



Lessons from
Her Life to Lift
Your Heart

The
Faith
of **Dolly**
Parton

DUDLEY DELFFS

Dudley's book gives great insight into why so many people around the world love Dolly Parton. While Dolly is one of the biggest superstars, she has never forgotten who she is and where she came from and the faith that anchors her life.

GOVERNOR OF TENNESSEE, Bill Haslam,
and First Lady Crissy Haslam

Three amazing strands of stories are woven into this fabulous book, *The Faith of Dolly Parton* by Dudley Delffs. The thread of biography speaks of a fascinating woman whom we tend to think we know, but whom I admire even more when seeing her through the lens of faith. The thread of memoir shared through the author's blending of his own life story with Dolly's is a gift of hope and connection. And the final thread, that of devotional, invites us to more. Faith-based questions at the end of each chapter take us deeper into our own stories, while the prayers remind us that it was Dolly's faith that has taken her to the heights she's attained, as she humbly acknowledges. Reading this book reminded me of my own faith journey and the gift of story told through music, words, and life. I love this book! You will too!

JANE KIRKPATRICK, award-winning
author of *All She Left Behind*

The Faith of Dolly Parton is a little book filled with big dreams! Dudley Delffs weaves together his unique spiritual journey with the wonder and wisdom of Dolly Parton's with a heartwarming result. I was uplifted by the inspirational gifts of both and delighted by the author's humor and the

joy hidden in the stories of Dolly's life. Inside this book, part memoir and part biography, lies a map for readers to unfold their own prayers and dreams.

DONNIE WINOKUR, author of *Chancer:
How One Good Boy Saved Another*

You may know Dolly Parton as a legendary singer, songwriter, music producer, actor, author, philanthropist, or entrepreneur. But those external successes are born out of a deep personal faith in Jesus Christ. In *The Faith of Dolly Parton*, award-winning author Dudley Delffs guides you through ten powerful lessons based on the music, character, and heart of this entertainment legend. Delffs's insight into the sincere faith of Dolly Parton will warm your heart and inspire you to become more vulnerable as you grow stronger in your faith.

CRAIG GROESCHEL, pastor of Life.Church,
New York Times bestselling author

The Faith of Dolly Parton made me smile one minute and reconsider what I thought I knew about her the next. Dudley Delffs uses his own spiritual journey to frame the way Dolly's Christian faith has anchored her life throughout her many career accomplishments and personal milestones. The result is a warm, down-home conversation about much more than Dolly and country music, offering us a reflection on the beautiful, mysterious ways God uniquely uses each of us for his kingdom.

CHRIS HODGES, senior pastor of Church of the
Highlands, author of *The Daniel Dilemma*

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Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

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INTRODUCTION

The Butterfly Effect

I always ask God to work through me and let me be a light of some kind and help in this world, so I always pray for that, and I always want to do good.

DOLLY PARTON

I love Dolly Parton.

I grew up with her, really. Dolly graduated from Sevier County High School the year I was born, which technically makes her old enough to be my mother. But to me she seemed more like an extended relative—a favorite aunt or beloved cousin. While I'd have loved for her to be my godmother, like she was for Miley Cyrus's character in *Hannah Montana*, Dolly hovered at the edges of my life, part muse urging me to dream more and part guardian angel pulling me back to my roots.

As a boy growing up in small-town Tennessee, I spent many evenings sprawled on the pea-green carpet of our family room watching Dolly on *The Porter Wagoner Show*,

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my daddy's favorite. Later, as a young man I prepared to propose to my wife beneath the watchful gaze of Dolly's bronze statue in front of the courthouse in Sevierville, Tennessee. And as a young father, we took our three small children on vacation to Dollywood.

I've never met Dolly in person and have only seen her perform live a couple of times. But like the University of Tennessee, the Smoky Mountains, biscuits and gravy, the works of Flannery O'Connor, and the lonesome sound of the night train echoing from beyond the pasture on the farm where I grew up, Dolly Parton is woven into the fabric of my life. And it's not just her music that has shaped who I am—it's her Christian faith.

When I talk about the spiritual role models in my life who continue to inspire me, most people laugh or raise their eyebrows when I include Dolly on that list. But why not? In a world filled with so much turmoil, division, strife, and conflict, Miss Dolly models a kind of Christian faith that manages to be authentic, positive, hopeful, and contagious. In a world where public figures fall from pedestals daily, if not hourly, Dolly Parton is the exception. She keeps the faith, holds her ground, and keeps on being who she has always been ever since rising into stardom over fifty years ago. Whether celebrating a new album or unveiling an addition to her eponymous theme park, Dolly has never been shy about crediting God and her relationship with him as the source of her success. Even when others prefer to focus on her iconic curves, the

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mysteries of her love life, or her latest groundbreaking endeavor, Dolly still manages to give God credit for it all.

More important than what she says, though, is how Dolly lives out her faith in tangible, openhearted, mountain-moving ways. She's a philanthropist and a humanitarian—big words for a little lady who says she only wants to share her songs with as many people as possible. There's a simple childlike joy about her generosity and desire to help other people, whether teaching children to read or enabling residents of her beloved Smoky Mountains to recover from devastating wildfires.

Dolly doesn't preach or presume to tell us how we ought to think and behave. She doesn't discuss denominations, politics, or other people's mistakes. If anything, she goes out of her way to take the high road, to give people the benefit of the doubt, to hope for the best in her fellow human beings. Dolly frequently quotes the Bible but has refused to be baited by matters of interpretation or theology. She keeps her faith simple, mostly private, and action-oriented.

She's a "Backwoods Barbie" as fervent as Billy Graham, but Dolly would never set herself up as a spiritual role model. Yet you will struggle to find a better example of what it means to be hugely successful and still humble, gifted yet grounded, both faithful and fabulous, as genuine as they come despite the glamor, a cultural icon yet still a simple gal from the holler down near Locust Ridge. Positive and profound, upbeat and down-home, sequins

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sparkling on an old soul, Miss Dolly can teach us a few things about accepting ourselves, loving others, chasing our dreams, trusting God, and celebrating the life he has given each of us.

Her lessons of faith are often small and subtle, which reflects what Jesus said about giving: “When you demonstrate generosity, do it with pure motives and without drawing attention to yourself” (Matthew 6:3, TPT). The way Dolly Parton lives out her faith reminds me of the butterfly effect. Borrowed from science and mainstreamed into pop culture, the term *butterfly effect* usually refers to the way small, seemingly trivial events—such as a butterfly flapping its wings in one location—can have enormous consequences, contributing to a tornado, for instance, in another part of the world.

I can’t think of a better metaphor for Dolly’s faith and its cumulative impact on millions of lives. Her faith demonstrates the effect small habits and patient dedication to one’s dreams can produce. Captivated by butterflies since chasing them as a girl, Dolly was inspired to write and record her hit song “Love Is Like a Butterfly,” gradually adopting the little winged beauties as her brand symbol and personal totem. When asked why she loves butterflies so much, Dolly said, “They remind me of myself . . . they just go about their business, gentle, but determined.”

No doubt about it, Dolly’s gentle, determined way of living out her faith has pollinated so many people’s

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lives, including my own, with joy, inspiration, and hope. She has become known for her compassion, generosity, inclusivity, and philanthropy as much as for her voice, musical artistry, and famous figure. The positive impact of her music, personality, storytelling, songwriting, and generosity is undeniable. She makes me proud to be from Tennessee, to love country music, and to be a Christian.

Whether you're just discovering Dolly or are a lifetime admirer of the Queen of Country, I hope you will be encouraged, inspired, amused, and energized by the life lessons that follow, all drawn from Dolly's life. I don't know her personally and she hasn't paid me to say nice things about her. If anything, she would probably joke about much of what I have to say and then change the subject to talk about her new album or the latest books donated to kids participating in her Imagination Library. That's just who she is. She would be the last person to make a fuss about her faith.

But that's the very reason we love her. Hers is the kind of faith that inspires you to be all that God made you to be. The kind of faith that can help you hang on when times are hard and to set your sights higher after your latest accomplishment.

She models the kind of faith that takes big leaps, gets back up after a fall, and trusts God for the next giant step. The kind that causes you to pray, to really talk to God openly and honestly from your heart again. To keep quiet around others if you can't say something nice.

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To pause and marvel at purple wildflowers swaying on a sun-kissed hillside.

The kind of faith that hums a little song through the darkest night and still finds something to laugh about when there are plenty of reasons to cry. The kind of faith that celebrates blessings and joyfully shares them with others.

The kind of faith that lasts a lifetime.

The kind of faith this book is all about.

The faith of Dolly Parton.

CHAPTER 1

Dream Your Way Forward

*In the midst of the direst poverty and despair,
the human spirit, especially that of children, will
find some hope to cling to, some promise of a
better day.*

DOLLY PARTON

I'll never forget the first time I saw Dolly Parton. I was probably about six at the time, sprawled on the carpet of our family room—the den as we called it—arranging green army men among plastic farm animals and Matchbox cars while my parents watched shows on the large oak-veneered RCA console angled in the corner. Our viewing skewed toward my father's favorites or shows considered appropriate for our family, which basically meant me, as the only kid in the house and my parents' only child together.

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The same shows always seemed to be on: staples like *The Andy Griffith Show* and *Gunsmoke*, along with *Bonanza*, *Mannix*, and *Hawaii Five-O*. Two country music shows, however, stood out: *The Porter Wagoner Show* and *Hee Haw*. While my father loved country music, these programs didn't interest me much. Some of the music was okay, even good sometimes, but the country cornball humor annoyed me.

I couldn't put my finger on it at the time, but the corny jokes and predictable routines puzzled me. They were goofy and silly, playing up the stereotypes that even as a kid I found over-the-top and limiting, if not insulting. My father tended to laugh, especially if he was on his third or fourth drink, and my mother would grin or chuckle, usually following his lead.

Despite my usual disinterest in what my dad was watching, one person on *The Porter Wagoner Show* always drew my attention. I know it's easy to assume that I was fascinated by her extraordinary figure and frothy blonde hair sculpted like cotton candy—and maybe I was—but there was something special about Dolly Parton. I couldn't have put it into words then, but it was more than just the fact that she was young and pretty and had big breasts. It was even more than her beautiful voice that reminded me of birdsong, sometimes bright and chipper like a robin and other times as lonesome and sad as a whip-poor-will.

Yes, Dolly had—for lack of a better word—*presence*,

that mysterious star quality exuding from certain people who seem more alive, more aware, more positive, basically, just *more*. Many of these larger-than-life people are entertainers, performers, and celebrities, but many wait tables, manage retail stores, or repair computers. I suspect Dolly would still be Dolly even if she were a bank teller, a soccer mom (now there's an image!), or an attorney.

Whether performing a duet with Porter or pretending to be a dumb blonde in a hillbilly skit, Dolly seemed both smart and sincere. She didn't mind poking fun at country stereotypes because she was in on the joke. She was self-aware enough to deliver her punch lines with that tinkling-bell laugh of hers and then emotionally intense enough to beg "Jolene" not to take her man and mean it. The fact that she wrote many of her own songs only reinforced my impression that she was not like every other performer or country music singer.

Simply put, Dolly was special.

Humble Beginnings

Dolly's origins have become the Smoky Mountain mythology her brand is built on. She has always joked about it ("Sure we had runnin' water—when we'd run and get it!"), but the reality must have been severe. Working their small farmstead from a two-room cabin in the shadow of the Great Smoky Mountains, her parents,

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Lee and Avie Lee Parton, focused on keeping food on the table and a roof over the heads of their growing family. They were so poor that the local doctor who delivered Dolly, Dr. Robert Thomas, received a pound of cornmeal as payment.

One of Dolly's earliest biographers, Alanna Nash, then a journalist for *Country Music Magazine*, visited the old Parton cabin and wrote: "No matter how many pictures you have seen or how much you have fantasized about it, you are not prepared. It is the most extreme rural poverty imaginable—direr even than Dolly has painted it—and as you stand there gazing at the ancient washing machine on the porch and the inoperative still off to the side of the house in front of the rusted automobile parts, and the scraggly chickens, you feel guilty for having wondered if Dolly has exaggerated her humble origins."¹

Dolly's father raised a bit of tobacco as a cash crop, tended the family's vegetable garden, and worked construction and odd jobs in nearby Sevierville and Knoxville to keep his family going. Mama Parton stayed home with their young children, keeping them all clothed and fed while often expecting their next one. Early on she disguised their poverty through her imagination, teaching Dolly and her siblings how to make "stone soup," turning a meager broth with potatoes and a few vegetables into a magical meal.

By virtually all accounts, little Dolly was a happy, carefree child, usually running barefoot in the swept,

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dirt-packed yard, chasing after chickens or listening to her mama tell Bible stories from their tiny porch. She had older siblings to play with and younger ones to chase after. Nonetheless, as the fourth of twelve children, Dolly also realized early on that her parents simply didn't have the time or energy to devote to each child's specific preferences, talents, and personality. "[Daddy] and Mama had so many kids that none of us got special attention."² But what they did have, she's always quick to add, is plenty of love. Dolly and her siblings knew what being in a loving family was all about.

Nancy Barr/Mediapunch/REX/Shutterstock



Photograph of Dolly (upper right in the back) and family at Christmas in 1960

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And Dolly quickly found a way to stand out. Music became her natural means of self-expression, a shared language that commanded the attention of her family, friends, and neighbors. Whether at home doing chores, worshipping at church, or performing at school, Dolly's sunny smile and crystal clear voice could not be ignored.

Even before she was born, Dolly was surrounded by music. Her mother frequently sang hymns and old mountain folk songs to her children while cooking, doing chores, and sewing by the fire. Her maternal grandfather, Reverend Jake Owens, was a Pentecostal preacher, so Dolly was exposed to more hymns and church music in the tiny mountain church where he preached. She was singing in church by age six and playing guitar by age seven.

And it wasn't just to get others' attention. Writing songs and singing them was as natural to Dolly as breathing in the fresh mountain air. She's made up little melodies for as long as she can remember, with "Little Tiny Tasseltop," a song about a beloved corncob doll her mama made for her, being the first song she ever wrote. Young Dolly noticed the natural rhythms around her while growing up—the two notes of a bobwhite, the sound of her mother snapping beans, the tap-tap-tap of a spoon on a cup—and found herself humming and riffing throughout the day.

Dolly knew she loved music and never thought about whether it was practical. With the joyful assurance of a child doing something she loves, Dolly never questioned

her attraction for words set to music. She just seemed to know that songs and singing were part of who she was, part of who God made her to be.

Dolly enlisted her siblings, especially her sisters, to join in her performances too. She even jokes that her sisters were “musically abused” by Dolly’s attempts to make them her backup singers. But she would perform even when she couldn’t find an audience, well, at least a human audience. In her autobiography, *Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business*, Dolly recalls how she’d stand on their front porch, grab a broom handle or tobacco stake to use as her microphone, and sing her heart out to the hens, roosters, ducks, and pigs roaming in the yard. She wrote, “They didn’t applaud much, but with the aid of a little corn, they could be counted on to hang around for a while.”³

Her Little Old Chapel

With no formal training or professional instruments, Dolly still managed to practice her songwriting and singing skills daily. When she was around twelve, she began to regularly visit an old abandoned chapel in the mountain community not far from her home. There she discovered a kind of sacred space to think about herself, her life, her dreams, and her faith.

She also discovered an old busted piano. Keeping the loose ivory tops of keys as treasures, Dolly also took some

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of the piano strings and fastened them to an old mandolin she'd found in her family's barn. She describes the result as sounding more like a dulcimer than anything else, but she used this improvised instrument to write many of her early songs.

Curiously enough, this deserted, run-down little church became a kind of Pandora's box for a girl on the cusp of becoming a woman, for in it her three passions, or three "mysteries" as she has described them, collided and converged: God, music, and sex. In her autobiography, Dolly describes how this little chapel became the place where she reflected on her growing attraction to boys, aided by some graphic graffiti left by some of her peers, as well as the place where she met God at a deep, personal level.

Dolly had plenty of exposure to matters of Christian faith by this point. After all, her grandfather was a preacher and her mother was a "devoutly religious woman." Dolly witnessed the way their faith worked for them. But the notion of God as an angry old man throwing lightning bolts down at sinners that she'd heard about in Sunday school and in her grandpa's sermons didn't appeal to her. Dolly describes herself as "the ultimate nightmare for a fundamentalist Christian out to save souls. I was a kid with her own opinions." She explains, "Like everything else in my life, I found God in my own unique way."⁴

Coupling her contrary nature with the unique mix of curiosity and embarrassment most of us experience going into adolescence, Dolly struggled to understand why

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Christians seemed to condemn something as powerful and natural as physical attraction and sexual feelings. She grew up on a farm in a rural community and had seen plenty of animals coupling and bearing their young. It was just part of the cycle of life.

She was also keenly aware of her own developing body, and the increased attention she was receiving from boys—especially at church. Apparently, it was no accident that lots of local boys showed up on the Sunday Dolly was baptized, drawn more by the image of her rising from the water in the white sundress her mother had made than by the desire to share hallelujahs for her salvation. The church ladies noticed, of course, and made their judgment known regarding the kinds of boys these were, but they also judged Dolly for being so young, nubile, and beautiful.

Could it be true that loving God and loving boys didn't mix? And yet both kinds of love, the spiritual as well as the physical, stirred up such deep feelings. So for Dolly, it seems that her budding interest in sexual feelings got intricately tangled up with her feelings and impressions of God. That is, until she began seeking time alone with God in that deserted little chapel.

She describes the way she would sing songs to God, talk with him, and share her heart while sitting alone inside the cool shadows of the decrepit sanctuary: "One day as I prayed in earnest, I broke through some sort of spirit wall and found God. Away from the stares of boys

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and the mothers and the preachers, I had met him not as a chastising, bombastic bully but as a friend I could talk to on a one-to-one basis. He is our father, after all, and that's the kind of heavenly father that made sense to me."⁵

Many Christians would label Dolly's encounter with God as her moment of conversion to a personal relationship with her Creator. But this meeting was about more than her salvation; it was about her purpose. During this encounter with God, Dolly also had another epiphany. She realized that her dreams of making music and becoming a star were not silly and childish but "grand real schemes ordained and cocreated by my newfound heavenly father." She concludes, "The joy of the truth I found there is with me to this day. I had found God. I had found Dolly Parton. And I loved them both."⁶

Dolly never focused on what she lacked in her early life. She consistently chose to be thankful for what she had and chose to trust God for more. Living by faith, she has seen God bless her in ways she never imagined.

My "Testimony"

Where I grew up, we called personal stories of meeting God and getting saved "testimonies." Like Dolly, I struggled to make sense of what I heard about God in church. There seemed to be a big dividing line in the Bible. The Old Testament God seemed scary, inconsistent, arbitrary, controlling, and willing to harbor a grudge for quite

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a few generations. In the New Testament, God seemed accepting, forgiving, compassionate, and loving—to the point of sending his only Son, Jesus, to live as a man and to die on a cross so we could enjoy an eternal relationship with him.

I'm sure the church in which I grew up was a fine church in many ways, but like many communities of faith, it struggled with welcoming and loving people who were different. It was made up of strictly Baptist, white, blue-collar, heterosexual, teetotaling, Bible-reading families—and divorces were frowned upon. While my family ticked some of those boxes, we missed a few. Both my parents had been married and divorced before marrying and having me. While they were working class, my father didn't fit in with other fathers who were salesmen, mechanics, managers, or farmers. And unlike those folks, he was a drinker.

While working construction on a government project, my dad suffered a crane falling on his leg, which led to disability for the rest of his life. But you can't keep a good hillbilly down, so my dad found other ways to fill his time and attempted to make money in addition to his pension. He was a redneck entrepreneur: buying, fixing, and selling used cars; buying, repairing, and selling antiques, and gambling—on football teams, cockfights, pool games, dog races, and poker games. The fuel for such unique endeavors was usually beer but occasionally something stronger.

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My mother and her parents were strong people of faith, born and raised Southern Baptists. Though my father was similarly raised, as an adult he had rejected organized religion. He knew the gossip and secrets of most people in our small town and scoffed at their pretense of being devout Christians on Sunday mornings when he knew what—and who—they had been doing the rest of the week.

But my parents threw a wild card into the deck from which the cards of my faith would be dealt. They made the decision to send their only son to a small Catholic parochial school in a town nearby. What possessed them, other than the Holy Spirit, to send me there and pay monthly tuition of thirty-five dollars a month, we still don't know.

What they told me was that they wanted me to have opportunities they never had. They wanted me to do better than scraping and scrounging from paycheck to paycheck. Education was vitally important. They wanted me to go to college someday. As a result, I attended the School of the Good Shepherd and received one of the best early preparatory educations available. I attended Catholic school through eighth grade before attending the local public high school.

As one of only a handful of Protestants among several hundred Catholic students, I attended mass most every day along with my classmates. I sat in on catechism and confirmation classes. I learned to say the rosary (despite

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my grandmother's warning not to pray to the Virgin Mary) and began collecting favorite saints like other kids collected baseball cards.

There was a sharp contrast between the faith system at school and the one at church. The mystery, the beauty, the history of the Catholic Church and its Liturgy appealed to me. I liked the way the priest used real bread and wine instead of crackers and grape juice for communion. I liked the smell of incense and the intricacy of the nativity scene during Advent and the stations of the cross during Lent.

Although I joined the Baptist church and was baptized into it as a twelve-year-old, I rebelled in my heart until my junior year of college, when I encountered God while sitting alone in a small, dark chapel at the Pope John XXIII Catholic Student Center on the campus of the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. The private conversation I had with God that day remains a turning point, one in which I found my salvation as well as my sense of purpose in the world.

Like Dolly, I rejected much of what I grew up experiencing in my local church and school and found my own personal path to God, with help from so many godly people over the years. I take to heart Paul's words to believers in the church at Philippi to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12, KJV). I suspect Dolly would too.

We all have various events, experiences, and individuals that have shaped what we believe about God

and how—or if—we live out our faith. Whatever your faith background, regardless of the positive and negative associations you may have with organized religion or institutions of faith, Dolly's story reminds us to embrace the unique relationship each of us is called to have with God. To approach him not as a bully or curmudgeonly tyrant but as a loving, generous, compassionate heavenly Father. To seek him in the quiet, still places of our lives.

Dreaming Is Free

Discovering her own unique relationship with God wasn't the only way Dolly overcame the expectations and limitations into which she was born. The poverty she experienced seems only to have made her more determined to succeed. Being poor wasn't a barrier any more than being female, young, or blonde. They simply were part of the world as she knew it, the same world that inspired her to chase butterflies, hum little tunes, and make up words to them.

Dolly knew she had something to give. She knew she didn't want to be contained by the mountains, living the life she witnessed growing up there. At the same time, she knew the Smoky Mountains and being “country folk” were parts of her, foundations shaping who she would become. Dolly writes, “Being born poor is something I am neither proud nor ashamed of. I have found that poverty is something you don't really realize while you're in it.

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At least not if you're a kid with a head full of dreams and a house full of loving family."⁷

For me, and I suspect many of her fans, part of the magic of Dolly's story is that she grew up about as poor as one can be. She's never tried to sugarcoat it, and while she often jokes about it, she also tries to avoid romanticizing it. She shares stories of how, during particularly lean times, her mama would send the kids out to look for stones to make "stone soup." So caught up in the fairy tale of finding the perfect magic stone to season their supper, Dolly and her siblings shifted focus from their empty bellies to the thin soup made with little more than potatoes and onions. She has plenty of other stories, and they have become an integral part of her iconic status.

While I was fortunate to grow up in a lower middle-class family, I know my father grew up in similar conditions to those Dolly experienced. My dad was one of five and grew up in a small farmhouse in rural Bedford County, Tennessee. He grew up with no electricity or indoor plumbing. His father was a carpenter by trade and did odd jobs when he was sober enough to hold a hammer without his hands shaking. His mother sewed and did leather work for the burgeoning Walking Horse industry there in Shelbyville.

Like J. D. Vance describes in his recent bestselling memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*, my upbringing could have led me to a very different, dark, dead end. While my childhood

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wasn't nearly as chaotic and traumatic as the one he describes, I endured the abridged version, never sure what I'd find when I came home from school or what my father's mood and sobriety level would be.

Would he be sober, and therefore tense and angry, or would he be on his second six-pack, which meant mellow and talkative? Would he be using his .22 to shoot wasps off the ceiling in our dining room? Or would he order me to our back barn to feed and water more than two hundred roosters he was grooming for the next big cockfight that weekend?

With an unstable home life due to my father's drinking and gambling, I might have turned to alcohol, weed, meth, or a host of other illicit substances to numb my pain. Instead I channeled my energies into my education—that escape hatch my parents opened by sending me to Catholic school. Instead of pouring myself into music as Dolly had done, early on I discovered I had a gift for writing—stories, poems, school papers, jokes and riddles, really anything that could be put into words.

I was a good student, smart enough to skip grades, and basked in the academic affirmation. I was going to college come hell or high water, and I was going to make something of my life. I would write books someday, the same kinds of books that inspired, entertained, and informed me of a bigger, brighter world. I would have a different kind of life than the one my parents and most of my peers accepted.

A Patchwork Past

One true story about Dolly Parton's childhood has reached nearly mythic status—and tells us a lot about her resilience at a young age. Dolly's desire to be noticed and feel special didn't go entirely unnoticed. With the love and intuitive wisdom only a mother could possess, Dolly's mama knew the perfect way to delight her little girl and help her stand out. Mrs. Parton brought a beloved Bible story—one that's also about someone wanting to feel special—to life when she used a box of fabric scraps to make a special coat for Dolly.

The implied parallels to the biblical character of Joseph, who was his father Jacob's favorite, could not be missed. For one thing, crafting such a garment took considerable time—a precious commodity for the mother of such a large family.

But the result was worth it. Little Dolly loved the handmade gift. She describes how she couldn't wait to wear it to school and have everyone notice her beautiful coat, a one-of-a-kind symbol of Dolly's bright personality.

But when she did, her classmates didn't appreciate her new crazy-quilt jacket. Instead they teased and bullied her about it. With the vicious cruelty that kids seem to reserve for those who dare to be different, they told her it looked homemade, nothing more than a bunch of old rags stitched together.

Dolly's heart was crushed, but she loved her beautiful

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coat and refused to take it off the entire day. She did not let the jeers, taunts, and bullying of her classmates deter her. For her, the coat represented the love of her mother, a recognition of her uniqueness, and a sense of her divine destiny. She wouldn't give her peers the satisfaction of turning her against it.

Dolly tells of how she walked home from school that day with her head held high, showing God her coat and knowing that he delighted in its vivid colors and the love-stitched care with which it had been made. She knew he thought she was special because he had made her that way. Despite the cruel teasing of others, she refused to be tainted by shame.

Coat of Many Colors

The story doesn't end there, of course. Dolly transformed the pain of that bittersweet memory by writing and recording the hit song, "Coat of Many Colors." "[It's] still my favorite song that I ever wrote or sang," Dolly shared in her autobiography.⁸ No wonder then, that this incident became the basis for the recent television movies about Dolly's early life, "Dolly Parton's Coat of Many Colors" and "Dolly Parton's Christmas of Many Colors: Circle of Love," both on NBC.

While it's easy to romanticize the past when looking back from a more prosperous present, Dolly's song does more than honor a special childhood memory. Deceptively

simple and straightforward, the poignant lyrics of her song place us as listeners in her hole-worn shoes. The song transcends the incident it recounts to reveal a deeper revelation. For the heart of the song is that Dolly felt rich in her new coat even as those around her mocked her for what their limited thinking deemed poor. Through the song, she tells us she tried to make her classmates see that one is only poor if they choose to be—coincidentally pointing out the same timeless truth to you and me.

This truth is at the center of Dolly's success. She knew even as a little girl that "the LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). None of us wants to be judged, labeled, or dismissed based on how we look or the ways others perceive us. We want to be known for what's on the inside, for the unique, special creation God has made each of us.

Through her words and in her music, Dolly consistently reminds us all to embrace our dreams in a big old bear hug of perseverance and possibility. Despite the poverty into which she was born and the hurtful attitudes of many around her, Dolly would not be deterred in pursuing her dreams. As one biographer observed, "With an active imagination, Dolly, the child, was able to transcend her desolate surroundings and circumstances, and before long, that imagination and unyielding faith provided a way to spare her the bleak future that seemed so certain to be hers as a woman of the mountains."⁹ Simply put, Dolly

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had faith that God was doing something bigger in her life than anyone could see.

Dolly's story inspires me. I'm reminded that no matter our external circumstances or what haters might say, I never want limitations to define me. I want to pursue my dreams, confident of God's unique plan for my life. Dolly's example inspires us all to use our gifts to reach beyond where we start and to look ahead at where we're going. No matter what we're up against, we can dream our way forward.

Divine Dose of Dolly

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

JEREMIAH 29:11

At the end of each chapter, you will find a few questions and exercises to help you apply Dolly’s inspiring lessons to your own life and journey of faith. You don’t have to write your answers down, but you might be surprised how helpful it can be if you do. Dolly has frequently said how much she loves making lists and how important it is for her to write down her dreams.

You’ll also find a relevant theme song from Dolly’s discography that you’re encouraged to listen to in order to enhance your appreciation and understanding of Dolly and how she expresses her life and faith through her music. A couple questions for reflection are also provided for your consideration after listening to the suggested song.

Finally, you’ll find a short prayer to adapt and use as a model for your own time of “talkin’ with God.” These

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prayers are mine, inspired by what I've learned from Dolly, both throughout my life, as well as while writing this book. There's nothing magic about my words here, but I hope they'll kindle a spark to ignite your desire to talk to God. None of this is intended to be homework but just a way of enriching your personal experience and strengthening your faith.

🦋 What childhood dreams does the story of Dolly's coat of many colors stir in you? What incident, conversation, or gift from your childhood stands out in your memory as one that has sustained you through hard times?

🦋 What unfulfilled dreams do you still harbor from childhood? What's one small goal you can set and pursue today to rekindle your passion from when you were young?

Listen to Dolly sing "In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad)" before answering the following questions.

🦋 What feelings stirred within you as you listened to this song? Why?

🦋 Do you believe we tend to romanticize our past and the hardships we've endured? Based on the words

Dream Your Way Forward

in this song, which Dolly indeed wrote, how do you think she regards her early struggles in light of her present success?

Dear God,

You're in charge. You've made me and brought me through good times and bad to where I am now. Help me see past the limitations in my life and focus on your many blessings. Thank you for the talents and resources you've poured into my life. Give me wisdom about how to use them to be the best version of myself—the person you created me to be—so that I may bless others.

Amen.

CHAPTER 2

You Need Wings to Fly

*You're not going to see your dreams come true if
you don't put wings, legs, arms, hands and feet
on 'em.*

DOLLY PARTON

To hear Dolly tell it, there was never a time in her life when she wasn't performing music. Already making up her own little songs and singing them, Dolly naturally sang in church, especially considering her granddaddy, Jake Owens, was the pastor at the little country church. She's often said she began singing hymns up front when she was only six or seven, and as she began to learn how to play guitar, she soon accompanied herself during the services.

By age ten, Dolly had made a huge leap from singing in church to performing on the radio. Thanks to her mother's brother, a talented singer-songwriter named Bill Owens, whom she called Uncle Billy, young Dolly encountered a golden opportunity to begin her professional singing

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career by becoming a regular on *The Cas Walker Farm and Home Hour*, a local radio and TV variety show there in East Tennessee.

If you study the life of Orton Caswell “Cas” Walker, it’s easy to understand why he agreed to hire Dolly Parton for his show. Born into a working-class family in Sevier County, Tennessee, Mr. Walker had begun chasing his dream at a young age, quitting school at just fourteen. He then spent almost a decade working a variety of jobs, including coal mining in Kentucky, to save money to open his first Cas Walker’s Cash Store in Knoxville. Eventually, he would open over two dozen such stores in East Tennessee, Eastern Kentucky, and Southwest Virginia. Always looking for novel ways to promote his brand, Mr. Walker started his own local radio, and later television, variety show.¹

I grew up in Middle Tennessee about a hundred miles southeast of Nashville, so we didn’t have Cas Walker’s stores. But my wife grew up in Knoxville and vividly remembers the colorful, cantankerous, controversial Cas as the epitome of the Southern, racist, conservative, Baptist, self-made man. His stores, along with his advertising and his radio and TV programs, reflected down-home, straight-talking, working-class values accentuated with sensational, attention-grabbing gimmicks.

A master salesman and consummate promoter, Cas Walker may have been as impressed by young Dolly’s work ethic and attitude as he was with her talent. As Dolly

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recounts in her autobiography, her uncle Bill, who had taught her how to play the guitar and shared her passion for music and stardom, took her backstage to meet Mr. Walker, where she promptly declared, “Mr. Walker, I want to work for you!”² According to Dolly, Walker was impressed with her choice of words, claiming that many people asked him for a job, but virtually none offered to work *for* him.

He hired ten-year-old Dolly on the spot.

Dolly describes her first public performance, there in Knoxville in the small WIVK studio auditorium, as terrifying, exhilarating, and ultimately addictive. It was as if she knew she was lighting a fuse that would result in a life-transforming explosion of the talent, dreams, and determination within her tiny frame. Starting out tentatively, Dolly owned the opportunity and poured her heart into it, claiming to sing with the same gusto she exuded in her barnyard performances back home. She admits that for all she knew, this might be her one and only chance to sing on the radio. She held nothing back, and the live audience there loved her for it.

She was an instant hit. The audience went wild and demanded an encore, which Dolly had not thought to prepare. Guided by Uncle Bill and her own instincts, Dolly sang the same song again to even more thunderous applause. She claims that incident began her love affair with the public, one she knew she would have for the rest of her life. Keep in mind, this was long before the

breakout success of incredibly young talents like Tanya Tucker, LeAnn Rimes, and Taylor Swift.

This story amazes me. While we may not have the same kind of dramatic opportunities to advance our dreams like Dolly experienced that day, we can all be reminded to give all we've got when we finally get our shot. We may be nervous, self-conscious, and afraid of messing up and blowing the opportunity. But all the more reason to make the most of every moment, every encounter, every blessing that opens up before us. As Jesus said, "All things are possible for one who believes" (Mark 9:23, ESV).

Fool for Words

While I didn't have a big break at such a young age like Dolly, I probably wrote as often as she sang. I've been a fool for words and stories for as long as I can remember. I read everything I could get my hands on—blowing past Dick and Jane stories once I discovered a pig named Wilbur and a spider named Charlotte, among others. I read chapter books at school, true adventure tales from the library, *Highlights* and *Grit* in the doctor's office, and whatever I could find at home. Naturally, I tried my hand at imitating most everything I read.

Such practice surely made a difference. In his bestselling book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell asserts that a person must invest at least ten thousand hours in practicing their talent or art in order to excel and maximize their

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potential. While some experts dispute his claim, Dolly Parton certainly provides ample evidence about what it takes to be the best.

Of course, Dolly began singing and writing songs before she started school, so accumulating those hours may have been easy. For the rest of us, though, such an investment of time and energy sounds daunting and prohibitive. And if we haven't yet invested that much time into fulfilling our dream—if we've even identified what our dream is—then we may feel like it's too late.

The trick, I suppose, which Gladwell and others have explained, is not to make the hours the point but simply steady practice in the pursuit of one's passion. If you love to draw and paint, then you'll naturally pick up a pen or brush and start doodling and sketching. If you love to cook, then no one will have to tell you to experiment with flavors to create your own recipes. And if you love music as much as Dolly, then you don't have to be forced to practice your piano lessons or come up with lyrics for your own songs.

While Dolly wasn't my inspiration at the time—more likely it was Franklin W. Dixon and *The Hardy Boys*—I too discovered my lifelong passion for writing stories early in life. Comic books, mostly Batman and Spider-Man, were also part of my steady story diet. And I'm sure the Bible stories I frequently heard at both church and school fueled my imagination as well. I can remember in Sunday school marveling at Jonah's deep dive with the

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whale, Noah's willingness to build an ocean liner-sized boat before it even started raining, David's courage and giant talent with a slingshot, and Joseph's coat of many colors—the catalyst, along with his big dreams, for the life of constant cliff-hangers into which his brothers sold him.

With so many heroic tales floating around inside me, it was only natural that I started writing my own. In fact, I wrote my first book to fulfill a fifth-grade class assignment. Crossing over from English class, where we wrote our story, to art class, where we illustrated and bound our book, my first (and only) Andy Archer mystery took the boy sleuth out West (from his small town in Tennessee) to his uncle's dude ranch, where he solved *The Mystery of the Copper Canyon*. While the clunky writing and yellow-daisy wallpaper book jacket still make me cringe, I can't deny how that first story foreshadowed my love for Colorado and the West, where I lived for almost twenty years, and my love of mystery novels, including a couple I wrote that were published.

Throughout my adult life, I've been most fortunate to earn a living by relying on words. But it hasn't always been easy. As Dolly frequently says, "If you want the rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain."³

I remember running into quite a few rain clouds in college. My roommate at the University of Tennessee majored in business, and he used to tease me about being an English major. "What can you do with a degree in English? What does a bunch of poetry and old novels

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have to do with real life?" he would ask. I had plenty of answers for him but harbored my own fears about being another wannabe writer or starving artist.

They're probably the same fears my future father-in-law, Jim Scruggs, had when I asked for permission to marry his daughter. At the time, I was finishing a master's degree in English with an emphasis on writing poetry. I had a university job as a teaching assistant that covered my tuition and paid a small stipend in exchange for helping teach freshman writing courses. "I'm not sure how poets make a living," Mister Jim said diplomatically. "Do you set up shop and hang out a shingle or what?"

I focused on the "or what" and continued to teach at the university level while completing a PhD in the field of creative writing. I also began getting a few poems published and started freelancing as an editor and contract writer. When I was twenty-five, a publisher offered me a contract for my first novel. An editor had read a handful of sample pages from my portfolio and loved it. Overnight, I had a contract for my first book even though the manuscript was only half finished!

With the publication of *Forgiving August*, one of my childhood dreams came true. I had always imagined I would spend years and years writing my first novel and then endure more years of countless rejection slips before a publisher took a chance and published my book, which naturally would turn out to be a bestseller. But my dream didn't happen that way. I got an opportunity that allowed

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me to take a giant stride on my journey but with a different outcome than imagined.

Despite selling about ten thousand copies and being optioned for a movie by a production company in Hollywood, my novel didn't launch my career as the next Ernest Hemingway or Harper Lee. In fact, not much changed other than wanting my dream—to write for a living—to come true more than ever and glimpsing just how hard it is to make it happen. But having one book under my belt allowed me to get a literary agent and contracts for more books. Getting my first novel published wasn't the doorway into fame and fortune as much as a stepping-stone in my apprenticeship as a working writer.

Just like Dolly's first big break was only the first step in a lifelong journey.

The Greased Pole of Success

While Dolly's debut on Cas Walker's show was a hit and kept her performing weekly, she describes another incident with the legendary entrepreneur that I find even more revealing—and entertaining. As one of his promotional stunts, Walker had taken an old telephone pole and sanded it smooth before staking it in front of one of his stores and coating it with grease. A cash prize of \$250 sat at the top for anyone who could successfully climb the greased pole and retrieve it. This daunting task invited gawkers and lots of attention, just as Cas had planned.

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But no one was able to retrieve the prize money. Until Dolly set her mind to it.

In typical Dolly fashion, this self-proclaimed tomboy and future star knew climbing to the top of the pole required more than physical strength and agility—it required cunning. Little Dolly drenched herself with water before rolling around in dirt and sand to create adequate friction for her climb. The crowd that gathered to watch her initially laughed at her tactics but then cheered as she reached the top, grabbed the cash, and shimmied down.

Back on the ground, however, someone recognized Dolly as a performer on Walker's show and started complaining that her success was rigged. As word spread the crowd became angry at what appeared to be a setup, yet another of Cas Walker's gimmicks to attract attention, having a little blonde girl accomplish what many adults had tried to do and failed.

But Walker wasn't having any of their back talk! According to Dolly, Cas seemed just as angry as the crowd, offended at their accusations that he would rig the stunt. He challenged them to prove how such a feat as climbing a greased pole could even be rigged. And in complete candor, Walker admitted he hadn't expected anyone to successfully scale the pole and claim the cash prize. He praised Dolly's ingenuity and said the money was hers to keep.

This story tickles me because it shows the shrewd intelligence of Dolly Parton in action at a young age.

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Many people saw the pole and assumed it was impossible to climb. Others saw it and thought they could use sheer strength and willpower to ascend and claim the prize. But only Dolly thought through what was actually required to get the job done. She knew from others' failed attempts that strength, agility, and determination weren't enough. Something was needed to counteract all that grease coating the pole. Her method was brilliant in its simplicity. The dirt and sand clung to her clothes because they were wet. The thin layer of mud coating her body provided enough resistance to leverage her efforts successfully.

She used the resources at her disposal to create a way to reach her goal.

Dolly did what others said couldn't be done.

And she's been doing it ever since!

The Climb Continues

Dolly's climb to stardom may have begun in Knoxville with Cas Walker, but her next step required even greater courage, confidence, and calculation—and a trip to Lake Charles, Louisiana. Another of Dolly's uncles, John Henry Owens, lived there and, like his brother Bill, Uncle John loved to write songs, perform and record them. When he was stationed at a military base in Lake Charles, Henry discovered a small recording studio nearby, Goldband Records, and befriended the owner, Ed Shuler. It seemed to Dolly like the perfect place to record her first single.

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But first Dolly had to get from East Tennessee to Southern Louisiana. Her parents were reluctant at best, so Dolly manipulated her grandma Rena to accompany her on the Greyhound bus. Writing about that trip, Dolly makes it sound like quite the adventure and ultimately a life-changing passage. They had to change buses and, of course, missed their connection. But nothing deterred Dolly from yet another opportunity to see her dreams get off the ground. I suspect she would have carried her grandma if she'd had to in order to record her first single.

For the first time, Dolly left Tennessee and traveled through Alabama and Mississippi to Louisiana. There in Lake Charles, she recorded "Puppy Love" (a song she'd cowritten with her uncle Bill), discovered how much she loved bananas (eating too many and getting sick on them), and experienced her first true crush after meeting a dark-eyed Cajun boy, the son of Ed Shuler, the studio owner.

Her single got local radio play, mostly based on her regular appearances on Cas Walker's show, but it likely fueled her next giant—and I mean *Transformers*-sized—leap: performing onstage at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville. I'm still stunned when I think about a girl of thirteen setting such an audacious, out-of-reach goal—let alone doing it. But then, Dolly clearly knew that the only way to make her dreams come true was to do the hard work of supporting them from the ground up.

She was determined to fly.

The Grand Ole Opry

Exactly how a young teenage Dolly landed on the stage of the Grand Ole Opry remains a bit of a mystery. She and Uncle Billy had been traveling to Nashville on weekends, meeting industry insiders and trying to give their demos to record producers. They also looked for venues that would let them perform, but most clubs wouldn't let minors in the door because they served alcohol. Although Dolly had already started maturing into her famous figure, she was still a few years away from eighteen, the legal drinking age in Tennessee at the time.

Uncle Billy already knew many country performers, both established names as well as other up-and-comers, which is likely how he finagled the favors that got him and Dolly backstage at the Grand Ole Opry one Friday night. That night's schedule had already been determined, of course, with some performers going on more than once. Which is apparently how Dolly got to take center stage.

Told by stage manager Ott Devine she was too young to perform, Dolly later said, "But I didn't give up that easy. And my uncle and me kept talkin' to everybody backstage, worryin' 'em to death, I'm sure. But finally, Jimmy C. Newman gave me his spot. He had done one spot and he had a second coming up. I don't know why he did it—out of the goodness of his heart, I suppose, but it's somethin' I'll always remember and thank him for."⁴

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None other than the Man in Black, Johnny Cash, introduced her, saying, “We’ve got a little girl here from up in East Tennessee. Her daddy’s listening to the radio at home and she’s gonna be in real trouble if she doesn’t sing tonight, so let’s bring her out here.”⁵

Dolly sang a George Jones hit, “You Gotta Be My Baby,” and the response was much like the first time she sang on Cas Walker’s show. The crowd went wild and she performed three encores.

I don’t know how to convey just how huge this was. The Grand Ole Opry is one of those revered institutions that somehow deserves its iconic status, sustained by decades of talented musicians, singers, songwriters, and performers, each generation’s legacy strengthening the next. Started in 1925 by Nashville radio station WSM, the program began as an hour-long “barn dance” that included mostly bluegrass, folk, and country.

By the time Dolly performed in the late 1950s, the Opry had established itself as the premier showcase for country music. It had expanded to four hours and broadcast live from the Ryman Auditorium each weekend. Shows featured chart-topping country music stars as well as new breakout talent—like young Dolly—on their way up. Both regional and national products sponsored the Opry, including Martha White Flour, Prince Albert Tobacco, Pet Milk, Coca-Cola, and Purina. Now known as “Country Music’s Most Famous Stage,” the Opry prides itself on crossing genres, hosting performers singing and playing

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bluegrass, folk, gospel, rockabilly, and pop—all within the vibrant, dynamic canon of authentic American music.

I grew up listening to the Grand Ole Opry on the radio in my daddy's old GMC pickup on Saturday nights when he and I went hunting or fishing together. It's one of my best memories of feeling connected to him when I was growing up. Daddy loved the great female singers like Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn, and Tammy Wynette, as well as George Jones, Jim Reeves, and Roger Miller, whose hit "King of the Road" we'd sing together.

His favorite was Hank Williams singing "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," which I couldn't understand at the time, but later, as an adult, it made perfect sense. All that suffering, anguish, and pain laid bare in the stark beauty of simple words and images. For me, that may be the essence—and the brilliance—of the art form known as country music: transforming personal pain into shared beauty. Soulful lyrics telling a story set to rhythm and melody. Giving voice to the unspoken heartache of millions of listeners.

Even when the music wasn't to my liking on the Opry, I still appreciated the diversity of performers and styles. Most of all, there was just something electric about hearing a live performance only eighty miles up the road from where we lived. It made me feel connected to a time and a place, to people before me and beyond me. Those songs I heard as a boy with my daddy made the world seem bigger than Franklin County, Tennessee, and somehow also more bearable.

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I wonder if Dolly had similar feelings that night she performed. If she realized how quickly her dreams were taking flight. If she had any idea how high she would go. That night Dolly unveiled her voice, her talent, her presence, her sheer force of will in being there in a way that no one could forget. She had laid the foundation for the dream that would continue taking shape before her very eyes.⁶

Elbow Grease

With a regular, weekly radio gig, a recorded single, and a stunning debut at the Grand Ole Opry, it's no surprise that Dolly's next step was to move to Nashville. She had promised to finish high school first, which she did and became the first in her family to do so. Despite her early successes, though, her classmates laughed when Dolly announced her plans to go to Nashville and become a big star after graduation. At the time it hurt her feelings, but later she reflected that her peers simply didn't have the capacity to take her big dreams seriously. If you can't imagine yourself leaving home, taking risks, working hard, and persevering when times get hard—all in pursuit of your heart's desire—then it's difficult to understand how anyone else could. But Dolly got on a bus with her guitar and three grocery bags full of her belongings the very next day after receiving her diploma from Sevier County High School.

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For all of her incredible breaks while so young, Dolly still faced innumerable barriers once she landed in Music City. Knocking on doors, shoving demo records in producers' hands, hitting the pavement day after day, and looking for the next gig had to be exhausting as well as humbling. Despite her early successes, she was just like so many other young, hungry, talented artists trying to make it big in Nashville.

With the ongoing assistance of her devoted uncle Bill, Dolly persevered and did all the grunt work that most people experience when attempting to launch a career in the arts and entertainment. They kept plugging away, day after day, week after week. They continued writing songs, staking out opportunities to meet influential movers and shakers in the industry, and seizing every chance to take another step closer to stardom. They would wait for hours in a record executive's office based on his polite invitation the day before to "drop by" sometime.

During this time, Dolly worked part-time jobs when she could, babysitting and waiting tables mostly. But money was tight, and she later joked about living on ketchup and relish, even going into a grocery store and pretending to shop just so she could down a pint of milk or sneak some chips. Weeks turned into months, and many others would have given up and taken the next bus home. But not Dolly—she was there for the duration, determined to make it one way or another.

Finally, her hard work began to pay off, and Dolly land-

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ed spots on early morning Nashville radio shows hosted by Ralph Emery and Eddie Hill, respectively. Around the same time, something even more significant happened: she caught the eye of Fred Foster, the owner of Monument Records and Combine Publishing, who signed her to a deal. While Foster initially envisioned Dolly as a female Elvis, he came around to see her true potential after another artist, Bill Phillips, had a big hit with “Put It Off Until Tomorrow,” a song written by Dolly and Uncle Bill that went on to win BMI song of the year in 1966. Dolly harmonized vocals on that song, which went uncredited but created quite a buzz among those in the industry.

Based on this buzz and Dolly’s own preference, Foster agreed to let her return to singing and recording country songs. It was the right move. Back in her comfort zone, Dolly had her first top ten country hit with “Dumb Blonde,” a prophetic song if there ever was one. It’s a breakup song, but the feisty lyrics could easily be Dolly’s motto: “Just because I’m blonde/Don’t think I’m dumb.” In fact, she later joked that it never bothered her when anyone called her a dumb blonde because she knew she wasn’t dumb—or blonde!

The Engine of Faith

Getting your dreams off the ground requires more than hard work—it takes faith. You have to believe not only in your own talent and ability but also in God’s ability to

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do more through your life than you can do by yourself. About this season of her life, Dolly later said, “I had this something that kept pushing me forward even when I was so scared I wished I could die. It was something I had to do, not because somebody else had told me I had to, but because I had told myself I did.”⁷

Dolly’s dreams may have been fueled by her hard work, but the engine for pushing herself and persevering had to be her faith. She knew she wasn’t the prettiest or most talented and certainly not the richest or best connected. But she knew she had been given something special by God—something she felt compelled to share with others, the gift of her music. Maybe it’s a calling or just living out the purpose you were created for, but regardless of the label, it comes back to trusting God.

The Bible is filled with stories of men and women who weren’t the best or smartest, the richest or most educated, but more times than not, they are the ones God chooses to bless and shine through. They are simply willing, sometimes reluctantly, to follow God’s path while being good stewards of all the Lord has given them. From Abraham to the apostle Paul, from Rahab to Ruth, the leaders we find fulfilling their divine destiny in the Bible all have one thing in common. It’s not their external appearance or internal intelligence that fuels their success. It’s not their family connections or large inheritance. It’s their faith.

What is faith? “Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1).

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With this definition established, this passage from the Bible then lists a Who's Who of the Old Testament, identifying well-known believers who trusted God for amazing, usually miraculous results. The factual evidence may not have supported their goal. The resources available to them might not have been enough. The logic of their situation might have dictated the exact opposite of what they knew they had to do—because they lived by faith and not by sight.

Believing in God and trusting him for your own good may not seem easy at first. But maybe this kind of trust in him is like a muscle we develop over time—and it does get easier to rely on him if we're exercising it consistently. Maybe that's the benefit of spiritual disciplines as they're usually called, those habits and practices designed to deepen our faith and draw us closer to God. They help you discover your purpose in life and the joy that comes from living out that purpose for the benefit of those around you.

Dolly Parton understands this as well as any preacher I've ever met. In her book *Dream More*, Dolly reveals that she once asked her mother why she thought God had blessed her with such extraordinary success and not others she knew who were smarter or more talented. Mama Parton said, "God has his purpose for everybody. We all have our journey to walk."⁸ She went on to tell her famous daughter that she suspected God had blessed Dolly with so much because he knew Dolly would be willing to share.

Joy in the Journey

I like that answer. Sure, we can all point to lots of successful people who don't seem half as generous or caring as Dolly. But I seriously doubt any of them are truly happy and enjoying what they have. So many successful people seem to lose sight of their blessings and become fixated on the next big thing—their next big promotion, accomplishment, conquest, purchase, or privilege. You know, the “I'll be happy when” phenomenon. Only, the when never arrives, and enough never seems to be enough.

I've tried to keep this in mind as I've slowly advanced and experienced what most people would consider a successful writing career. It's not the fame and fortune of John Grisham or the prestige and pedigree of Joyce Carol Oates, but it's allowed me to do what I love doing—writing, telling stories, helping others tell their stories—and has provided a decent income for me and my family. I'm incredibly blessed to be my own boss, work with amazing authors, and make a good living. And my journey isn't over yet!

Neither is yours. A few years ago, I reached a milestone birthday and struggled with the knowledge that, most likely, more than half my life was over. While some of my dreams have come true, I was forced to acknowledge that the odds were against me fulfilling others, such as writing my own superhero comic book, penning an Academy Award-winning screenplay, or hitting the *New York Times*

You Need Wings to Fly

bestseller list for a book with my own name on it and not someone else's.

I moped for a couple of weeks, but then I saw Dolly being interviewed about a new TV movie she'd produced based on her life, *Dolly Parton's Coat of Many Colors*. Not only was she excited about this movie because of its deeply personal story line, but because she genuinely wanted to encourage people that nothing is impossible. If a sharecropper's daughter from Locust Ridge could become arguably the most glamorous and successful woman on the planet, then anything could happen. Dolly also announced she was about to launch a new album, *Pure & Simple*, and begin her largest world tour in twenty-five years, performing in over sixty cities.

I had to laugh at myself and quit moping.

At a time in life when so many people are content to enjoy retirement or, like me, are lamenting unfulfilled dreams, Dolly was taking risks and going strong. She hadn't quit dreaming or stopped working hard to see new dreams come to life. Her example inspired me to drag out a screenplay I'd started years before and had never finished. Maybe it was too late for me to take home an Oscar someday, but I would never know if I didn't try, would I? Dolly's example cuts through my excuses like a hot knife through butter!

Her work ethic reminds me of a marathon runner, pacing herself mile after mile, knowing when to go a little faster or a little slower, conquering hills and enjoying the

The Faith of Dolly Parton

view along the way. Sure she can sprint, but her ultimate goal requires a steadier, more consistent pace to reach the destination that remains miles away. Like the writer of Acts, she can say, “My only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24).

Dolly illustrates running the race of faith to which we’re all called, stepping out and trusting God to lead the way. She reminds us that if you work hard and patiently persevere—and if you keep the faith and trust where God is leading you—then your dreams eventually take flight. But you’ll never fly if you don’t try!

Divine Dose of Dolly

*May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us;
establish the work of our hands for us—
yes, establish the work of our hands.*

PSALM 90:17

-  How much effort do you put into pursuing your dreams each day? What often prevents you from working harder and devoting more time to what you care about most? How can you draw on your faith in God to overcome these obstacles?
-  What were your favorite pursuits, hobbies, and interests during childhood? Music, sports, fashion, animals—something else? What did you enjoy learning about the most when you were growing up? What have you done to cultivate your interest in these areas lately? What's one thing you can do today?

Listen to Dolly sing “Better Get to Livin’” before answering the following questions. You might want to look up the lyrics as well, just to make sure you hear all that Dolly has to say in this song.

The Faith of Dolly Parton

- ✈ How do Dolly's lyrics in "Better Get to Livin'" speak to you considering where you are in your life right now? How does that make you feel? Why?
- ✈ Do you agree with Dolly in this song that it's always easier to complain about our lives than to work toward our own happiness? What would it look like for you to "get to livin'" and pour more of yourself into the pursuit of what matters most to you?

Dear God,

Sometimes I feel foolish when I consider my childhood dreams in the midst of all the cares and responsibilities in my life now. But you made me for a special purpose and you've given me dreams that may seem dead but are only sleeping. Awake those dreams in me, Lord, and show me the steps I need to take to realize those dreams. Give me your power to keep going when times are hard and give me your peace when troubles come. I know my dreams can't come true unless I rely on you.

Amen.

CHAPTER 3

Know When to Stretch Your Wings

*You may not want to be a star, but you do want
to star in your own dreams.*

DOLLY PARTON

One night Dolly appeared on our TV screen in a flowy red dress and looking as solemn as Sister Ann Thomas, our school principal, during morning mass. Dolly sat on a little white bench and sang a song we'd never heard before. It was called "I Will Always Love You," and she sounded sadder than the First Baptist Church choir singing "How Great Thou Art" at my granddaddy's funeral that year. At one point the screen split, showing off the new advancements of technology, and Dolly appeared to be singing to herself. She didn't cry or get teary, although she looked and sounded like she could, with her trembly vibrato. Despite the sadness of the song, I sensed maybe she really wasn't that sad at all.

The Faith of Dolly Parton



CSU Archives/Everett Collection/Newscom

Porter Wagoner and Dolly Parton, 1973

Porter, decked out in an outfit that looked like a rhinestone factory exploded onto his blue leisure suit, joined Dolly immediately after her performance. He said, “I think that’s one of your prettiest songs.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“And you sang it like you meant it,” he added.

“I did mean it—I do.”

Turned out Dolly was leaving *The Porter Wagoner Show*. My father couldn’t believe it. But my mother had no trouble at all.

The Faith of Dolly Parton

Lessons from Her Life to Lift Your Heart

By Dudley Delffs

Dolly Parton has entertained, educated, and inspired millions of fans for over five decades. And, the Queen of Country Music has never been shy about crediting her Christian faith for her success.

“A belief in God is essential,” Dolly shares. “You have to believe in something bigger than yourself. We grew up believing that through God all things are possible.” She has never been shy about discussing her faith and relationship with God. “People say, ‘Well, I am surprised that you talk about your faith,’ and I say, ‘Why not? That’s who I am. That’s what keeps me going.’”

Tennessee native, Dolly fanboy, and award-winning writer Dudley Delffs now spotlights ten faith lessons as evidenced in Dolly’s life, music, interviews, and attitude. *The Faith of Dolly Parton* focuses on the ways Dolly’s life can inspire us all to be more authentic, to trust God during hard times, to stay grounded during the good times, and to always keep our sense of humor.

Available at major retailers including:

