

*chapter one*



# *Good Soil*

*A*lthough we don't often realize it, the conditions surrounding us in childhood have a profound influence on what we want out of life, how we go about getting it, and even if we do get it. Those circumstances are like the soil in which the seed of a life is sown, and to a great degree they set the boundaries of what is possible—or at least what we think is possible—at any given time. That was just as true for me as it would be for my disabled child.



Even when I was very young, I realized that my family was somehow tainted. Nothing was ever said about it, but I knew that under the surface something was wrong.

My mother, Trudy, was the youngest of four children. She was born four years later than her next-oldest sibling, after Grandma had had several miscarriages, and she weighed only four pounds at birth. Mom really was the “baby” of the family, which perhaps explains why she was emotionally immature. She ended up pregnant at sixteen, and although there was a shotgun wedding, she continued to live with my grandparents after my sister Lou was born.

When she was nineteen, Mom met my father at a dance. Ted was a musician who played guitar in nightclubs and on the radio, gave music lessons, and occasionally worked as an appliance salesman. He was about ten years older than Mom, good looking, and apparently very persuasive, for my mother did whatever he wanted. Soon she was pregnant again, and in 1933 my sister Shirley was born. This time there was no wedding, for it seems Ted hadn't divorced his first wife. To make matters worse, he had a drinking problem and couldn't hold a job. My grandparents had to rescue my mother and sisters several times when they ran out of food, but Mom wouldn't leave Ted. He kept promising to marry her, and she kept believing him.

In 1936, Ted was about to stand trial for stealing

money from his boss. Instead, he got a chance to start over in California. A few years earlier, my Uncle Clyde had gone into business with my Aunt Ellen's husband, Mike. By 1936 the two had a successful camera shop in Oakland, and my grandfather talked Clyde into giving Ted a job. My parents moved from Missouri to California, and my grandparents, Alva and Cora, soon followed from Kansas.

I was born at home on February 4, 1937, three months after we moved to Oakland. Six months later, Ted lost the battle with the bottle and quit his job because “it wasn't good enough.” With that, my grandfather told him to leave. Grandpa warned Ted that if he ever came around again, he would tell the police where they could find him. My parents were together less than five years, and I grew up not knowing my father.



Money was scarce during the Great Depression, but one thing hard times did for my family was to strengthen our sense of community and belonging. I was part of an extended family in which my aunts and uncles and grandparents treated me as if I were their own child. With my aunts and uncles close by, my grandparents, mother, sisters, and I lived together until 1943.

By then the United States was at war, my grandfather and mother had gone to work in the shipyards, and Uncle Clyde had enlisted in the Army. One of Uncle Clyde's

hobbies was horseback riding, and since he needed a place to leave the horses while he was in the service, he bought a small farm in Livermore. The fall I entered first grade, Grandma and Shirley moved to the farm, and six months later the family decided that I should live there, too, while Grandpa, Mom, and Lou stayed in town. Nobody said anything to me about it. One day it was just time to move.

When I was older, I realized that Shirley and I had still needed supervision, while Lou, who was in the seventh grade, was old enough to stay alone while my grandfather and mother worked. At the time, however, I thought I was being punished by being sent away. Like my mother and grandfather, I enjoyed socializing, but Grandma rarely spoke, and Shirley spent all her time with her nose in a book. The nearest children lived a mile away. We didn't own a car, and I was too young to walk that far to visit. The first year on the farm was the loneliest time of my young life.

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Things got better the following year, when my grandfather moved to the farm to be with us. Soon family and friends were pooling their gas rations and coming for supper almost every Sunday. Grandpa loved people and

always had something to share, whether it was the Good Word or a chicken or rabbit from the farm. Between these visits, school, and chores, my life fell into a comfortable routine. Still, I was glad when the war ended and we moved back to town.

Three years later, my grandmother died. She had had health problems for many years, and I'm sure the work she did on the farm would have worn out even a healthy person. Part of Grandma's legacy to me was her conviction of the importance of education. She had graduated from a teacher's college and taught for several years before she married my grandfather. She was also very creative and could sew anything from scratch. In fact, she had wanted to be a milliner, but her folks thought that teaching was a more practical career. Grandma started giving me lessons on the treadle sewing machine when I was four.

Trudy was more like a beautiful older sister than a mother, and after my grandmother's death, my grandfather was the biggest influence in my life. Grandpa set strict standards for behavior, but he also answered all my questions and encouraged me to seek God's path for me. I was raised a Methodist, and every Sunday, rain or shine, we went to church. Struggling with feelings of being unclean and unworthy, I tried never to do anything wrong, and when I found clear guidelines in religion, I embraced them totally. Shirley often teased me about being a Goody Two-Shoes, but I really believed that if I followed what my grandfather