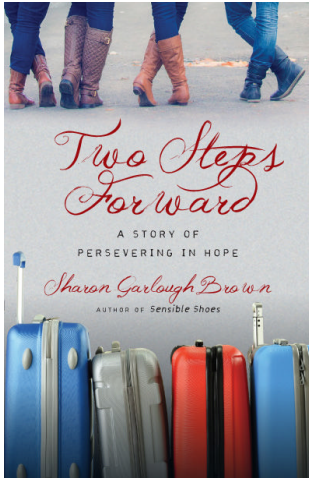




# BOOK EXCERPT



*Two Steps Forward: A Story of Persevering in Hope* (Sensible Shoes Series)

Available October 2015

\$18, 304 pages, paperback

978-0-8308-4318-3

## Finding Hope in Unlocking Memories

What a journey Meg had taken since September, when she first met Hannah, Mara and Charissa at the New Hope Retreat Center. They had happened to sit together at a back corner table near an exit door, and Meg had used the excuse of her high heels to avoid walking the prayer labyrinth. "I'm afraid I didn't wear very sensible shoes," Meg told them. "Guess I wasn't taking 'sacred journey' literally, huh?"

"I like it!" Mara exclaimed. "Sacred journeys need sensible shoes! What shall we call ourselves? The Sensible Shoes Club?"

Over the past three months, they had learned to travel deeper into God's heart, sometimes with reluctant and stumbling steps. Meg had grown to love and appreciate each of them: Mara, a fifty-year-old wife, mother of three sons, and soon-to-be grandmother; Charissa, a married and newly pregnant graduate student; Hannah, a pastor on a nine-month sabbatical from ministry in Chicago.

All of them had come to the airport to pray for Meg and offer their encouragement. She was grateful. So grateful for companions on the spiritual journey.

"It's gonna be an awfully long month before we can all be together again," Mara had said while they drank coffee in the Kingsbury Airport terminal. "I don't want to fall off the track, you know? I just hope I remember some of the stuff I learned during the retreat. Me and my menopause brain. Remind me, okay?"

"Me too," said Charissa. "I wrote down a whole list of spiritual disciplines that I wanted to keep practicing, all kinds of things that could help me grow in the right direction and be less self-centered. But I always get even more obsessed about school this time of year, with final papers and projects and everything. Lately, I haven't been doing much of anything from that list. My rule of life right now is just 'Survive.'"

"So start smaller," Hannah suggested. "Maybe choose one thing that will help you stay connected with God in the midst of the stress, and then there may be other practices you can gradually weave in."

"I just wish there were a quick fix," Charissa said. "It's the whole letting-go-of-control thing. I don't know if I'll ever get there. Maybe I'll always be a control freak."

"At least you see it, right?" said Mara. "That's progress! Even if it feels slow. Guess I have to keep remembering that it's okay if it's two steps forward, one step back. 'Course, sometimes it feels like a few baby steps forward, then a few big steps back. And I still get dizzy from

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walkin' around and around in circles, same old baggage again and again."

Meg had recorded some of their prayer requests in her notebook: for Charissa to find ways to love and serve others well, even in the midst of her busyness; for Mara to know God's peace and to persevere in faith while battling chronic frustration and disappointment with her husband and their two teenage sons; for Hannah as she continued to settle into the rhythm of rest and a new relationship.

"How about you, Meg?" Mara asked. "How else can we pray for you?"

"I think 'hope' is my word right now," Meg replied. "Especially with all the hopes I have for this trip, for my time with Becca. We lit an Advent candle in worship yesterday – the hope candle – and my pastor talked about how true Christian hope isn't about wishing for things, how there's a big difference between hoping for something specific to happen versus trusting God to be faithful, no matter what happens." She had written down some sermon quotes in her notebook so that she would remember: *Our hope isn't uncertain. Christian hope doesn't fluctuate according to circumstances. True hope is about having confidence that God's good and loving purposes in Christ can never be thwarted, no matter how it appears.*

"I'll pray for you every day, girlfriend," Mara had said.

Meg knew she meant it.

She rotated her feet in several slow circles, then pressed the button on her armrest to recline. Her seatmate was snoring softly, mouth draped open. Meg stared at the pendant around her neck. She had been quick to judge the widow for carrying her husband's ashes in a locket, forgetting that she also carried part of her husband with her. She had tucked Jim's last card into her carry-on bag, the card he'd given her on the day they saw their baby on the ultrasound. He had written about his love for Meg, his love for their unborn child, his eagerness to be a dad, his certainty that Meg would be a wonderful mother. But weeks later, on a dismal, gray November afternoon, Meg's world imploded when Jim's car slid off an icy highway and slammed into a tree. He died at St. Luke's Hospital before she could get there to say good-bye. On Christmas Eve, with anguished sobs, Meg returned to St. Luke's and delivered their baby, a beautiful girl who had her mother's large doe eyes, just as her father had hoped. And now that baby girl was turning twenty-one, and she and Meg would celebrate together in England.

So much to celebrate, so much to share.

Out of necessity, Meg had mentally and emotionally locked Jim away after he died. Unable to face the prospect of raising Becca alone, she left the beloved home she had shared with Jim and returned to her childhood house, where tears were not tolerated. Her mother, widowed



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when Meg was four years old, had no patience for weakness or self-pity and offered an ultimatum: if Meg was going to live under her roof, she would need to pull herself together and move on. Fearful of disintegrating under the weight of her grief, Meg swallowed her sorrow and complied with her mother's demands as best she could. Becca, meanwhile, learned early in life that asking questions about her daddy made Mommy sad, so after a while, she stopped asking. And the years rolled on as if Jim had never existed.

But after twenty-one years of repressing her grief, Meg had recently discovered the courage and freedom not only to mourn, but to let Jim live again in her mind and heart. Though it was difficult to feel the pain of his absence, she was also remembering the joy of their life together, and she wanted to share some of those joys with their daughter. She wanted Becca to know how much her father had loved her, even before he knew her. She wanted to look Becca in the eye and tell her how sorry she was for withholding him, how she wished she had done things differently. Now that Meg was remembering his life and love, she hoped he would come to life for Becca too.

*Hope.* That word again.

She had fixed her gaze on the flickering hope candle during worship, her prayers focused on the fears that had paralyzed her, the regrets that had consumed her, the longings for God that had begun to emerge, awakening her to new possibilities, new opportunities, new courage, yes—to new hope. Katherine, Hannah, Mara and Charissa had accompanied her on the first steps of that journey toward transformation and healing. Now there were more steps to take.

In England.

Jim would be so proud of her for traveling by herself across the ocean. And he'd be so proud of his daughter, their winged and confident, lively and spirited daughter, who had not inherited her mother's fears. *Thank God.* With a contented sigh, Meg leaned her head against the window and closed her eyes, eventually lulled to sleep by the gentle vibrations of the plane.

— Adapted from chapter one, "Keeping Watch"



**Sharon Garlough Brown** (MDiv, Princeton Theological Seminary) is a pastor, spiritual director, retreat leader and author. Her book *Sensible Shoes* was named one of television personality Kathie Lee Gifford's "favorite things" in March 2013. She and her husband Jack have served congregations in Scotland, Oklahoma and England and they currently copastor Redeemer Covenant Church in Caledonia, Michigan.

*"My longing is for readers to find themselves saying yes to these same invitations along the way."*

## Continuing the Story of *Sensible Shoes* with *Two Steps Forward*

*Acclaimed author Sharon Garlough Brown extends the spiritual journey for Hannah, Meg, Mara and Charissa, the characters we first met in the bestselling book Sensible Shoes. Here she explains how her own personal journey is reflected in these four characters and how these books have affected her and her readers.*

**For readers unfamiliar with the Sensible Shoes Series, what made you want to write about Hannah, Meg, Mara and Charissa? How did this series develop?**

**Sharon Garlough Brown:** In September of 2008 I began leading a weekly spiritual formation group for women at the church where my husband, Jack, and I pastor. I wanted to introduce some spiritual disciplines that have deeply impacted my life with God, practices that have helped me pay attention to the presence of God and the movement of the Spirit in transformative ways. Each week we explored an ancient Christian practice like prayerfully reading the Word (*lectio divina*), the prayer of *examen* and praying with imagination. We practiced silence, journaled and listened prayerfully to one another's stories. The women grew to trust each other deeply, confessing sins and naming sorrows. Our time together was sacred space where we encountered the living God, and God worked in profound ways to bring about healing, transformation and freedom.

In one of our first meetings, one of the women in the group looked around the circle and commented, "Everybody here is wearing really cute but sensible shoes!" The phrase stuck, and we began to refer to ourselves as the "Sensible Shoes Club." God was leading us through the unpredictable and sometimes treacherous terrain of the inner life, and we needed sensible shoes for the journey. We also needed one another.

As we walked together, I sensed there was a story to tell – not a story about our particular journeys, but a story about the power of the Spirit to conform us into the image of Jesus Christ. I began to wonder what would happen if I created four characters who met at a retreat center in order to learn ways to walk more closely with God. And so Meg, Hannah, Mara and Charissa emerged from my imagination, each of them wrestling with common issues: letting go of control, trusting God, people-pleasing, perfectionism, hiding behind roles and busyness, fear, regret, guilt and shame. Each of them is invited to travel deeper into the heart of God and to discover the height and depth, length and breadth of his love. They're invited to know God and know themselves more intimately. And they're invited to say yes to the gift of community.

**What made you want to write a second book following the story of *Sensible Shoes*? Did you always envision continuing the story of these four women?**

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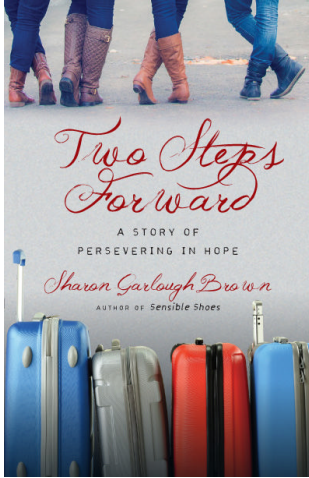
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# Q & A



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*"Stories are stealthy. They have a way of stirring us, confronting us, comforting us, inspiring us."*

**Sharon:** When I finished writing *Sensible Shoes*, I had no idea it would strike such a chord with readers. I know this may sound odd, but I actually wrote good-bye letters to the characters when the book was done, thanking them for what I had learned in the process of writing and wishing them well as they went into the world. Then, after *Sensible Shoes* was published, I was frequently asked if there would be a sequel. I didn't know. The next question was often, "But what happens to them?" I honestly didn't know. The writing process for me is an unscripted, un-outlined journey of discovery, and I knew that I wouldn't have any idea of what happened to the characters unless I prayed and listened and wrote the next steps of their journey. It took a few years, but I eventually started playing with scenes. Once the characters started talking to me again, I was delighted. I had missed them, and I longed to see what would happen as they continued to walk with God and with each other.

**What can readers expect to learn about Hannah, Meg, Mara and Charissa in this book? And what can they look forward to in the third book, *Barefoot*?**

**Sharon:** *Two Steps Forward* picks up right on the same day that *Sensible Shoes* finishes. The characters are not in a retreat together, so the issue becomes, "What will they remember about how to practice dwelling deeply in God's love? And how will they respond to God and to others when life unravels?"

*Sensible Shoes* contains a lot of visible teaching content: the "spiritual discipline handouts" the characters receive at the retreat are provided in the book for readers to use. In *Two Steps Forward* the spiritual formation content is more subtly embedded. Hannah, Meg, Mara and Charissa are trying to integrate what they've learned so that when the storms hit, they're able to persevere in hope. Life is complicated and messy in *Two Steps Forward* and remembering to turn toward God and community in the midst of the mess takes practice. They struggle. They falter. And by the grace of God, they keep moving forward in the process of becoming more and more like Jesus.

The book takes place during Advent, a time to keep watch for the dawning of light and the coming of Christ into unexpected places. Hannah, Meg, Mara and Charissa are learning to recognize his coming. They're learning how to see in the dark. *Barefoot* will continue the story of their transformation into the seasons of Lent and Easter and will explore themes of forgiveness, dying to self and surrendering to God.

***Sensible Shoes* received enormous praise and response when IVP first published it, including an endorsement from Kathie Lee Gifford on TODAY. What do you think makes readers resonate with these characters so deeply?**

**Sharon:** The comment I most frequently hear from readers is, "I saw myself in the characters." Readers identify with the struggles and imperfections, the sorrows and compulsions, the longings and fears. I hear from people like Hannah, who hide behind their

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# Q & A

“With her characteristic wisdom and grace, Sharon Garlough Brown gives voice to hope in the stories of Hannah, Charissa, Maya and Meg. Their spiritual journeys during Advent are marked by darkness, waiting and even heartbreak. Yet in Brown’s honest and tender narrative, their friendship with each other and their openness to God’s work in their lives continues to draw them toward light and new life, bearing witness to light in the darkness. To read this book is to learn to hope. In the lives of these four women, Brown reveals a God who calls us beloved even through our tears, who faithfully keeps his promises and who sends a Savior to bring joy to the world. *Two Steps Forward* offers spiritual insights of the rarest beauty about both the pain and the peace at the ‘growing edges’ in our life with God. Like *Sensible Shoes*, this book is a gift and blessing to all who long for Emmanuel.”

—Rebecca Konyndyk

DeYoung, professor of philosophy, Calvin College, author of *Glittering Vices*

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busyness, unable to rest in the love of God because they’re trying so hard to be faithful. I hear from people like Meg, who have never been free to share their fears and sorrows because they grew up in families that communicated strong messages of shame and condemnation. I hear from people like Charissa, who hide behind the mask of perfection, terrified of failure and driven by the need to be admired. I hear from people like Mara, who have endured deep wounds of rejection and who feel isolated in their pain. Many readers see themselves in the characters’ stories and are reminded they’re not alone. More than that, as they watch the characters move forward in the process of healing and transformation, they begin to glimpse the possibilities for their own deepening life with God in community.

## **How has your work as a spiritual director influenced your writing?**

**Sharon:** So much of a spiritual director’s work is about paying attention and listening prayerfully. A spiritual director compassionately holds a person’s most intimate stories, providing a safe place where there’s room to encounter the living God. Spiritual direction is about facilitating deeper friendship with God, asking evocative questions, helping someone to notice and name God’s presence and to respond to the Holy Spirit’s invitations.

I don’t know any other way to write. As an author, I’m listening prayerfully for the characters’ stories to emerge. I’m asking evocative questions. I’m longing for each of them to notice and name the presence of God. I’m not attempting to control and manage what they do or say – the characters have the freedom to walk on and off the page, and they have a way of surprising me. I write about them as if they were real people I’m privileged to walk alongside. I cry over their heartaches; I watch for their openness to encounter God; I rejoice when they respond with courage. And I’m in prayer, listening for God’s invitations as I write.

## **Likewise, how have these books influenced your work as a spiritual director?**

**Sharon:** I hope I’ve become more attentive to the unique elements of each person’s story and needs. The characters are very different from one another – the practices of prayer that might be helpful and fruitful for someone like Hannah might not be life-giving to someone like Charissa, and vice versa. Writing keeps me thinking creatively about how to invite people from all different backgrounds, experiences, and seasons of life and faith into the presence of God. I also find that images and metaphors, which sit at the heart of storytelling, can be powerful gifts in the process of spiritual direction. Jesus understood the power of story to invite reflection on the character of God and the nature of life in the kingdom. Writing helps me to remember to engage imagination as I listen and pray.

## **What makes these books different from other Christian fiction that’s available today? And similarly, how do these books (aside from the fact that they are novels) differ from nonfiction spiritual formation works?**

**Sharon:** The books in the *Sensible Shoes* Series focus on the process of spiritual formation,

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on the ways the characters are responding to God in faith or resisting God in fear. That's the heart of the story; not so much what happens to the characters, but rather, how they're being shaped by the Spirit as they prayerfully examine their lives and move forward in community. As the characters learn different spiritual disciplines in order to deepen their awareness of God and their friendship with God, readers are also invited to share the journey and to explore ways of prayer that might be unfamiliar. I think what's unusual is the formation content that's embedded in the books. I often hear from retreat leaders, spiritual directors, therapists, pastors and ministry leaders who use *Sensible Shoes* as a gentle means of introducing people to the riches and wisdom of the contemplative life, people who might never have read a nonfiction book about spiritual formation.

Stories are stealthy. They have a way of stirring us, confronting us, comforting us, inspiring us. We tend to read fiction differently than nonfiction. Our defenses are down, and we're open to being drawn into the lives of characters, to inhabit their worlds. Fiction invites us to take a memorable journey. My hope is that readers will say yes to the invitation to travel deeper into the heart of God—that the characters of the series will become mirrors and windows for many to see themselves and God more clearly.