



A LIFE OF LISTENING

DISCERNING

GOD'S VOICE

AND

DISCOVERING

OUR OWN

A MEMOIR BY

LEIGHTON FORD

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THE EARLIEST VOICES

*For you have been my hope, Sovereign LORD,
my confidence since my youth.*

PSALM 71:5



No matter how hard I try, I cannot remember the sound of my mother's voice.

I can summon to mind her appearance—short and stern, fashionably dressed. But when I try to recall the tone, the scale, the rhythm of her speech, some inflection—nothing comes. Others tell me she sounded like an old-time schoolmarm, her voice high-pitched and thin like a bird's.

Maybe it's because she was my adoptive mother, not my birth mother. But I did not know that for the first dozen years of my life.

Or maybe it's because while I was growing up, my mother would spend hours lecturing me—her preferred method of correction. So I may have blocked it out. It was as if hers was a voice that I heard, and heard, and heard, and then had to stop hearing.

There is another Voice who has been calling to me all my life, like somebody I already know, somebody I know I will recognize on meeting for the first time. It is the invisible thread twining through my life, drawing all other threads together. When I finally meet this Voice, I will be face-to-face with Jesus. He will speak my true name. I will answer and for the first time hear the sound of my own true voice. I will know that, finally, I have come all the way home.

This invisible thread began its weaving through my life long before I was aware of it. My mother's was the first voice that spoke to me, earliest and most insistently. In those years the Voice sounded very like my mother. It took me a long time to tell the difference.



I was born with long legs and given a long name—the long legs from my biological father, the names from my adoptive mother, Olive.

I found out I was adopted on an autumn afternoon when my mother took me for a walk in Toronto's High Park. She had a purpose for that walk, as she did for most things. She had decided it was time to tell me a secret held from me all these years—that I was adopted.

"There was an accident," she told me, explaining about my birth parents. For a long time I assumed they must have been killed in a car wreck. It was years before I realized I was the "accident."

"We didn't have to adopt you," she said as we walked among the rough russet maple leaves. "We chose you. And we love you."

Why did she wait that long? I have no idea. I must have been very naive or I would have guessed it long before, because by this

time I was over six feet tall and my mother barely four foot eleven and my father also short. Clearly, we had different genes!

I did not feel troubled about the adoption. Rather, being chosen made me feel special and later also gave me a sense of how significant it is when the Bible says God “adopts” us into his family.

Soon after I was born, my adopted parents, Charles and Olive Ford, took me to Chatham, Ontario—the “Maple City” in southern Ontario known for the magnificent trees that burst into color every fall—where they ran a jewelry store.

It was about as British a provincial Canadian city as it could be: Chatham in Kent County with the Thames River running through it, replicating the old country. The first settlers clearly wanted to keep their loyalty to king and crown. The street names were very English—King Street, where Ford’s Jewelers was located, and Victoria Avenue, where our first home stood.

These English-sounding streets and river were intersected by Tecumseh Park, named after the famed Indian chief killed in battle a few miles upriver at Moraviantown. There was also a small population known as “colored” people in Chatham and district, descendants of former slaves who escaped from the United States to new homes in Canada via the Underground Railway. One terminal of their route was only two or three blocks from our store.

Our small city was a market center for the farmers. Many of them were Dutch immigrants, who grew their sugar beets and tobacco on the rich lands around the city and came to town on a Saturday night to shop and drink good, dark Dutch beer, hopefully spending some of their hard-earned money at our store.

Although my parents had lost most of their savings and investments during the Great Depression, business was steady. My

father was the watchmaker, my mother the buyer with a good eye for fashion. Yet she was always worried about not having enough money.

But there was enough for her to buy fine clothes, and she took frequent buying trips to Detroit, an hour away. Sometimes she took along a retired Salvation Army woman officer, Major Lindsay, thinking the customs officers at the border—seeing her religious uniform—would not ask too many questions about what Mom had bought when they came back to Canada.

After school I often did my homework at the store, where Mom and Dad both worked, sometimes playing games of hide-and-seek with a friend in the long basement storage room or in the underground halls of the hotel building where they rented space. When I was older I also helped with sales during busy times.

One night during Christmas rush when they were both at work, I remember feeling a terrible fear of being left alone. I was an only child, although two or three foster girls lived with us at times. On this night I was there by myself, both my mother and father working late. I woke in a panic when I realized no one else was in the house and was so frightened that I called a taxi and had the driver take me to the store, still dressed in my pajamas.

I wonder if all adopted children have native loneliness embedded deep in the psyche, a subconscious fear of being abandoned that can be triggered anytime.



I had friends enough in those younger years, but as far I can remember my parents had few. I can't recollect them ever entertaining for a meal or a party, nor did we eat together at home very often. Except for breakfast, most of our meals—of mine—for

years were taken at one of the hotel restaurants along King Street or at Rexall Drugs, where I loved a grilled cheese sandwich and coke for lunch.

On our dining room wall is my painting of the house where I lived as a boy at 283 Victoria Avenue, a fine two-story wooden house with white walls and blue trim. It is a late-afternoon scene, and the long shadows of the evergreens fall across the lawn toward the house. In the foreground are the brilliant branches of a maple tree in full autumn glory. A set of windows on the side takes me back years, three multipaned dormer windows jutting out from a sitting room. Just inside was an alcove with a brown cabinet radio, where in the late afternoons I listened to radio serials—The Lone Ranger; Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy; The Green Hornet. On Saturday nights in winter I sat glued to the radio listening to Foster Hewitt announce, “From downtown Toronto’s Maple Leaf Gardens, it’s hockey night in Canada,” and dreamed that someday I too would be a hockey broadcaster.

I loved sports. But as a boy I was too shy and gangly to be good at them. Later I found I had a strong competitive streak and quick reflexes, enough to play goalie in hockey and later to slam returns at the net in tennis. But in the early years my mother, always protective, never encouraged me in sports. She had a different interest to instill in me.

For Mother the choice to adopt was made not only out of love but for what she believed was a God-given purpose. When I was a few days old, she took me to be dedicated to the Lord by Dr. Henry Frost, a missionary leader. He said, “Mrs. Ford, I believe God has given you this child for a purpose,” and she often reminded me of what he said.

Mother held onto that purpose. She had wanted to be a missionary. As a child she sang “I’m going to the Congo, the call is growing stronger . . .” The call may have seemed strong, but she was not fit to be a missionary. So, her own dream unfulfilled, she looked for a child to adopt to live out that calling.

The adoption was privately arranged after she had picked me and checked out my birth parents. Her son needed the right blood lines to fulfill the purpose she (and presumably God) had for him—for me.

She also was the one who named me—Leighton Frederick Sandys Ford—each name carrying a special meaning for her. “Leighton” was after the first Canadian ambassador to the United States, Leighton McCarthy. “Frederick” was from the uncle she adored who left his studies for the Anglican ministry to enlist in the Canadian army and was killed at the Battle of Vimy Ridge in France during the Great War. “Sandys” was after an Anglican deaconess from an aristocratic family in our city, whom she greatly admired. Those names, in almost a biblical sense, signified to her my calling, and hers.

She was a small but very determined woman who compensated for her stature by identifying with Queen Victoria (who was also quite short) by wearing lifts in her shoes to add an inch or so of height. She prided herself on being an astute business woman, the brains behind the business, with a special knack of choosing the fine jewelry for their store. She dressed quite fashionably in her fur coats and feathered hats in winter and summer frocks.



My earliest image of coming before God is of myself as a small boy, kneeling at a prayer bench on the second floor of that frame

house on Victoria Avenue. It consisted of a kind of wooden prie-dieu with a slanted top and shelves, and a small stool, placed in an alcove against the railing at the top of our stairs.

There, day after day, and what seemed sometimes hour after hour, Mother would have me kneel to memorize Bible verses. I would dutifully repeat prayers after her word by word, all the while hoping I could soon escape and go out to play.

Why that didn't turn me off to prayer forever I am not sure, except that I was a dutiful child, and she was determined to shape me for what she was sure was my calling. As she would often remind me, holding up books about famous missionaries and preachers, "Leighton, God is looking for more men like this." It was clear in her mind—and I suppose in mine—that I was to be one of them.

Those sessions seemed endless, and my mind wandered outside where I wanted to be playing with my friends. But they did imprint on my mind that life had a great purpose, that the world was bigger than our small city, and that I was to be part of that purpose and that world.

My mother reinforced that purpose in every way she could, making sure there was a spiritual input to every activity.

She and I often took the train to Toronto for her to shop for fine clothes. On these trips my only escape from boredom was reading. I was allowed to purchase the latest edition of *Chums: The Boys' Own Annual*, and I could lose myself in the adventure stories of explorers while she had her hair done. On one of these trips we went to a large church to hear a visiting preacher, who had been chief of chaplains in the British army. "Listen," she whispered, poking me in the side, "That is a very great man. God wants more like him."

Voices by the Lake

In Chatham she felt smothered and deprived of strong Bible teaching. So from the time I was five she took me each summer to the Canadian Keswick Conference, a spiritual center in the Muskoka Lakes of Ontario. Most vacationers went for fun, food, water sports. Devout Christians went there for rest and spiritual renewal.

For a young lad the trip itself was an adventure. A three-and-a-half-hour train ride on the Canadian National or Canadian Pacific railroads to Toronto. A change of trains at the cavernous Union Station. Then the exciting two-plus hours north to the lake country.

My mother saw to it that my Bible learning began as we traveled. Once on the train she made me memorize Jesus' long prayer in the seventeenth chapter of John's Gospel. I can still repeat his words from the old King James: "These words spake Jesus, and lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said . . ."

Once in Muskoka we would catch a lake steamer to the village of Port Carling. There we switched to take the *Abmic* through the twisting Indian River to Keswick. Captain Hill, who commanded the ship, was fascinating to me, both because he was missing a thumb and because sometimes he would let me come into the cabin and steer as he directed me through the straits—telling me to move the wheel "one spoke to the left, two to the right."

Keswick was set in a cove, snuggled under some hills, and full of the scent of summer firs. There was one hill especially that I loved to climb by myself when I was old enough. At the top was a rocky place with a view of the lake and beyond. Our own hometown was in the flat, sugar-beet farmlands of southwestern Ontario, a fertile but not a very inspiring landscape. In contrast the loveliness of the hills and rocks and lakes of Muskoka

infused into my soul a love for high places and water, which remains to this day.

After the first summer or two my mother arranged for us to stay for a month in a canvas cabin on a rocky knoll where a wooden platform formed the base for this cabin, pieces of canvas squares on wooden frames. From there we set out each morning for the daily Bible lectures in the eight-sided Delectable Mansion. For me the serious side was more than offset by the fun events—tennis, lawn bowling and croquet, pickup softball games with the staff (most of whom were Bible college students), and afternoon swims in the cove.

Many sounds come back to me, many voices from those summer days.

The most lasting were from what was called the “Galilee Cathedral,” a kind of outdoor chapel built into a slope down to the water and named for the lake where Jesus called his disciples and taught the crowds. After supper most nights, a missionary hour took place in this outdoor sanctuary.

Rows of steps were shaped leading down to the lakeside. On each were wooden benches, supports and backs and arm rests still rough with bark. A small platform made with native Muskoka stone jutted out into the lake, and standing on it one or more missionaries would tell their stories. Some were attractive, full of life and wonderful accounts. Some droned on. Two voices from that lakeside remain with me. There were the voices telling of faraway places—Ethiopia, the Solomon Islands, China, the heart of Africa. From them I learned that Mussolini’s Italian army had invaded Ethiopia, land of the “Lion of Judah,” the emperor Haile Selassie. These voices made me conscious of the vast world

beyond my own small Ontario town and began to form in me a world consciousness.

Then there was the voice of the lake itself, the gentle waters of Lake Rosseau lapping up on the shore as we sang and the missionaries spoke. It was a lulling, almost hypnotizing voice. Quiet as these waves were, they must have drowned out the painful efforts of some of the less inspirational missionaries. The waves were the voice of calm. Even as I remember them now I want to go and sit there, let hours pass beyond “the hour,” and allow the peace that seldom was found in our home to settle into my spirit.

When the time came to leave, the lake steamer would come to pick up departing guests. Everyone would trek down to the pier for goodbyes led by Rowland Bingham, the *éminence gris* of Keswick. A small man with a long rather dog-like face who always wore a multicolored pin-striped blazer, he was remarkable, with vision far beyond his size, a founder of the Sudan Interior Mission, and a man whose faith and prayers infused the spirit of Keswick.

As the ship left he would wave his hands and start us singing Keswick’s traditional farewell song:

Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees,
and looks to God alone,
laughs at impossibilities,
and cries it shall be done.¹

The ship would chug away. Keswick’s rocky point would disappear around a bend.

We would be off from delectable mansions to a world of war, of foreign missions, of ordinary school days in unglamorous homes and towns, but with a sense that we had been in touch for

a few days or weeks with something beyond the humdrum of daily life.

Voices from the world. The voice of the lake. They were forming in me, unconsciously, the twin longings of my soul: to go and simply to be.

On the return train ride to Toronto we would pass through the small city of Orillia, set by another lake, Lake Simcoe.

There, nearly half a century later, I would meet another mother, the one who gave me birth, who also listened to her own voices by the lake, some with a very different tone.

But for now, Olive was the first “voice” of my calling. Through her efforts I was surrounded by God’s voice, and yet it was also a voice that sounded at times like her own. I understood very little then of the demons that drove her from which I would need to be free.

Sifting

I have known since my earliest years that God was calling to me, that he knew my name(s) better than I did. But in later years I have found myself sifting through all the voices that have called my name, contemplating the different ways in which I have heard God’s voice speaking through them. As you read my story, perhaps it will stir a remembering of the voices you have heard in your life—those you have been guided by, those you might have forgotten, those you long to hear once again.

Together, let’s listen for the Voice of our calling—the sound of God at work in our lives, weaving all things together in a tapestry of divine artistry. When we walk in the light, as God is in the light, we become fellow travelers on the path that leads through dark places as well as bright. In the words of Leonard Cohen:

A LIFE OF LISTENING

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in²

And, I would add, that's how the light gets out.

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