



Introduction

Dear reader:

I grew up in a traditional family, with strong Christian values, in a beautiful Chattanooga, Tennessee, suburb. As a child and young woman, my parents purposely sheltered me, and somehow protected me from all of life's inevitable hardships. I spent my first 19 years living in a "kind world", surrounded by loving parents, caring maternal grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and lots of close family friends. I always felt safe, secure, and deeply loved.

The segregated Southern United States, before the 1964 Civil Rights Act, kept the races separated. From kindergarten to 12th grade, my classmates had faces that looked like mine—lily white—and lifestyles that resembled mine—safe suburbs with two cars parked in the garage. In 1964, city officials finally removed the "Coloreds only" and "Whites only" signs from public toilets, water fountains, bus stations, and other public facilities. The offensive, divisive signs came down, but it took decades for hearts to change and true integration to





JOHNNY CORNFLAKES

happen in my city. I traveled mostly by car during those early years. I had never ridden a city bus.

In 1970, at my church, the Flintstone Baptist Church, I met Timothy, a college sophomore at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. We dated, fell in love, and married a year later. After his 1972 college graduation, we moved to Chelsea, a crime-laded, dirty inner city on the outskirts of Boston, Massachusetts. Harvard Divinity School had accepted him to begin work on a three-year Master of Divinity degree. I agreed to go in spite of my apprehensions and my secret fears of moving to an unknown city so far from home.

Twelve hundred miles away, my safe, secure world turned upside down. I no longer felt protected. I saw few white faces. Our inner city neighbors had skin of many colors and customs from world-wide places. They spoke languages I couldn't even identify. Impoverished families – children, teens, unwed mothers – meet me everywhere I turned. I saw suffering, violence, and hunger first-hand on the filthy streets of Chelsea. For the first few months there, I refused to unpack my dishes. I stayed in a state of shock.

Timothy took a position with the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention so we could afford groceries. It paid little, but provided a large empty church building for worship services, and a small one-family parsonage for us to live in. Timothy became pastor of that church, the First Baptist Church of Chelsea. In our first Sunday church worship service we had eight people attend. And that number included Timothy and me! Mere survival, not God, proved more important to people in Chelsea.

I took a secretarial job at the Children's Community Corner child care center that met in the basement of the grand old First Baptist Church of Chelsea. I worked hard, and I cried much over the children's desperate needs and fragmented family lives.





INTRODUCTION

Throughout my years in Chelsea, God began to teach me to “see” others with His eyes. Directly in my daily path God placed a mysterious, smelly, and pestering old man—Johnny Cornflakes. The town drunk, Johnny, bummed his way from house to house, trash bin to city trash bin, in search of cereal crumbs and daily sustenance. As far as I knew at that time, Johnny had no home, no possessions. At night he slept in cardboard boxes or in back alleys behind Chelsea’s restaurants. Johnny proved one ugly, unlovable creature. And, for a while, the nasty sight of him brought vomit to my throat.

Before Timothy and I left Chelsea, Massachusetts however, Johnny Cornflakes would teach me a lesson in loving the unloved that I could never have learned in the safe, clean, segregated suburbs of Chattanooga, Tennessee. Through Johnny Cornflakes, God changed my heart. Forever. I have many times since thanked God for my “Chelsea experience” for our desperate hardships, empty stomachs, and rich teachable moments.

From Chelsea, we moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where Timothy taught church history at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I gave birth to two children at Louisville’s Baptist Hospital East during those nine years there.

Throughout those years, I kept Johnny’s memory very close to my heart. I wondered where he was, if he were still alive. I found my answer on the Sunday we traveled back to visit Chelsea and the First Baptist Church.

From Louisville, we moved to Birmingham, Alabama. Timothy founded a divinity school, Beeson Divinity School, on the campus of Samford University. I enrolled my young children in kindergarten and first grade, and spent most of my time taking care of my family. I stayed busy cooking, cleaning, carpooling children, going to church, teaching Sunday School, etc. But, for some reason, Johnny Cornflakes always stayed on my heart and mind while I raced around doing the work wives and moms do.





JOHNNY CORNFLAKES

On the day before Thanksgiving, 1995, my activities stopped. Doctors at Brookwood Hospital performed successful major surgery on me. But due to some surgical complications, the recovery time proved very long—almost eight months. While I lay flat on my back, my incisions and internal organs healing, I had plenty of time to think. I thought again about my experiences with Johnny Cornflakes so many years ago.

“Tell Johnny’s story, Denise,” God seemed to be saying to my heart. “Write it down so that the whole world will learn what Johnny Cornflakes taught you about genuinely loving others—especially unloved others.”

Day after day, God-directed thoughts about Johnny flooded my mind. I finally pulled my computer into my bed, and in spite of physical discomfort and pain, I started to write. I wrote for weeks from my bed until I finished the story of Johnny Cornflakes.

But nothing happened. My body healed and my active life resumed. Five years passed. God sent no interested publishers my way. I wondered if I had really received God’s direction to write it. The manuscript lay on my desk gathering dust. Then, no doubt due to God’s intervention, my friend Dr. Dellanna O’Brien, executive director of the Woman’s Missionary Union, offered to read the manuscript. She liked it, and took it to WMU’s New Hope Publishers.

They published the little volume, and kept it in print for several years. By the time the book had gone out of print, a small United States audience had bought and read it.

Now, in 2010, to my great delight, Christian Focus Publications has decided to republish the story – for the whole world to read. I guess God isn’t finished with Johnny’s story. I pray that the book will touch many more lives with God’s simple and incredible message of love.

I wrote *Johnny Cornflakes: A Story about Loving the Unloved* for individuals to read, but also for families to read together. The story’s message provides many teachable moments for parents





INTRODUCTION

and grandparents to talk about God and life and love with their children and grandchildren. It's a simple story, but one that tugs at the heart and may even change a life. I hope so.

My deep appreciation goes to all those people who made the book possible: my family, my friends, my publishers, and a bevy of readers who loved the story and shared it with others. And my special gratitude goes to God alone, who encouraged my heart to simply "tell Johnny's story".

Denise George
Birmingham, Alabama
January 1, 2010

(Note: The book is based on fact. However, some of the names have been changed to protect privacy, and some of the time sequences and events have been rearranged, shortened, or lengthened for clearer communication and more interesting reading.)

