The pearl of great price

Frances Howard-Snyder

Abstract  “The Pearl of Great Price” is a short story that explores the ways faith can go wrong. The central character, Janet, a single mom in a dead end job, is drawn into a multi-level marketing scheme, Benevite, by an unscrupulous salesman. She is encouraged to believe in herself and her dream and to give everything she has to it. She is fed the standard clichés to the effect that you can achieve whatever you want if you try hard enough. In the end her faith in her dream leads to the loss of her relationship with her child and other losses. Her pursuit exhibits many of the standard features of faith, belief, desire, resilience, tenacity, passion, and yet she does not save herself. The story is not meant as an indictment of faith in general, but as an acknowledgement of the fact that faith can be a vice and an exploration of when this might be so.

Keywords  Faith · Bad faith · Belief · Trust

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matthew 13: 45–46)

This interview was key. If I could convince the president of the PTA to buy my products, and more importantly, to sign up as a distributor, if I could catch this one

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big fish, win this one soul, I’d be Sapphire, and on my way to Silver, just a few short steps away from Freedom.

I was running late. I had to change out of my Denny’s uniform and make the house respectable. Bethany had promised she’d clean the kitchen and unpack the Benevite boxes and stack them neatly. Damn! She hadn’t done it. The dishes were still on the counters; the boxes were still unpacked. What! She’d opened a couple of boxes and spilled their contents on the kitchen floor, yellow corn cereal mixed with brick brown dog pellets. No saving that. I could have killed her. “Bethany!”

I found her in the living room sprawled on the sofa eating a donut. In spite of my anger I couldn’t help being moved by her soft skin, green eyes and dark curls, my gorgeous, infuriating eighteen year old child.

“What’s gotten into you? What did you do with my products? You know how much that stuff costs? You’re going to have to pay for this.”

“Whatever.” She changed the channel without looking at me.

I stepped between her and the television. “Why, Bethany?”

She peered around me. “You know how I hate keeping those stupid Benevite boxes in my bedroom.”

“I don’t have time for this now. An important client’s coming over. We’ll talk later. You have to help clean up this mess.”

“Not happening.” She stood, picked up her purse and jacket, and strode through the kitchen, grabbing the keys to my Subaru as she went.

I stared after her and then yelled, “Hey, I didn’t say you could take the car,” but the sound of the accelerator drowned my words.

I wanted to jump up and down and grind the cereal and dog food into dust but that would be counterproductive and undignified. I glanced at the fridge. The phrase *Winners Never Quit and Quitters Never Win* met my eye, written in elegant calligraphy and pinned in between the postcards from Santorini and the photo of Kenneth’s boy graduating from Stanford—my gallery of inspiration, all the things we’d do when we made it big. Well, we weren’t going to make it big if I couldn’t reel in the president of the PTA. So I rolled up my sleeves, swept up most of the trash, and then dragged the heavy vacuum cleaner from the hall closet.

The phone rang while my hands were busy. “Janet,” a polished woman’s voice said into the answering machine. “This is Meg. I can’t make it to your home this evening. If you really want to meet, why don’t you stop by the Starbucks on Eleventh. I’m meeting someone else there and can most likely squeeze you in around seven.” Click.

New plan. No time for vacuuming. I needed to dress up, gather my Benevite materials, and get down to Starbucks on Eleventh.

“Oh fuck!” I said and quickly corrected myself. “Oh fudge.” Starbucks was five miles away. How the heck was I supposed to get there without a car? I just had to get to that meeting. This one deal could make all the difference. Meg had lots of connections and she’d be a great persuader. If I could just get her in my stable, I’d be on my way. My sponsor, Kenneth, would know what to do. As I’d done so often in the last seven years, I called him.

“Be ready in ten minutes,” he told me. He’d swing by in his Lexus and take me to the meeting. We could even brainstorm strategies on the ride over.
I found a blouse without grease stains and carefully applied eyeliner, recalling the
day I first met Kenneth, the day that had changed my life.

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The Denny’s where I worked had been mostly empty late that evening. My
rubber soles squeaked on the linoleum. The cash register cha-chinged and the
dishwasher hummed, while a couple of workers joked in the kitchen.

“More coffee, please,” the guy in the corner called out. He looked like
money—something about his haircut and suit, the gold tiepin and cuff links. Who
wears cuff links?

I carried the pot over. The man was freshly shaved, unusual for this time of night.

“Long day?” he asked.

I nodded and tried to smile.

“Do you like your job?”

Stupid question. Or maybe he was testing me. What was I supposed to say?

He nodded. “Tell me about your dreams…” He peered at the name tag on my
chest. “Janet. What would you do with a million dollars?”

I glanced behind me. My manager didn’t mind us chatting with good-paying
customers if no-one else was waiting.

“I’m serious,” he added.

“I’d take my kid to Disneyland.”

“How old? Do you have a photo?”

I showed him a sun-whitened picture of the only person who mattered in my life,
my little girl in braids and braces.

“What’s her name?”

“Bethany.”

He didn’t say she was cute or that Bethany was an interesting name, which
disappointed me, but at least meant he was honest. “Recent?” he asked.

I nodded. “Just turned eleven. Do you have kids of your own?”

He pulled out his wallet and extracted a photo of a boy in a cap and gown. “My
boy, Conner, graduating from Stanford,” he said and gazed at the photo for a long
time.

“Yeah,” I muttered. “That’s another thing I’d do with a million dollars.” I half
turned to get back to work.

He must have sensed my irritation, because he touched my arm ever so gently
and said, “What if I told you there was a way?”

I shrugged and kept my mouth shut.

But he went on. “Bethany can go to a fine college, Janet. You just have to have
faith.”

I looked into his eyes: swimming pool blue but deeper than any pool I’d seen, so
deep that you couldn’t see the bottom. A man you could trust.

The door jangled. I turned to go.

“What time do you get off?” he asked.
I gave him a look.

“Coffee shop? Seven Eleven? Anywhere you feel safe. I have a business proposition for you. Nothing more sinister.”

We met outside the restaurant at eleven and walked to an all-night diner. I half hoped he’d try to kiss me. My recent divorce had left me cautiously on the look-out for a good guy to replace the bad guy who’d left me. And if the good guy had money, well, I wouldn’t complain. But Kenneth had other plans. His talk was scrupulously accurate and free of any profanity. You’d think his mind was clean shaven too. He liked me, I could tell, but he wouldn’t hit on me. What did he want then? Did he want to help me or did he want something from me?

“Both,” he insisted when I asked, holding my gaze for a long time. “We have something to gain from each other. I’m not out to trick you and I’m not offering charity. I’m proposing a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

The business he worked for, Benevite, was constantly seeking men and women from all walks of life who had winning personalities and the desire and willingness to work hard and make sacrifices. Here he gave me an appraising look and I tried to sit up straighter and square my shoulders. Kenneth had been just like me fifteen years before, he said, trapped in a dead end job, certain that he wouldn’t be able to give his children a decent education, terrified that he’d be doing the same dull, soul-destroying work well after the normal age of retirement.

If I accepted his proposition I’d become an independent distributor, selling Benevite products and making money. He would take a small percentage of my earnings as payment for connecting me to Benevite. If I wanted to make real money, I’d learn to do exactly as he did and find my own distributors who would sell and give me small percentages of their incomes. I’d then pass a tiny fraction of these payments on to him. “And everyone would win.” Eventually, if I worked hard enough, I’d have a whole empire of salespeople working under me and funneling drops of their earnings up to me. A *trickle-up economy*, he described it.

He insisted that I not make an impulsive decision. I had to take the proposal away and think about it for a few days, perhaps read the on-line testimonials, and even call up the folks whose numbers were listed on the videos. He was interested in working with me only if I was committed, and I’d be committed only if I came to this decision on my own.

He turned back just as we were parting. “Here.” He opened his wallet and drew out a photograph. “Something to inspire you.”

I looked at the picture, the one that had made my mouth water. “No, I can’t take it. It’s your son. A really special moment.”

He cocked his head. “You’re special too, Janet. It would mean a lot to me if you took it.”

Still I hesitated.

“And I do have another copy.”

That photo settled it. I pretended to take my time, but I’d already decided. I was going to give everything I had to my new business. I was going to make a fortune, and give myself and my daughter a good life.

I started talking about the company—at work, at church, in the line at the grocery store, even when it embarrassed me, even when my pastor asked me not to mix God
and mammon, even when the prospects were rude. Occasionally, some people, a retired couple at the church and one of my neighbors, agreed to buy my products. Kenneth coached me in strategies and sometimes met with clients and helped me convince them. “If you approach ten thousand people and convince just one percent, that’s one hundred people!” Kenneth told me. “Rejection is part of the deal. Don’t let it get you down.”

A couple of months later I found myself at Lake Shalom Park. The water, glittering in the sunlight and dotted with fishing boats and kayaks, was surrounded on three sides by banks of evergreens. The fourth was bordered by playing fields, a picnic area and tennis courts. Benevite had set up a raised dais next to one of the barbecue pits. I joined the group nervously. The men, like Kenneth, were all clean shaven, short-haired, and dressed in jackets and ties. The women could have just come from a Baptist church—in nylons, skirts, mascara, and stiff hair. I felt out of place in my cargo shorts and t-shirt, what I’d guessed would be standard picnic gear. Kenneth looked from them to me. I got the message.

After the potato salad and hotdogs and lemonade, the awards ceremony began. I sat beside Kenneth as Benevite members received plaques or badges for reaching their Bronze, Sapphire, Silver, Gold, and Platinum levels. Some made brief speeches about the importance of believing in yourself, toughing it out through the hard patches, keeping your eye on your dreams. They talked of what they’d bought and what they hoped to buy—surgery, college, a forty foot boat, an African safari, and mostly, freedom from the drudgery of work. The woman beside me watched with her bottom lip between her teeth. The man in front of us leaned forward and held up a phone to record the talk.

“They’re hungry,” Kenneth told me. “You have to be hungrier.”

Just as the ceremony was winding down, Kenneth trotted up to the podium. “Before we part,” he said and paused to wait for the crowd to hush. “Before we go our separate ways to realize our dreams, I have one last award.”

The crowd held its breath. “The award for the most enthusiastic newbie….” Another pause. “Goes to … Janet Lackey.”

I looked around. Someone else with my name! And then when no-one moved and Kenneth stared at me, I realized that I was, however briefly, the center of attention. I rose to my feet, blushed, stumbled up to the dais, and stood while Kenneth pinned the medal to my t-shirt and whispered that this was the first of many. The applause started and grew louder. I closed my eyes and felt the wave of love lift me up into something larger than myself.

I attached the medal to the fridge door—next to the photo of Kenneth’s son, and resolved to do better. I made lists of people to approach, even people who made me uncomfortable. I called my haughty ex-sister-in-law and described my new business and all that I hoped to achieve and the virtues of our products—wholly organic, U.S.-made, cheaper than Costco. “And hey, why not support a relative? If not for my sake, how about for Bethany? This business venture is going to help put her through college.”

Lily sighed and said she didn’t like making such decisions on the spot, but she promised she’d look into it. But when I called again, she said no.
“But don’t you want to help your own niece?” I asked. “You have a good job at the university. You could easily afford—”

“Look, Janet. I’ve done some research. Only 1 in 64,000 people who start out with these pyramid schemes actually make enough to justify the effort. You’d do better going back to community college.”

How dare she patronize me like that? How dare she reject my perfectly reasonable offer? “You’re a fine one to talk,” I spat. “Don’t you know how unlikely you are to achieve your sacred dream of becoming a famous author? What are the chances of getting your book published? Do some research on that.”

There was a long silence. And then Lily said good-bye and put the phone down. I hated myself—both for hurting her feelings and for losing the chance to win her as a convert. I thought of discussing the interview with Kenneth, but I knew what he’d say: don’t ever let them think you’re desperate. Make them think it’s their loss. I did ask him about the odds of success.

He grinned. “We have a 100% success rate.” He paused, winked at my dubious face, and continued, “For those who are All In. Of course, lots of people don’t have the passion or the commitment and drop out, wasting time and money. But those who have faith…” Here he looked significantly at the cross around my neck. “Will reap rewards one hundred fold.”

I resolved to work harder and to be less thin-skinned about rejection. I didn’t care much about what Lily thought, but Bethany’s criticisms were more painful. Sometimes she got upset with me—like the times I stacked Benevite supplies in her bedroom, or the time I had to miss her big choir solo to attend a motivational seminar in Seattle or the times I wasn’t home to make her dinner or help with homework. But the incident she always returned to with bitterness was the evening of her junior prom. I dropped her off at the restaurant and met her date, a handsome and popular member of the football team, and his parents, an attractive couple who owned a gym. The sort of people who interacted with a lot of other people, I realized.

“And what do you do, Janet?” the dad asked me.

“I’m involved in a very exciting business venture.” I ignored Bethany’s scowl. “Perhaps you’d like to hear about it. There are lots of opportunities for enterprising and hard-working folks like yourselves.”

They listened and then said they had to leave to fetch their younger child. I insisted on handing them my card and adding a few more reasons to take an interest in Benevite. They nodded pleasantly and promised to check out the website.

“How could you, Mom?” Bethany said when she returned at midnight. She stormed into the living room where I was working on my accounts and flung herself onto the sofa and pressed her face into the fake suede.

“Tell me what happened?”

Her face was blotchy when she looked up. “Why did you have to try to sell your stupid Beneshit to Jonah’s parents? He spent the entire evening making fun of you. I didn’t know whether to join in or defend you.”

And when he didn’t call the next day or the next, Bethany raged around the house.

“Bethany,” I pleaded. “Talk to me.”
“He was really special, Mom. I’ve been in love with him all year.”

I tried to tell myself that it wasn’t my fault, that if he was really worth it, he’d overlook a little networking on his girl’s mother’s part. A boy that mean-spirited didn’t deserve a girl like Bethany.

When Kenneth came over to drop off some products a few days later, I invited him in and offered him a glass of lemonade. “Don’t you ever worry that all this concern with money is wrong?” I asked, touching my face, a nervous habit I haven’t quite been able to break. “I mean, wouldn’t it be better for me to spend those few hours a day when I’m not at the restaurant, with Bethany, helping her with her homework, shooting hoops, taking her to amusement parks or movies or museums? She won’t be young forever. Is the money really worth the sacrifice?”

Kenneth drew back. “You really don’t get it, do you? After all these years of my instruction. Unbelievable.” He shook his head and wouldn’t look at me.

I was dumbfounded. He’d always been so patient. I hadn’t intended to anger him and longed to earn back his good will.

“What?” I begged.

He looked around my living room. As I watched his gaze take in the worn rug, the stained sofa and the mold on the ceiling, I felt myself blush.

“Money isn’t just dirty pieces of paper, Janet,” he said, spreading the words out like I was dim-witted. “Money is education, health care, travel, a home in a safe neighborhood. You’re doing this for your child, Janet—for Bethany.”

Using children’s names was a good tactic, he’d taught me. It stirs up something in a mother, makes her more persuadable. He was right. I realized how naïve I’d been.

“Do you think it’d be more valuable to Bethany to have you shoot hoops with her,” he continued, “Than to get her into Stanford? Do you think when she looks back on her life working as a checkout girl at Stop and Shop, she’ll be glad that her mother took her on a rollercoaster? I’m disappointed in you, Janet. I thought you understood.”

I closed my eyes so he wouldn’t see inside me. Looking for instant gratification had always been my problem: crappy grades in high school, dropping out of community college, getting pregnant before I was married. “You’re right,” I murmured.

He flashed his twenty thousand dollar smile and took my hand. “Of course I am. But that’s why we need each other—to remind each other of the things that matter when the going gets rough, to shore up our flagging faith.”

He looked away and I realized something about him.

“You’re unhappy too?”

He shrugged. “A little.”

“What is it? Is it your son?”

“My son?” He stared at me blankly.

“The one who graduated from Stanford. You gave me his picture.”

“Oh, uh, Carter. No, he’s doing fine. Things have been a little rough lately. Sorry I took it out on you. We just have to muscle through.” He looked around again and his gaze rested on a baby picture on the mantelpiece. “Remember when you held
Bethany in your arms for the very first time? You forgot all about the labor pains then, didn’t you?”

I nodded.

“That’s what it’ll be like when we make it. These hard times will seem like nothing then.”

After he left I held that photo in my hands. Maybe my baby would forget the hard times too after I made enough money to send her to college and Europe and buy her that sports car she’d been hankering after. I needed to explain it all to her—maybe even use Kenneth’s words. And I’d promise I wouldn’t try to sell the company to any of her boyfriends’ families in the future.

But she never gave me the chance to keep or break that promise. She never let me meet another boyfriend. She’d slip out of the house whenever her date’s car pulled up. She’d never bring him in at the end of an evening. And she steadfastly refused to pass on my invitations to dinner. I didn’t even learn their names.

I could have insisted but she seemed to be having fun, I was able to get on with my work, and we weren’t fighting day and night. A sort of peace had descended on our home and that suited us both.

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We arrived at the Starbucks on Eleventh a few minutes after seven and saw Meg seated in a corner on her own. I was eager to get over there but Kenneth stopped to buy three lattes. I introduced them. He offered her a coffee. She accepted and flashed a smile at him that was very different from the smile she gave me. Good thing I brought him along, I thought.

I started explaining how Benevite worked. Kenneth helped, adding some phrases and numbers with an ease that had always amazed me. She asked him detailed questions. I opened my mouth to answer but he was ahead of me. Just then I felt my phone buzz in my pocket. I glanced at it discreetly—totally against the rules but Meg wouldn’t notice because she was so focused on Kenneth.

I had to take this call. “Excuse me,” I muttered. “Bathroom break.” I hurried outside. “Hi Bethany, Sweetheart… where are you? I’m sorry I yelled earlier. It’s OK that you took the car. I found another way to get to my meeting—”

“You don’t get it, Mom,” Bethany said. “I’m leaving—forever.”

“What are you talking about? What about school?”

“I’m eighteen, Mom. I get to leave if I want. And I wasn’t going to graduate anyway.”

“Don’t be absurd. You have to graduate. You have to go to college. That’s what this has all been about.”

She laughed miserably. “It’s what you’ve been all about maybe. You have no idea what I’ve been about.”

“Yes. I have. You’ve been about ….” In my crazed stress, I couldn’t think of a single thing except, “Boys and…”

“Not boys, Mom. One boy. Marcus. My life’s been all about him for the last year and now it’s about him and our baby.”

“Baby?”
“Yup. Due in six months.”
“But you’re not… I would have noticed…”
“Didn’t you hear me barfing up that disgusting Benevite lasagna yesterday morning?”

I had heard her and figured she’d just overeaten—all those donuts. Which also would explain the weight gain. And her moodiness? Well, she’d always been a difficult girl. I hadn’t paid attention. I’d missed the important clues.

“Bethany,” I murmured. “You’re just a baby yourself. You can’t. We can fix this. Come home. We’ll find a way…”

“No, Mom. Marcus and I will handle this on our own. And I can tell you one thing for sure. I’m going to be a good mother to this child. I won’t let her down.”

“Don’t say that. Everything I’ve done, everything I’ve sacrificed, everything… well it’s all been for your sake.”

Her laughter crackled on the end of the line. “You keep believing that, Mom if it keeps you happy. Write it on a little itty bitty piece of paper and stick it on your mirror. And I’m keeping the car. It’s a small price to pay for spoiling my life.” And then she hung up.

I stood in the parking lot staring at the rain gleaming in puddles and on windshields. My child was gone, a high school dropout and pregnant at eighteen. Acid pooled in my gut.

I headed back inside. I needed Kenneth to drive me home, to comfort me, to help me sort out this mess.

I walked into the coffee shop—in time to see Kenneth’s and Meg’s heads bent together over some paperwork. After a few minutes, Meg stood, shook his hand and sailed out, her eyes on a small photograph of a boy in a cap and gown. Conner, or Carter, or whoever Kenneth’s kid was. He must have a lot of copies of that photo, I realized dully.

I moved to the wooden seat still warm from Meg’s velvet-clad posterior. “What happened?”

Kenneth beamed at me. “I signed her up. She’s going to be an excellent addition to the company.”

“Thanks.” Relief washed over me. At least one thing was going right.

“Don’t thank me too fast,” he murmured without looking up.

It took me a while to understand. “You mean… she’s going to be your distributor, not mine? You cut me out?”

“Sorry, Kid. This deal will make me Gold.”

“But what about me?”

“There’ll be other wins for you. You just have to….” He paused, distracted by something on one of the forms in front of him.

“What Kenneth? What do I have to do to be a winner like you? I’m doing everything I can. You said that I would succeed if I was fully committed.”

He stood up slowly and looked into my eyes. “The fact that you simply walked away from this deal with Meg means that… well, in the final analysis, you aren’t fully committed.”

“But…”

“You know the story of the pearl of great price?”
“From the bible? Of course.”
“Well—Benevite is like that. It doesn’t work if you aren’t willing to sacrifice everything for it.”

I stared at him. “I don’t think Jesus was talking about Benevite.”
“Hell, Janet. The point is you have to give your whole heart or you will fail. And I’m afraid I don’t see you giving your whole heart.”

I thought of all the years, all the awkward conversations with strangers, all the nights filling out forms and adding up figures. And then I thought of Bethany. Where was she tonight? Which one was Marcus? How would she cope with this baby? My troubles tumbled over me, big and small, pushing me down—my car, my daughter, the dogfood and cereal on my kitchen floor, Kenneth, my ex-husband—threatening to drag me down to the bottom of a murky pool. Part of me wanted to just let go and drown.

Or I could kick and struggle and swim towards the light. Nothing else would save me. Kenneth was right. I hadn’t fought hard enough up till now. I recalled a verse I’d copied out and pasted on my mirror. “If you falter in times of adversity how small is your strength.” I swayed on my feet.

Kenneth gripped my shoulder and held me up. “I’ll help you make it, Janet. I can see you have talent. You couldn’t have hooked Meg if you hadn’t. And I’m grateful for that. I’ll find a way to pay you back.”

The idea that I had talent made me smile through my tears. I thought of Bethany. My best chance of getting her back was to prove to her that I wasn’t a failure and that I could provide for her and her new family. Kenneth was right. I couldn’t go back. I had to go forward. If I could just find the strength to give this enterprise one last full-hearted effort, I could be where Kenneth was: golden.

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