

Birthing Hope: Giving Fear to the Light

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Childbirth Reveals our Anxieties – and our Hope

Rachel Marie Stone, acclaimed author of *Eat with Joy* and editor of the newly revised *More-with-Less* cookbook, reflects on the time she spent as a doula and missionary in Malawi in her new memoir *Birthing Hope: Giving Fear to the Light*. During this period in her life, Stone came to terms with both every day and far-reaching anxiety. She grappled anew with the realities of human suffering, global justice, and maternal health.

“After the birth of my second son, I was motivated to become a doula so that I could help other women experience empathetic and empowering care during what I understand to be a spiritually significant time,” said Stone. “As I learned more about birth, I came to view it as a powerful spiritual metaphor; one that the biblical writers use, yet is too little discussed among Christians. During the years that I was writing and studying this topic, I lived and worked as a teacher and doula in one of the poorest countries in Africa. There, the metaphor of birth—a time of suffering that results in new life—took on greater significance as I wrestled with the hard reality that sometimes painful labor brings forth only more death and loss, and that love always entails terrible risk. I think we often struggle with anxiety and fear because it’s so hard to love wholeheartedly in a world that’s uncertain. But to numb out, disengage, or occupy ourselves with anxiety robs us from living as well. And mere ‘positive thinking’ isn’t that helpful. There are real risks, and life can feel harsh and cruel. But beauty, kindness, and empathy are part of God’s redeeming work in the world.”

In these profound reflections on the mysteries of life and death, Stone unpacks how childbirth reveals our anxieties, physicality, and mortality. All who are born or give birth will someday die. Yet even in the midst of our fears and doubts, birth is a profoundly hopeful act of faith as new life is brought into a hurting world that groans for redemption. God becomes present to us as a mother who consents to the risk of love and ultimately lets us make our own way in the world, as every good mother must do.

“Ask me what this book is about and I will struggle to give you a simple answer,” writes Ellen Painter Dollar, author of *No Easy Choice*. “It is about pregnancy and birth, anxiety and despair, blood and water. It is memoir and history, poetry and theology. Ask me, though, why you should read this book, and my answer is very simple—because you are a person with a body, in and through which you bear pain, fear, and failure. Read this book for its necessary wisdom. In our most desperate vulnerability, when all we can do is endure, God is there too.”

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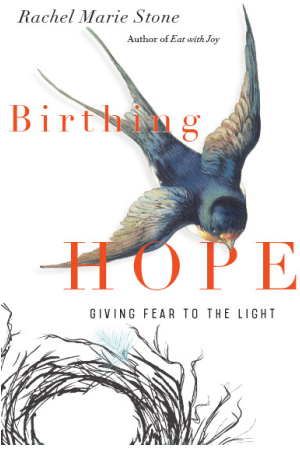
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Author of *Eat with Joy*



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In One's Blood

I was born the same year that a strange malady called GRID (the precursor to AIDS) first began killing gay men in New York and San Francisco. My mom received several pints of donated blood right after I was born, a few years before HIV was identified as the cause of GRID. This was before anyone realized that far from being restricted to the so-called four Hs generally regarded as contemptible “others” (heroin addicts, homosexuals, Haitians, and hemophiliacs), AIDS was indiscriminate. Statistically speaking, my mom wasn't in much danger. But she sometimes mentioned those transfusions. She was aware that she wouldn't have been immune to the illness that so many religious people at the time were calling a just punishment from God.

When I was five or six, not long after the first famous people started dying of AIDS and people started openly talking about it, my dad became acutely ill. He had been moderately unwell for several years but now he grew thin and gaunt. His mouth was lined with sores and he had diarrhea all the time. The members of our largely Italian church in Brooklyn, where he was the pastor, made lasagna and baked ziti.

“Eat, eat,” they would say. “We have to fatten you up.” But my dad got thinner and weaker. He lay on the couch in the middle of the day. He had generalized lymphadenopathy (swollen lymph nodes all over his body). I heard him crying in the bathroom. The doctors said it must be cancer, or it must be something else, but they didn't know what. The Salvadoran grandmother of some church friends—known universally as Mama—spent two hours on the bus to bring a brown paper bag containing a single egg and several spices.

“I make you *ponche crema*, pastor. *Ponche crema* make you better,” Mama said in her broken English. *Ponche crema* was basically warm eggnog, but the gesture was everything. An old woman was giving what little she had—her precious recipe—to a sick man as her cherished ritual of care.

There was sickness in Mama's family, too. Her granddaughter's husband, Joe, was sick and no one knew what it was. Joe was my dad's age, and the congregation offered prayers for them in the same breath. They were companions in illness; the “sick guys.” Then one day, Joe, who was not gay, not Haitian, and not a hemophiliac, had an answer to what was wrong—he had once used needle drugs. Now his wife, Vera, was also infected.

My dad asked for the HIV test.

Joe and Vera lived by the water, and Joe had a glass bottom boat. He said he'd take me out on the bay so that we'd be able to see the fish swimming underneath. Joe died just a little while later, and my dad's HIV test came back negative.

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BOOK EXCERPT

It turns out that my dad had celiac disease. All that lovingly offered pasta full of gluten turned his body against itself. Bowls of rice replaced loaves of bread, and soon after my dad was perfectly well. But then phone rang, and Vera, too, was dead.

My mother did not acquire the virus at my birth and did not pass it to me. My father did not have the virus and did not die, though he came close. We were okay, for now. But you never knew. Someone might rape you or poke you with a needle in a crowd or hide a needle in a theater seat. Someone might spill something disgusting on you. You might go for a dental cleaning only to be intentionally infected by a deranged hygienist.

Or, decades later, you might find yourself standing in the blood and body fluids of the maternity ward, holding your hands to the light and fretting over whether your chewed-up cuticles and paper-cut skin was broken enough to let in the virus you'd dodged all these years.

— Taken from chapter 3, "Reflect"



Rachel Marie Stone on Faith, Justice, Health, and More

Rachel Marie Stone's writing about food, faith, justice, public health, and maternal health has appeared in the *Washington Post*, the *Huffington Post*, *Christianity Today*, the *Christian Century*, *Books and Culture*, *Sojourners*, *In Touch* magazine, Religion News Service, Patheos, and more. Her first book, *Eat with Joy: Redeeming God's Gift of Food*, won a Christianity Today Book Award and was named by a Religion News Service columnist as one of the year's ten most intriguing titles in religion. She was chosen to revise the classic cookbook *More-with-Less* (Herald Press), which has sold nearly a million copies.

Stone is a regular columnist for *Christianity Today* and regularly reviews titles in religion and general fiction for *Publishers Weekly*. She has spoken widely at conferences on the topics of faith, food, hospitality, maternal health, and justice, and has been interviewed on the radio and for print publications.

Stone has lived overseas in three countries for five of the past ten years, has written two volumes of religious education curriculum for Well-Trained Mind Press, has taught English in Malawi, Africa, and prekindergarten in New Jersey, and is now a high school English teacher at the Stony Brook School, a boarding and preparatory school on Long Island (NY). She has two sons with her husband, Tim.

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Praise for *Eat With Joy*

"Stone, a contributor to *Christianity Today's* Her.meneutics blog, presents a compelling case to tone down foodie righteousness with common sense and awe of the sacred. Confessing to personal struggles with eating disorders, Stone ends each chapter with lyrical prayers drawn from around the world. 'Better the occasional meal shared with friends at McDonald's than organic salad in bitter isolation,' Stone admonishes the new dietary purists."

—John Murawski, Religion News Service, "The Year's 10 Most Intriguing Religion Books," December 22, 2013

"Rachel Marie Stone reminds us that God intends us to delight in food, and she invites us to do so again. Offering up both wisdom and recipes, Stone welcomes us to the table and shows us a way to eat with joy."

— *Relevant Magazine*, May/June 2013

"Rachel Marie Stone is a woman after my own heart: a mom, a writer and a Christian who loves to feed the people she cares about. *Eat with Joy* is practical and inspiring, wise and full of love."

—Shauna Niequist, author of *Present Over Perfect*