

# Ever BLOOM

STORIES *of* LIVING DEEPLY ROOTED  
AND TRANSFORMED LIVES



by women of  
**Redbud**  
WRITERS GUILD

**Edited by Shayne Moore  
and Margaret Ann Philbrick**



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# *Branches*



# Beyond September 11th

*by Nicole T. Walters*

There were seeds of faith being planted in my life before I ever knew it, evidence of God's plan when I look back. Like the acorn that lies dormant on the forest floor, it seems random, accidental. But it is just lying in wait for the right time and place to become something greater.

At fourteen my life was characterized by fertile soil, ready for those seeds to take root. The only way I can explain it is that God was pursuing me long before I could put a name to the emptiness inside. Faith was new and church was foreign to me, but I wanted desperately to grow.

But for all my enthusiasm, my roots stopped shallow. It wasn't long before, grappling with how to make sense of living out a faith my family didn't share, the love was choked out by rules and the hypocrisy that surrounded me in that little youth group.

Lost in the weeds and thorns of disillusionment, I uprooted myself from it all: Church. God. Rules.

Everything about my suburban existence was challenged when I planted my life in a large public university. My self-constructed Christian bubble had already burst. Now my Deep South, middle-class, white one did, too.

I gladly launched myself into the diversity all around me while I tried to ignore the stirrings in my soul. I was unsure how to reconcile a God who was supposed to love everyone with his people who, in my experience, did not. The tiny sapling that had been my faith was not dead but found no place to grow.

By the first semester of my junior year, *I* had plans, and I didn't want to ask God for his input. In an interesting pairing of classes—

Intro to World Religions and Arabic—I simultaneously learned the basic beliefs of Islam and made my first Muslim friends.

As I grew to love my Middle Eastern friends, the tension grew inside of me. I still believed Jesus was more than the prophet my Muslim friends viewed him as, but where did they fit into his plan?

It was in this ripe place for growth that I found myself the day the world shook and the smoke rose into the sky over New York City. Many people of my generation recall September 11, 2001, as a day that changed everything—for me it was the day after.

The wounds still fresh—the normal chatter before my Arabic class was replaced with an unnatural hush. I don't know how long we sat there before our professor with kind eyes spoke quietly. Our class looked very different than most that day—the mixture of white and brown faces, the meeting of different faiths. While others that day discussed the fear of terrorism and blamed those responsible, we talked about a different kind of fear and blame.

I got to glimpse firsthand the pain of those who were at the receiving end of pointed fingers and targeted insults. Tears flowed anew as my beautiful friends spoke of their fear in being targeted because of their brightly colored headscarves, and some admitted—with much shame—that they had thought of removing them.

There were the victims of 9/11 in the official counts announced when the rubble was cleared away. But there was a whole other group of people who became victims that day. The women in hijabs. The Sikhs wearing turbans. The devout men with beards. The Muhammads and Osamas. The Khans and Alis.

In one day they were all labeled “enemy” because of their faith or their name, their language or heritage. They became feared and hated, targeted and profiled.

That night I stood amid the flickering flames of a makeshift altar. The iron arch that stood as the entrance to our North Campus was littered with flowers and candles, surrounded by weeping students.

There haven't been many times in my life I can say I heard God speak specifically or audibly to me. But in that moment the voice ringing in my ears was so clear and forceful that it brought me to my knees: "Love those who, even now, others are growing to hate. Love those who are feared and oppressed, rejected, and who have few who love them."

"I will go wherever you ask me to, Lord," I cried. "I will not let hate win in my life. I will love, and I will show your mercy and grace to anyone who needs to know it."

Jesus found me on the steps of the arch that night. And for the first time, I really found him. The soil, the light, the season—they were all just right. Everything that had led me there, all the seeds of my faith, came together in that moment as my understanding of grace began to take root.



The rebuilding began—of lives torn apart, of a Ground Zero blown to bits, and of my faith. But other destruction had begun—hatred rumbling through the world. Wars were fought, terror cells grew, an Arab Spring rose, and every day more killing occurred in the name of a misunderstood and feared faith.

That moment which launched the hatred altered the trajectory of my life, too....

**...continue reading *Beyond September 11th* in your copy of *Everbloom*.**

■ P R A Y E R

Jesus—you who pursue me with unending love and who have invited me into your family—thank you for allowing me the space to grow into a flourishing faith and for using me to communicate your grace and love to a hurting world. Show me how I can become part of the transformation you want to see in others and in welcoming the outsider. Amen.

■ W R I T I N G P R O M P T

Imagine a person whom you might extend a welcoming hand to, and describe your actions.