon weren’t so much about capturing Ariel’s voice as they were about capturing her heart, and I couldn’t have done it without Howard. Virtually everything about the way I portrayed Ariel came from him. I may have provided the vocals, but he provided everything else. I just did everything exactly the way he did it.

That doesn’t mean it was easy. In fact, I’m sure somewhere

deep within the Disney archives there are miles of tape of Howard teaching me not to sing. And yet when all was said and done, somewhere between “Look at this stuff” and “Someday I’ll be . . .,” a little mermaid found her voice, and a belter from Broadway learned that it’s okay to surrender a few notes in order to tell an authentic story.

I owe so much to the fiery little redhead I got to know in the recording studio that day. She’s given me an amazing career, an incredibly fulfilling ministry, and the opportunity to share my faith with thousands of people the world over. The privilege of providing Ariel’s voice truly has been a gift from God. Any one of a million other girls could have done it, and it certainly wasn’t the career path I was heading down at the time. But God knew exactly what He was doing when He started me on this extraordinary journey. I just had to trust and follow Him.

The best part? We don’t have to be perfect. Because you know what? Life isn’t a perfect pass either. We’re going to make mistakes. I know I have. But I like to think I’ve learned a little something from each of them. And though some were incredibly painful, I also like to think they’ve made me a better person, a better wife, a better mom, and a better friend.

Nobody’s perfect. The goal is to keep trying, to keep learning, and to keep trusting God. Looking back, I can see His fingerprints all over my life—in the doors He’s opened, in the ones He’s slammed shut, and in all the extraordinary people He’s placed in my path at just the right moment and for just the right reason. He knew every mistake I was going to make before I made it, and He was always there to pick me up and steer me in the right direction when I went off

course. It wasn't always the direction I'd *planned* on going, but it was always the right one.

God may have given me the gift of music, but He never asked that my voice always be perfect. All He has ever asked is that I listen, do my best, and go wherever *His* voice leads. That's all He asks of any of us.