

FEATURE

'Hannah's Gift' celebrates living life to fullest

By Donna Marbach
Contributing writer

The death of a child is a mother's worst nightmare. It calls into question her own purpose in life and shakes her faith to its very foundations. What kind of a God permits such suffering in an innocent? How can anyone ever again believe in truth, beauty and justice after such a loss?

In *Hannah's Gift, Lessons from a Life Fully Lived*, author Maria Housden faces all these questions as she recounts the illness and death by cancer of her 3-year-old daughter, Hannah. Unbelievably, Housden avoids both isolating herself in a shroud of grief and wallowing in sentimentality. Instead, with *Hannah's Gift* she presents the reader with a spiritually uplifting story about life, courage, honesty and even joy.

Hannah, as described by Housden, is an exceptional little girl who steals the reader's heart from the very first pages of the book. The book opens with Hannah and her mother purchasing shoes in a Stride-Rite children's shoe store — an everyday event that becomes an extraordinary one when Hannah politely declines sensible black shoes for red patent-leather Mary Janes. Her joy in this simple and mildly outrageous purchase is contagious. She closes her eyes, extends her arms and begins to dance in the atrium outside the store. Her exuberance catches the attention of passersby and even persuades a few other children and an elderly man to join in the dance.

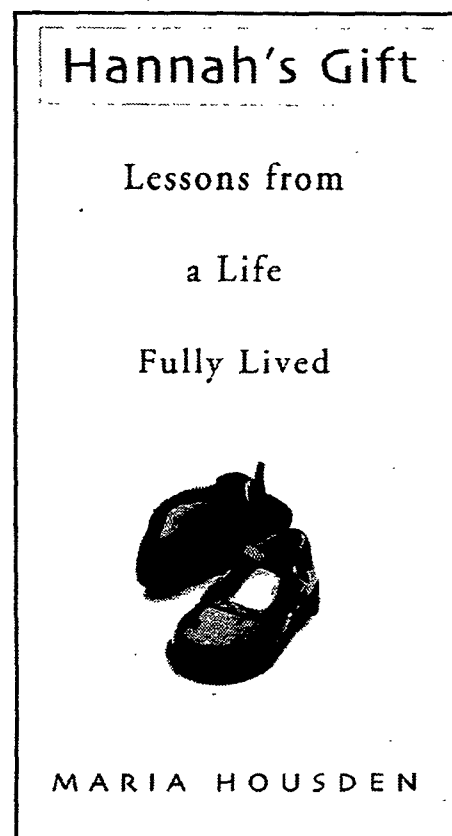
One woman, her arms full of shopping bags, turned to the woman next to her. "I've always wanted a pair of red shoes," she said. "Me, too," said the other. "What have we been

waiting for?"

These simple red shoes become a symbol throughout the book of the many lessons Hannah has to share about living life to the fullest and asking for what you want. In a later chapter, totally unflinching by hospital doctors, Hannah wears these same red shoes into the operating room, but only after insisting that those treating her first have the courtesy to introduce themselves by their "real" (i.e., first) names.

As delightful and wonderful as Hannah is, it is her mother, Maria, who becomes the most captivating character in this book. She is a mother who has endured the unendurable. First, she suffers a miscarriage of a much-wanted child on the same day she learns of Hannah's cancerous tumor. Later she realizes the need to answer openly and honestly her 5-year-old son Will's questions about death. She experiences brief moments of hope, only to be confronted with the inevitability of Hannah's death as the cancer metastasizes to an inoperable tumor. Maria finds herself torn between witnessing her daughter's suffering and facing her own pain at the ultimate loss that will relieve Hannah's suffering.

Yet, from these difficult and heart-wrenching experiences, Maria transcends her fear, anger and grief to recount Hannah's story in simple, straightforward language that ultimately becomes a celebration of life. The book, which flows with the detail and immediacy of a well-written novel, is organized into five sections: Truth, Joy, Faith, Compassion and Wonder. Each section is further divided into short chapters — anecdotes really — mostly about Hannah, her independence and



her courage, but also about the family's struggles to accept Hannah's illness and, ultimately, her death.

Hannah's Gift is a spiritually inspiring book that holds the concepts of religion, prayer and faith as strong themes throughout. Laurajane, pastor of the family's Methodist Church, draws them together by exposing her own humanity and vulnerability when she admits out loud, "... it's hard to believe that the God I love would let a child suffer like this." At that moment, what the family — especial-

ly Maria — needed was not for someone to make them feel better, but for someone, as Maria herself so eloquently states, "to stand with me in the face of the raw truth." Laurajane, in her humility and empathy, becomes the rock upon which Maria can build her faith.

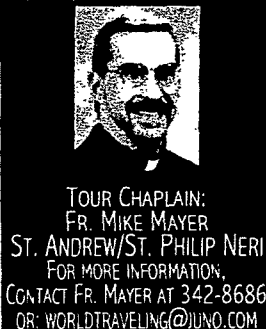
Later, the pastor organizes a "healing service," in which the entire congregation prays for and honors Hannah. At first, Maria is uncomfortable with the service. She sees it as a means of bringing false hope to a situation in which there is no hope. Maria knows that Hannah is dying and that no prayer service can cure her.

The lesson that Maria learns, however, is that "healing" takes many forms. In the end, Maria changes her views and writes:

I realized that healing can happen even without a cure. No matter when Hannah died, she would die knowing that her life had mattered, that she was completely loved. I couldn't imagine a more profound healing than that.

Hannah's Gift is an extraordinary little treasure. It openly celebrates the importance of each and every human life — no matter how short or seemingly insignificant. By the example of one 3-year-old's ability to change an entire hospital's manner of treating its patients, we are shown that each of us can live our lives so as to make a difference in the world. By the example of a mother who is willing to learn from her children, we can free ourselves to live each day to the fullest; to use fully and enjoy all our talents and gifts; to be honest with ourselves and others; and, ultimately, to be open to discovering God in all our experiences.

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