

Nancy Heche

THE TRUTH CAME OUT

Imagine you're a mother of five with twenty-five years of happy marriage under your belt, when your husband is diagnosed with AIDS—the shocking result of his homosexual secret. Now imagine that three months after his passing, your eighteen-year-old son is killed in a car accident. Continue imagining that, a few years down the track, just as you're beginning to recover, your well-known actress daughter begins a very public lesbian affair. How do you cope with such a string of events—the betrayal, the grief, the public exposure?

That's Nancy Heche's story. The beauty of having this interview in print form is that Nancy's words can be slowly reflected on. The downside is the printed page misses the passion that was in her voice as we spoke. Nancy's book is called *The Truth Comes Out: The Story of My Heart's Transformation*. As you'll see, this once bitter heart now champions love and compassion for the homosexual community.

Nancy, my introduction doesn't mention half of what you've been through. You lost a child shortly after birth; you recently lost you daughter Susan to brain cancer. I don't know how you're still standing. How are you still standing?

You know, there's a song that the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir sings here. It goes: 'Jesus, you are the source of my strength, you are the

Nancy Heche

strength of my life.’ That’s not just a song to me. Every time I play it I’ve got my hands in the air and I’m singing out the window; if I’m in the car I’m shouting out the window: ‘You are the source of my strength, you are the strength of my life!’ That’s the only way any of us get through the difficult times, it really is. It’s not a cliché, it’s the truth.

Well, you’ve proved that. Describe just how you felt that day when the results came back from the doctor about your husband Don.

Well, this is almost twenty-five years ago, Sheridan, so we didn’t know anything about AIDS. In fact, the *doctors* hardly knew anything about AIDS. There had been one article in the *New York Times* about a month before Don died. So many of the things in the article seemed to click with his physical symptoms.

But never in a million years would I have thought that my husband was having homosexual affairs. We were the perfect Christian family. It was such a shock that I really didn’t even deal with it. I heard the words. I was furious because I realised he had lived a double life, totally betrayed us and lived a lie for most of our marriage, probably. I told my children what it meant that he was dying of AIDS and then for almost ten years we never talked about it. We dealt with it by not dealing with it. It was shameful, embarrassing and humiliating, and there was no place that I knew to go for help.

Some would ask how a secret like that could be kept from you for twenty-five years, but keeping secrets was part of your family upbringing to some degree, wasn’t it?

It was. In the book I say I was a perfect candidate for the wife of a man with a secret life, because my father had a secret life and

⊕

Life

we didn't talk about things in our family. I have heard so many comments from people who, when they read the book, say, 'That was just like our family. We never talked about anything either.' A lot of families keep secrets.

But I talked to a woman a few weeks ago. She'd been married for twenty-five years also and her husband had just told her that he was having homosexual affairs, and she didn't know anything about it. So if you're not looking for it, it can be a real surprise. If it's the furthest thing from your mind, you don't even entertain the thought that it's a possibility.

Were you worried about being HIV positive yourself?

⊕ Not right then because the doctors didn't know much about AIDS and didn't even suggest that I get tested. I mean, that's the astounding thing. A few years later I was tested, and I believe really it's a miracle [that I wasn't infected]. I guess God saved me so I can talk about it. ⊕

Jumping ahead a few years, your daughter, Anne Heche, then begins her internationally-reported relationship with Ellen DeGeneres. Describe your feelings when that went public.

Well, I knew that now we were going to *have* to deal with it. It had been so secret before, now it was totally public and I couldn't hide anymore. I didn't handle it very well. Once again, I didn't know there were any resources or help available for families. The subtitle to my book is *The Story of My Heart's Transformation*. I began the process of beginning to deal with the issue of homosexuality in my family, going from a place of fear and anger and confusion about homosexuality and learning through scripture what God's heart was for *me*, not for somebody else.

Nancy Heche

I think that was the biggest thing for me, Sheridan. I learned that this was a spiritual journey for me. It wasn't about trying to change my daughter or anybody else. God was going to be doing something in my heart. That was ten years ago now for me, and he has begun to change and heal my heart. When my husband died I vowed I would never even say the word 'homosexual' again. I was so hurt and serious. Now, here I am at the other end of the spectrum, speaking out, really being an advocate to show love and respect for individuals in the gay community. So I've had a long journey and a big heart transformation.

What's your relationship with Anne like now, Nancy? Has she read the book?

I don't know if she's read the book. We have what I call a pretty typical mother–daughter relationship. We have some great connections, and in fact there's a chapter in the book where I go through some of those times. We connect and we have a great time and then we're totally disconnected. Then we connect again and then we're disconnected. So we have some highs and lows and ups and downs and ins and outs. We don't have an extremely close relationship, but it's one that we're working on always. Which I think is pretty typical. Mother–daughter relationships are pretty tricky.

A work in progress.

A work in progress.

In the book you're very open about some of your own lifestyle choices after your husband's death. We could say that you went looking for love in all the wrong places.

Yes, I did. I didn't make good choices; they were some of the worst decisions of my life. However, God uses them, and I think this is

Life

part of the wonder of God's redemptive grace—he can redeem the bad choices that we make.

Those decisions that I made, as unhealthy as they were, gave me more empathy and more understanding for the struggles people face, whether it's a same-sex attraction or an opposite-sex attraction. We struggle with those temptations and we make a moral choice. Will we get involved in an unhealthy sexual relationship, or will we grow and be strengthened through [the temptation]? I've realised that the sexual struggles people have are not easily answered. We make those decisions sometimes out of pain and grief and confusion, but by God's great grace he redeems it. So I've learned to be more empathic for people who are going through difficult sexual situations.

I want to dig out some of the lessons you've learned though all of this. You lost a son in a car accident; your daughter had a high profile homosexual affair; another daughter, Abigail, went into prostitution for a time. None of these things would be part of a mother's dreams for her children. What have you learned about coping with broken dreams?

Oh boy, that's a good question. I guess what I'd say is that I've learned about *God* through broken dreams. I'm a psychotherapist, so I work with clients who have broken dreams also—last night I was talking to a couple who'd just had their second miscarriage, a huge loss of a dream for them. What I've learned is that if God is going to fulfil his purpose in our lives, there will be some suffering.

We don't always know God's plan for us. In scripture certainly some things are spelt out—we're to live in holiness and we're to live in the scripture and be obedient to it. But as far as the specifics, we don't know how God is going to work those things out in our lives. However, what we know from scripture is that the men and

Nancy Heche

women in the Bible, like those listed in Hebrews chapter 11—the faith chapter—also had difficulties. They did not have any easy life, and it didn't ever seem to get easy for them. So my theory—looking at my life, at the lives of believers I know, at scripture and at my clients—is that if God is going to fulfil his purpose in our life, a meaningful profound purpose, we are going to have a difficult life. It's very clear in scripture that we learn obedience through suffering, just like Jesus did. If we think it's going to be an easy life, we're sadly mistaken. Isn't that your experience?

Absolutely. The greatest times of growth in my life have been through the greatest times of pain and confusion.

And it's not necessarily in the moment, as you referred to. I walked away from the Lord for a few years, but was he not refining me even then? Yes he was, but it didn't really seem like it. I'm sure that people thought back then, 'When is Nancy ever going to get her act together again?' But God continues to use his Spirit to quicken the Bible in our lives, I think.

Your husband lived this double life on you for twenty-five years. What has your life experience taught you about trusting people?

Oooh, especially trusting men—it's not easy. That's another place where I can be very empathic with others when they have been hurt in relationships, and the difficulties they feel in diving into another relationship. When I'm talking to couples in couples counselling and they're working on trust, I tell them to build trust one sentence at a time and one episode at a time. If the wife says she *will* pick up the children at three o'clock today, even though she forgot all week long, then take her at her word that she will do it. If the husband says he'll be home at six o'clock, trust that he will be. Trust

Life

builds one sentence at a time, one day at a time. We grow in trust, I think.

Your family history was very much about keeping secrets and not asking questions. What have you learned about revealing yourself to others?

The first time I said the words 'My husband died of AIDS' was at a women's lunch at Moody Church in Chicago. It was almost ten years after Don's death and I was giving my testimony. The host, Mary Whelchel, knew my story and told me I could share as much or as little as I wanted to. All of a sudden I said it: 'My husband died of AIDS.' As soon I'd finished several women came up to me. While no one else had a husband who'd died of AIDS, they starting telling about their daughter who was a prostitute, or their son who was in jail, or their husband who had shot himself. And what I realised in that moment was that when I became vulnerable, as difficult as it was and I said it with tears, it seemed to create the environment for other people to share their broken heart. I think that's really valuable. Most people want to tell their story if they know someone will listen and someone cares.

I'm committed to that right now. I'm wanting to dialogue with people, especially in the homosexual community, which is where my focus is right now. I want to hear their stories. I want to hear what happened in their lives; I just want to listen. And people want to tell me their stories because they know I've done everything. I've gone through it all, so they don't have much hesitation. I think that's the value of sharing. It does take discernment, but once Anne came out and our family was pretty exposed I realised that, really, we didn't have many secrets. Not that everybody in the world knows our story, but a lot of people do, and so I really didn't have anything to gain by pretending that it didn't happen to me.

Nancy Heche

What about relating to the homosexual community? That's something you've had quite a transformation of heart about over the years too.

Oh, it is. I cannot believe what God is doing in my heart. Really I don't even . . . I hardly know how to speak about it, because it sounds so extreme for me. But he has given me such a heart for the individuals in the gay community, the men and women. I am longing to talk with them, to sit and hear their stories.

Just last week I was at a party—this was such a wonderful experience for me. One of the caterers was obviously a gay man, and after dinner I thanked him for his help. He said, 'Oh no, thank *you*.' I asked him what for and he said, 'Thank you for all you do to love people like me.' It made tears come to my eyes. I thought, *Oh Jesus, thank you. You have worked that love in me.* I don't even know how he knew what I was doing. If some gay people know I work with some organisations they don't like me at all, so it was such a blessing to me. We just talked as long as we could the rest of the evening.

That is about the furthest thing from anything I could have ever imagined doing in my life, Sheridan. This is the work of God in my heart, that's all I can say, because this isn't something that I would choose. I used to think that all the pain was on my side. What I've learned is that there is so much pain in people who are struggling with coming out, struggling with talking to their families about it. And just learning the abuse that they've suffered in their family sometimes, and worst of all in the church—those are all the things that began to soften my heart.

So I encourage people to get informed—to sit down and have a dangerous dialogue with someone that they think they would never have talked to. Just listen to their story and get the human side of it. [Christians] are commanded to love. God so loved the *world*—



Life

it's not divided into homosexual and heterosexual—he loved the *world*. We must love them if we are going to represent Jesus. We're supposed to be known by our love. So I really . . . you can tell I'm up on my soap box now . . .

[Laughter]

You're passionate on this one! And you're not talking about endorsement, but love.

Absolutely—in the same way that Jesus loved us in the midst of our stuff. Think about me: I spent almost ten years away from the Lord. Did he still love me? Absolutely. Did it look like it, or look like I cared? Not to most people. But he still loved me through it all. There were people who cared for me, but I had one friend in particular who spoke to me about scripture and still loved me. We must show the love of Christ or we will never make any inroads into anybody's life.

