



JUST ENOUGH
LIGHT TO
THRIVE

MIRIAM BUTLER CONRAD

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PLUMBLINE

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PUBLISHER'S FOREWORD

I'M GOING TO MAKE A PREDICTION THAT YOU HAVE NOT encountered a book quite like this one. Readers who are looking for a good read with a storybook ending may be disappointed; those entering the story with curiosity and courage will find one of the most painfully amazing and exhilarating stories of grace you have ever encountered. Most of us recognize that, in reality, all of our lives are filled with the contradiction of pain and grace. While it's probably more nuanced in most of our situations, Miriam's story puts it in stark relief. We can all testify that the hard places or seasons in our lives have been where God has been most present. I want you to keep this in mind as you journey with Miriam through this beautiful telling of her nearly unbelievable life story.

Miriam herself can't recall how she came upon my colleague J. D. Walt's Seedbed Daily Text. As the name indicates, J. D. posts a daily devotional and, like so many, Miriam was drawn to the transparent realism of J. D.'s writing. Sometime around 2015 she was moved to respond to one of his posts that really hit home for her. J. D. is well known to actually engage his readers, and soon they were in back-and-forth correspondence. J. D. shared with her about Seedbed's New Room Conference, and she decided to fly to Nashville to check out our gathering. Miriam went, not knowing anyone except J. D., whom she had never met. She presented herself as a volunteer and asked how she could make herself useful.

She struck me as poised, erect in posture, elegant in manner, and as we would all come to discover, hilariously funny.

As the years progressed, she was grafted into our tight-knit family of overworked staff and volunteers who were trying to pull off this growing conference platform as we expanded to regional events and ever-larger conference venues. Owing to the fact that her son was an airline pilot with free family standby ticket status, she was able to fly for free from her home in Las Vegas and pop in and out of our lives often. One of the first regional events we had was in Houston. When we were gathering for breakfast at the hotel, Miriam took one look at me and said, "You are *not* going out with that wrinkled shirt." When I was getting dressed, I had observed that my white long-sleeved Seedbed-branded shirt was pretty wrinkled, but I had shrugged it off. Miriam, however, insisted that I give it to her so she could run up to her room for a quick ironing job. Even after the events, she was always busy helping in some large or small capacity by stuffing bags, handling food, manning the registration table. You name it.

Over time, we discovered beautiful things about Miriam. We had a practice of gathering for group prayer in the greenroom before the main conference sessions. It was a group of a dozen or two that included the speakers, our staff team, and the extraordinarily talented praise-band musicians who always traveled with us from The Woodlands, Texas. During one session, it was early, and as folks were gathering in, Miriam slipped over to the piano and began playing the most enchanted renditions of the great hymns of the church. The musically savvy praise-band members were astonished at her skill on the keyboard and the whole spiritually tuned-in room was enthralled at her obvious abilities and the beauty of the music. Miriam seemed embarrassed at having interrupted the proceedings and was preparing to stop, but one of the

musicians said, “No, Miriam, please don’t stop; this is so beautiful.” A spiritual aura had overcome the room.

That year our team began a practice of weekly phone-in prayer calls with about twelve of us around the country for group prayer for our work, ourselves, and for the coming great awakening. We naturally invited Miriam into this call. She was the only one who was not on our official roster of paid staff who participated, but it seemed totally appropriate that she was there. It was during these prayer calls where everyone would share a bit of their lives that some unsettling details about Miriam’s circumstances came to light: her husband was an invalid in a wheelchair; he was not happy and seemed unkind to her; there was financial hardship; it took a lot to make the arrangements for her to join us for our events. But we had become family, and as the months and years moved along, we heard some of the details of her husband’s declining health and ultimate death. We had heard enough of her situation in brief to know that this was all really hard. Really, really hard.

At some point along the way, Miriam and I talked about writing. It turned out that Miriam had a commercially published Christian trade book that had been released in the 1980s. She had a sizeable collection of journals and other unpublished writings, but she was at a loss about how best to channel her writing gifts that she had, like so many things in her life, let languish as she lived the hard realities of her daily life. I told her that if she would come to our offices in Franklin with her writing samples, I would block out a couple of days and we would sift through them and discover what we would. Needless to say, we had a delightful time visiting and sharing and talking through all the material that was sprawled out on my sizeable desktop.

As I probed, she shared more bits and pieces of her personal biography. I’m pretty sure that writing a memoir was the furthest

CHAPTER ONE

**IN THE
BEGINNING**

EVEN THE PATHETIC WAIL OF THE NEWBORN COULD NOT prevent the rejection of her mother. Flailing her arms against the tiny baby girl, she screamed, “Get her away from me!” The nurse’s eyes scanned the room, hoping to find someone whose expression would indicate they understood what was going on. Seeing only horror and disbelief reflected back, she took the naked infant and put her on a stainless-steel table until there would be a spare minute to attend to her cries.

The woman who had just brought this life into the world was close to dying. She required every bit of attention available from the nurses and doctors present, so the baby’s screams were ignored.

Even after the medical emergency was resolved, the mother adamantly refused to recognize any responsibility she might have to contribute to a healthy beginning of this little girl’s life. The tiny soul was denied the love, joy, personal touch, and physical nourishment God had designed her to receive at her mother’s breast.

It was the harbinger of a lifetime of rejection.

My father stood outside the door and looked through the six-by-six-inch window into the delivery room. He had been watching nervously ever since they took his wife in what now seemed like a

long time before. The doctor told him that his wife was ready to deliver, and the baby was obviously ready to be born, but she wasn't cooperating with the doctors. As they wheeled her into the delivery room, my father pleaded with my mother to help the doctors and not fight against them, but she was irrationally determined not to have another child, even if it killed her in the process.

Once in the delivery room, nature took over and I was born, ready or not, wanted or not, beautiful or not. I made my appearance.

The nurse who put me on the table eventually returned to clean me, wrap me in a blanket, and carry me outside to my father who awkwardly received me. She told him she was running downstairs to get a bottle of formula since my own mother wouldn't touch me, much less put me to her breast.

Confused, heartbroken, and afraid, Dad found a chair in the little waiting room and sat down. I had stopped screaming by that time. He knew the formula might satisfy me for the moment, but what about later? Tonight? Tomorrow? Who was going to feed me then?

Dad should not have been surprised. Mom had warned him. If the newborn were a boy, he would be welcome to share the family unit with his two-and-a-half-year-old brother. But if it were a girl—she, *it*, wasn't even going to darken the door of their home. There would be no girl babies in her house!

And now the very worst had happened. It was a girl baby, and to say it wasn't welcome was a vast understatement.

The formula appeared and the nurse handed the bottle to Daddy: "Here, you better get used to feeding this child right now—it's obvious her mother isn't going to do it!"

And with that command came an idea: *If I can learn to feed this baby, I can learn to change this baby, and I can learn to dress this baby, and, ultimately, I can learn how to raise this little girl. Even if her mother won't do it, there's nothing stopping me from saving our family*

humiliation and shame. Surely her mother can't refuse to let me bring her home if she doesn't have to have anything to do with her!

There was a lot at stake besides the welfare of the infant. My dad was the pastor of a small church in the community. All those who attended certainly knew Mother was pregnant and about to deliver. To quietly put the child up for adoption was out of the question.

After the infant was fed and returned to the nursery, Dad found Mom's room and approached her with a plan: "How about if we take her home as if everything is just fine, and I will assume all responsibility for her and you won't have to do anything? You can just pretend she never happened until she can take care of herself."

I am convinced that if Mom had been physically and emotionally stronger at that minute, she would have laughed in Dad's face at such a bizarre suggestion. But the delivery had so weakened her in spirit as well as in body that she had no power left to argue with him, and so nodded her head, acknowledging her reluctant willingness for me to be brought home.

The next day when Dad returned to the hospital, he saw the delivery room nurse who had been so compassionate the day before. The name tag on her uniform read: "Miriam Anderson." Dad told her that he was going to name me Miriam because he was certain I would not have survived had it not been for her concern and caring. Decades later, God worked it out that I would meet Miriam Anderson (by that time long retired from nursing), who had never forgotten my story, and told it to me just as I have now told it to you.

Eventually the dreaded day came to bring me home. Since Mom refused to touch me, Dad lied to one of the women in the church and told her Mom wasn't strong enough to hold me in the car (long before the days of car seats or seat belts), and asked if she would come along to hold me as he drove.

Mom kept her word. She lived the years of my childhood as though I were invisible and not part of the family. Dad told me much later that from the time I was a newborn until I could fend for myself, Mom utterly ignored my presence except for times of rage. At home she never held, fed, bathed, or changed me—and rarely spoke to me as an infant or toddler.

She never spoke my name. *You*, or *That Girl*, and sometimes *It* all referred to me. I don't remember her ever touching me except when she would grip my arm to keep me from running from her beatings.

Public life was a totally different matter. It was as if someone pulled the curtain back and set our family down in an entirely different dimension of reality.

Suddenly Mom became the loving, doting, all-consumed mother. She held me and fed me and changed me and cooed at me and bragged on my looks. I'm sure her friends believed me to be the most fortunate infant ever.

Such tenderness.

Such attention.

Such love being poured out on me.

Such lies.

And they never knew. The charade continued through my infancy and right into my toddler years. Later, I would hear from a few of Mom's friends that they felt something wasn't right about our home, but Dad's position as a pastor intimidated them so much, they couldn't work up the courage to ask questions. The people who suspected I was not being treated with love and kindness cared much more for themselves than they did about me.

I had no one to love me.

I had no one to defend me.

Or hold me.

I was alone.

Within a year, Dad resigned his pastorate as he couldn't keep up with the stresses of raising an infant and meeting the demands of a congregation.

A few years ago, I spent several months as a hospital chaplain. My assignment was the PICU—Pediatric Intensive Care Unit. Here were tiny babies receiving varying levels of life-giving treatment. Mothers and fathers, nurses and doctors gathered around the precious infant who sometimes could hardly be seen under all the equipment.

The nurses encouraged the parents to make skin-to-skin contact as often as possible: “Find some place where there isn't a bandage or a needle or a tube, and gently and slowly just move your finger around, up and down, and speak tenderly to them. Watch as their breathing slows and their heartbeats become regular. They understand the touch of love no matter how ill they are.”

I have held infants in my arms as I performed baptismal rites for those who passed away in their mother's womb before they were born. There were teeny ones who died before ever leaving the hospital. Those were excruciatingly difficult times. The sadness experienced during the delivery by the parents, as well as the entire attending staff, can be overwhelming. I have watched strong, tough physicians weep while assisting the mother. Still the mother holds her arms out to take the precious, lifeless infant; speaks words of love and affirmation over the child who cannot hear; caresses the skin that cannot feel; holds the infant tight against her chest as she sobs with anguish. The depth of pain when an infant dies is immeasurable.

CHAPTER TWO

**WHO ARE
THESE PEOPLE?**

MY FATHER WAS BORN ON A SMALL FARM IN HARDIN County, Iowa, on June 16, 1886. The details are a little fuzzy about how he managed to acquire employment in the traveling entertainment business called Chautauqua (still functioning today). He rode the train from town to town, playing the role of Hamlet in the Shakespearian work of the same name. Dad's flair for the dramatic was well-suited to such employment and particularly to the dark, evil atmosphere of the play's tragedy.

Sometime in his early twenties, he made a return visit to his parents' home in Iowa. His father and mother had been earnestly praying that Dad would come to love God and turn his life over to Him. This was often the topic of conversation during his short stay, but Dad was adamant in his refusal to be interested in anything spiritual.

When the visit was over, he left to walk the several miles to the train station. He used to tell the story about how the farther he got from home, the heavier the conviction became to open his heart to Jesus. He took it as long as he could and, finally, knelt down by a log beside the road and made his peace with God.

Ultimately, he left Chautauqua and enrolled at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, Illinois. His entire life he claimed to be a graduate of Moody, but that was not true. As I learned doing research for this book, he actually disappeared three months prior to graduation and never finished. The woman I spoke with in the alumni office of Moody said there was a note in his file to ask whoever might call concerning Dad's history if they knew what happened to him. I felt a stab in my stomach. No, I didn't know. When going through my parents' important papers, I wondered why I hadn't found his graduation certificate. This deception was added to the fat file in my mind labeled "Questions and Disappointments."

At some point Dad got married, had two children, and began pastoring a church in the true wild west: Bisbee, Arizona. Dad brought all the drama and enthusiasm of the stage right onto the platform, and began packing out the house every week. Hundreds of little children in Sunday school, lines of people waiting to find seats in the sanctuary; it was one of the first megachurches in America.

It was also the setting for heartbreak and an ultimate display of selfishness.

Meanwhile, my mother came into the world in Fayetteville, Arkansas, just two years before the turn of the century. She also lived on a small farm with her parents and five older siblings. Ultimately, the family moved to a small town southeast of Los Angeles.

My mother was physically beautiful and a talented vocalist. She became a sought-after light opera singer in Southern California, and enjoyed considerable fame. She married and had two children, but had no association with the church even though her parents were believers and attended regularly.

Approximately ten years after Dad settled in Bisbee, the church in Southern California where my mother's parents were attending

invited my father to come to their church for a week of special meetings. This type of thing was common in those days—special meeting on Sunday morning, dinner on the grounds, and then afternoon and evening services every night during the week, culminating the next Sunday morning. Dad accepted the invitation, packed his bag, and got on the train to go to California.

The pastor of the California church thought that having special music for the opening Sunday morning might be a drawing card for the community, so he asked my mother if she would sing the first Sunday morning my father was there to preach.

By this time, my mother's marriage was in deep trouble. She had found her husband with another woman, so had left him and moved in with her parents . . . leaving the two children with their father.

Suffice it to say that my father *never* returned to Bisbee, abandoning his twelve-year-old daughter, nine-year-old son, wife, and large church! They who would become my mother and father left together at the end of the week of meetings and were not heard from for several years. Ultimately, they divorced their respective spouses and married each other in 1931, both abandoning their responsibilities as parents.

My mother never acknowledged to me that she had children by her first husband. I only found out when my niece started doing some research into our family history and discovered the facts of the situation. Can you imagine giving birth to two precious children and then leaving them—never to make contact again—to run off into the sunset with some man you had known for seven days?

My father's ministerial credentials were stripped from him, but he failed to acknowledge that small detail. In truth, he was no longer licensed nor qualified to preach, to "marry or bury or carry," but he just ignored that and went on officiating as if he were in good standing. Of course, that means that there are many couples

throughout the United States who were never legally married, although they thought they were—including my husband, Roy, and me. It was sometime around our fiftieth anniversary that I made that connection in my mind and was horrified to realize we had been “living in sin” all those years! We found another preacher to make it legal, but by that time it was kind of a moot point. While researching some papers for this chapter, I found our marriage certificate from January 1955. Sure enough, there is Dad’s signature on the officiate line and my mother as the witness. Oops.

Following their marriage, my parents relocated to the Midwest (where nobody knew them), and began holding tent meetings, which were popular in those days. Dad bought a big, white tent; found some farmer that would let him put it up in a field; went to all the pastors of the local churches and enlisted their help; hired a piano player; got somebody to construct makeshift benches; put flyers up all over the county; put straw in the aisles and down by the altar; and then the people would drive for miles to hear this “fired-up preacher and his singing wife!”

Those precious country preachers did not know enough to validate Dad’s credentials. And Dad was just devious enough to fail to mention his other life.

One of the other benefits of this kind of ministry was that they were building a substantial mailing list of good, solid, honest people who believed in them as a couple, as genuine ambassadors for God, who believed in my dad as an anointed preacher and my mom who had “given her talent” to the work of the church. It was all a sham, but most of those folks never learned the truth. There was no vehicle such as Facebook or Twitter to out them.

Five years after they married, my brother, Phill, was born, and then thirty months later I came along. Mom was forty when I was born, and Dad was about fifty-two.

Miriam Conrad's life could not have been more difficult—from childhood neglect and sexual abuse to extramarital affairs, domestic turmoil, and more. Readers looking for a storybook ending may be disappointed, but those entering the story with curiosity and courage will find one of the most painfully amazing and exhilarating stories of grace they have ever encountered. Even the most hopeless circumstances leave room for God's redemption.

Very few lives conclude with all the loose ends tied up. Miriam's particular trauma is more pronounced than that of most, but the tension between brokenness and blessing will strike a familiar chord. At one point or another, we've all had to acknowledge that our lives are out of sync—damaged almost irreconcilably. Take heart. Even when the visible circumstances leave no hints of vindication, God is ever present, kind, and abundantly gracious.

Evil doesn't get the last word. As Miriam's story demonstrates, by confronting the darkness we find just enough light to thrive.

Miriam Butler Conrad is a native of San Diego, California, who now resides in Las Vegas, Nevada. Not only is she a professional pianist—beginning in her early teenage years and continuing her career as a studio musician in Southern California—she has also spent much of her life traveling the world as a speaker on leadership and religious topics. Miriam and her late husband, Roy, have three adult sons, six grandchildren, and four great grandchildren.

