

NEVER TO FOREVER ROSES: BREAKTHROUGHS

By Maria Carter

Breakthroughs are the cause of change in your life, whether you embrace or resist them. As mirrors to your soul, breakthroughs and change can help you discover and accept who you truly are.

*Breakthroughs bring clarity and redefinition...
Wake up the senses...
Break the stagnant mindset, heartset, and soulset...
Bring you closer to Your Essence and to God.*
—MARIA CARTER

INSTRUMENTS

There are places on earth that are breathtakingly beautiful, that fill you with wonder and awe of the majesty that is God. That remind you of your place.

And then there are people who affect you that same way, too, by allowing the majesty of God to shine through them.

My life changed the day I met Bonnie Agnes Dehner.

After months of planning, the day finally came for me to meet Wally “Famous” Amos. I wanted so much to meet him but found I would not be able to attend the lecture he was in town to deliver. I had read all about the original gourmet cookie king who’d lost it all—including the use of his own name. He managed to transform that lemon into lemonade by traveling the world to inspire and bring joy to people with his unique life story. I’d heard that in person he was a loving, genuine, and lively person. Although unable to hear him speak because I had a plane to catch that same evening, I arranged to be his driver during the day up until my flight. I agreed to pick him up from the airport and take him to his various appointments.

I thoroughly enjoyed meeting Wally. He personifies love, joy, and colorful vitality! He is irrepressible and his cheerful countenance becomes infectious. Never without his kazoo and original hand-painted watermelon shoes, Wally magically transforms any environment. Like a modern-day Pied Piper, he draws people to him and instantly everyone is caught up in his laughter and joy. I received so much more from meeting him than I ever could have imagined possible.

As I had his attention in the drive from the airport to the hotel and his next appointment, I attempted to pick Wally’s brain. Instead, Wally fired questions at me to draw out my dreams. He

generously dished out inspiration and encouragement, and then gave me an even greater, more precious gift in the form of a very special introduction.

We drove up to the Carmelite Monastery of San Diego, an exquisite Spanish-style mission. I turned to Wally and asked when I should return to pick him up after his appointment. To my surprise, Wally answered, “Oh, no, Maria! Come inside. I want you to meet the nuns.” He told me that I must meet a very special person who would have such a powerful effect on me; that I would want to start corresponding with her.

As a child, I had been schooled by Catholic nuns. But I had never once visited a monastery or met a Carmelite. All I knew about monks and Carmelites was that they were very secretive, devout, silent, and deliberate, and lived apart and prayed in special holy places. Carmelites were supposed to be the saintliest nuns whose ‘job’ was to pray. Their cloistered lifestyle meant staying inside the walls of the monastery and never venturing out into the community. They generally do not receive visitors outside of family, very close friends, or those who come to ask for prayers for some serious need. I expected an austere monastery like that depicted in *The Sound of Music*. I also thought my ‘good Catholic girl’ upbringing prepared me well by providing the right mix of discipline and reverence to ‘enter the convent’ for this brief visit.

Wally and I walked through the rose garden up to the carved wooden double doors of the main entrance. The fragrance and the beauty of the roses filled me with awe and left me certain that we were entering a sacred place.

As we walked through the garden, Wally explained how he met Sr. Ada (Bonnie Agnes Dehner), the cookie maker of the Monastery. One of the other nuns had decided these two great cookie connoisseurs should meet. She had shipped Sr. Ada’s cookies to Wally and that was the beginning of a great friendship.

We entered the monastery reception area. The carved wooden walls and ceiling, closed inner room doors, and the old cathedral smell confirmed my expectations of a “*Sound of Music*”-like monastery. A sweet voice behind a small cylindrical door in an opening in the wall directed us to pick up the key from the cubby after the doorway spun around, and then walk to a visiting room down the hall. We picked up the key and continued on, passing more closed doors as we heard the clicking of our heels on the ancient tile echo in the empty hallway.

We unlocked the visiting room and sat quietly in the chairs that faced a wall that separated us from the other half of the room. We could look into the other half through the doorway of wooden bars that comprised the upper two-thirds of the separating wall. Two picnic style benches, three or four chairs, a picture of Jesus and a crucifix were all that adorned the room. We heard the church bell clang to summon the nuns for Wally’s visit.

So far, the visit had felt like entering another place and time. Another country? Another century? Another culture? This unfamiliar old-world environment heightened my impression of being surrounded by ancient secrets and wisdom.

The door on the opposite end of the room behind the bars suddenly opened and we could hear merry chattering. Both Wally and I stood. The sisters pushed away the bars, giggling and laughing, and soon kazooing was added to the mix. Wally had brought kazoos for us all! My perception of monasteries and cloistered nuns—shattered!

Then Wally quieted the room and formally introduced me to his ‘family’ and to Sr. Ada.

When Sr. Ada looked into my eyes with such love, joy and acceptance, I had the same visceral, physical reaction I have when I behold the most beautiful places on earth. It was electrifying—from my toes to my tightened throat, I stood ready to cry. Beauty does that to me. I cry.

In that moment, something happened to me. My own limited perception of love, joy and acceptance shattered into a deeper understanding. In that moment, I knew I had to get to know her and correspond with her. I wanted so much to learn from this extraordinary person.

Wally finished the formalities of the introduction, and just like Wally, quickly shifted the mood into outrageous playfulness and had us all rolling with laughter! The remainder of the visit continued to shatter my image of nuns as we joked and sang and giggled together. I had known Wally was funny, but the combination of his humor with the quick wit of the nuns was intoxicating. I never laughed so hard in my life. Like little children, we eventually settled down to quiet time together. Our visit ended with an enchanting serenade from the nuns, angelic gothic harmonies that blessed us on our way.

I walked away from the monastery and drove Wally back to his hotel in a state of total amazement. Where had I been all my life to miss out on this kind of magic? Wally Amos, Sr. Ada, the other nuns, the monastery? I stumbled into experiencing a level of *unconditional love* I never knew existed. What other of life’s gems were in my back yard or right under my nose?

To my delight, this encounter with this earthly saint, Sr. Ada, ended with an invitation from her to correspond. Right from the beginning, I poured out my heart and soul to Sr. Ada. It was easy. I felt so comfortable divulging my deepest thoughts. Before long she invited me to visit. The first year I visited once, the second year, perhaps twice. We became very close friends and our visits were, oh, so precious. We spoke of God, spirituality, philosophy, love, joy, acceptance, surrender, friendship, intimacy, and more. I began to explore and understand these values at a deeper, purer level. I began to see my life change for the better.

I began to create more of everything in my life. I formed deeper connections with people as I ‘mimicked’ Sr. Ada’s listening, heartfelt communication, jubilant and fun personality, and her blissfulness towards God and life. Everyone began to respond to me much more positively. Everyone! My husband, Michael, our two children, Nicole and Dominic, family, friends, business associates, and acquaintances. Because of this, I deepened my relationship with Michael and created harmony at home, more friends and interesting career developments, and less stress in my life. More of my prayers were answered. Life became more fun!

My friends would jokingly tell me that my prayers were answered in a bigger way and more often than most people because the nuns had a direct link to the man upstairs! Knowing the Carmelites prayed for me gave me a sort of invincible confidence. I felt as if ‘cradled’ all the time.

Later in my third year of friendship with Sr. Ada, her arthritis worsened enough to prohibit her from driving. I became her driver.

I felt blessed to see her and extend the frequency of our visits to sometimes one and two times a month. Our friendship bloomed, which inspired and elevated my spirituality. I learned so much from her. And she didn’t try to teach me. I learned more from who she **was**. We discovered that we had the same birthday, only 34 years apart. She began to call me her twin; also because it seemed so. The more we got to know each other and my spirituality evolved, the more we became kindred spirits.

I experienced a greater depth of love, serenity, peace, joy, acceptance, forgiveness, service and spirit. Her life devoted to prayer, Sr. Ada prayed these things for me, for my family, friends, and for humanity. I learned and can feel the awesome power of prayer.

This Carmelite Monastery shattered my preconceived ideas about monasteries and other holy places. I once thought monasteries were holy places meant only for those who *hide* in prayer. I now believe monasteries were meant for those who love prayer. They focus their prayers as pure and powerful love that reaches far beyond the monastery walls in a silent broadcast to the world. These Carmelite nuns shattered my perception of saints, nuns, and holy people. I once thought saints had to be dead and canonized by the church. I believe differently knowing Sr. Ada and the Carmelites, who I consider modern-day saints amidst us. Sr. Ada shattered my assumption about myself as an enlightened person. I once thought an enlightened person had to be a saint. I now believe it is possible for all of us to be enlightened, each at our own level. These breakthroughs opened the way for many rich blessings in my life.

This friendship with the Carmelites helped grow my very dear friendship with Wally and his wife, Christine. When Wally comes to San Diego, I still drive him around! Almost every visit, we go to the Monastery. Wally also continues to introduce me to incredible people who significantly affect my life. Both Marcia Snow, his speaker manager extraordinaire, and Shelly Mecum, author of *God’s Photo Album*, have become two of my closest friends.

Sr. Ada also helped expand my understanding of ‘giving.’ Although unseen and unheard, the Carmelites and Sr. Ada’s kind of giving—prayer, is potent and transcends physicality. Giving by listening intently, the ultimate gift, is time and attention one-on-one with each other.

The form of giving most have difficulty with is tithing. I once thought ‘tithing is a duty.’ I now think ‘tithing is a joy.’ Most commonly, people understand tithing as giving 10% of your income to the source of your spiritual nourishment. Beyond that, I learned that tithing is “putting your money where your mouth is.” *Many will say, “God is my source,” few will then gladly put their money (tithes) towards their word.* For a long time, this category included me. When I stopped looking to the economy, my job, and other circumstances as my source, I no longer had

difficulty letting go of my money to a tithe. I saw Sr. Ada and the nuns give so freely of their prayer, attention, what little possession they had. They embodied “God as source” and it seemed that their every breath was a celebration of that. I let go of my tight-fisted grasp on my money, and dove into this other realm of giving and abundance. Although difficult at first, I began to tithe with joy and great gratitude. This new realm opened my mind to living life more fully, opened many doors of opportunities, and thus increased wealth of every kind for me. Once I understood this form of giving and gratitude, tithing became easy for me. I felt great giving to the source of my spiritual nourishment. I felt a sense of security, that I was living a part of the bigger plan for me, and that all my needs would be met. All of this, and Sr. Ada never asked me for a dime.

She taught me about the natures and power of love. That love has no boundaries. That many people flock to churches, services, lectures, seminars, and books, become wrapped up in the surface trappings of these ‘systems,’ form separateness and elitism, and forget to live love. Such ‘systems’ are outward ways to discover, nurture, enhance, and/or share this life and love *within us, if we choose to see*. Sr. Ada loved and embraced whatever form of religion or spirituality I practiced. She helped me ‘connect the dots’ from a system of discovery, to actual application of living love. She did not tell me what to do. She simply epitomized love. She was a blessed instrument, like the beloved Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who described herself as “a pen in the hand of God.”

My Sr. Ada passed away the summer of 1996. At her funeral, which was jammed—standing room only, I discovered that she had touched the lives of *thousands*—through correspondence. Somehow this didn’t surprise me. The walls of the Monastery could not contain her love and brilliance! When Sr. Ada and I talked, she listened as if I was the only person in the world. This gift obviously extended to the thousands of others to whom she had written letters and notes. What a pleasant surprise of a shattering of my perception of her! As one among her thousands, I know now how blessed I am to have had my special time with her.

I hold a legacy of her memory and beingness that I feel compelled to share. I believe she came into my life so I could experience the depth and essence of her as this magnificent instrument of God’s love and to learn to develop that capacity for unconditional love within others and myself.

The prioress of the monastery, Sr. Yvonne, called me in one day to visit, several weeks after Sr. Ada’s memorial service. We reminisced about our dear Sr. Ada and shared our tears.

She then took my hand, gingerly placing a small object in it. She quickly closed my hand so I couldn’t see what it was. She said, “We went through Sr. Ada’s belongings and we felt she would have wanted you to have this.”

I opened my hand and saw Sr. Ada’s cross necklace. I stared in disbelief at the glistening cross, which commemorated Sr. Ada’s 50-year tenure as a nun. Overwhelmed with emotions, I began to cry in front of Sr. Yvonne. All I could think was, “Who am I to deserve this gift?” As if reading my mind, Sr. Yvonne pressed it deeper into my hand and looked at me reassuringly, “This was meant for you.”

So be it. I accepted.

Gradually I adjusted to wearing this precious cross. I wear it close to my heart. It reminds me daily of Sr. Ada and how much I miss her. It also seems to have a blessed ‘magical’ energy about it. I feel “I am protected and guided in all that I do.”

I more easily opened my heart to living my life with greater love. I dream bigger. I laugh easier. I give *and receive* a whole lot better. I know and love myself, and others, more deeply. This deeper love has frightened me, as I had to trust, become vulnerable, and reveal and share more of myself. Stepping outside my own personal world is a shattering of a limited self, of a comfort zone of existence. The usual “What if I’m rejected?” and “What if I look foolish?” would creep up. Once I grew beyond that to “So what!”—Breakthroughs became thrilling! Surprisingly, I now seek breakthroughs.

With Sr. Ada as a presence behind my growth, I feel the responsibility to live and share these treasures of living, compelled to help create a more loving world. The massiveness of this undertaking frightens me, so I take it one step at a time. Sr. Ada’s death and the gift of her cross shattered my preconceived role in this master plan. Deep love doesn’t have to come from places like the monastery, but already resides within us. We must use our talents and live our purpose to express this deep love.

I wear the cross always. It triggers the realization that what I am, do, think, say and live can be as pure and as powerful a love as Sr. Ada is. And, yes, I have had my doubts and fears, “Can I live up to this?”

Many others have told me that I have touched their lives. I pray to God that I will be shown, and that I will live all the ways that this gift can be shared.

Three years after Sr. Ada’s passing, I finally came to the belief that I do live up to what the cross means to me. I was at an advanced leadership seminar with several of my mentors, in a staff assisting role. I started to receive responses of deep gratitude and great positive feedback from many students during the seminar. Two of the directors took notice of that and other qualities I displayed and offered me a prestigious leadership position as a co-facilitator of another advanced seminar. I knew how selective they were and thus was honored by their offer. I realized right then what a powerful affect I had on people. In that moment, I believed that as an instrument of love, I could be just as powerful a love as Sr. Ada, in my own way, in my own style.

I consider myself to be an ordinary person who made self-discoveries that shattered some my major limited beliefs about myself. “I’m only a Filipina in a white man’s world...” “I don’t have the education or experience...” “If I become successful and wealthy, I’ll lose or destroy my marriage...” That defining moment shattered the hold that I allowed these beliefs to dominate my life. Like a true shattering, the moment felt as if a bubble of glass...Boom!...Busted into hundreds of little pieces. I felt as if I had lived my entire life in a glass bubble, then saw freedom for the first time.

When this happened, I turned a major corner in my life—from the road of self-doubt and “I’m not enough,” to the road of self-acceptance and unconditional love. When I turned that corner, I felt a sense of peace and serenity about me, *that I was fully equipped to handle whatever lay ahead for me*. It required all that I learned from Sr. Ada, my life experiences up to that point, and all the breakthroughs of limited beliefs about my abilities, life, and myself. When I once thought ‘never,’ I now consider that through change, I can have all the love I want in life ‘forever.’

Breakthroughs are extraordinary opportunities to make significant and long lasting changes you seek in your life. For example, when your perception of yourself as an instrument of love expands to “loving life,” the universe responds to your expanded mind and self, giving you more reasons to love your life, more opportunities to love more deeply in your existing relationships. You meet more people enlightened like you. You’ll receive unexpected gifts in many forms. *You increase your magnetism to attract what you really want.*

Since this major turning point, life continues as if a fire hose is turned on! Because of my outpouring of love to the world, my friend, Janet Attwood described me as a ‘walking heart’! The world returns my outpouring with reciprocated love, plus opportunities, synchronicities, and gifts! **Love is so powerful.** When I trust this power, when I surrender to it, I am at peace knowing I am a beloved instrument.

*Breakthroughs help you know, love,
and cherish you,
your loved ones,
your purpose, and your life.*

—MARIA CARTER
