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## CHAPTER 1



# SLATHER Me Up and Stuff Me In:

How an MRI Exposed  
the Me I Never Wanted to Know

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*Before I can live with other folks I've got to live with myself.  
The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a  
person's conscience.*

—ATTICUS FINCH in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Seduction has many voices. It calls in strident tones and wears a painted face, luring us boldly with lust, desire, and pride.

And it beckons in the silent spaces of apathy that linger between our motives and words. Like an anaconda, it lurks beneath the watermark of consciousness, waiting to grip us in its diabolical embrace, then slowly crush the life from us.

## THE SERPENT BENEATH

For most of my adult life, I'd stood waist-deep in water, seduced by superficial ripples of apathy, unaware that seduction had coiled around me. I didn't know a monster existed in the waters of my life. I'd chosen delusion, and my monster of delusion was my own self-talk, a reality that lurked beneath the waterline of my awareness. I'd ignored it and slipped into blissful apathy regarding its power in my life. Mine was a silent seduction.

Until the day my body and soul slammed into an insurmountable wall of need, and I found myself eavesdropping on my heart for the first time.

One minute I was hurtling full-throttle down the road of life, radio blaring and windows rolled up tight to the world around me while I steered with my knee and scribbled church committee meetings into my planner. Then suddenly my face was planted in gravel and grit, and darkness had swallowed me.

It was the kind of crash that leaves permanent skid marks on your soul, the kind that divides your life into *Before* and *After*. But I never saw it coming. I was too busy careening from task to task on a full tank of premium self-obsession that was propelling me through life like a pinball on steroids.

Don't get me wrong. I was doing all the right things—the admirable things Christians tell themselves they do to honor God. I was just doing them for the wrong reasons and didn't know it. I hadn't learned to listen to my self-talk yet. I'd mastered plenty of ways to hide my true motives from myself. After all, my husband, Dan, and I had worked in full-time Christian ministry for over twenty years, and nobody I knew was sitting around church potluck suppers talking about their secret agendas or roots of bitterness. Besides, Dan and I had a solid marriage and two phenomenal adult children. I was teaching, writing, speaking, serving. I had the day planner to prove I was doing things of eternal value, and if I could bring it along to heaven for a little celestial Show-and-Tell someday, I was sure I'd outshine many of my friends.

After all, I'd directed small church choirs, community choirs, *junior high* choirs, for heaven's sake (I'd always assumed an extra dollop of God's blessing anywhere junior highers were involved). And then there were the high school mission trips that involved tarantulas and honest-to-goodness deprivation and outhouses and manual labor in the desert. I was practically one with Corrie ten Boom and Mother Teresa on those trips. To my way of thinking, of course, before I learned to turn up the volume on thoughts I hadn't wanted to admit were there.

And then there was the tiny salary we'd lived on and the hundreds of kids whose lives we'd poured ourselves into. According to my Subconscious Spiritual Checklist, I was doing all right. I was in ministry leadership, and I smiled most of the time in public and tried hard to have devotions and feel appropriately guilty when I didn't. Like a lot of people I knew, I'd come to believe that spiritual growth was measured by not complaining too much and banging out the jobs on my Christian to-do list. I thought I had a bright, shiny heart, buffed up and polished, like some kind of spiritual gazing ball. On good days, if I kept myself busy enough, I actually believed it.

When there were doubts, I shoved them aside and took more notes in church. Doubts were to be ignored. Doubts were signs of spiritual weakness and cracks in the armor of God, and I did not want to be cracked.

And so I ran faster, jumped higher, scribbled more commitments into my planner, and kept my Christian radio station turned up loud enough to cover the babble that raged below the surface of my soul.

It wasn't until I slammed into an insurmountable wall of need that I began to see that the bright places in my heart were only mirages, glimmers of heat rising from the parched soil of my soul that had gone dry years ago.

But my need would become God's megaphone. Pain would force me to lie still with my eyes squeezed shut and my face planted in dirt as I searched for God's perspective—a perspective that I'd buried beneath layers of rationalization, excuse, pride, fear, and my compulsion to please.

My acts of service had been self-service to impress people.

My hands extended in missions had been grasping to prove to those around me that I was willing to do "spiritual" things, difficult things.

My loyalties and commitment to friends had often been fear of rejection wrapped in the tinsel of approval addiction.

Until my life slammed into a wall of physical pain and suffering, I hadn't known these things about myself, at least in ways I was

willing to admit. I hadn't known them because I'd never learned to listen to the whisperings of my own heart. I'd smothered the sound of my own soul crying out for soul fulfillment.

Perhaps it was the knowledge deep within me that I was truly broken, truly needy that kept me racing from task to task, anesthetizing my emptiness with the next date scribbled into my planner. Something inside me told me that as long as I was moving, I didn't have to focus on where I really was, on who I really was.

*He pressed my face so close to  
His own that I finally saw glimmers  
of my real self for the very first  
time reflected in His eyes.*

In June of 1999, God decided to introduce me to myself. It was the month when my self-obsession collided with His love, and He pressed my face so close to His own that I finally saw glimmers of my real self for the very first time reflected in His eyes. It was the month when I first began to hear the whisperings of my true neediness and the voice of God calling me to Himself.

A journey was about to begin, a journey that would end with me, Shelly Beach, meeting myself for the first time. But before it would begin, I would have to slam into that wall of suffering and stare into the dirt for a while.

And it would hurt.

## COLLIDING WITH GOD

I began to hear the squeal of the brakes and feel the seat belt tighten against my chest during an unnerving emergency room

discussion with a doctor who wanted to crank off my skull to root around inside my brain. I'd just returned from a trip to Europe, so I was accustomed to knowing my legs would take me from point A to point B. But two days after I'd returned home, I woke up to find my legs had gone on strike. I was suddenly unable to support my own weight, much less walk, and so one afternoon Dan carried me into a hospital emergency room like the world's largest rag doll.

Within hours, all parts of me were refusing to cooperate. Apparently, I was considered an interesting specimen and was offered every test available, then promptly shipped off to a new hospital farther up the food chain. Twice.

Soon after arriving at Detroit Medical Center, I was tied up with my bedsheets and slid into an MRI tube. This was not the welcome I'd been hoping for. Perhaps this technique was for ease of stuffing or the technicians were afraid that once they slid me in, they wouldn't be able to slide me back out. But I did find it frightening that none of the self-avowed medical professionals buzzing around me that day recognized the terrifying implications of tying up a patient producing frequent and violent gastric expulsions and shoving her into a space half her size. But they'd been given the job of determining if the Giant Thing Near My Brain Stem was a real-live tumor, and I'd already been given maximum doses of every anti-nausea medication known to medical science. So their only recourse was to stuff me in the tube, repeat polite platitudes, do the Hokey Pokey, and hope for the best.

I had already earned, in my brief stay in the neuro-oncology unit at Detroit Medical Center, the much-deserved name of the "Puking Lady in Room 332." But despite my impressive credentials, I was not offered a free pass for the test where technicians encase your head inside a giant helmet screwed to a sliding MRI table. I was certain that if I had been a schnauzer or a guinea pig, animal rights activists would have protected me from such an abomination. I could see through one slitted eye that the people in white intended to tie me down, clamp me in, and stuff my larger-than-pimento-sized

girth into an olive-sized tube. I have never been good at geometry, but even in my diminished mental state, I knew I was in serious trouble.

The most important reason was that I hadn't opened my eyes in days. My universe had come to resemble a kaleidoscope of bouncing, trembling, triplicate blobs that had forced me into a fetal position while I prayed that no one weighing more than a Chihuahua would walk any closer than my door. I wanted people to stop blowing up my veins and sticking pins in my legs and writing in ink on my chart that I couldn't stand up or walk or keep my eyeballs from jerking like a hummingbird on caffeine. I wanted them to stop reminding me that life had suddenly, inexplicably spun out of control because a walnut-sized something-or-other had taken up residence near my brain stem. I wanted them to figure out what it was and how to get rid of it so they could get me out of that horrible hospital and back to my *life*, which was disintegrating with the ticking of the clock.

And to top it off, a radiologist who had not been taught that Customer Satisfaction Is Number One had told me that I would have to lie absolutely still on my back for over an hour to get the images that would determine if life as I had known it would ever resume. For a fleeting second I'd considered laughing. Lying on my back for even ten minutes would have required a miracle on par with my performing with the Bolshoi Ballet, but no one seemed interested in what I could or couldn't do. They were only interested in what I *had* to do.

A panic ball was placed in my right hand as the sheets were pulled taut, then tied over my chest.

"I can't do this. I'm going to throw up in there."

"You've got the panic ball. If you feel sick, give it a squeeze, and we'll pull you out."

I was slid onto the narrow table as the tech maneuvered my head into the helmet, and I felt the locking mechanism click into place. With the sound, a prayer rose from deep within me.

*Dear God. I can't do this.*

“You’ll be all right, ma’am. MRIs really aren’t a big deal. All you have to do is close your eyes, think peaceful thoughts, and be still.”

## THE THUD OF THE SOUL

My heart sank as I felt the thud of my soul hitting a wall.

*Be still.*

Now there was a concept I’d never been able to grasp. I’d floundered with it for years, even though I’d done the right things my pastors had preached about. Devotions, praying, and always I’d felt the thud of my soul hitting that wall.

With a gentle whirring, I felt the table move and my shoulders curl as my body cupped to the shape of the cylinder.

The first grip of panic tore at my chest. A soft current brushed my face, yet I felt as if the air had been sucked from my lungs. Cold metal pressed against me, and I squeezed my eyes shut so tightly I feared my blood vessels might burst. I knew that if my lids flickered open for only an instant and I glimpsed the cold metal encasing me like a coffin, I would scream. A single question pounded through my mind.

*Why am I here, God?*

The narrowness of the space pressed in. I was trapped. I could do nothing but lie still and wait. I inhaled and tried to ignore the pressure of the sheets shrouding me.

*I don't know how to do this, God. I'm not strong enough. You made some people strong and I am not one of them, so just hand this assignment off to someone else. I pass.*

Spasms of nausea gripped my stomach. I inhaled deeply and concentrated on the light show flashing on the back of my eyelids.

“How long have I been in here?”

My voice was barely loud enough to whisper.

“It’s only been twelve minutes, Mrs. Beach. You’re doing fine.”

This person was obviously not in the tube. I was not doing fine,

and I was about to prove it. I squeezed the ball. Over and over. But it was too late.

I proved them all wrong in one terrifying spasm of horror. My head strained at the helmet, and the metal bit into my skin as I fought against my coffin. I'd tried to be still, but it hadn't been enough.

Shame washed over me as I felt the rush of hands to pull me from the tube, release my head, and clean me. If I'd had any spare body fluids, I would have cried. Because I'd failed, the doctors would have no answers. They'd be forced to make me repeat the test.

I was wheeled into the hallway where the sounds of life swirled around me as I lay in a surreal limbo with my eyes shut tight to the world. Dan joined me, and the warmth of his hand enveloped mine as he gently avoided the IVs and tubes that had become part of me.

New despair seeped into my soul as I lay again in a fetal position, my husband stroking my brow as we waited for news of nothing. In the anguish of those moments, the voices that had lay submerged beneath the watermark of my soul floated slowly to the surface.

*You were only in the scanner for minutes. You faced that humiliation for nothing.*

Guilt and anger washed over me, and I searched for a verse, for a thread of hope.

*You're alone. You can't feel God, can you? You came out the same Shelly you went in—a bit damper and colder, but the same. They think you have cancer, you know. God doesn't promise to protect you.*

Almost instantaneously, a verse sprang to mind. *But His grace is sufficient for me, and His strength is made perfect in my weakness.*

The clash of voices pulled at my thoughts.

*God was with me. He's real, in spite of what I feel. He's going to provide everything I'm going to need.*

*God's presence is an illusion. You're not strong enough for this, and you're on your own. This is going to break your faith. You've got nothing but empty religion.*

## WHOSE VOICE WAS THAT?

In that moment, the world faded away. Then quietly, a parallel awareness stirred in my thoughts. I was arguing with myself. How strange was that? I was actually telling myself conflicting things that couldn't possibly both be true.

I slowly pulled myself back from the struggle and surveyed my self-talk. What I saw shocked me. For the first time I saw with clarity the lies that were raging against truth. I could see that the battle in my mind was almost like watching Atticus Finch take on Mr. Gilmer in a sweltering Alabama courtroom in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Until that moment, I'd been unaware that I argued with myself, even lied to myself. Although my belief system and values were derived from the things I determined to be true inside my head, I'd never purposefully eavesdropped on my self-talk before. I'd ignored this internal world. Now, suddenly, an MRI scan had exposed my inner duplicity and the fact that life had kept me so focused upon my external world that my inner dialogues had been lost beneath the waterlines of my daily activity.

I'd become so busy doing the stuff of life that I'd blocked out the diabolical self-talk that marked the struggles in my own heart.

I stared into the darkness as I faced the reality that the God I'd claimed to know and to love was, in many ways, a stranger to me. It was a brutal truth to face as I waited to be taken back to the brain cancer unit. It was a truth that took me to the end of myself, and that is where the work of God began—helping me discover the parched soil of my heart, my hidden agendas and self-centered obsessions. But God had brought me to a place where I'd begin to listen, to recognize His voice, then begin to see myself, one glimpse at a time, as I found myself in Him.

I'd begin by recognizing that I battled with the desire to silence God's voice with my own.

I'd begin by recognizing that my spirit was opposed to God's, that I struggled to outwit Him, to equal Him, and ultimately become my

own god. But these were truths I refused to allow to rise above the waterline of my heart until I'd learned to listen to my self-talk.

### GOD'S GRACE IN A VERY SMALL SPACE

On that day in 1999 in the hospital hallway, the sound of footsteps approached.

“We’re taking you back to your room, Mrs. Beach. We managed somehow to get the images of your brain we needed, right down to the second you got sick. Your doctor will be sharing the results with you, but let’s just say we won’t be needing a scan of your whole body after all.”

Dan and I sat in stunned silence struggling to understand what we’d just been told. The truth dawned in scattered shards of hope, then in one brilliant burst.

They hadn’t found a tumor or cancer. They weren’t going to repeat the scan.

On a hospital gurney, surrounded by blurred shapes and clinging to a plastic basin, I heard the smallest of whispers. The voice I’d waited for in the small space of the MRI tube breathed truth quietly into my heart.

*I was with you, Shelly. I always am and I always have been, even in the still, small places.*

I began to listen and to hear. God’s megaphone of suffering was beginning to teach me that my self-talk had obscured His voice. Unless I learned to listen in the silent spaces that lingered between my motives and my words, my soul would never find satisfaction in God alone, and I would never learn to love others.

For most of my adult life I’d been seduced by my own self-talk—seduced by spiritual apathy, by the power of delusion. I’d chosen to ignore the reality of conflicting voices vying to control my mind, will, emotions, and to place a stranglehold on my relationship with God. My compassionate, gracious, loving heavenly Father, more than anything, longed for me to know Him. For years

He'd been speaking to me, but my babbling had obscured His voice.

And so He broke my heart so that I could hear Him, so that He could lift my face to His own and draw me to Himself. For weeks, I lay in silence. And in the silent spaces of my apathy I discovered agendas, calluses, fears, and facades.

In my months of illness and recovery from my brain lesion, not a tumor, God's voice stirred fresh in me—this time a new message: “Be a woman of one voice, with pure motives and a heart for only Me.”

The promise of truth flowed through me with Holy Spirit power.

Tears of brokenness softened the parched soil of my heart as I cried out to know a God who spoke to me and moved in me.

In the months that I lay in the stillness of a hospital room, I learned to listen to the silent motives of my heart. I learned that seduction wears many faces and that God's look of compassion bears only one face—the face of Jesus Christ, God's Son, who calls to us.

“Come to Me.”

## SOUL SEARCH

### Breaking the Silence

- Do you struggle with busyness that keeps you from listening to your heart and focusing on your relationship with God? Why?
- What “bricks” can you identify in your wall of spiritual need? What attitudes, thoughts, sins, habits do you struggle to hide, even from yourself? What conversations do you have with yourself to justify or rationalize your actions?
- If you struggle with guilt in your self-talk, how does Satan use that guilt to beat you down? Do you feel it's true guilt or false guilt? Why?
- Do you struggle with feeling you truly know God? Do you desire to know Him more intimately? Can you identify what you believe may be obstacles to intimacy with God?
- Do you have a difficult time believing that God desires a personal relationship with you? What do you think may have contributed to this feeling?

## FACING THE SEDUCTION

### Listening to the Spirit and the Word

- Spend time in prayer asking God to reveal areas of spiritual need in your life. You may want to use one or several of the following Scripture passages or refer to the topical listing of Scripture in appendix 7.

Psalms 51

Galatians 5:22–24

Matthew 5:44–45

Matthew 16:24–26

2 Peter 1:4–8

Matthew 16:12, 14–15

- What do these passages say about God’s desire to be in an intimate relationship with us?

Jeremiah 29:11

1 John 3:1

John 10:14–15

Deuteronomy 26:18

Ephesians 1:4–6

- Turn to the back of this book and complete the exercise in appendix 1.
- Consider asking an accountability partner to join you as you read through this book. Spiritual transformation is always best accomplished in conjunction with the Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the people of God. This person should be someone of spiritual maturity and discernment who knows you well enough to give loving feedback.

## RESPONDING FROM THE HEART

### Prayer

Gracious and loving Father, I come to You admitting that I’m facing a wall of need. I know that more than anything, You want to have a closer and deeper relationship with me, and today I’m taking a first

step toward You by asking You to change me from the inside out. Thank You for loving me as I am but for not leaving me in my brokenness.

Please help me see the ugly parts of myself I've worked so hard to hide with self-talk. Show me who You created me to be, fully empowering me through Your Holy Spirit to become that person. Show me the roots of my self-deceptions, whether big or small. Help me listen to the conversations I carry on with myself, knowing they're a mirror to my heart, a key to my motives, and the source of my commitment to live out the double love command to passionately love You and others.

Thank You for grace and for the gift of Your love as I turn toward You in humble obedience. More than anything, Lord, I want to have a heart that loves You more. Amen.