

Embracing
a Concrete
Desert

A spiritual journey
towards wholeness

Lynne E. Chandler

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Contents

Introduction	9
1 When life gives you smog, enjoy the sunsets	11
<i>My sister in Cairo</i>	16
2 Ismeen	17
<i>Poverty</i>	19
<i>The sounds, the smells</i>	20
3 Have you ever lived through a sandstorm and not tasted grit in your teeth?	21
<i>Holding on</i>	26
<i>A desert caravan</i>	27
4 Ayad	28
<i>An oasis in the din</i>	30
5 On adopting a city	31
<i>Wings of escape</i>	33
6 Alive to the moment	34
<i>Good morning tree</i>	36
7 Other children's lives	37
<i>A Middle Eastern donkey</i>	39

8	On embracing grey hair and fat deposits	40
	<i>Whose rules?</i>	43
	<i>To be happy</i>	44
9	Illegal: HIV/AIDS.....	45
	<i>I am thirsty</i>	48
10	Pets matter	49
	<i>A dove</i>	51
11	Avoiding prayer ruts—and a glimpse of a holy moment	52
	<i>The road I walk</i>	54
12	HMPs versus VIPs.....	55
	<i>Inside the heart</i>	59
	<i>Living water</i>	60
13	The day my daughter fell into a hole	61
	<i>Entrusted with a charge</i>	65
14	Life-giving source	66
	<i>Our Great River</i>	70
	<i>Jesus the refugee</i>	71
15	Dangers.....	72
	<i>Aware of life</i>	75

16	Trash bin files	76
	<i>Out of control</i>	79
	<i>Having to stop</i>	80
17	One morning in the life of a summer respite	81
	<i>A famine of nature and beauty</i>	85
	<i>Hardships</i>	86
18	The holy mundane: the story of Cairo grocery shopping	87
	<i>My car in Cairo</i>	90
19	Ali Baba	91
	<i>Burning bush</i>	94
20	The Middle Eastern carpenter	95
	<i>The gift of grace</i>	101
	<i>Not a material object</i>	102
21	Waste management redeemers	103
	<i>Just when I thought</i>	106
22	Journal revisited	107
	<i>Suffering</i>	110
	<i>A magic cure</i>	111
	<i>You have tuned my ears</i>	112

Introduction

These pages were brought to birth during a modern-day Middle Eastern fight for survival. During my first two years in Cairo I felt as if I was sharing a dried-up desert well, abandoned with Joseph and his coat of many colours. My soul dehydrated as I grieved the loss of nature and quiet and freedom. In time I discovered that the poisonous thorn piercing through my camel saddle had a name—negativity. Since I had been robbed of outward resources, such as morning walks in fresh air, I was forced to accept that the alternative to dying spiritually was to learn to manoeuvre within. My soul was being shaken awake from a slumber of security and self-centredness. It wasn't like an alarm clock going off or a loud mosque call blasting, but like the gentle blowing in of a cool spring breeze, hardly perceptible at first.

The deeper I searched, the more strongly I was drawn to my Creator, the essence of all being. Layers and layers of grime had built up but at the core rested God's image. Stories of Jesus introduced themselves to me differently. They hinted at what God looked like, wearing Middle Eastern shoes, of course. What Christ found important and essential, he communicated through the way he lived his life, but I'm sure much was lost on his friends then, as now. Living faith, transformation, being alive to the present moment—these were things worth embracing and nurturing in others through an outwardly focused life. Slowly my heartstrings began to retune to the source of all life. Creation, I learned, includes 'people flowers'. My Cairo garden had nearly 20 million of them.

The first leap I took was decided by my mind. I chose to take it; then my heart was persuaded to follow. There was a lot of dramatic jerking and sputtering and stumbling along—what a sight I was at times! This book is the story of some of that journey, as it is not finished yet. Because it's not about arriving, I have learnt that I don't have to wait till the end to celebrate. What follows is simply a glimpse of raw wanderings through the barren lands of concrete and the discovery of fresh water springs of the soul.

When life gives you smog, enjoy the sunsets

If someone had told me at any other point in my life that I would end up living in one of the most polluted cities in the world, I would have laughed in terror. In fact, I had already visited the exotic, historic city of Cairo twice in my life and hated it both times. How could someone possibly live in such a place of chaos, pollution, constant noise and no nature? It could not be survivable—and certainly no one would ever choose to be put there; they would have to be born into it. I'm not saying this perspective is a good one. It is just my own honest, desperate opinion and I hope it holds no truth for any of my millions of neighbours.

If you know the great story of Jonah, then you'll understand where I'm coming from. I love to come across these far-out stories when I'm reading the Bible. It's like finding a mirror sticking out from between the printed words. Well, maybe I only love it when there's a sense of recognition, when I'm debriefing myself after having (sort of) survived a similar messy story in my own life. Sometimes I wonder why I can't have the same 'mirror' experience with something less dramatic, like sitting by quiet waters, restoring my soul.

Jonah. I knew from the first words out of my husband Paul-Gordon's adventuresome mouth that I'd be facing the choice between following quietly or buying a boat ticket for the fastest

route away from Nineveh—I mean, Cairo—with the risk that I'd be spat up there anyway, but all yucky-mucky-like, after unnecessary self-inflicted suffering. I guess it must have been, at the very least, embarrassing for the prophet, having to jump into a swirling sea-storm to save an endangered boat, knowing that it was all his fault.

Now, I'm definitely the thrill-seeking type, so it wasn't the Egyptian archaeology, adventure desert caravanning or *Death on the Nile* images that were scaring me; it was the 'big developing world city' thing.

So I thought I would try to get past the whole 'not me' Jonah story, and follow. I'm actually quite good at following, sometimes. It wasn't as if going to pastor an international church was an off-the-wall cause. It was a dream for both of us, something deeper and more spiritually fulfilling than what we were doing at the time. My husband, not I, was going to be the pastor but I would be involved too, beyond just coordinating music for services. As for being a full-time mum and bad housewife (not a bad wife, I mean, but the 'house' bit), I knew I could do that anywhere in the world. Putting aside the large 'pollution-and-lack-of-nature phobia' badge I was wearing mentally, I knew everything would be OK because this opportunity was a 'call'—or something like that. I knew lots of people who had had 'calls' before and I sometimes wished I had a special one of my own, but mine seemed to be a generalised sort of calling that I could fulfil anywhere—the call to journey towards God and celebrate the divine spark in others. I knew that this could keep me out of trouble for a lifetime.

To make a long story short, we sold our house and gave away our family dog, which expert people had said would never survive the harshness of the city—not because of the pollution but because of the risk of being poisoned (a common way to

rid the streets of stray dogs). We put all our earthly belongings into storage, including my concert harp, and headed off for the Middle East. It was just after the events of 9/11 but people were usually polite in their best wishes for our safety and their response to our decision to uproot our eleven-year-old daughter, Britelle, and eight-year-old son, Treston.

Thankfully we were welcomed with open arms by the beautiful little church in Cairo, whose people were happy to have anyone filling the post—even better a family with children and a pastor who loved to write and deliver sermons. The church property also hosted ten other congregations, worshipping in a variety of other languages: several in Arabic, French, Korean, Swedish and a couple of African languages.



Eighteen months after our arrival, I had gone through all the culture shock, used all the adjustment strategies, shed gallons of tears and offered great quantities of wordless prayers, but I was still struggling. It wasn't that I was unhappy with my life's purpose. I had made friends, and I enjoyed leading a musical ensemble at church and facilitating a monthly church book club. Everyone else in the family was thriving at the time. Why couldn't I adjust?

Then, one day in March, I made a promise to my family during dinner that I would never say another bad word about living in a big, polluted, nature-void city, or they could make me pay them ten Egyptian pounds. The poison of negative thinking was overtaking even my smog-induced asthma problem. So I made a positive decision to put on a pair of negative-free glasses that cold March morning, and slowly I started to see beautiful sunsets through the smog. They really are red and mysterious-looking—the sunsets, that is, not the

glasses. Next I discovered that sunrises look nice through smog, too. Then the little birds that I was feeding on my windowsill began to look happier, and the large sycamore tree generously blocking the view of the office building next door started having leaves that danced in the wind, reminding me of God's Spirit blowing life and hope my way—if only I'd notice. I had to pay up once for a negative slip in attitude, but that was four months into the deal.

One of my best friends here is a Buddhist and she instructed me in calm breathing, which helped with my asthma but also helped me go deeper in my own Christian faith, meditating on the beautiful words of scripture and being mindful of God in the little things in life, like recognising nature in my heart and 'people flowers'. The concept of a garden full of people, rather than flowers, bloomed into an important image for me. It opened up my mind and heart to search for beauty in others. I also discovered the 19th-century American poet Emily Dickinson by accident and tried my hand at some 'poem therapy'.

The other day, I remembered one thing I had learnt in Year 6 from the decorations around my classroom, back in the Chicago area. One wall was plastered with cut-out paper lemons and bubble letters saying, 'If life gives you lemons, make lemonade.' I always liked working at lemonade stands. I wonder what smog-ade would taste like!

I wish I could say that I have arrived and will never have to stare into the darkness of my own pyramid sarcophagus chamber again, but I know that isn't so. I do know, though, that I have to embrace the present moment and celebrate life, whatever that may involve today. My Creator is alive within and throughout this amazing world, and has never failed, through thick and thin, to wrap me in wings of protection and comfort. There are many layers of negativity to be peeled back so that

a glimpse of God's image can show through. Just as one layer is lifting, another appears to take its place. That's where grace comes in. In desperate times, God dishes it out lavishly, like my grandma's generous servings of homemade strawberry shortcake. It's admittedly smoggy in my heart sometimes but there are sunsets worth celebrating, too. Reading and thinking about Jesus and how he lived have definitely pointed me in the right direction.



I don't know where I'm at in the Jonah story now. Maybe I'm just trying to come to terms with the worm-eaten vine, like Jonah outside the gates of Nineveh. At least he got to sit somewhere quiet to complain! One day God provided a vine to shade him and the next day a worm destroyed it (see Jonah 4). I hope I'll be able to move on to something more exciting, like imagining myself as the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with perfume (Mark 14:3–9) or wondering if I'm Martha or Mary (Luke 10:38–42). But in the meantime, trying to look and live deeply one day at a time is my calling—that, and enjoying sunsets in smog.

My sister in Cairo

*I don't know what hunger is,
but my sister in Cairo does.
I don't know how poverty pains,
but my brother here shows me the way.*

*Why was I born to richness of choices?
Why were they born without?*

*Somehow there must be a way to bridge
the chasm that comes between.*

*The clay that formed our souls was God's;
there's no difference between you and me.
Blessed are the poor in spirit.
I have much to learn from them.*

*I'll gladly give you my earthly treasures
if you give me some of heaven.*

My sister

Ismeen

Just a few days into our Cairo adventure, we met a little girl probably about my son Treston's age. That evening, she was begging for money, effectively communicating her hopes of not having to go to bed hungry. Unfortunately I did not have any *gineeh* (Egyptian pounds) on me and my husband had wandered off in another direction. Directly behind me, I found that the pavement was being transformed into a place of worship. The call to prayer had not yet sounded but was clearly expected soon. I fought to lower my voice as I explained in English, and in vain, that I didn't have any money with me. Pulling out one of my new Arabic phrases, I asked her what her name was. Her deeply sunken brown eyes gazed at me in confusion and apprehension. I smiled and talked to her gently but she could not return my smile. 'Ismeen,' she whispered.

The ragged, oversized, long-sleeved woollen dress she was wearing looked unbearable in the oppressive July heat. She carefully inspected the perfectly clean, barely worn clothes of my children. Her eyes stopped on Treston's tennis shoes. She studied them for a long time and then inconspicuously glanced down at her own dirty, calloused, bare feet. I wondered if I should wrestle his shoes off him and hand them over.

Behind me the prayers grew louder. I tried to tell Ismeen I would be right back and went in search of my husband. He was finally found, talking to a vendor who had not stopped to pray. Quickly my children told him that we needed money

to give to Ismeen. 'Who is Ismeen?' 'Our new friend,' they explained. By the time we emerged from the twists and turns of the bazaar shops, prayer time had ended. Ismeen was gone.

Poverty

*Poverty looked me in the face today.
She smiled
and made a plea.
How could I turn my eyes away,
when she reflected
me?
A refrain of thankfulness is stuck
repeating in my head.*

*Will I one day search for it,
when circumstances
change,*

*and find the melody off tune,
or
that it's set me
free?*

Poverty

The sounds, the smells

*I can't escape the
sounds, the smells.
Assault is everywhere.*

*I wish it did not drain me so,
But this is how*

you made me.

sounds,

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