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Week six: WFL

Randy Robison and Sheila Walsh

Vaneetha Risner

SHEILA: Welcome to *LIFE Today*! I'm Sheila Walsh here with Randy Robison. I want to read you a prologue of a fantastic new book I've been reading. "Can you tell us about your life? I look at the faces in the room. Each look back expectantly. I take a breath, say a silent prayer and begin to speak. I tell them about polio and bullying, medical mistakes and wrongful deaths. I describe abandonment, betrayal and loss. 'But is there anything happy' they ask? My eyes sparkle as I grin. My joy evident, 'Come and see.'"

Wow! Please welcome our guest today Vaneetha Rendall Risner. That's quite an introduction to a book. Welcome!

VANEETHA: Yeah, my life is um, yeah, had lots of twists and turns and yet, that's why I wrote it because I would love for people to come and see that God is good even in the midst of really hard things.

SHEILA: Take us back to your childhood, Vaneetha because you had a lot of struggles in the early years of your life. Tell us about that.

VANEETHA: I was born in India to Christian parents and when I was three months old, I contracted polio, Sheila. I was born in '64 so the polio vaccine had been out for a dozen years and so the doctors had no idea what it was. I was just a little too young. In India, they don't give the vaccine at three months but they had never seen it before, so they gave me cortisone which lowers your body's immune system; it lowers your temperature as well, so my fever went down. But very quickly I was a quadriplegic, I was completely paralyzed. And then the doctor said, "Oh no, we gave her the wrong medicine. We didn't know she had polio."

So my parents really didn't know what to do. And in India, the culture is if you have a major disability your whole family is not only shunned, there is just not a lot of medical care because there is a sense that you brought this upon yourself.

So they said to my parents, "If you want good medical care for her you really need to go to the west." So my dad was actually a professor in India and he took a job installing telephones in London just so I could get good medical care, which was pretty incredible. He gave up his whole career.

I had my first surgery in England when I was two and by the time I was 13 I had 21 operations. So lots of surgeries and I lived in the hospital. When I was three we moved to Montreal and I started having a lot of surgeries there but I lived in a hospital. So I lived in the Shriners Hospital. I was there for months out of every year. When I was seven I was actually in a body cast, flat on my back for a year, nine months, actually straight.

So that was hard but honestly, Sheila, the harder thing was being bullied. So right after I got out of the hospital when I was seven I learned to walk. That's how old I was when I could walk without braces. And I remember wanting to surprise my parents. They got an apartment right across the street from my school. So I was trying to walk home and these kids threw stones at me and called me a cripple. I fell down and I remember at that moment thinking, I don't understand this world but it's not safe. Like I have no idea why people are doing this to me and I have no idea what's happening in my life.

So that was sort of this beginning of bitterness because I didn't understand why people thought I was so different. People would, they wouldn't call me "cripple" very often although they did sometimes, but they would imitate the way that I walked. And I would see people doing that.

So I got so angry at God and my parents are Christians and they would talk about faith to me all the time. But I don't know if any of your listeners feel that way but people can just talk about faith and you can pretend that you're a Christian and you can go to church and do all of those

things, which is what I did, but I really had no relationship with God, and didn't want one.

It was really only in high school a friend of mine came to Christ and said, "You've got to believe." What she said is, "God is real!" And I was terrified. I thought, oh no! Now somebody my age is going to want to talk to me about God. So I went home and just asked God, "If you're real, show me."

The next morning I flipped open the Bible; was flipping around randomly just kind of thinking is God going show me anything? And I found John nine where Jesus is talking to his disciples and they see a blind man and they say, "Who sinned? This man or his parents that he was born blind?"

And Jesus says, "It was not that this man sinned or his parents but that the work of God would be displayed in his life."

Just reading that I felt like God was actually speaking to me saying, "Your polio has a purpose. It is not because you did anything wrong or your parents did anything wrong but because I'm going to use it."

I didn't even understand what that meant but I knew at that moment this was the God of the universe and he was talking to me. I remember kneeling down beside my bed, I was 16 and I committed my life to Christ. So that was just this radical turnaround from being so angry from being bullied to saying God is going to use this. He is going to use this bullying, he is going to use all of this. I don't know how but he will.

RANDY: And wasn't it about that time that you started having a little more stability with your physical circumstance and got to a level of normalcy?

VANEETHA: Yes! So each surgery really helped my body just do different things. What I had was muscle transfer, so I had parts of my body that didn't work effected by polio, certain muscles. So if you needed to... you could use two muscles to do something but if you just had

one you could still sort of do it. So they would transfer muscles all through my body which is what they did throughout my growing up. So by the time I was in high school I was able to walk normally.

I have no shoulder muscle and never have so my arms have always been very weak. But in general, I lived a pretty normal life, got a driver's license, went away to college, moved to Boston on my own, went to grad school. So my life for most people looked exactly the same as theirs except for the fact that I had a limp. So that limp was always there and I knew my arms were weak but I would say most people didn't know that at all.

SHEILA: So your life at that point seemed to have taken a really positive road. And I think it was at that point then you get married and have a child? Tell us about that period of your life.

VANEETHA: Well, that was this really wonderful period. From the time I was 16 to 30, my life was just going well. I had everything I wanted and really felt that this was what the Christian life was for me. And then when I was 30--I actually got married about 28, 30 I had a miscarriage and that really surprised me because it was this first piece of wow, life is not always going to be perfect and safe.

And then I had a daughter, had two more miscarriages and then had a son with a heart problem. He was born with a hypoplastic left heart, which means he only had half a heart. Had surgery at birth though and was doing really well. And we just thought, okay, we're out of the woods. This is great! And when he was seven weeks old we took him in for a checkup and the doctor pulled him off all of his medicines saying, "He's doing so well. He just doesn't need his medicine." And three days later he died.

So that was just this shocking piece for me. I really pulled away from God when that happened because I felt like when I was 16 God was going to use my life but I thought all my suffering was behind me. And to think that there was more suffering felt very unsafe to me. I thought, God's not safe, life is not safe again. And so I pulled away from God.

And then I remember the one day in my car just crying out to God because I felt so lonely without Jesus. And the presence of the Lord filled my car. I don't think I could ever describe to anyone exactly what that felt like but God was in my car and I thought if this is heaven then I'm ready to go now. There was just this sense of peace and sense of joy that transcended anything I'd ever known. And to this day is probably the most remarkable moment of my life. But it grounded me to see how everything can fall apart and yet God's presence can change everything.

And so I would say what God has given me in suffering is more than he has taken away because having that glimpse of what the presence of Jesus can do in our lives changed everything for me.

RANDY: That's a huge statement. The crazy thing is you haven't even told all of the suffering in your life in these few minutes. Of course, in the book you detail that. But not only has your body betrayed you, and have doctors failed you, and people mistreated you, but even in some of your closest relationships you talk about some betrayal there. Give us, just so people can have a point to relate to, you had some really close betrayals.

VANEETHA: Yes. So, after Paul died, I actually was diagnosed with post-polio syndrome. So was dealing with my body failing and just sort of in the middle of that my ex-husband, actually came home and told me he was leaving for someone else. We had been married close to 18 years then and that was a huge betrayal. I really could not believe that was happening. He moved out of state and I was left to parent two adolescent daughters on my own. And that was really the hardest thing for me because I was alone. With everything else I had my husband, we were pretty close so when I went through health issues and we went through Paul's death together, that felt different and this felt personal and it felt overwhelming.

I remember crying every night and lying in my bed actually screaming, "God, do you hate me?" Once again God met me, Randy. It was kind of almost supernatural the way he would get up with me in the morning. I would get up and pull out my Bible because I had nothing good about my day. There was nothing good but that time with God. And that time transformed me I would say. It was those few years after my husband left and I was parenting and life was falling apart, my kids were very angry, everything was going wrong and yet Jesus would open up scripture to

me every day. I remember reading Psalm 119:25 every day, "My soul clings to the dust. Revive me according to your word." And by the time I left that time with God in the morning from just reading the Bible, he had revived me and I felt like a different person.

So that has kind of carried over where I feel like God talks to me through the Bible. I can pick it up, not every time and every day but feeling, God you're right here. You speak to me. And I could say that's the biggest reason, Randy, that I could say what God has given me in suffering is more than what he's taken away--because of that.

SHEILA: I really want, when I read that line, "What God gives in suffering is greater than what he takes away." Honestly, I could sit with that alone for a week and just meditate on that. Because I'm thinking of the people who are watching us right now who have lost so much, gone through so much, who are struggling physically, who are struggling emotionally, who are struggling financially, what would you say to someone who is like, if God is good, why am I going through this?

VANEETHA: Yes. I've asked that question so many times, Sheila and I would say one it is a mystery why you're going through this. Nobody can really give you answers. I find it really hard when people kind of spout scriptures like they know because they don't. Job never knew why he suffered. And yet, God doesn't give Job an explanation but he shows Job who he is. And that is what God does for us in suffering. We don't have an explanation. We know that God uses it for good. We look at Joseph in the Bible and he says, "You meant this for good." But I don't think this side of heaven we're going to see what all of that good is so we just need to trust there is good and there is a purpose and one day you will see it.

But on this earth I would say God will draw near to you; that you will see God and so just press into him. But be honest, honestly, I think one of the biggest things for me in really seeing God was being willing to say this is hard. I think a lot of Christians feel like they kind of have to put on a happy face and say it is all good. I think that pulls us away from God or it did me because that wasn't authentic for me. And then I felt that I couldn't even talk to God.

So it was really, some mornings I would pull out Lamentations three and it is pretty hard to find some harsher words than that, and say them because God invites us to be honest. I find that through the Psalms and through the entire Bible the more we're honest with God the more we trust him. Because we trust him enough to talk to him. And the more we draw close to him the more he can comfort us, the more that we can see this change in our own lives through suffering, even if we don't know why we're suffering, we sense God's presence in our suffering.

RANDY: Yeah. You keep talking about what happened when you were in pain, whether physical or emotional or whatever, and you took that, you ran to God essentially and now you're talking about him meeting you. Contrast that with you with some times where you didn't run to God. And I ask this for people who are listening to you going, yeah, I'm glad that worked for you. I'm just not there. I'm not sure.

Because I think it is important, yes, we hear your testimony and what God has done with you but to understand almost the differences--like the good news and the bad news. What happened when you didn't take your pain to God?

VANEETHA: I found when I didn't take my pain to God, I got empty and angry and bitter. And what I would do, the times that I haven't taken my pain to God is I've put it on other people and I felt like it was their job to make me feel better. And I found that I wanted my friends and my family to sort of make up for this loss that I've had. And some of these losses are huge.

When you put that on people, they can't really bear the weight of it. So I felt strains in my relationships too because I felt that people weren't doing enough. They weren't calling me enough. They weren't writing to me enough. They weren't serving me enough. That may well be true. Often we do let our friends down. But I think when we put this emotional weight on them that they can't carry, our relationships really start to feel less life giving for us. I think I really didn't like people and I was mad at God so I started to get really depressed because everything was black.

I think depression is really a natural part, sometimes of struggle. And that's okay. I don't feel like

Christians need to say everything is good, I'm not depressed. But yet at the same time people can't fill what only God can fill in us. And so I would just be angry and bitter when I didn't go to God. And just feel this sense of low level of what's the point of life? Like life looked grey every day when I didn't want to involve God in my pain and didn't call out to him.

SHEILA: I think one of the powerful things that you're sharing that is so important is that you get to bring all of who you are to God. It's like Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. He processed his pain in the presence of his father rather than just pretending this is going to be good.

VANEETHA: Exactly. And I think I love that passage, Sheila because he asks God to take away the pain. I think we ask God to heal our family, to heal ourselves, to give us jobs, all those things we beg God for that. And I have done that. I have begged God. And sometimes God says "no" and sometimes God says "yes" but I feel like really being honest enough to tell him what hurts and what we want from him really changes our relationship with him rather than this I'm just accepting everything God has and I need to be joyful, I think that ends up...I think we end up struggling.

SHEILA: I agree.

RANDY: Right now there are a lot of people in a situation that I wouldn't ask anyone to endure. I think God's got a deliverance for a lot of people and I think you may be that deliverance. Watch this.

On the mission field:

Open Captions: The global water crisis. 100's of thousands will die this year from contaminated water

ANNOUNCER: People living in the United States and other industrialized nations read these headlines. But mothers around the world in developing countries live them. Denise Nyuhire has never had a drink of uncontaminated water in her life. And neither had her daughter who died

because of a waterborne illness.

Open Captions: I am still very sad about my daughter dying from this water. I am afraid that water is going to kill the rest of my children.

ANNOUNCER: This story has been repeated over and over for mothers in Denise's village. Veronica, a grandmother has lost her husband, three of her children, and most recently, a grandchild to waterborne illness.

Open Captions: I am heartbroken with this drinking water. It hurts a lot that we all have to drink this water.

ANNOUNCER: Our hope is Veronica, Denise, and other villagers will be blessed with an answer to a prayer for clean water. And that they never become just another statistic about death caused by contaminated water.

Open Captions: I would ask if you can help give us clean water. I would also ask God for clean water so that our children could live.

In the studio:

SHEILA: Would you think about that just for one second? That that grown woman, that beautiful woman has never once in her life had a drink of clean water. That's just stunning to me.

The thing that I feel equally weighty is that this is not something that there's nothing we can do about. Sometimes we'll hear about terrible pandemics around the world or desperate situations and we want to help but there is a limit to what we can do. This is entirely fixable.

Our commitment here at *LIFE Outreach* is to be able to put clean water wells into villages where literally, the children are dying, a grandchild is dying, a husband is dying, simply because they do not have access to a clean water source.

I've been on these trips and walked to the places with mothers and their children and looked at what the water looks like and A, it is filthy. But way more than that, it is the waterborne illnesses, the diseases that are contained in the water.

I heard the story of a mother who tried to get her child some help; tried to get on a bicycle to try and ride to a clinic and the child died on the way there.

We can change this. For very little you and I can make a difference. We have a commitment here this year to put 350 new wells in 20 nations. And Randy, if we all do this together we can do this.

RANDY: We can. And it's, you watch that, it's kind of hard to believe that someone has never had a cup of clean drinking water. If someone said that to you or I, Sheila, we'd be like, "Well here, let me give you a cup of clean water."

Well, that's the opportunity that we have right now today to give someone that first drink of clean water. You know it's so simple. Here's how simple it is. To give one person a cup of clean drinking water, not for a day, not for a week, not for a year but for the rest of their life, the average is \$4.80. I've spent that on coffee recently. So it's so doable that it is almost hard to comprehend.

But because we've been doing this for so many years, because we've got people on the ground in places in 20 nations right now, ready to go, we've been doing this, we know it works. We've done this because of you. We've done this because of other viewers who have partnered and said, "Yeah, I'll give \$48 and provided clean drinking water for a lifetime." Sure! Of course, who wouldn't? Maybe you can afford to drill an entire well--\$4800. If you can do that, I would encourage you to do it right now.

This is a problem in our world where you and I are the solution. So I'm just asking you to be that solution today. Will you go online, will you go to the phone? Make the best gift you can and know that when you do it, you are that answer to that mother's prayer. You are that refreshing drink to that woman's lips. You are Christ in someone's life. Join us today as we give Water for

LIFE.

Begin video clip

Announcer: Dirty disease-filled water. How desperate would a mother need to be to consider giving this contaminated substance to her child? For many mothers and their families living in extreme poverty, this is their only choice.

But with your help they won't have to make this choice ever again. Mission: Water for LIFE provides clean, disease-free water for thousands of children and their families giving them a life free from the fear of death. With your gift today you can help drill and establish 350 water wells this year. Your gift of \$24 will help provide clean water for five children. A gift of \$48 will help provide ten. \$72 will provide for 15. And \$144 will help provide life-giving water for 30 people for a lifetime.

With your gift, we'll send you *Speak Your Name* devotions and declarations on the reality of Jesus. Filled with stunning imagery, these 40 encouraging devotions by Laney Rene serve as a reminder of the power of Jesus' name.

With your gift of \$100 or more, please request the "Be Refreshed" pitcher. This beautiful ceramic pitcher is decorated with Proverbs 11:25 and is sure to make a lovely addition to your table or home.

Finally, please consider a gift of \$1200 to help provide water for 250 people or a gift of \$4800 to help sponsor a complete well. And you may request our brand-new, inspiring bronze sculpture, "Divine Servant."

Please call, write or make your gift online.

End of video

On the mission field:

RALPH: Randy, Sheila, I travel all over the world as the director of missions for *LIFE Today*. I continue to hear some of the same stories. Death. Why? Simply because they don't have clean drinking water. These mothers who wanted to give life to her children, she wanted to bring health to her family by bringing water home. But she ends up bringing contaminated water--if she can find any. And it brings death to her children.

I beg you as parents, I'm a parent myself, help our viewers understand none of us want to bring death into our home. None of us want to bring contaminated water to our children. We want to bring water that is going to bring them life. Please help our viewers know that they can give and be an answer to a mother's cry. I need your help today.

In the studio:

RANDY: Thank you so much for going to the phone, going online, giving the best gift you can. You really can make a difference.

I want to thank our guest today. Vaneetha, thank you for speaking and sharing from such a place of pain.

VANEETHA: I was so happy to do that because I share about this because Jesus met me in this incredible way and just sharing about it completes my joy. And if you guys get any help from this that adds to all of our joy because that's why we're here, that you would meet Jesus.

SHEILA: It is a fantastic book. It's called, *Walking Through Fire*: "A memoir of loss and redemption." Very powerful book!

RANDY: Yes! Be sure to request her book, *Walking Through Fire* with any gift today. And join us again next time on *LIFE Today*!