

**“MY LIFE”:
THE MARY J. BLIGE
PRINCIPLE**



WE LIVE IN an age of reality and want to see and hear what's real, not what's fake or made-up. We're bombarded by reality TV shows like *The Real World*, *Survivor*, *American Idol*, *America's Next Top Model*, *Extreme Make Over*, and various versions of *The Real Housewives*. The lives of others fascinate us. Even in the popular music industry, the ones who experience the highest levels of success are those whose music reflects their real lives, present or past. Artists like 50 Cent, 2Pac, Jay-Z, T.I., Eminem, Lauryn—excuse me—Ms. Hill, Alicia Keys, Janet Jackson, John Legend, Kanye West, and Toni Braxton sing and rhyme about real problems they've been through, experiences others can identify with.

TALKING HER BUSINESS

Who does this better than Mary J. Blige? All hail the Queen! She always sings about her life and lets us into her innermost parts. Her album titles alone suggest that she has built her career on the idea of “talking her business,” as we would say in Trinidad. Albums *What’s the 411?*, *My Life*, *Share My World*, *Mary*, *No More Drama*, *Love & Life*, *The Breakthrough*, *Growing Pains*, and *Stronger With Each Tear* make us feel like spectators watching her life’s experiences. Whether she’s begging her man to stay, admitting she’s head over heels in love, or admitting she’s heartbroken, Mary doesn’t seem to be ashamed to pour out her heart.

She delivers a raw sincerity few artists can reproduce. Though she seems open and honest about her life, this transparency wasn’t intentional, as she admits in an article about her 2003 release, *Love & Life*.

“This album is more upbeat,” she notes. “It’s a celebration of coming full circle. It’s who I am and who Mary J. Blige has been.” Delivered with conviction and compassion, the songs on *Love & Life* are evidence of Mary’s spiritual growth and her transcendence over a childhood in the projects of Yonkers, New York and an early success plagued with drama, to her current joy. “Yes, she’s gotten lost, she’s done this and that and she’s been trying to figure it out,” Mary admits in her typically forthright manner.⁸

With the same inner strength and raw honesty she had used to tackle her personal pain, these uncompromising recordings revealed the universality of Mary’s heartaches and demonstrated the healing power of music. “I didn’t want to tell my business,” she continues. “I had no other choice. I wrote it down and people came back to me and said ‘You saved my life!’ without even knowing that when they listened to me sing, it helped me, too.”

Ushering in the 21st century Mary released the triple-platinum *No More Drama* in 2001. “I always thought my fans

were just inner city but people from all over the world and of every color responded to that record. I gave a lot of myself not knowing it was gonna reach so many people.”

Whether pouring her heart out in a recording booth or on a concert stage or privately learning how to love herself and help others, Mary J. Blige has discovered something powerful. The music that she makes, the songs that have brought so much joy and solace to so many, have also been her own salvation.

“Going through all the stuff I went through wasn’t in vain because I found out that my job is to give,” she concludes. “No More Drama wasn’t just an album, it was a transition in my life. I was tired of suffering, of the hustle and hassle of everyday life. I figured out that all along, the problem had been pride and ignorance. Right now I’m growing, I’m learning, and I’m listening. I realized that I need to hear the truth and that the truth is setting me free. And what you hear on Love & Life is the truth and my willingness to embrace it.”⁹

Mary’s music reaches other people and “saves” their lives. Telling them about her experiences helps them deal with their problems.

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

The call of Peter, Andrew, James, and John still seems odd to me. Could it be that Jesus’ call alone prompted them to leave their livelihoods and follow him? I looked for the account of this calling in another book of the Gospels, hoping Matthew and Mark told a summarized version. Sure enough, Dr. Luke paints the complete picture:

One day as Jesus was preaching on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, great crowds pressed in on him to listen to the word of God. He noticed two empty boats at the water’s edge, for the fishermen had left them and were washing their nets. Stepping into one of the boats, Jesus asked

Simon, its owner, to push it out into the water. So he sat in the boat and taught the crowds from there. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Now go out where it is deeper and let down your nets, and you will catch many fish.” “Master,” Simon replied, “we worked hard all last night and didn’t catch a thing. But if you say so, we’ll try again.” And this time their nets were so full they began to tear! A shout for help brought their partners in the other boat, and soon both boats were filled with fish and on the verge of sinking. When Simon Peter realized what had happened, he fell to his knees before Jesus and said, “Oh, Lord, please leave me—I’m too much of a sinner to be around you.” For he was awestruck by the size of their catch, as were the others with him. His partners, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were also amazed. Jesus replied to Simon, “Don’t be afraid! From now on you’ll be fishing for people!” And as soon as they landed, they left everything and followed Jesus.

—Luke 5:1-11 NLT

These guys didn’t follow Jesus after hearing only one sermon; they experienced his power in their lives. Jesus could have chosen someone else’s boat, but he chose Peter’s. He knew about Peter’s needs and met them several times above and beyond what Peter expected. In fact, Peter had a *personal* experience with Jesus. So what was Peter’s reaction? He acknowledged his unworthiness to be in the Lord’s presence. But when Jesus called him to be his disciple, Peter immediately jumped off the boat and followed Jesus without hesitation. I’m pretty sure what his thoughts must have been; *If following Jesus’ instructions gives us more fish than our nets and those of our neighbors can handle, imagine what else he could do in my life.*

Had I been in Peter’s shoes, I probably would have followed Jesus too, if only to see what else he could do for me. If not for the personal experience, Peter probably wouldn’t have been as

readily willing to accept the call and leave everything behind to follow Jesus.

Another reaction follows meeting and having an experience with Jesus. This appears to be someone’s first instinct, an automatic reaction he or she cannot help. We clearly see it in John’s version of the calling of the disciples. In fact, his account has nothing to do with boats, suggesting that Peter met Jesus before he came to his boat.

The following day, John was again standing with two of his disciples. As Jesus walked by, John looked at him and then declared, “Look! There is the Lamb of God!” Then John’s two disciples turned and followed Jesus. Jesus looked around and saw them following. “What do you want?” he asked them. They replied, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” “Come and see,” he said. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon when they went with him to the place, and they stayed there the rest of the day. Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of these men who had heard what John said and then followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother, Simon, and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means the Christ). Then Andrew brought Simon to meet Jesus. Looking intently at Simon, Jesus said, “You are Simon, the son of John—but you will be called Cephas” (which means Peter). The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Come, be my disciple.” Philip was from Bethsaida, Andrew and Peter’s hometown. Philip went off to look for Nathanael and told him, “We have found the very person Moses and the prophets wrote about! His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth.” “Nazareth!” exclaimed Nathanael. “Can anything good come from there?” “Just come and see for yourself” Philip said. As they approached, Jesus said, “Here comes an honest man—a true son of Israel.” “How do you know about me?” Nathanael asked. And Jesus

replied, “I could see you under the fig tree before Philip found you.” Nathanael replied, “Teacher, you are the Son of God—the King of Israel!” Jesus asked him, “Do you believe all this just because I told you I had seen you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than this.” Then he said, “The truth is, you will all see heaven open and the angels of God going up and down upon the Son of Man, the one who is the stairway between heaven and earth.

—John 1:35-52 NLT

The first thing Andrew did after meeting the Messiah was to find his brother—someone close to him, someone he cared about—and tell him about Jesus. Philip did the same thing; he told someone that he’d found the Messiah. I like Nathanael’s reaction. He doubted anything good could come from Nazareth. Philip and Andrew not only ran and told someone but also extended an invitation to come and see for themselves. I wonder if they left Jesus waiting for an answer while they ran to find their loved ones.

Now, in the above examples, these experiences affected those Jesus had sought. Is the reaction the same today for those who seek an experience with Jesus? Matthew 9:27-31 says, “After Jesus left the girl’s home, two blind men followed along behind him, shouting, ‘Son of David, have mercy on us!’ They went right into the house where he was staying, and Jesus asked them, ‘Do you believe I can make you see?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ they told him, ‘we do.’ Then he touched their eyes and said, ‘Because of your faith, it will happen.’ Then their eyes were opened, and they could see! Jesus sternly warned them, ‘Don’t tell anyone about this.’ But instead, they went out and spread his fame all over the region” (NLT).

These two men were blind for God only knows how long, and they ran behind Jesus after he had raised Jairus’s daughter from the dead (Mark 5:35-43), begging him for relief from their affliction. Jesus healed them and warned them not to tell

anyone. Instead, they blatantly disobeyed their healer’s orders and “spread his fame all over the region.” Weren’t they scared that by disobeying him they might go blind again? Probably not. It seems like their only concern was testifying that they who had once been blind could now see, and that Jesus was the One who had healed them.

They weren’t the only disobedient people Jesus healed. The Gospels are full of disobedient and ungrateful sick people. Consider this leper in Mark 1:40-45, for example:

A man with leprosy came and knelt in front of Jesus, begging to be healed. “If you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean,” he said. Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out and touched him. “I am willing,” he said. “Be healed!” Instantly the leprosy disappeared, and the man was healed. Then Jesus sent him on his way with a stern warning: “Don’t tell anyone about this. Instead, go to the priest and let him examine you. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy. This will be a public testimony that you have been cleansed.” But the man went and spread the word, proclaiming to everyone what had happened. As a result, large crowds soon surrounded Jesus, and he couldn’t publicly enter a town anywhere. He had to stay out in the secluded places, but people from everywhere kept coming to him.

—NLT

AUTOMATIC REACTION

Jesus gave the man simple instructions: “Go show yourself to the priest with an offering.” He also gave the man a stern warning: “Don’t talk to anyone along the way.” Now suppose you asked someone for help. After the person helped you, he or she asked for something in return. Wouldn’t you, out of sheer gratitude, feel

obligated to give the person what he or she asked for? Not so with these sick people. Against Jesus' orders, they broadcasted that he had healed them from leprosy, blindness, and a host of ailments.

Why did Jesus stress not to tell others what he had done for them? What was the result of their disobedience? According to verse forty-five, people crawled out of the woodwork to find Jesus. In fact, Jesus couldn't go anywhere without a crowd following him, and he was forced to stay on the outskirts of town. But still people came, looking for this healer. Matthew 4:23-25 says,

Jesus traveled throughout the region of Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness. News about him spread as far as Syria, and people soon began bringing to him all who were sick. And whatever their sickness or disease, or if they were demon possessed or epileptic or paralyzed—he healed them all. Large crowds followed him wherever he went—people from Galilee, the Ten Towns, Jerusalem, from all over Judea, and from east of the Jordan River.

—NLT

Wait, a trend is developing here. Those who couldn't remain silent had met Jesus or had an experience with him. He blessed or healed them, and the first thing they wanted to do was to tell others about what he had done for them. When they did so, those who heard their story sought Jesus so he could heal and bless them too. Testifying was an automatic reaction that caused them to appear ungrateful and disobey his direct orders. They apparently couldn't help but talk about what they'd personally experienced, and the result of their testimony was the crowd drawn to Jesus.

This should come as no surprise. Jesus says that when we talk about what he has done for us and lift him up, he will draw

crowds (“all men”) to himself. “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me” (John 12:32 KJV). That verse explains why Jesus insisted that they not tell; the crowds would slow his ministry and hamper his ability to teach and lead people to knowledge of the Kingdom.

Pastor David Defoe, during his stint as the associate pastor at the Metropolitan Seventh-day Adventist Church, made a crucial point after he read my outline for this book. In addition to “slowing” Jesus’ ministry, he said, people flocked to Jesus in search of physical healing. He wished to give them spiritual healing, which many needed but wouldn’t have stayed long enough to receive. We may argue that they at least searched for Jesus, but for that conversation I’ll patch you through to Pastor Defoe.

BEING A WITNESS

What does any of this have to do with Mary’s testimony? I’ll explain.

Anyone who knows me well knows that my favorite television show is *Law & Order*. My passion for this show has slightly altered my thinking. In the world of *Law & Order*, anyone who speaks of his or her experience in any matter is a witness. Didn’t Jesus tell his disciples to be his witnesses to the world? Jesus says, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8 NIV). Just to be sure I wasn’t using the word out of context, I went to an online dictionary to see what the word *witness* actually means.

Witness (n)

1. (a) One who can give a firsthand account of something seen, heard, or experienced: *a witness to the accident*.
(b) One who furnishes evidence.
2. Something that serves as evidence; a sign.

Witness (v) *Witnessed, Witnessing, Witnesses v. tr.*

1. To be present at or have personal knowledge of.
2. To take note of; observe.
3. To provide or serve as evidence of. See Synonyms at *indicate*.
4. To testify to; bear witness.
5. To be the setting or site of: *This old auditorium has witnessed many ceremonies.*
6. To attest to the legality or authenticity of by signing one's name to.
7. To furnish or serve as evidence; testify.
8. To testify to one's religious beliefs.¹⁰

In *Law & Order*, and probably any court of law, hearsay is inadmissible and makes a witness useless. Assistant District Attorney Jack McCoy (a character in the series) wouldn't use your testimony if you weren't a witness or lacked personal knowledge to contribute as evidence in the case before the court. Did I just say "testimony"? That's right, I did. A witness comes to court to "testify," to talk about what he or she has personally seen, heard, or experienced.

This issue is more serious than I thought. The disobedient sick people Jesus healed testified of their experience with Jesus, and their desire to testify was automatic, something they seemed unable to control. Their desire to tell others about what Jesus had done for them was so intense that they disobeyed Jesus to share their testimony. On the word of their testimony alone, others sought Christ, and their lives were saved.

When Mary J. Blige tells her story—when she testifies—her fans say that she saves their lives. She has built her successful career on testifying, the effects of which are more powerful than

she probably realizes. She has helped many people overcome their problems because they have identified with hers. Though she gives thanks to God on the back of her CDs, at award shows, and even during interludes on her CD's, her testimonies are not about what Jesus has done for her. She simply shares—testifies about—her life experiences.

Perhaps without realizing it, Mary J. Blige has come across a formula that has incredible merit, even in the absence of Jesus. Our testimony saves lives in that it helps, strengthens, and encourages others. Mary J. Blige has experienced the personal benefit of testifying. In addition to helping others through her testimony, she has persevered through her own rough times simply by testifying about them.

As Christ's disciples, God has called us to go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth as witnesses for him. Our Great Commission is to teach all nations as Jesus has commanded us. To fulfill his commission effectively, we must first experience Jesus personally.

First, if we haven't personally experienced Jesus, we cannot be effective witnesses. If we lack firsthand knowledge of what Jesus can do, why should anyone believe what we have to say? If our testimonies wouldn't be valid in court, why should they be valid anywhere else?

Second, Jesus said in Matthew 28:20 that we should teach the nations “to observe all things that I have commanded you” (NKJV). A disciple learns, studies, and trains in the presence of his master. As we learned before, we cannot do distance learning with Jesus. We can't teach what we haven't learned. True disciples learn only in their master's presence; this arrangement gives them the personal experience necessary to effectively carry out the gospel commission.

As the leper and blind man clearly illustrate, testifying of your experience with Jesus is an automatic reaction. The disciples show that just meeting him alone prompted this response. Michael

Jackson might say, “You can’t help it / if you wanted to / wouldn’t help it even if you could!”¹¹ Why are so many Christians, who claim Jesus is working in their lives, reluctant to share what he has done and where he has brought them? As ministers, aren’t we aware that this message is what God has asked us to proclaim? Are we unaware of our testimony’s effect and power? When we testify, we lift up Jesus and draw others to him. But by testifying, don’t we also experience a personal benefit by the act itself?

THE BENEFIT OF TESTIFYING

Mary J. Blige knows about this benefit and exploits it. Perhaps she’s been reading Revelation 12:11: “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death” (NIV). The book of Revelation says a loud voice from heaven spoke these words, telling in advance how the woman (the church) already beat the enemy (Satan). Jesus’ saving blood and our testimony of how he saved us have defeated the enemy. Testifying not only draws others to Jesus but also helps us overcome.

Jesus, who knows each of us inside and out, knows how to get our attention. He knows what will break us and bring us to him. He only allows things to happen on this earth that will bring him glory. Therefore, God intends whatever we experience in this life—bad and good—to draw us close so we can enjoy a personal experience with our Creator. He tells us to go, to be his witnesses, and to tell others about what he has done for us. He knows full well that others will be drawn to him and that our testimony will help us overcome.

God calls us ministers to be witnesses for him. This simply means that whether we’re singing, preaching, acting, or participating in whatever form our ministry takes, we’re supposed to testify to what Jesus has done for us through things we’ve personally experienced. If we’ve never experienced Jesus’

provision in the nick of time, how can we sing about him being an on-time God? If we’ve never experienced his provision, how can we preach about him being a provider?

Look again at what Scripture says: “They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death” (Rev. 12:11 NIV). These people weren’t ashamed or afraid to share their testimonies. Like the sick people Jesus healed, they wouldn’t allow anything to keep them from testifying about Jesus. They weren’t afraid of dying or of people knowing their business. Not even Jesus’ instructions could hinder the testimony of those who had encountered him. Telling others is a bold, proud, automatic, and natural reaction.

THE MARY J. BLIGE PRINCIPLE

We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life. This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us. We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that you may fully share our joy.

—1 John 1:1-4 NLT

Mary J. Blige has become a multi-platinum-selling recording artist by using this testimony formula. She recognizes the personal benefit of overcoming her situations and her testimony’s power to save others.

Have you experienced a personal relationship with Jesus? Did your reaction to the experience mirror the reaction of the sick

people Jesus healed? As you continue to experience Jesus in your life, are you as bold as Mary J. Blige in telling your story? Can you, like Mary, say, “If you looked at my life and see what I’ve seen . . .”?¹²