



AN INTERVIEW WITH MARLO SCHALESKY

(provided courtesy of www.MarloSchalesky.com)

We're here with author and mother of five, Marlo Schalesky. Marlo has written a terrific new novel about a young woman whose world is turned upside down when she finds she needs to take care of a teenager with Down syndrome. Part of that world—and the part we'll be discussing today—is how the Lord uses unexpected events to make us reexamine our lives and draw us closer to Him.

Q: Marlo, your newest novel, *Shades of Morning*, features a 15-year-old boy with Down syndrome. What inspired you to choose that particular disability?

A: Andy did. And he did it one ordinary Sunday morning at church. I went not expecting to see anything special. But God had other plans. And so did Andy.

In the middle of the third song, a loud, awkward noise came from the far side of the church. I stood on tiptoes and peeked toward it. And there was Andy. His arms were raised, his eyes closed. And he was singing to his God for all he was worth. Andy, in his middle teens, with blond hair, thick glasses, and small ears. Andy, with Down syndrome and a grin on his face big enough for the angels to see.

That moment changed me. It showed me that beauty is found in unexpected places, and that God's gifts in our lives are often wrapped in awkward, off-key packages. I witnessed something beautiful, something wondrous that day, and it made me see that so often the hard things in life, the things we want to hide away, to forget, to cover up, can be transformed into things of beauty in the hands of God.

So that's how *Shades of Morning* was born – in those moments while Andy worshipped and I was left breathless by the wonder of it.

That's why my vision for *Shades of Morning* is to share that beauty with my readers, to show that God can take even our regrets and wash them clean, make them new. That His gifts to us come in ways we may not want, don't expect, and often don't recognize. But they are His gifts to us all the same, meant to set us free from the misconceptions that prevent us from being everything He wants us to be.

Q: The main character, Marnie, keeps a box full of pieces of paper where she records her regrets. Why do so many believers struggle to let go of their regrets?

A: I think there are two reasons. First, as believers, we are keenly aware of the cost of our sins and mistakes to the One we love. Jesus suffered and died on the cross for us. So we wish we could have done better, chosen better, lived in a way that would always bring honor to God. But of course, we haven't and we didn't and we won't. Not always.

And that's when the little whispers of fear set in – whispers that tell us that we missed God's best for us. That if only we'd done better, chosen better, lived right, then we would be the people God wanted and be living the life He wanted too. But now, the whispers say, it's too late. Our mistakes are too great. Now we can never live God's dream for us.

Hogwash! There's a reason that our enemy is called "the accuser of the brethren" – it's because those whispers are not from One who loves us, calls us, transforms us. They are lies from the one who accuses. They are meant to paralyze us and keep us from following Paul's example in Philippians 3:13-14 (NIV), "But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

Q: How can we find forgiveness and healing from those past regrets?

A: This is the important thing: God calls us to repent, not to regret. And that's what we need to do. All of us have made mistakes, have chosen poorly, missed opportunities, done things we wish we'd never done. But we don't need to dwell in regret. Instead, simply confess, repent. move on. It's like riding a horse. If you keep looking behind you, the horse stalls, wavers, gets confused. You have to keep your eye on where you want to go. Repentance keeps you looking forward. Regret causes you to keep looking back.

And worse, a bigger problem with regret is that it denies the primary power of God – the power to transform anything in our lives to His glory. It says, "This is too much for God."

But the God who transformed an implement of execution, the cross, into a symbol of salvation has proven that He can transform anything – past, present, or future – into something that points to His glory. Think about that. Before Jesus, the cross was a symbol of horror and disgrace and misery. It was the most horrific way to die a criminal's death. But after Jesus, it became a symbol of redemption and wonder and love. If God could so change the meaning of the cross, He can also transform those ugly things in our lives for His glory.

So, we need to take off the band-aid and expose our regrets, repent of them, and simply leave them in the hands of God, looking forward in expectation of His transforming power, even when that transformation seems impossible.

Q: Regret often keeps us from going deeper in our relationship with God. How does Marnie's relationship with God change during the course of the book?

A: Regrets will shape you if you give them the power, if they become what you treasure in your heart. And that's exactly what happens to Marnie. She hides from her regrets by

locking them away. She doesn't think they can touch her there. But instead of being free from them, she's really just carrying them with her.

That's how it is with us. When we lock away these parts of our lives from God and ourselves, we are really just hiding them in our hearts, making them our treasure.

Marnie learns that she has to face her regrets, confess them to those she hurt and to her friends, and only then can she be healed of them. And with healing, she finds that can see God's presence in her life and how He's been working in beautiful and wondrous ways to transform those regrets into something new and good in her life. But as long as she hides her regrets in her heart, she simply can't draw close to God and experience the power of his healing touch.

For her, and for us, it's about trusting God enough to face regret and let it go, to believe that God can take anything and make it beautiful. To believe that God truly does forgive our sins and forget them. And that He can take our mistakes and remake them. That's what the cross is all about. That's what life in Christ is about too.

Q: Marnie had her life neatly planned out, and all of her plans were turned upside-down when she becomes the guardian of her 15-year-old nephew. As believers, how should we react when life doesn't go according to our plans?

A: It's a running joke in my household that my plans exist solely for God's amusement ... so He'll have something to chuckle about as He leads my life in ways I never dreamed. I gave my life to Christ when I was in college, and apparently He thought I really meant it, because as it turned out, that was the end of me making life plans and having them work out like I wanted. And the one thing I've learned from it all is to wait and to watch, because I know that when life doesn't go according to plan, that's when God is working with power.

I'm reminded of the story of Mary, Jesus' mother. Talk about plans going awry from the moment the angel showed up. She had a nice, quiet life planned. But then she's pregnant out of wedlock, she has to take a long donkey ride and deliver the baby in a barn, the only story we know about him growing up is that he about gave his parents a heart attack by staying in Jerusalem without their permission, and then of course. Then he starts his ministry and becomes homeless and hated by the elite. And as if that isn't bad enough, Mary has to watch her son die on a Roman cross – the worst death known to those people at that time.

And yet, it's in that horrific moment that encapsulates the very epitome of what it means for plans and hopes to go awry – in that moment we find the most incredible, wondrous, breathtaking act of God of all time. It is the moment of redemption, of glory, of splendor, of the answer to all the prayers and hopes from the beginning of time until now. It is at that moment that we find the salvation of all mankind.

I think it may always be that way. That there, at the very place where our dreams don't come true, where our expectations are shattered – that is where God is standing in the greatest power. Those are the moments, the places that change the world, where we find a depth and wonder deeper than we ever dared to dream.

Because, this I know for certain: the life God gives you is not the life you dreamed. It is the Kingdom of Heaven lived through you. It is wondrous. It is incredible. It is unexpected. And it is found at the foot of the cross.

Q: As Marnie discovers, beauty is found in unexpected places, and God's gifts to us are often wrapped in unexpected, and maybe even awkward, packages. Can you share an example of this from your own life?

A: The biggest unwanted, unexpected package in my life has been a 20-year journey through infertility and miscarriage. When I got married, I planned to have the number of children I wanted to have, when I wanted to have them. I had plans! But you know how my plans turn out ... yep, God was shaking His head saying, "I don't think so."

And so began a journey that has been fraught with questions, doubts, pain, and some amazing miracles.

Now, as I look back, I see that just about every deep and meaningful thing I've learned about God, I can point to my journey through infertility and say, "Yeah, infertility taught me that." It taught me that I'm not the god of my life. God is. It taught me there are things I can't control, can't achieve, no matter how hard I try. And sometimes I must choose to live the life God has given me, with love and hope, (and joy!) even when it's not the life I dreamed.

Infertility taught me that God calls me not to the pursuit of my dreams, but to love. "Love one another," Jesus says. "Love your neighbor as yourself."

So, those are just a few of the things that God taught me through the journey of my own unwanted package of infertility and miscarriage. My hope is that *Shades of Morning* will reveal the same truths and more to others as well.

Q: Another theme found in the book deals with the regret and fear tied to miscarriage, something you're familiar with. How did you get through those painful experiences, and how can we reach out to women who have lost a baby?

A: Yes, miscarriage has certainly been one of those awkward, painful packages for me. I've had six miscarriages, and they're devastating. I mostly got through them the ugly way – by struggling, wrestling, crying out to God, and by sitting at my computer and playing solitaire while the tears streamed down my face. But for me, that's what it took to face the pain and disappointment and go through it, so I could come out in a new, different place. A place where I could see God more clearly.

As I mentioned before, I think that's the key – not to hide from the pain or bury it, but to lay it at God's feet and go through it, struggling, wrestling, crying – whatever is needed to get through to a new place of understanding about God, yourself, and what your life is really about.

As for others, I think the most helpful thing people have done is to simply mourn with me, to let me know they're sharing my sorrow and disappointment, so that I wasn't standing alone. Then, they found out if I needed to do any procedures, because for some of my miscarriages I had to go into the surgery center. Then, friends brought meals, volunteered to look after my other kids so my husband could come in with me, etc. Afterward, those same friends invited me out to a fun chick-flick movie and coffee afterward. They didn't act awkward or try to avoid mentioning the baby. They were just there for me, like always, being a friend.

On the other hand, the less helpful people focused on trying to make me feel better by coming up with excuses for why God may have allowed this miscarriage, or giving me reasons why the miscarriage wasn't as bad as it may seem. "You'll get pregnant again soon," they'd say. Or, "It's good that it happened earlier in the pregnancy." Or, "This baby just wasn't right." Then, they followed it up with stories of others who had gone through miscarriage later, or got pregnant right away again. But this approach, while meaning well, really only serves to convince people they shouldn't really be feeling as bad as they are. It tells the woman she should skirt the pain, deny it. It's really not that bad.

My real friends have shared my sorrows. They haven't tried to diminish them.

Q: Your books always feature a surprising twist at the end. Without giving the ending away, what can readers expect when they turn the last page?

A: My hope is that readers will catch their breath in wonder and say, "Ooo, that's cool. That changes everything!" Personally, I love stories with surprise twists that tie into the overall theme of the book. So, for my books, my goal is to have a twist that reveals a deeper meaning in the story. I want to surprise and delight readers not just with something they didn't see coming, but with something that allows them to see and experience the characters' journeys in deep ways. In the end, my real prayer is that when readers catch their breath at the ending, they'll also catch their breath in wonder at the mystery and beauty of our vivid God. I hope the vision of *Him* will take their breath away. At its heart, that's what the surprise twist is all about.

Q: Where can our listeners learn more about you, *Shades of Morning*, and your other books?

A: I hope listeners will visit my website at www.VividGod.com (or www.ShadesofMorning.com) and check out the excerpt for *Shades of Morning*, and various other information there. From there, listeners can also find links to my blog, Twitter account, and Facebook author page, where I focus on deeper living for everyday people.

Visit www.MarloSchalesky.com for more interviews with Marlo and news about upcoming releases!