

Finding God's plan for my life



Lemons <sup>to</sup>  
Lemonade

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and Pat Moore



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# Foreword

Every once in a while, I do what's called a lemonade fast. For seven to ten days, all that enters my body is lemonade. I know that sounds like a junk-food fast, because, of course, lemonade is not known to be a nutritious beverage. Ah, but I have a special recipe. No store-bought pink liquid filled with refined sugar is involved. Oh, no! My concoction is composed of twenty ounces of water, two tablespoons of fresh squeezed lemon juice, two tablespoons of grade B maple syrup (which is the stage at which it is most mineral rich but less sweet), and a pinch of cayenne pepper. Shake it up and drink as much as you need to maintain energy and suppress hunger, one twenty-ounce bottle after another all day long. The beverage is far more yummy than it sounds. The taste is superb. But I don't drink it for the taste. The point of the lemonade fast is to give the body a rest and a cleanse while increasing mental energy.

Every time I do this fast, I feel as if my spiritual perceptions become more acute and focused, which is exactly the effect this delightful book has had on me. It's been a kind of

*Lemons to Lemonade*

spiritual lemonade fast for me. Sylvia and Pat have brought together a tremendously helpful series of insights skillfully communicated in the form of personal testimony. It's a page-turner full of heart—theirs and God's. Chapter by chapter, the reader gets the distinct impression that God is a very real Person who is eager to be involved in our “little” lives, which is the only impression worth having about God. Anything short of that, and this big universe cannot but turn out to be frightening. Pat and Sylvia have raised my awareness of God's love, His care, and His passion for me. Thank you, my dear sisters.

Ty Gibson

# Introduction

“Sylvia, are you sitting down?” asked the voice over my cell phone.

It was Easter weekend, and I was on the way to the mall with my sister-in-law and two young nieces.

“Well, Girlfriend, I did it!” my friend, Pat, exclaimed.

“Did what?” I asked.

“I just finished the first chapter of your book!”

“What!” I shrieked. “You did? How? When did you decide to write it?” My excitement and questions drowned out the noisy chaos created by the two little girls in the back seat.

And so began the journey of the book you now hold in your hands. It’s the story of my journey—a journey that carried me far away from God—and of the people and means He used to bring me home again. It’s the story of God’s creative and patient love. It’s the story of God’s eagerness to teach and to reveal Himself. It’s the story of God’s ability to use even the most unlikely of us.

I had the honor of presenting the story of this journey at the Kentucky-Tennessee Women’s Retreat in the fall of 2003.

In fact, part of the story is the result of preparing for that speaking engagement. Following the retreat, a number of women requested a copy of the material I had shared over that weekend. Through those requests, I sensed God calling me to put the information in a book.

“Lord, I can’t do that! You know I am not a writer!” was my answer to His prompts.

Then my friend Pat came to mind. She is a writer; she could tell this story for me. So I asked her to consider putting my story and our shared experiences into written words. She was dubious at first, but agreed to pray about it. One morning she awoke with the opening scenario fixed in her thoughts and realized that perhaps God did want her to have a part in the telling of this story.

Each of our life journeys is unique, and yet we have doubts, fears, and desires in common along the way. I invite you to travel with me, and I hope, as I share my experience, you will discover that God is never far away, that He holds the answers you are seeking, and that He can’t wait to show you the passion, joy, and contentment He has planned especially for you!

Chapter 1

# The Search

I drove slowly into the church parking lot and pulled into the first available space. Instead of getting out and heading for the door, I sat quietly behind the wheel.

*This is it, Lord. If it doesn't work this time, I am not going to try again. Three strikes and You're out, I told God.*

*I really do want this to succeed, don't I? With a plea from my heart, I opened the door and, with much trepidation, walked toward the church entrance. What will I experience this time?*

Let me introduce myself. My name is Sylvia Matiko, and I am a professional businesswoman. I enjoy people and thrive under pressure. For most of my career, I worked at Ripley Entertainment (yes, the Ripley's Believe It or Not! corporate headquarters) as one of their vice presidents and traveled extensively. I now have my own company and help business owners, CEOs, and other top executives handle their business challenges. The journey to this point in my life has been like a big roller-coaster ride in a theme park, a "five-ticket ride" as we say in the amusement industry! Come along with me for the ride as I share my story.

My mother and father, both of German descent, differed in their religious backgrounds. Before their wedding, my Catholic father requested that his children be raised in the Catholic faith. My mother, a nonpracticing Seventh-day Adventist, agreed. So, as an infant, I was baptized into the Catholic Church, but our family's attendance was sporadic at best. I attended only the Catholic Church until my grandmother came from Germany to visit us in Toronto.

"Milda," she asked my mother, "will you find me a Seventh-day Adventist congregation to attend while I am here? And it needs to be one that speaks German!"

A very strict Seventh-day Adventist, my grandmother would never think of missing Sabbath services.

My mother obliged, phoning around until she found one. Surprisingly, my father encouraged her to take my grandmother to services. But after Oma returned to Germany, my father demanded that our attendance stop. However, my mother continued to attend a Seventh-day Adventist church, taking my brother and me with her.

So began our dual-church controversy. Sometimes we'd attend church on Saturday; sometimes we'd go on Sunday. A few times we attended church both days! Eventually my mother returned to her spiritual roots, a decision causing a great deal of strife in our home. My father was very upset, certain that we were being brainwashed in that Saturday church. I was not surprised at his reaction, but things at home became so tense, I realized this issue had the potential to destroy our family. It really frightened me. I valued my father's opinion, but I was raised to think for myself, to question everything, and to accept nothing at face value. I still tend to be skeptical, sometimes to my detriment. But because of the love of my parents for each other, and because of my mother's trust in God, the



tension lessened over time, yet it never completely disappeared.

As the time neared for me to enter my junior year of high school, I was determined to attend Kingsway College, an Adventist school, rather than attending the public high school in our area. I knew getting my father's permission would be almost impossible. He was still concerned about his children being brainwashed.

My mom broached the subject with him but was promptly told "No!"

"Sylvia," she said to me, "just give this idea a rest for a few weeks. Then why don't you talk to him over summer vacation. Because you're his little girl, he will probably at least listen to what you have to say."

The summer holidays progressed, and as the deadline for my application drew near, I knew the time to confront my dad had come.

"Daddy, I need to talk to you." I climbed onto his lap and wrapped my arms around him just as I had as a little girl.

"I don't want to go back to Orangeville High School. I am afraid. Every day someone asks me if I want to buy drugs. Lots of the kids are drinking. My classmates are getting pregnant. And last year one of the kids was murdered. I don't want to be there! In fact at one of the Friday night dances last year, they had policemen stationed at the entrance, and all the other exits were barred with heavy chains. I don't know what might happen if I have to go to school there next year. Please, may I go to Kingsway?"

When he realized how frightened I was about attending Orangeville High, he agreed to take a look at Kingsway College. We made the two-hour drive so that my dad could see the campus. Having a daughter attend a private school was a

bit of a status symbol, too, and I was quick to point this out to him. He finally relented, agreeing to let me attend.

It was a hard transition from home to a boarding school, and as a normal teenager—one who questioned everything—my time at Kingsway was not without its moments of crisis. I was rebellious, pushing the limits as far as I could without getting expelled. Even so, those years gave birth to a lot of wonderful friendships that have lasted through the years.

One particular trial was the annual week of prayer. How I hated it! On the outside, I complied, playing in the band and attending the meetings, but when the altar calls were made, I cringed!

*It is just emotional manipulation*, I rationalized. I wasn't going to succumb to peer pressure and walk down to the front of the chapel. I was not going to let them brainwash me as my father had so often warned.

After Kingsway, it was on to Andrews University. This transition was no easier than the first one. Enduring more rules and regulations and required worship attendance, I couldn't wait to get out of there. My attitude softened a bit when I joined the school's gymnastic team, and although I felt God's tug on my heart, I resisted. After all, wasn't I doing all the right things? I read all the books, I read my Bible, and I took all the required religion classes! But when the week of prayer rolled around and the altar calls were made, I sat there shaking my head at the misguided people following what I was sure was an emotional whim. I was not going to be trapped like that!

After obtaining my business degree from Andrews University, I set out to conquer the world. I was ready to escape the world of Adventists, but God had a different idea! Ironically, I

was hired by Crawford Adventist Academy. Does God have a sense of humor, or what! I became the bookkeeper and then school system accountant. But when I was asked to teach an accounting class, I turned down the invitation.

“No way! I am not a teacher!” I stated emphatically.

The school board assured me that certification would be an easy process and begged me to agree. I just couldn't! I knew something they didn't that would be a major complication in acceding to their request. You see, I was not a baptized member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It was a step I had never taken. I pretended to be a member, and no one at Crawford had ever asked me that particular question. I was sure I'd be fired if it were known. It was decision time. What was I going to do?

I did what was comfortable and familiar. I ran. I found a job as a controller for an interior-design company.

*Phew! That was close, I thought. No baptism for me!*

During this time I married the man of my dreams. Warren had been raised an Adventist but was not attending church. So, although my church attendance had been erratic, after our marriage, I stopped attending altogether. What did I need church for? Hadn't I already found a husband? Isn't that why all young girls go to church anyway? I was ecstatic to be free, outside the Adventist bubble. The new kind of freedom we found felt wonderful! My husband and I were having the time of our lives.

My brother used to say, “Sylvia, you two are living a beer commercial!” And he was just about right. We were working hard, playing hard, and living only for ourselves. We had it made! No more rules, no more regulations, no more religious hypocrisy! I was so glad to be free of all that. My life in the fast lane had finally begun. I was beginning to live my dream.

Then I was offered a great job working for Ripley's Believe It or Not! as their corporate controller. Soon I was promoted to vice president of finance, then to vice president of franchise operations, which allowed me to travel the world, seeing many wonderful places. I worked long hours seven days a week and got to meet many famous people, such as Jimmy Carter, Margaret Thatcher, George Bush, and Colin Powell. I was rated as one of the few women executives in Canada who broke through that glass ceiling so many women come up against.

When Ripley's moved their corporate headquarters from Toronto, Canada, to Orlando, Florida, we moved with them. We bought a big, beautiful house, and I drove a company car. We were living the "good life"! I had a great salary, furs, jewelry, a fantastic job, and a travel budget. What more could anyone want?

In the Orlando area, I ran into Shawn, a former classmate from my academy days. I think we both enjoyed renewing our friendship.

"Sylvia, how about coming to a women's ministry tea with me at our church?" Shawn asked one day.

"No way!" I told her. "You are not going to get me into a church."

"Oh, come on, it will be fun!" Shawn persisted.

I was very reluctant, but Shawn was lovingly persuasive, and eventually I agreed to attend. You can believe that I was on my guard as I walked into the church, sure that someone would try some arm-twisting—but the tea turned out to be a delightful experience. No one tried to convert me. No one was out to beat me over the head with their religious ideas. I survived stepping back into a church and had to chuckle at myself as I realized all the emotional baggage I was carrying.

I was not about to make church a part of my routine, however; I was enjoying the “good life” too much. For twelve years I had been living this lifestyle, but unfortunately, life in the fast lane does take its toll.

I was the only female executive at Ripley’s and felt extra pressure as a result. The guys would get home at six-thirty in the morning after a thirty-hour flight from Asia, and they would be in the office by afternoon. And though my body and mind craved more sleep and relaxation, I forced myself to head into the office too. I was exhausted but would never admit that I was having difficulty keeping up with the guys. Of course, they had wives to do their laundry and the grocery shopping! Warren was a big help, but since I was the wife, I felt those chores were part of my responsibilities. Juggling the demands of a full-time career and home can become overwhelming. I felt the pressure and guilt build up before each trip. I would try to leave prepared meals for my husband, even though he assured me it wasn’t necessary. His assurances that he would be fine only added to my feelings of guilt. The internal pressure continued to mount.

Although I was busy and secure in my career, my husband was struggling. Finding a position when we first moved to Orlando was not easy for him. He’d finally taken a job that required well over an hour’s commute each way, but the distance soon grew to be more than he wanted to endure. He then found a consulting job requiring a bit of travel, and since I was traveling as well, I thought it was great. But as often happens, the hours he was needed began to decrease, and soon he was working only ten hours a month. So his job search began anew.

I remember one day finding a one-inch-thick folder in our home office that was filled with rejection letters. I was blown away! I could just imagine how this was affecting Warren’s

self-esteem, especially when people were beginning to tease him about living off of his wife. Though said in jest, I knew the words made him uncomfortable. My concentration on my job didn't help the situation any either.

Warren's job search eventually turned up a job in Salinas, California. By this time, our relationship had become strained due to the stresses we were both under. Warren really wanted to try this job, so we decided he should move to California by himself to give it a trial run. One of the most depressing times I've experienced was when we found an apartment for him and began to furnish it with the essentials. Living in separate households didn't fit with my picture of the good life. Warren and I did still manage to see each other occasionally. Whenever I traveled west, I routed my trip through San Francisco or San Jose so we could get together. And he made it back to Orlando a few weekends too. But the situation was less than ideal.

During this time, I had a regularly scheduled checkup with my physician. Not anticipating anything unusual, I was completely surprised when I received a phone call from his office the following day informing me that my mammogram results were irregular. I would need to schedule some additional testing at the hospital. I was at the office when that call came through, and after hanging up the phone, I remember thinking *What just happened here?*

Since the nurse would give me no details, I promptly called my brother, a radiologist, and asked him what was going on.

"Sylvia, don't worry about it. They probably just need some more films to get a better view. It happens sometimes," he responded.

The technician who examined my breasts the next day was very kind and compassionate, but she kept coming back and

repeatedly taking more pictures of my right breast. I was getting more and more nervous by this time and begged her to tell me what she knew.

“You have a lump in your breast,” she said, taking my hand and showing me exactly where it was. I could feel it!

“Can this really be happening?” I moaned. I was in shock.

They scheduled me for an ultrasound the following day. My physician would be there to take a look at the mass.

When I got home, I called my brother again and told him the results of the tests done that morning.

“Raymond, they found a lump in my breast.”

There was complete silence on the other end of the line. Then realizing my fear, he replied, “The ultrasound is a typical procedure. I am sure they are just wanting to be sure of any irregularities.” But I could tell that he was very concerned.

“It’s probably nothing!” Raymond added. Then he quoted the percentages of women whose masses turn out to be benign, but I don’t remember much of what was said.

When I called my husband in California to tell him I was scheduled for an ultrasound, his response was the same as my brother’s—dead silence. I knew that Warren wanted to be there with me, but it was impossible. There was no way he could take time off from his new job, make the necessary travel arrangements, and arrive by the time I was scheduled to be at the hospital.

I didn’t try to phone my mother. When I was about ten years old, my mom discovered she had a lump in her breast, and I remember how distraught she was. I was concerned that she would worry herself into a heart attack. I didn’t want to tell anyone else. I thought to myself, *I can handle this situation on my own!*

So, the next day, I went off to the hospital—alone. The tests revealed the presence of a mass, but it was benign!

What a sense of relief I felt!

The stress of that experience, however, was stockpiled along with the other stresses in my psyche. Sooner or later, something would have to give.

One day at work shortly after my cancer scare, I began to feel as if I were coming down with the flu. My chest felt heavy, and I couldn't breathe properly. I decided to go to the clinic nearby.

"Mrs. Matiko, there is nothing wrong with you," the doctor informed me after giving me a thorough checkup.

"I suggest that you resolve whatever issues you are struggling with and lessen the stress you are under. Your symptoms are a result of too much stress. You are having an anxiety attack."

*What! That's impossible! I am not under too much stress!* I told myself.

He just looked at me and said, "I suggest you enroll in a stress reduction and management class." He wrote on my medical chart: Diagnosis: anxiety attack.

*No way! They just didn't find what's wrong with me,* I thought to myself.

But the anxiety attacks became more frequent. They would happen at the oddest times. I would feel lightheaded, and my breathing would become irregular. My chest would tighten, and I would feel faint. But I refused to accept the possibility that my body might be trying to tell me something.

My mother-in-law was among the first to notice that all was not well. The subtle signs of discontent were visible to her. I was so busy, always on the go, always moving on to the next challenge, that I could not see what she saw. And she



picked up on the telltale signs of a growing distance in my marriage.

“Sylvia, if you don’t start taking better care of yourself, the next time I see you, it will be in a hospital!” she warned. I was still in denial. I couldn’t believe her words.

I did feel a bit disillusioned. I was working hard, and yet the contentment and happiness I expected weren’t there. *Why am I knocking myself out, skimping on sleep, working sixteen- to twenty-hour days, seven days a week? Where is it getting me?* I wondered. I felt that something was missing but had no idea what that something could be.

My family, too, began expressing concern about the effects of my hectic lifestyle. “You can’t burn the candle at both ends and expect the fire to burn forever!” they admonished.

I didn’t know it then, but God was watching and had a plan. To me, religion was still just a means of control, and I wanted nothing to do with religion or the church. God was well aware of my attitude. He gently reminded me of Shawn and the lovely experience I’d had in her church.

*Maybe I need to explore religions a bit more,* I thought to myself.

I began questioning my own beliefs and started to examine other religions. I realized that there were some answers I didn’t have. I read a lot of self-help books, sure that I could make whatever changes were needed.

*After all, it just takes self-discipline,* I thought to myself. *I have plenty of that. I certainly don’t need any outside help, definitely not any help from God.*

However, I felt like a yo-yo, bouncing from one idea to the next. My emotional turmoil and dissatisfaction increased as the distance in my marriage relationship grew, and I felt helpless to stop it.

When I visited Thailand, I delved into Buddhism and discovered some good principles for living. But as my anger and frustration continued to build, I decided there was no God or any “higher being” and declared myself to be an atheist. My mother was horrified! I remember talking with my mother-in-law, asking her to prove there was a God. I’ll never forget her response.

“Sylvia,” she said, “I can’t prove there is a God. But I can tell you that your way leads only to destruction and death, but my beliefs give me great hope!”

*She’s got a point*, I admitted to myself, *one worth consideration*. And a glimmer of hope started to glow in my soul.

I attended church a few times, mostly to see my friend, Shawn, but then I began to attend because I liked her pastor and her church. He did not hammer doctrines from his pulpit, but talked about developing a friendship, a relationship with God. His down-to-earth stories and sermons created a longing in me to know more. In that congregation, I did not feel judged or condemned because of the clothes I wore or because of my lifestyle.

I remember one particular sermon during which the pastor talked about getting angry with God. I had been taught that such behavior was totally unacceptable and irreverent. But he compared it to our occasional anger with our earthly parents. The pastor said, “He’s our heavenly Father and already knows how we feel; He wants honest communication and doesn’t mind our anger or our questions.”

The concept that God wanted honest communication from His children was a startling idea for me. On my way home from that service, I ranted and railed at God for all that I did not understand: *God, I am miserable! Won’t You show me how to make the changes in my life that I need to make? There has to be a way, Lord!*

I read more books and attended church whenever I was in town, but God still seemed so distant. I just wasn't making a connection! I was so frustrated and angry.

At one point, I yelled, "God, if You are really up there, help me!"

I tried to go back to church; I tried to stop working on Saturdays. After all, I understood the importance of the Sabbath! But I also realized that if any significant change in my lifestyle was to be made, I would need to leave Ripley's. But that was no easy task. If I lost that identity, where would that leave me? I am a professional businesswoman, and no self-respecting professional is without a five-year plan. If I changed my lifestyle, what would that do to my plans? What would my purpose be? What would my five-year plan look like?

One day, I sat down with my Bible and decided to play Bible roulette. You know the game: Just let the Bible fall open, randomly point to a passage, and then read the verse. I knew that this was not the way to communicate with God and, in fact, had been told not to expect God to work that way, but I was at the end of my rope!

*God, if You really do care about me, You can tell me what I need to know,* I prayed.

I was not trying to be flippant; I was just so desperate for an answer, so desperate to know His plan for my life. Believe it or not, God answered that plea. The verse my finger touched read, "Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed" (Proverbs 16:3). The tears ran down my face as I wept. I knew I had to make a decision. Was I going to commit my plans to God or not? Was I going to trust Him or not?

Sitting there, I prayed, *Lord, here's my five-year plan. You're going to have to figure it out! It's now in Your hands.*

I decided that we should sell our luxurious home and that I should resign from Ripley's. Surely that would take care of a majority of the issues facing me. What I didn't know at that time was that God does things on His timetable, not on ours. Our house was on the market for over a year without a single offer! I felt confused and betrayed.

*God, I am doing all this because I want to follow You. So why aren't You taking care of this?*

I also wanted to get my marriage back into shape, and Warren was not happy all alone in California. The job was not what he expected, and we were miserable without each other. He wanted to come home, and I wanted him home. We needed to work things out together and really give this a try. *For better or for worse*, I remembered. I made those vows, and I decided I was going to do everything I could to keep them.

Warren came home after about four months in California and started the job search again. It was a difficult struggle, and he tried everything from real estate to mortgage brokering, but nothing clicked.

When he found a job that interested him in Nashville, Tennessee, I thought, *This is the answer to my prayer! This is a way for me to get out of Ripley's and make a new start.*

So I made a deal with God. "Lord, I promise that if the house sells and my husband is offered a position, I will begin regular church attendance."

Well, much to my surprise, the house sold very quickly, my husband was offered a job, which he eagerly accepted, and we were on our way to Nashville.

Friend, God is good, isn't He? Even when we try to bargain with Him, making promises and demands we shouldn't, God looks inside our hearts, and He acts from what He sees there.

He already knew just what I needed and where He wanted me to be. He was working out His plan in His time.

Well, I kept my promise. I called the local Adventist conference office and got the addresses of the Adventist churches in the area. I thought I would try the Adventist churches first, and if that didn't work out, I would work through my list of other denominations. Sabbath morning found me in the first of several Adventist churches in Nashville. The greeters were friendly—but that's their job, right? I sat in the back, on the aisle, so I could escape easily if I needed to. No one spoke to me. I felt like a stranger and so out of place! The experience went downhill from there. It was a very traditional service, the sermon filled with religious jargon. It was way over my head, and I was terribly bored. When they sang the closing hymn, I almost bolted out the door.

*Nothing's changed here since the 1970s!* I thought as I inwardly cringed. I was so disappointed.

My second Sabbath found me at another church, and though the congregation was friendly, it was not a good fit for me either. I was disheartened.

The following Sabbath was my “three strikes and you're out” Sabbath, mentioned earlier in this chapter. You now understand my desperation as I entered those church doors that morning.

*Lord, I pleaded, please let someone take an interest in me. Let someone reach out to me!*

The greeters were there to smile and shake my hand. I again found a seat in the back and on the aisle. The sermon was good. The pastor used stories and examples I could relate to.

I noticed many young people in the congregation. *That's always a good sign,* I thought. The service ended and I rose to leave. No one had spoken to me.

## *Lemons to Lemonade*

*No one here cares about me either*, my heart cried. I was almost in tears as I neared the doors when someone grabbed my elbow from behind.

“Hi! Have I seen you here before?”

I thought I was going to faint! *Has God really answered my prayer? Has He sent an angel?*

My “angel” that day was Gail, the associate pastor’s wife. She made me feel so welcome and introduced me to lots of people! She invited me to return and also invited me to her women’s Bible study group that met during Sabbath School. I was overwhelmed and felt warm inside. I smiled as I realized I had found a church home.

Friend, does God care about you? Does He still answer our prayers? Does He have a plan for your life? Can He take everything, all the lemons we find in our experiences, and make something good happen? Can He truly make lemonade? I am here to tell you, “He surely can!” I pray that as I share the story of my journey, you will find hope growing in your own heart for the changes you want in your own life.



*Father God,*

*Thank You for never giving up on us. Thank You for Your passionate pursuit! Please send a human angel into each of our lives who will show us Your love, grace, and mercy. Continue to take our lemons and make lemonade out of them! Thank You, Lord! Amen.*