

By the Grace of God

**BY THE
GRACE OF
GOD**

**LEE FRANCES HELLER
AND
FRIENDS**

*Writings for Families, Friends
and Clergy*

*Including Thoughts by
Becky Allison, Terri Main, Elisabeth Kellogg
and
Rev. David Horton*

Edited by Julie Ann Johnson

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GOD MADE YOU ALIVE WITH CHRIST. HE FORGAVE US ALL OUR SINS, HAVING CANCELED THE WRITTEN CODE (THE LAW OF MOSES) THAT WAS AGAINST US AND THAT STOOD TO OPPOSE US. HE TOOK IT ALL AWAY, NAILING IT TO HIS CROSS.

– Colossians 2:13-14

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Lee Frances Heller, August, 1999

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***THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
LEE FRANCES HELLER.***

***LEE DEDICATED MANY OF HER 81 YEARS TO CHRISTIAN
SERVICE.***

***SHE WAS ASSOCIATED WITH THE GOOD SHEPHERD
MISSION IN PATERSON, NEW JERSEY, BEGINNING IN 1965
SERVING AS A COOK, THEN CHAPLAIN, AND FINALLY AS
SUPERINTENDENT UNTIL RETIREMENT IN 1985.***

***AFTER RETIREMENT, SHE DEDICATED THE LAST TWELVE
YEARS OF HER LIFE AS A “MISSIONARY” TO HER
“COMMUNITY” OF CROSSDRESSERS, TRANSSEXUALS AND
OTHER TRANSGENDERED PEOPLE.***

– JULIE ANN JOHNSON

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In this chapter, we revisit some of Lee Frances Heller's personal correspondence to her unofficial "board of directors" and friends, and in particular to Julie Johnson and Becky Allison.

In these letters, we see so much of Lee's personal struggles with her declining health, yet see her closeness with her Creator ever increasing. We also see her vision for helping those who struggle with their own Christianity.

Included is her final letter to her friends, only a few days before she died, where she saw her Saviour, Jesus Christ, as a triumph over Satan's final shot at her.

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Lee and neighbor Marge

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Again, I thank you all.

Julie Ann Johnson

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FOREWORD

Julie Ann Johnson

Being transgendered is a difficult situation for a person to be in. Much of society has a misunderstanding of what is happening. And much of this stems from fear. But the transgendered person, too, has an equal fear, and too often lives in the “closet”, so to speak, because of the fear of losing their family or livelihood.

When this same person is also a Christian, there is all the more anxiety. Being a Christian and also being a crossdresser or a transsexual is not an unusual phenomenon. In fact, there are large numbers of transgendered people who profess their faith in Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, and too often, when a transgendered person is found out by members of their church, there is movement to ostracize them. It was because of her own feelings of guilt that Lee Frances Heller studied the Scriptures and found that there is no real Biblical support for this exclusion. She thus dedicated the last several years of her life to helping crossdressing and transsexual Christians understand that the gift of God in Jesus Christ is equally available to all. Lee firmly believed that God does not want anyone to perish.

Lee published a quarterly newsletter called *Grace and Lace* – so named because the Grace of God extends even to those who crossdress. Dozens of individuals wrote for these letters over the years, with Becky Allison and Terri Main being regular contributors. After having health setbacks in 1997, Lee gave up *Grace and Lace*, but then started another newsletter, *The Christian Love Letter*, to tell of God’s infinite love to all who accept Jesus Christ. *Grace and Lace*’s theme was that it is surely all right to be transgendered. *Love Letter*’s theme presented the developing path to God, then told of God’s plan of Salvation.

The circulation of these letters was small at first. Only a couple dozen copies of the earliest were distributed. But as the word spread, so did the readership, with about 400 transgendered Christians on Lee’s mailing list when she died. Virtually all the costs throughout the years were borne by her meager pension, or by gifts from friends. So grateful were those she helped, that in the last year of her life, when her health required special care, several of her friends rallied with monthly financial support.

I was one of those that she helped through her writings. It was through Lee Frances Heller that God helped me to find a way to come to terms with my then-secret feeling of hopelessness as to my own transsexuality. I struggled with the fear that there was nothing but separation from God because of my medical condition. I had always felt the guilt that society placed on me for being a crossdresser, and that kept

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me from being a “real” Christian. Certainly, I always considered my faith in Jesus Christ absolute. But so confused was I over these issues that this was one of the reasons I was absent from the formal church for many years of my adult life.

Then that fateful weekend in early April several years ago, when my intense feeling of gender discomfort “exploded”. I finally asked God to help me find a way – and He did. He did several things in parallel. These included directing my “coming out”. But more importantly, He led me to a wonderful evangelical Christian church in Wheaton, Illinois, and to an equally wonderful Sunday School teacher who accepts me as I am. Then He led me to Lee Frances Heller. Lee and I became friends for the last three years of her life. Lee helped me understand the wonderful love of God and His gift of Salvation to me through Jesus Christ – even me, a transgendered person.

I was deeply saddened when this wonderful person was taken to be with the Lord on May 19, 2000. I went to her memorial service in Jackson, Mississippi, on May 30, where many of her friends had gathered to pay their respects to this individual who helped so many of our community to realize that God loves even us. In the following days, the Lord led me to undertake the publication of her writings, along with those of others who appeared in *Grace and Lace* and *Love Letter*.

It is the purpose of this book to help crossdressers, transsexuals, and other transgendered people understand that God, the Creator, does not condemn them, but loves them and wants them to preserve their faith in Jesus Christ. It is also intended to be a help for family, friends, clergy and church people to understand the Scripture as it relates to those who are transgendered.

Becky Allison has been particularly inspirational in my own life, as I travel a similar path of a person coming to terms with transsexualism. Becky’s articles were a feature of both *Grace and Lace* and *Love Letter*. We see her understanding her own crossdressing, then transitioning into a woman. In each step she deals with her own Christianity. Lee and Becky were best of friends.

I have long known of, and respected, the writings of Terri Main in their help for Christian living. Terri is a teacher by profession, and heads Emergence Ministries for transgendered people. I have presented many of her more important writings on Christian living that appeared in *Grace and Lace* and *Love Letter*. Among those are help in finding a church home. She also writes daily inspirational messages, and operates an Internet bulletin board for Christian transsexuals.

To help explain to others about transgenderism from the Christian perspective, I asked Rev. David Horton if I could include his special writings on the subject.

David's writings have helped many in the church understand crossdressing and transsexuality from both Christian and practical perspectives.

Elisabeth Kellogg has written excellent treatises on understanding specific Scriptures that are pertinent to transgendered people. Elisabeth has looked into historical interpretations attributed to these references, and presents her findings in three articles.

I have also included an index of all known issues of *Grace and Lace Letter* and *Christian Love Letter*. There are small photos of each cover to help identify them, as well as the contents and authors of that issue. In addition, there is an index of several important support resources for transgendered individuals.

I also felt it was important to include the human side of Lee Frances Heller, by means of personal correspondence, because this helps us understand her and how her newsletters were produced and why. These letters help us understand her own struggles over the years. I have included those writings prior to 1997 printed as part of the *Grace and Lace Letters* chapter. By 1997, most of her correspondence to her friends was done by e-mail. In a separate section, I have included many of her meaningful messages to me and some of those to Becky Allison (through Becky's courtesy). The reader will note that most of these are one-sided, because after all, this book is about Lee Frances Heller. I hope that the reader will understand the rich life this poor-in-possessions, yet wonderful Christian person led.

As I spent the last several months in locating missing issues of *Grace and Lace*, and then working on this labor of love – learning how to produce a book the new computer way – I had a lot of time to think about the messages Lee was bringing. And when I did the indexes, I realized how well balanced the articles were over a twelve year period, and that she had left us a legacy of writing that was reasonably orderly, and certainly well thought out. The same can be said of the writings of Becky and David and Terri and Elisabeth.

Then I think of the message continually conveyed to me and others: that there is room at the Cross of Jesus Christ for even those of us who are transgendered. When we believe in and put our faith in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, as had Lee and other writers in this book, and as have I, when God looks at me, through Jesus Christ, I am perfect. Isn't that amazing?

Julie Ann Johnson
Wheaton, Illinois

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St. Andrews Church, Jackson, Mississippi

OUT OF THE GUTTER

Well!!!! I did make it to my (and 45 others') confirmation at St. Andrew's Episcopal Cathedral; however, the forces of evil, namely Satan, had to have one final shot at trying to stop me from going. My friend Peter pulled up in front of the church on Sunday and was helping me out of the car and into a wheelchair when my bad knee gave way and I flopped in the gutter of the main street in Jackson, Capitol Street. Peter had to get the policewoman on the corner to help him pick me up and put me in the wheelchair. Another man came and assisted.

There was my 235 pounds of dead weight laying in the gutter. God has let me experience much on the seamy side of life, including sixty days in the Bronx, NY jail in 1962 for public drunkenness. But never have I laid in a street gutter. So I have now. From the gutter, the church looked beautiful with the morning sun shining on it, highlighting a huge colorful banner of Christ which was hung on what would be the steeple. I never knew the banner was there. I had never seen it, as I don't look up when I'm in the car. Anyhow, I immediately saw the spiritual application and my own testimony personified. From the gutter I saw my Saviour, Jesus Christ. From the gutter to Christ. St. Andrew's can now say they picked up a poor old soul out of the gutter, brushed her off, took her in the church where the Bishop of Mississippi confirmed her, and a new Lee Frances was born!!

Lee

In her last letter to her friends, May 16, 2000.

Lee Frances Heller died three days later, peacefully in her sleep, May 19, 2000, at the age of 81.

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LEE FRANCES HELLER

April 5, 1919 - May 19, 2000

Lee Frances Heller, who devoted the last fifteen years of her life to sharing God's love with all her transgendered sisters and brothers, passed away in her sleep on May 19, 2000, at her home in Jackson, Mississippi. Lee Frances was 81 years old.

Lee Frances was born in Youngstown, Ohio, and served in the Marine Corps in World War II. After the war, she worked at one job after another until she found the Good Shepherd Mission in Paterson, New Jersey. Her first experience at Good Shepherd was as a lodger, but after she committed her life to God, she was asked to be the chaplain of the Mission, and in 1965 she was appointed to be resident director, a position she held for twenty years.

After she retired from the Mission in 1985, Lee Frances moved to Jackson, Mississippi, to be close to family members. By this time she had managed to reconcile her Christian faith with her lifelong realization that she was transgendered.

It became a personal crusade for her to share this reconciliation with other crossdressers and transsexual persons. At her little home in north Jackson, letters arrived almost daily from persons who had read her announcements in *Tapestry* and other community publications. "*Is God Against Us?*" was the headline question of her most used essay, and after finishing the essay, the reader was quite certain God was not against us, indeed.

In those days Lee answered every letter with a handwritten note. She became a prolific writer, and soon began publishing a quarterly message which she sent to a list of dozens of persons – ultimately well over one hundred – who contacted her requesting more information on their spiritual lives. Her "prayer list" grew long as she promised to pray for all those individuals. Lee gave her message a name which she felt combined images of Christianity and crossdressing: the now well-known *Grace and Lace Letter*. At the 1992 Texas "T" Party, she received a special recognition award for her contributions to the spiritual growth of transgendered persons.

To establish contact with other transgendered people in Mississippi, Lee organized the *Beta Chi* chapter of *Tri-Ess*. The group was never large, but for years she was hostess to their meetings, and remembered everyone who

spent time in her home.

It was through an advertisement for *Beta Chi* that I came to know Lee Frances Heller. Of all the people whose lives she touched, I was privileged to live in closest proximity to her home. I still remember that first frightened call I made from a pay phone, hearing Lee's cheerful voice, and immediately feeling at ease. Soon I was visiting in her home, hearing her testimony, and realizing how her words met the need I had felt for spiritual guidance. It has been my privilege to write essays for the *Grace and Lace Letter* since 1992.

Those times, just before and at the start of my transition, were the most difficult of my life, and Lee Frances provided the stability which kept me centered. Without her prayers and personal encouragement I would not have succeeded in my new life as I did.

I moved away from Jackson in 1993, and for several years my contact with Lee was over the telephone. In the meantime she continued to publish *G&L*, as she abbreviated it. The publication became larger as more writers began to contribute regularly. Finally, in 1998, Lee decided *G&L* had become too large for her, and turned over publication to Jane and Mary Fairfax. But, as all her friends knew, Lee would never stop writing. Almost immediately she announced the *Christian Love Letter*, ostensibly a smaller publication, but one which also grew rapidly.

With the help of other friends such as Julie and Kori, Lee reluctantly let herself be pushed into the computer age. She loved her new blue iMac! We all looked forward to her frequent e-mail updates. Articles from *Grace and Lace* and the *Love Letter* appeared in multiple sites on the World Wide Web. Lee was never willing to accept praise for her efforts, giving all the credit to the Lord.

After several years' absence, I returned for a visit in 1999 to find Lee's health had deteriorated and she had been hospitalized with breathing problems. She seemed to recover well, however, and we had a wonderful visit. I was encouraged that she might continue to improve. Unfortunately, several more hospitalizations followed during the rest of the year, and she came to need home oxygen at times. Despite all that, her spirits were cheerful as ever, and I looked forward to seeing her in May, 2000.

I arrived at Lee's home early on the morning of May 18, and she was feeling well enough to visit and to brew a pot of coffee. We talked of the new issue of a *Love Letter* she planned to begin compiling in June. She remained vig-

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ously independent, and told me how she intended to remain at home, rather than in an assisted-living environment.

She loved telling me her experience of being confirmed in the Episcopal Church just the week prior to my visit. As she described in her last e-mail message to all of us on her list, she had fallen while getting out of the car to go into the church: “never have I laid in a street gutter. So I have now. From the gutter the church looked beautiful with the morning sun shining on it highlighting a huge colorful banner of Christ which was hung on what would be the steeple. I never knew the banner was there. I had never seen it, as I don’t look up when I’m in the car. Anyhow, I immediately saw the spiritual application and my own testimony personified. From the gutter I saw my Saviour, Jesus Christ. From the gutter to Christ. St. Andrew’s can now say they picked up a poor old soul out of the gutter, brushed her off, took her in the church where the Bishop of Mississippi confirmed her, and a new Lee Frances was born!”

Finally it was time for me to go, and, as always, we held hands and prayed together. (As my roommate Margaux says, “I’ve never heard anyone pray like Lee Frances. She talks like she has a direct line to God.” And so she did.) We agreed to go to church, and to lunch on Sunday, the 21st. As I drove away, she stood on her front steps, smiling and waving as she had done hundreds of times before.

On May 19 I was away from my inn all day, and it was after dark when I returned. The desk clerk stopped me as I walked to my room: there was a message to call Marge. My heart sank: Marge was Lee Frances’s next door neighbor.

I didn’t want to believe it as I heard her say, “Lee passed away quietly in her sleep this afternoon. She was in the same position as when I checked on her earlier, but she wasn’t breathing.”

Lee Frances willed her body to the University of Mississippi Medical Center, so there was no burial. A memorial service was held at St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church.

Lee Frances Heller leaves a sister, three sons, and a daughter; 14 grandchildren; and 13 great-grandchildren. She leaves hundreds of sisters and brothers who found comfort and faith in her publications; some of them literally found the strength to go on living because of the letters she wrote.

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And she leaves a great emptiness in my heart. I know she is at peace and enjoying her new existence with the God she loves so much. But we who love her here will miss her so.

I love you, “Mom.”

Becky Allison

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HOMILY FOR LEE FRANCES HELLER

**Given At the Memorial Service On May 30, 2000
At the Chapel Of St. Andrew's Cathedral, Jackson, Mississippi**

By Rev. Susan Bock

I don't know just what our life is like "beyond the vale": whether we sit around the throne of God singing alleluias day and night, like the *Revelation to John* says. Or, if we feed the sheep all day, like a dying child once told me; or if we watch old movies and catch up on all the reading we missed here. This would be my idea of Paradise! I'll leave it all to a loving God who can surely be trusted to work out the details for us.

I do know, for a fact, that one of the ways a person lives forever, is in our following her example and doing what she taught us to do. Here is some of what Lee Frances taught us before going on ahead of us to claim her final reward.

First, to be ourselves. To take up the very life and destiny, and use the particular gifts God has given us. To live from the inside out, taking our cues from the Holy Spirit of God, who richly dwells within each one of us.

Each of us is given as a gift to this world, and there is no higher calling than to be the person we are given and called to be. To speak our truth. To carry our cross. To let our light shine, no matter what the cost, because the promise beyond the cost is that we will hear God's own voice saying, "Well done, good and faithful friend of mine. Come now, and enter your rest."

Second, she taught us to reach out in love to all those on the margins, suffering in any way, and to bring them close in to the heart of God. Lee was, herself, good news to the poor, the rejected, and the bound, and her words no less healing or prophetic than the words of Jesus when He said, "Blessed are you poor; blessed are you hungry; blessed are you mournful and you who are hated. For God is near to you in your very affliction, and promises to one day turn this world order right side up!"

With Isaiah and Jesus, Lee Frances was no less than a prophet, who proclaimed that compassion is the highest order of human relationships, and God's deepest desire for them. Not judgement. Not fear. But compassion.

The community of Jesus Christ is not a gathering of those who best keep all the rules of religion. Rather it is a community of those who keep them, and those who try to make others keep them, and then, mostly, all the rest of us, who know ourselves to be sinful, weak, and poor, and that all we have to make us worthy to come inside is our belovedness in God. Lee reminded us of that all the time.

She taught us to keep growing, to keep stretching our hearts and minds so that we might come more and more into the full stature of love which was Christ's. Lee Frances maintained that delicate balance between taking a brave stand, and yet keeping her heart open and gentle towards new truth. She resisted organized religion right up to the end, whenever and wherever it was exclusive and hateful, even as she was becoming more deeply a part of it through her confirmation in the Christian community just days before her death.

Though her outer nature was wasting away, her inner nature was, and is, being renewed every day. When we are confirmed, the bishop lays hands on our heads and asks that we daily increase in the Holy Spirit "more and more". This is her life, still.

In the passage from *Isaiah*, we read God's vision for how we will one day live together: it will be a feast for all people, with rich, fatty foods, well-aged wines, and God near enough to tenderly wipe away our very last tears!

Until that day, God gives us signs and reminders of the country of heaven. Lee Frances was such a sign and promise. A clear, true messenger of God's love for each of us. May we honor her and continue her life through our own courage to become the selves we are given to be, to speak the truth only we can say, to carry the cross only we can carry, to answer the call that only we can hear.

May we gather all God's people to God's heart through words and lives of compassion.

May we keep on growing all though this life which bumps right up to eternity, keeping our hearts supple and warm, so that God can stretch and shape and fill them with more and more love.

In her last e-mail to many of you, she wrote of her fall just outside the church on the day of her confirmation. "never have I laid in a street gutter. So I have now. From the gutter the Church looked beautiful with the morning

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sun shining on it, highlighting a huge colorful banner of Christ which was hung on what would be the steeple. I never knew the banner was there. I had never seen it, as I don't look up when I'm in the car. Anyhow, I immediately saw the Spiritual application and my own testimony personified. From the gutter I saw my Saviour, Jesus Christ. From the gutter to Christ. St. Andrew's can now say they picked up a poor old soul out of the gutter, brushed her off, took her in the Church where the Bishop of Mississippi confirmed her, and a new Lee Frances was born!"

The testimony of our faith is that in the gutter, from the gutter, we see Jesus. From the tomb, we see the risen Christ, and we see ourselves rising with Him.

Alleluia