

**A MENTOR BARGED INTO MY WORLD,
DUG HER CLAWS IN ME, AND CHANGED MY LIFE**

Dear Joy, *[an open letter to the daughter of my very special friend—a tribute to Linda Cressy Shirley]*

You asked about the special bond your mother and I had.

If I were to make a short list of the people who most significantly influenced my walk with the Lord your mother's name would be way up at the top. I was raised in a wonderful godly home and came to trust the Lord as my savior early in life. Later, at the age of 10 the Lord touched my heart. A missionary spoke in our Junior Church. I was in fifth grade and when he gave an invitation to come forward to consecrate our lives to world missions. I leapt out of my seat and stood before my friends and teachers. I wanted everyone to know I was willing to do anything that God would have me do.

Although my spiritual growth plateaued during my high school and college years, my devotion to Him never waned. I just didn't know what I should be doing on a daily or weekly basis to grow. There was a underlying unrest in my soul—perhaps hoping that someone would just walk into my life and take me by my spiritual hand *[or ear]*. Your Mom showed up and was the answer to that unspoken prayer. Actually, she dug her claws in me and wouldn't let go.

After I graduated from Taylor University *[biology and chemistry]*, I found myself living in a tent in the Everglades studying the flora and fauna, memorizing Scripture, and reading my Bible. In a couple of months I would start my graduate studies at the prestigious University of Pennsylvania's biology department with a fully-funded teaching fellowship scholarship.

Through several unique circumstances, I wound up visiting a church in Miami a mile or two from your mother's home. You may have guessed that this church was the Grove Community Church in Coconut Grove. Florida Bible College started there and the church was simply packed with students that Sunday morning. I visited college classes the next week and found that I was surrounded by people my age *[and even younger]* Who knew how to use their Bibles, knew how to pray, knew that God could use them in spiritual ministries, knew dozens/hundreds of Scripture verses by heart, knew how to bring other people to faith in Christ, and knew my Savior, Jesus, in a way I didn't. Something happened that week, and I realized I had just witnessed an incredible mob of students.

I became infected almost immediately and within a week I approached the president of the school and asked if I could start attending classes in the middle of the semester—even though I wouldn't get any credit. *[I told him I'd pay the tuition.]* He said, yes.

I knew nothing of spiritual gifts and didn't realize that God could actually use people like me. I had slowly come to the conclusion that God could get everything done without my help, but in rubbing shoulders day after day with this rabid student body all that changed.

One of the classes I attended that first week was Hebrews. I sat next to a girl who was an upperclassman and had the biggest smile but couldn't get both eyes to look at me at the same time. She walked to chapel after class with me and asked if I would sit with her. I had already found a friend, or rather, she had found me. Her name was Linda Cressy, your mom.

We chatted afterwards and she found out why I wanted to attend classes. She told me which teachers and classes to take. In the next seven weeks she often found me sitting by myself between classes and would just invade my space unasked. I appreciated her very much. She didn't drive. I had a car and would give her a lift home from time to time. I got to meet her folks and her brother, your Uncle Roger, several times.

She asked me if I wanted to go with her while she talked to people down at the University of Miami. So I gave her a ride and watched with fascination as she approached total strangers with her huge looseleaf Scofield Reference Bible and asked them if they wanted to talk about spiritual things. Amazingly, she could answer WITH A BIBLE VERSE every question or objection they had. Oh, how that gave me a hunger to know the Word of God as well as she.

She was excited but scared about her upcoming eye surgery. I think it meant a lot to her that I visited her in the hospital. She was so little on the outside but her confidence in the Lord made her a giant of a

girl in my eyes. She was open and honest with me from the start. I think she saw in me some potential. Perhaps she was a little impressed by my academic background, but she was even more appalled that someone with my abilities wasn't using his talents for God. Well, I guess I wasn't. However, my regard and awe of her was even greater.

Of course she knew that God didn't want everyone to go into full-time Christian work, but she was determined that God wasn't going to let me become a botanist/ecologist without an intense exposure to everything she could unload on me. She would chide me gently about immersing myself in "the study of the woody flora of Taiwan" as I was planning to do at Penn. I can't tell you how many times she asked me mockingly whether I intended to spend my life witnessing to flowers and plants.

At the time she was teaching a 4 & 5 year-old Sunday School class in a downtown Miami Spanish church. To be honest, her Spanish was sub-par, but that didn't seem to thwart her spirit. She had me drive her downtown so that I would get exposure to a thrilling teaching ministry in the dark musty basement of the Spanish church. The first verse I ever learned in Spanish was Gal 4.26, "Pues todos sois hijos de Dios, por la fe en Cristo Jesus!" FOR WE ARE ALL THE CHILDREN OF GOD BY FAITH IN CHRIST JESUS! She made me learn it before I walked into her class. After all, the teachers have to know it if they are going to make kids learn it. So we sang it to a little tune she made up. I still sing that song on occasion. Afterwards I had to memorize it in English at Bible college.

Whenever we would go to the park together or to a store she would talk to people about her best friend, the Lord Jesus. Then she began to nudge me to say something. If I got stuck, the conversation would go back to her and I'd drop into the learning & praying mode.

These were some great months together and I must have asked a thousand dumb questions. She was patient with me and I grew like a mushroom. The time was getting short before I would head off to graduate school at U of PENN and with that twinkle in her eye *[I don't remember which eye]* she told me that she was praying that I would be back in school in the Fall. For the second time in two years I wrote to the university and told them that I would not be enrolling at Penn and that I would not be taking their gracious scholarship. I came back to Miami and signed up as a fulltime *[freshman]* student. Your mother smirked at me when she saw me on campus and said, "I knew it all the time! I knew you'd come back."

Next year she introduced me to all the pretty Spanish girls in the high school class at her church and managed to get me to teach their class. Oh, I had been a poor Spanish student myself and had never met anyone *[except my college Spanish teacher]* who even spoke Spanish. I could barely say "Como esta?" let alone teach a class, but with the help of a roommate who was a missionary kid I would prepare a simple lesson and the girls in the class began to grow.

Your Mom was a senior and so we didn't have any classes together. But she'd still find me and sit with me in chapel lots of times.

We only overlapped one full year at FBC and then she graduated. We didn't see much of each other after that but I cherished in my heart a special spot for the girl who persisted in challenging me to become all that the Lord would have me be. I eventually took a teaching post at a Christian school and got married, and later taught at Florida Bible College.

Neither of us were good at keeping in touch through the ensuing years, but you remember seeing my family at your doorstep in Alabama from time to time. I often think of what might have changed if that little lady hadn't attached herself to my soul and prodded, mentored, and encouraged me during that period of my life.

I would gladly have come from any distance to her funeral had I known. I'm sorry I wasn't there. May God bless you in your pursuit of His heart and involvement in His work.

Pray that I will be as faithful as your mom in drawing others to the Savior's side and ministry.

Phil

Friend: Will you be that person that Linda was for me? Will you invade somebody else's life? You might just rescue somebody like me?