

A Companion Piece to the Series “How to Pursue Your Creative Purpose”

# The Right Hand of God

## A Parable about Using Your Gifts

By Minnie Lamberth

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*In the mid-1990s, I was struggling with how to use my gifts, and this piece of fiction came out as a parable of these struggles. My thinking was: God gives us gifts, we don't always know how to use them, and sometimes we're uncomfortable in how they're received. Even so, something is missing in the world when we don't put our gifts to use.*

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# The Right Hand of God

## *A Short Story by Minnie Lamberth*

Nothing was ever as quiet as it was in my mind the day I first heard about God. I was eight years old. My mother brought Him into the house.

"He was there all along," Momma said to Daddy as I walked in from school. She wore a light blue shirt dress, belted at the waist. Daddy was in a gray suit, hands on his hips.

With dark hair, porcelain skin, trim figure, and deep-green eyes, Momma filled a room in a way that no one could miss. I took after Daddy — brown hair and brown eyes. Also like Daddy, I tended to fidget when Momma said something serious. On this occasion, however, she brought with her a presence that silenced all activity.

Daddy turned to me. "Ruth," he said, "it looks like we're going to be having a visitor for a while. God is going to be staying at our house. I don't know exactly what this is going to mean, but it probably would be a good idea if you tried to keep your bedroom clean."

And that's how the whole thing got started.

God was a big presence to welcome into our home. He stayed on our minds a lot and seemed to bring about a number of questions.

"How can God be here if I don't see Him?" I asked my mother one morning. I sat on my bed and bounced while Momma searched my closet. Her hands paused on a pair of jeans; she turned back to me.

"Do you see Daddy right now?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"Is he in the house?"

"Yes," I answered.

"How do you know?"

"Because I didn't hear him leave."

Momma pulled out the jeans and a turtleneck shirt, then closed the closet door.

"Did you hear God leave?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"If you didn't hear God leave, that's how you know He's in the house." She handed me the clothes. "Wear this."

"Do you think God is nice?" I asked my mother on another occasion. We were

in the kitchen preparing for supper.

"Yes, I think He's nice," she answered. "He's been good to me. He got Daddy and me together. Then He gave us you to take care of. That was nice, don't you think?"

"Does He get mad?" I asked.

"Yes, He gets mad." She took a pot from a drawer beneath the oven, placed it in the sink, and began to fill it with water.

"How can He be nice if He gets mad?" I asked with certainty that I had caught a discrepancy.

Momma shut off the water. "Are you a nice girl?"

"Sometimes," I said.

"Do you ever get mad?"

"Yes."

"Why?" She placed the pot on the stove and turned on the eye.

"Because something's not going the way I want it to go."

"Why does that make you mad?" She pulled a box of spaghetti noodles from the cabinet.

"Because I want it to be better."

"God gets mad because He wants things to be better," Momma explained. "Help me empty the dishwasher."

The day after God arrived, I rushed home from school to see if He was still there. I talked to Him, told stories, asked questions. At first I chattered away — until I realized God wasn't talking back. He was very quiet, as if He were waiting until I finished saying whatever I had to say before He spoke.

"I'm done," I said. That's when God began to say things to me, but never in words, only mentally. He put thoughts in my head, and I nodded in agreement.

Not long after God came to our house, I took Him to school with me. We got in the car with Momma, and that's when I told her.

"I'm taking God to school with me," I said.

"That's nice, honey," she said.

I entered the front door of the school, which was actually the second floor. Walking past the office, I waved to the principal and his secretary through the glass window. Next, I hopped down a flight of concrete steps to get to the third-grade rooms. I had gotten to the bottom of those steps when something unusual happened.

My right hand began to tingle, as if it were being poked by a dozen needles. I held my hand out, opening and closing it to get the sensation to subside. I stretched it as wide as I could. Some fourth graders were four or five steps behind — one was a boy, the other a girl wearing glasses. The boy tried to grab a book from the girl;

she jerked it away. When she did that, her glasses flew from her head and landed in my right hand — which remained outstretched until that moment, then closed around the glasses.

“Give those back to me,” the girl said.

After I returned her glasses, the tingling in my hand subsided. In all the excitement, I had forgotten that God was with me. Remembering my manners, I showed Him to my classroom. When the class got started, the teacher asked several questions. I had a feeling that God knew some of the answers, but He wouldn't tell me what they were. He sat with me quietly until recess.

My friend Jean was the kind of girl who, if you didn't want to jump rope with her, you didn't get a jump rope. It's not that anybody had put her in charge of jump ropes; it's that she had a way of making you think she was in charge. That's why we were friends. Because I wanted to be able to get a jump rope when I needed one. That's also why Betty was Jean's friend. Usually we were a trio.

On this particular occasion, when God and I got to the playground for recess, I found out that Jean and Betty were mad at each other, and they both wanted to pull me to their sides in order to tip the balance of the disagreement in their favor. I wanted my friends to make a good impression with God; instead they argued in front of Him and tried to pull me into it too. I didn't know what to do. From somewhere within me, however, came a phrase I'd never said before: “What seems to be the trouble here?”

Betty said that Jean said that she, meaning Betty, couldn't spell. We had been given back our spelling tests just before recess. Betty had missed two words; Jean had not missed any. I had a total lapse of memory about my own spelling test because I had been so busy explaining to God everything that was going on, I had hardly been paying attention to those kinds of things.

Anyway, my right hand started getting that feeling again, the needle-like tingle. I touched Jean lightly on the shoulder and asked, “Is that true?” Jean quickly apologized to Betty and admitted that she was a good speller. Hearing Jean say that she was sorry startled both Betty and me. I didn't think much about this that morning, but I remembered it later when everything else had happened.

When Momma picked God and me up after school, I told her about catching the glasses.

“That's great, honey,” she said. “You were at the right place at the right time.”

Momma told Daddy when he came home from work that I had caught the glasses. He decided that I must have good eye-to-hand coordination and perhaps I should play softball. Good eye-to-hand coordination ran on his side of the family. The next day he brought home softball gloves and softballs. We went outside in the backyard, and he started throwing to me. He told me that I needed to mold the



softball glove to my hand.

"It should be so comfortable on you," he said, "that your hand doesn't feel natural without it."

"She's eight years old," Momma reminded him.

"I know," Daddy said. "We've already lost a lot of time, but we can catch up."

So, I became a softball player without a team — a person with a glove looking for a ball to catch.

One morning when God and I left for school, He reminded me to get my softball glove. I picked it up and put it on my hand. When we got to school, Jean asked me why I had the glove with me.

"My hand doesn't feel natural without it," I said.

"That's stupid," she said. "Now you've got to carry it around with you all day, like some idiot." Jean had a way with words.

"You're the idiot," Betty said to Jean. But we couldn't discuss it further because the class bell rang. We picked up the conversation at recess, when I put my glove on my hand again. Next to the playground in a ballfield for older kids, some sixth graders played softball.

"Why don't you go play with them?" Jean asked. When she asked me that, she didn't mean to be helpful; it was a dare. I walked toward the chain-link fence that separated our playground from the softball field and watched the game.

If you don't know the rules of the game, if you don't know the people playing, and if you can't tell who's ahead, softball can be boring to watch. I knew how to catch a ball, but there must be more to softball, I thought, than good eye-to-hand coordination. In the next moment, I uncovered a secret to what makes softball interesting.

A huge boy arrogantly trudged up to home plate. With rolls and rolls of fat, he was the widest boy I had ever seen. The mood of the whole field shifted. Both teams started making a lot of noise, yelling mostly. The batter glared at the pitcher in a defiant manner. With my hand in the glove, I climbed up a few links of the fence to get a better look.

The boy swung fast and furiously at the first pitch. He missed it entirely; more yells followed from the players on the field. The boy swung at the second pitch; he missed again. The noise level increased. I shifted on the links of the fence and propped my glove on the bar at the top.

At first, I thought my hand had fallen asleep; it tingled. With my feet hooked a few links from the bottom of the fence, my left hand hooked on a link near the top, I stretched out my right arm to get the tingling to stop. At the same time, the third pitch met an explosive crack off the boy's bat.

The ball soared straight toward a group of first graders behind me. With my

hand in the air, I yelled to the first graders to watch out. I was knocked from the fence and fell hard. From my flattened position on the ground, I spit dirt out of my mouth and sat upright. My grip loosened, and the ball rolled out of my glove.

A teacher ran over and asked if I was okay. "That's why we don't climb on fences," the teacher said. "We might fall and get hurt."

I cleaned myself up in the girls' restroom and headed back for my classroom. As I turned a corner in the hallway, my hand tingled again — this time worse than ever. I started shaking it, stretching it, opening and closing it, then for some reason I gripped a handle along the wall and pulled with all my might. A terrible and frightening noise blared throughout the school. My fear increased when I realized what had happened: I had pulled the fire alarm.

I was in real trouble, and I knew it. Children are not allowed to pull the fire alarm, and I had an awful feeling that the teachers would be mad at me. I started to shake uncontrollably, but I knew that I had to pull myself together to get out of this situation. I ran to my classroom, intending to apologize to Mrs. King, my teacher, and beg for mercy.

When I got to the room, breathless from anxiety, I tried to speak. There was no chance. The other students were filing out, single file. Mrs. King pulled me into the line and said, "Go, go, go."

"Mrs. King!" I said. "Mrs. King, wait!"

But she kept saying, "Go. No talking. Go."

The fire trucks arrived; the alarm continued to blare. Everything was so loud Mrs. King couldn't hear me. It was like I was mute. My mouth was moving but no words came out. I couldn't stop everything I had started.

By the time we got outside the building, my shoulders shook from sobs and fear. Before I knew it, everything I had eaten for breakfast found itself on the shirt of the boy in line ahead of me. The boy screamed in the way you scream when vomit is on your back. Mrs. King rushed over.

"Oh, Mrs. King, I feel so awful," I said.

"Ruth, you poor thing," she said, "you probably have that stomach virus that's going around. When we get back inside, you better go to the principal's office and call your momma."

Exhausted, I mumbled, "Okay."

"Bobby," Mrs. King said to the boy ahead of me, "you'll have to go, too. You're going to need another shirt."

Bobby and I sat side by side in the principal's office not saying a word. I really didn't know Bobby. Sure, my vomit was on his shirt, but I didn't want to talk about it. In fact, I didn't want to talk about much of anything.

"You must not feel well," Momma said when she picked me up. "You're not

saying a word.”

It was the kind of day where so much had happened, I couldn’t even think of how to explain it. I went straight to bed when I got home and slept until supper time. Daddy woke me up when he got in from work.

“Feeling better?” he asked.

“Yeah, Daddy, I’m better,” I said. “I feel fine.”

It looked like, by getting sick, I had caught a lucky break at school. I might not get in trouble after all. But it seemed to me that anything I said at this point would be risky.

A week later, I heard two teachers talking in front of me in the hallway of the school.

Miss Smith said, “One of the firemen said we were lucky, that if they hadn’t gotten there when they did, the whole place would have gone up in smoke.” Miss Smith was pretty with good taste in clothes.

“When were you talking to the fireman?” Mrs. Wilson asked.

“When I asked him to carry some heavy books to my car — after I invited him over to dinner to repay him.”

“You’ve got to take opportunities as they come, don’t you?”

“I like a man in uniform, you know.”

I had caught up with them, and they turned around quickly. For some reason, teachers don’t like for students to hear their conversations.

“Hurry on to class,” Miss Smith said.

So many strange things had taken place after I took God to school with me that I thought it best to leave Him home. I didn’t say anything about it to Him or anyone; I slipped out of the house one morning without a word.

“Where’s your softball glove?” Betty asked me at recess.

“I don’t carry it anymore,” I said.

“But you caught that ball with it,” she said.

“I know I caught the ball, but I don’t carry the glove anymore.”

Betty’s asking me about that glove made me mad for some reason, but Jean put everything in perspective for us.

“Stop talking about the glove,” she said. “She looked stupid carrying it around.”

I could count on Jean to make a point worth remembering, but I felt guilty about the glove. I felt guilty about everything. Daddy had told me that I didn’t seem like myself lately.

“I’m myself, Daddy,” I said.

Daddy looked at me like he didn’t believe me. “Are you sure you’re not beside yourself?”

“No, Daddy, I’m not beside myself,” I said. “I’m beside yourself.”

“Okay then,” he said. “You can stay beside myself, but don’t get beside yourself.”

“I won’t, Daddy,” I promised.

Daddy may have been right. Even though I was myself, I was not the self I used to be. Come to think of it, God didn’t seem like Himself either. He used to seem friendly; now He seemed distant. I figured He was mad at me because I didn’t take Him to school anymore.

My hand had stopped fixing things; it no longer tingled. Something big, it seemed to me, had been removed from my insides. On the outside I looked the same, but the inside had a huge hole that nobody could see.

I did okay without God, I thought, until the day Mrs. King got hurt. In the classroom after recess, I noticed that someone had left a soft drink can on the floor next to Mrs. King’s desk. Soft drinks weren’t allowed in the classroom, so I started to lean down and pick it up and put it in the trash can. But I decided that since it wasn’t my soft drink, somebody else could throw it away.

A minute or two later, two girls ran in. One of them kicked over the can and spilled the soft drink. The kids in the room made a collective gasp: we knew Mrs. King would not be happy.

When Mrs. King walked in, nobody said a word. Nobody wanted to get blamed for the soft drink spill, so everybody sat quietly. It seemed for a moment that she wasn’t going to see it. As she looked through papers in her hands, she stepped in the spilled liquid. She slipped and fell, dropping papers everywhere. Mrs. King screamed that she had broken something and someone should run get the principal.

An ambulance came and people carried Mrs. King out. When she came back two weeks later, she wore a cast and walked with crutches.

I realized that even if the soft drink did not belong to me, if I saw it on the floor and didn’t pick it up, I was partly responsible for what happened. I wondered if God would have picked up the soft drink if He had been with me.

Something else happened not long after Mrs. King broke her foot. Since she couldn’t walk well, she sent me on an errand to the office. She wanted me to take the class grades to the school secretary. On the way down the hall, with the papers in my hands, I saw two sixth-grade boys shoving each other. The office door opened at the end of the hallway; Betty came out and, without realizing it, walked into a dangerous path. One boy shoved the other boy right into her. She fell against the lockers in the hallway and slid to the floor. Two teachers came out of nearby classrooms, sent those boys to the office, and helped Betty stand up.

I watched this take place in front of my eyes, and I didn’t do a thing about it. I didn’t even warn Betty. This was my best friend. How could I watch — and do



nothing?

By the time I got to Betty, tears rolled down her face.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She looked at me as if I had hurt her feelings. "How come you'll catch a softball to save people you don't even know, and you won't help me, your best friend?"

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to explain it. I couldn't look her in the face, so I looked down at my feet and shrugged. "I left God at home," I said.

"What did you do that for?" she asked.

"He got me in trouble," I said.

"When did He get you in trouble?"

"The time we had that fire at the school and I threw up."

"You didn't get in trouble," she said. "You got sick. Getting sick is not the same as getting in trouble. Getting sick is something you can't help. Trouble is doing something bad. They are not the same."

Things had been confusing lately, but Betty made sense.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Do you want me to do anything?"

"Bring God back to school tomorrow," she said. "You're not the same without Him."

I didn't say a word when Momma picked me up from school and not a word when we got to the house. When we pulled into the driveway, I grabbed my books, went to my room, and sat on my bed. I thought about God and everything we had been through.

What I wanted to know was, after all this time, after I had left God here for so long, was He still in the house?

I was asking myself over and over, is God here? How do I know if He is here? Then I remembered: I never heard Him leave. If I didn't hear God leave, He's still in the house.

I was almost afraid to say this out loud, but once I decided that God was there watching me, and He knew that I knew He was there, I didn't figure I had a choice.

"God," I asked, "will you go with me to school tomorrow and will you let my right hand fix things again?"

God didn't say a word. He was very quiet, but I knew that He heard me.

The next day I took God to school with me. At the curb I opened the door of the car to the sounds of the school yard. Doors slammed, cars pulled away, students laughed or yelled, teachers talked — it was as if every noise called my attention to it.

My feet scraped against the concrete steps entering the building. Inside, the noises of the school buzzed in the background. I listened to my shoes echo in the hallway; hard-soled shoes echo in a way that makes me listen. My feet lifted easily;

they walked with a rhythm, a rhythm that I was a part of. Oddly enough, I walked in time to music I could not hear. I could not hear it, but I could feel it. My heart was beating to the same melody, beating again and again and again, reminding me “here I am, here I am, here I am.”

## ***What about You?***

*Do you sense that there's a gift within you that you want to put to use?*

*Is there something in your way that keeps you from pursuing this purpose?*

*If it's "I just don't have time," can you take five minutes today to start using your gift?*

*If it's "I don't have the skills I need," can you take five minutes today to get better at what you want to do?*

*Or if it's just basic fear, can you take five minutes today to act brave?*

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