

[Spirituality](#)



St. Teresa of Kolkata is seen in this undated photo. (CNS/Courtesy MotherTeresaMovie.com)



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I was stapling handouts in the monastery's Peace and All Good Room, preparing to present my scheduled workshop, when a woman rushed through the door, breathless. "Someone's fallen, and I need your help with her!" Together we raced to the foyer where an old woman lay with her head upon her arm.

"I haven't broken anything," she spoke calmly. "But it will be difficult to get me up."

I knelt beside her. "I'm Maureen. I'm so sorry this happened!"

"I'm M.J." She rolled onto her back.

"And I'm Cindy," said the other woman. "We'll try and lift you."

But M.J. was wedged too tightly against a step. Before trying a more personal position I asked, "Is it OK[p' if I put my hand in your armpit?"

"Yes. That's fine."

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I slipped my hand into the warm suede crease and suddenly, M.J. didn't feel like a stranger. An immense rush of love surrounded us. Cindy and I tugged and pulled, but M.J. couldn't budge. While I felt the beginnings of panic, M.J. remained serene. Another door opened and Maurice, a student from one of my previous workshops, entered and quickly joined in. With the three of us for support, M.J. popped up onto unsteady feet. Maurice and I high-fived, relieved.

The other attendees arrived and we settled into a room covered with brown wallpaper of twisting tree trunks similar to endpapers inside an antique book. A life-sized statue of the Immaculate Heart of Mary hovered nearby. The morning passed quickly as we embraced the Psalms while listening to recorded versions of "Shepherd Me O God" and "Miserere mei, Deus." M.J. was quiet, but followed attentively as we began sharing our experiences and our longings with a weighted stillness about her. When we took a break to eat the lunches we'd individually brought, we all shared what we had with one another: clementines, juice boxes, chocolate chip cookies.

With only an hour left, we moved to [Psalm 139](#), the one that captures the omnipresence of God. I read it aloud for the group: "Before and behind you encircle me and rest your hands upon me." Suddenly, M.J. began speaking.

"My mother never showed me any real love. She was a present mother, a solid mother, but I never felt love. I was one of 11 children. She never once held me or told me she loved me."

We stared, transfixed, sharing her grief.

"I know she did the best she could but I was so empty from this. I grew up and had this wound in my heart. I would cry and cry about being untouched and unloved. But Psalm 139 led me to an understanding of God that helped me let go. I grieved this. Then when I was in Calcutta with Mother Teresa, everything changed for me."



St. Teresa of Kolkata greets a baby in this archival photo. (OSV News/Carmel Communications)

Everyone's jaws must have dropped in unison. M.J. was perplexed. "Why do you have those looks on your faces?" she asked innocently.

Maurice and I made eye contact, then we all burst out laughing.

"M.J.," I reassured her, "we're not laughing at you, but did you just say you met Mother Teresa?"

"Yes. I went to the orphanages in Calcutta to help out twice. I went there to offer what I could. Mother Teresa would tell us, 'Always hold them.' I knew to hold the babies. So I came a long way from my childhood to being able to give what I had not been given."

Holiness filled the room and bound us up together with its beauty.

All I could think was, *Thank you God, that she shared.* "We're done around 3:00. I am so grateful we got to hear this, M.J. And I am also grateful that you didn't hurt yourself this morning."

"Me too."

"And I've been teaching for a long time," I teased, "but never once have I had to say 'Is it OK if I put my hand in your armpit?' "

M.J., now joining in with our laughter, added, "I am 85. I am at peace."

I often pray with the words of Mother Teresa, "Do not let the past disturb you, just leave everything in the Sacred Heart and begin again with joy." Her words now make me think of M.J.'s healing journey, which implanted itself into my heart and caused me to trust in Christ all over again: This woman who had not been held as a child, but who grew up to hold motherless children alongside a saint? A woman who had then let us hold her. All of it, a healing grace.