



# Finding Faith

Susan Clifford makes the case for why we all need faith in our lives

**By: Jennifer Layman**

You might say Susan Clifford has taken the "road less traveled" in her life. For the past nine years, she has been Reverend Susan Clifford at St. John's Parish in Eganville, and at Ascension in Killaloe. She is relatively new to the profession, having been ordained as a priest in 2005, but it's clear she has found her calling. Interestingly, her road to being a reverend started not on a road, but on a hill, a ski hill, in fact. On that ski hill, Susan Clifford was a member Canadian National Ski Team.

The Clifford family name is well known in skiing circles. Susan's father, John, was a racer, ski area developer, instructor and ski resort owner. He brought snow-making technology and the first all-steel T-bar lift to Canada. He developed hills such as Camp Fortune, Mont Ste Marie, Mont Cascades, Carlington Park, Calabogie Peaks and Mount Pakenham. He has an impressive resume. There is a biography written about him - White Gold: The John Clifford Story. Living your whole life at a ski hill, it was only natural that Susan and her sisters, Betsy and Joanne, would get into the business of competitive skiing, and they didn't disappoint. All three sisters were multi-year members of the Canadian national ski team, and climbed to be ranked among the best in the world. Betsy was a World Champion.

In the Clifford household of world class skiers, the bar was always set pretty high.

Susan remembers spending 11 months of the year skiing. Her life, she recalls, was only about skiing. They lived at Camp Fortune which she found isolating and Susan missed five months of high school every year in order to meet her competitive schedule which took her all over the world. Her sister,

Joanne, tutored her just so she could pass. It was an all-consuming commitment, and one that brought with it the prestige of being a world-class athlete and one of Canada's best on the ski circuit. Yet despite the medals and victories and podiums and notoriety, something was missing.

"Mentally, there was this great emptiness inside," she recalls. "I was just burned out. All of that effort; I just couldn't do it anymore."

Susan decided to quit skiing.

While she felt liberated by being able to leave the sport that had consumed her every day, she didn't really know what to do with her life now. She had a whole lot of free time on her hands, and she spent some of it with the wrong crowd, doing the wrong things. At age 20, she had a breakdown.

"Once I quit skiing I thought, "Oh my God, I'm a mess!" she says. "I was no longer Susan, the skier, so who was I? I didn't know what people thought of me because for so many years I just had tunnel vision for skiing."

Her learned discipline in sport let her know that she had to do something so she decided to go to university as a mature student. She enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts program at Queen's University. She dove into her studies and pulled herself together. She graduated and headed back "home."

Back in the Ottawa Valley, Susan started working at Wilderness Tours. Her sister, Joanne, had married the owner there and the

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business was growing. It was a role that played to her strengths: drive, dedication and performance so Susan poured herself into her job there. She refers to it as being her "machine way of thinking" where it was 110 per cent all day, every day, no exceptions.

That lasted a while, but eventually, it wasn't enough. There still needed to be something more in her life, but what? The constant feeling of "not enough" and her inability to fill that void took a toll on Susan. She felt lost and unhappy and every day seemed to feed into those feelings. Finally, she didn't know if she could continue to go to bed and wake up every day to face the same

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unhappiness. It broke her.

"At the time I was suicidal," she says. "I just hit the bottom. I turned to God and said, 'Give me one good reason to live,' and the word that came back to me was love."

Susan was not unaware of God. She had been baptized as a child, but she never attended church because Sunday was always a day to ski. Whatever made her reach out to God that does, she says it was an experience of the love of God filling her, and that it was the most natural experience in the world.

"That was my first encounter with the living God," she says. "That's what turned my life around. I was going down and down and down and that experience showed me the way up."

Susan didn't immediately seek out a church. She just sat with that new feeling for a while, not really sure what to do with it. She felt she was on to something, she wasn't feeling so alone, but what was she supposed to do with it? Susan decided to just go about her life, as usual.

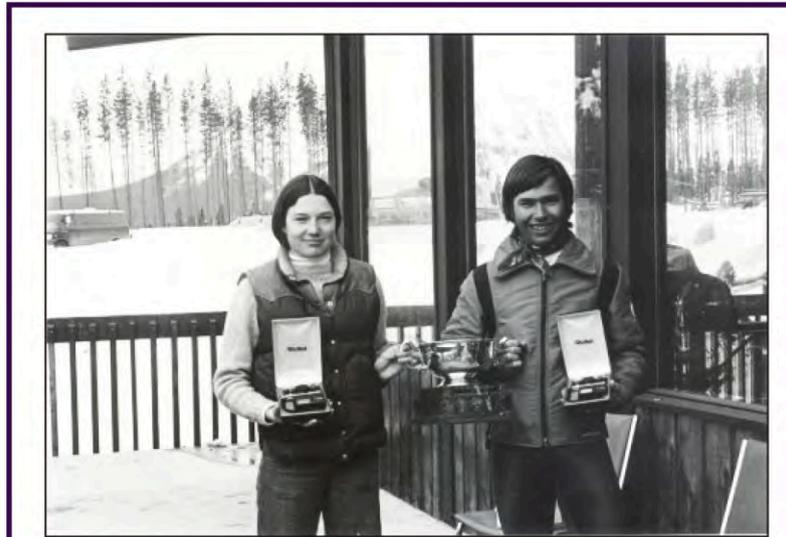
"A few years after that encounter, I heard 'Come find me in my church,' Susan recalls.

"I knew it was Jesus. I was so hungry for this and I just received this with open arms. In this darkness there was this clear, blazing light."

The next Sunday, she went to church before going to work at Wilderness Tours.

England to join a convent, which she did, staying for two years, learning lessons along the way. She tells a story about being assigned house duties in the convent and one of her jobs was to stack bread in the freezer. Not thinking much of the job, she did it, but a senior Sister chastised her for not doing it right, and she started to cry!

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Susan Clifford and Steve Podborski posing with Most Improved Skier Awards on the National Alpine Ski Team. Photo: Canadian Ski Museum.



1970 National Alpine Ski Team [L to R]: Kathy Kreiner, Karen Cloutier, Betsy Clifford, Laurie Kreiner, Susan Clifford. Photo: Canadian Ski Museum.

She didn't tell anyone about her experiences. She became driven again, and this time it was to learn as much as she could about the Bible and God. The more she learned, the more she felt this was her reason for being. She was drawing from her skiing skills - perseverance, hard work, discipline and focus - and putting it to a use that she felt was her destiny.

"Now I look back and it all makes sense," she says. "One thing I have learned is that there is a reason for everything and a purpose for everything. I firmly believe that."

In 1990, Susan moved to England where she would live for 18 years. She went to

"This is pathetic! I can't even put bread in the freezer. I'm useless," she remembers thinking. "But that was part of the process of learning humility. I just had to not take myself so seriously, to go with the flow more and to trust."

After two years, Susan decided to move out of the convent and into the community. She supported herself being a caretaker on a housing estate. She learned how to live with neighbours in close proximity, something so different from her upbringing at Camp Fortune. That was her life, for a decade, before she started to feel restless. She started to get a familiar feeling - that there was something more she was meant to do in her life. That feeling guided her to the ordained ministry; although to be honest, she wasn't so

confident God was right with His direction this time.

"I thought, 'This is crazy. I can't be a priest,' she says. 'You feel so unworthy. I can't write a sermon every Sunday.'

For four years, she went back and forth on whether she should or shouldn't be a priest. It was this battle between feeling called to pursue it, and feeling unable to do it at the level she would expect of herself. It all came full circle at the "Selection conference," a three-day event where Susan was interviewed and evaluated to see if peers in the ministry felt she was ready to be a priest.

"There has to be that spiritual call to make it work," she says. "It has to be in your heart. It's why people do a job they love."

And through her evaluation came a tremendous learning.

"All along, this journey was all about letting go and trusting God," she says. "It's not like skiing - it's not an individual strength. And it went against everything I had learned. But, when you go through this training, this formation, you re-learn to do things that leave room for God to walk with you."

don't even say the Lord's Prayer anymore. If kids aren't taught about God, they won't have that as a resource."

These choices we make as individuals and as a society are ones we are responsible for, she says. Our choices determine where we put our efforts, and there seems to be little effort for spirituality at times.

"We'll drive an hour and a half to a hockey game, but we won't drive to church because church is boring," she says. "We have to build up our spiritual muscle. Not everything has to be stimulating and entertaining. Those

go to church then, but today, she is on the other side of that belief. She has walked the walk, so to speak, and she knows without any possibility of doubt, that faith is necessary in our lives.

"We don't know our need for God," she says, "until there is nowhere else."

Knowing God is necessary and trusting Him does not automatically prevent hard times. They still happen. For two years, as a priest, Reverend Clifford struggled with depression. She got through it on faith, something she defines as "belief without 100



Reverend Susan Clifford at home in Eganville with her dog, Teddy.

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Susan was ordained as a deacon in 2004. She remembers still feeling inadequate at her ordination. She told an older, wise nun that she felt that she didn't know enough to be at this point. She remembers the nun's advice: "You're probably right, you don't know enough. But you know enough to get started."

Susan became Reverend Susan Clifford, a priest, in 2005.

"Life with God, well, it's night and day," she says. "In terms of strength and mental health, God is the decision-maker. I don't know how people do it without faith - belief in a higher power, something beyond ourselves, faith in general."

Living without faith is something Reverend Clifford sees a lot of in our society today. She notices that we live in a time where we don't acknowledge the spiritual part of our lives. While we are physical and mental beings, she says, we are also spiritual beings. She finds that people have completely lost focus and think that they don't need God.

"There are more things to do today on Sunday morning," she says, "and it takes some effort to get out of bed and go to church. Plus there's political correctness - we

values of patience, kindness, goodness, self control - where are you going to hear about these things unless you come to a church or a Christian group? We are spiritual beings and we are not doing enough for that."

To say Reverend Clifford feels strongly about spirituality would be a significant understatement. Maybe it's because of how long it took her to realize the value of a spiritual life herself that she pleads for others to not miss out on that part of life. She encourages being part of a church because it provides a comfortable place to grow the spiritual part of your life. She says a relationship with God is like a relationship with anyone in your life - you have to spend time together in order for that love to grow. When that love does grow, that is what gets you out of bed on a Sunday morning - to feel that love and to share that love with others.

Reverend Clifford knows that for some, spending time in church and learning about God and "strengthening the spiritual muscle" might not seem like it has much to offer. Susan Clifford was once one of those people who also spent Sunday mornings aware from church, being a world-ranked skier. That might have seemed like reason enough not to

per cent proof," that she would get better. At the time, she could not imagine getting better, but she knew it was God who had helped her before, and she believed He, along with her own faith, would help her again. That was enough.

"I really feel for people who have mental health struggles," she says. "I know how isolating that can be and I know how hard it is to get through a day. If I could say something to someone who is struggling, I would say to lean on God. Start immediately. You don't have to go to church, just lean on Him. As that grows, it can lead you to wanting to be in that community. I have learned that God does provide. Each year I experience how much He has helped me and each year I lean on Him more. I trust. I tell him, 'I need you even more God,' and he comes through."

When Reverend Clifford talks about faith, it's as if she is compelling you to listen to what she has to say. Whatever we might think that could accomplish on our own, it is nothing compared to what you accomplish with faith. When a world-ranked athlete tells you that, there is not much of an argument against it, is there?