



MY **DAWSON** NEIGHBOR

By **Melinda Rainey Thompson**

Early one morning as I dashed toward the gym from my car, virtually unrecognizable to the world with my scraped-back pony tail, inch-thick glasses, and no make-up, (I hope you are getting the full mental picture of this, because only Jesus and a dog could love me in this state) a friend called out to me from the sidewalk.

"How are those Baptists treating you?" she shouted in a way-too-loud voice for 6:15 a.m.

"What do you mean?" I responded in a much more appropriate decibel for pre-dawn conversation.

"You're Episcopalian!" she pointed out, as if I didn't know this already. "You think they're going to let you in?"

That encounter got me thinking, which almost always leads to trouble, or at the very least, an essay, article, or if I really can't help it, a book. I'm a writer. One phrase or something I witness or overhear can infect my imagination like an overactive virus, and I have to get it down on paper—or my laptop, to be precise. Although my handwriting leaves something to be desired, I can fly across a keyboard.

Real writers do not sit at beautiful desks in front of stained-glass windows sipping steaming mugs of tea waiting for God to send something down from a mountaintop, just in case you were wondering. Inspiration usually comes at the most inconvenient

times—when I'm trapped in a dark movie theater and have to crawl across the laps of moviegoers to scratch a few lines on the back of my ticket before I forget them or at 3 o'clock in the morning when I am lying awake beside my husband who is sleeping peacefully.

The pre-dawn hours are when my worries bubble up, real worries, like whether my children are texting and driving, and also insignificant ones like whether or not I have enough cookies for the baby shower. I worry about my children, my aging parents, and work. I worry about what the world is coming to. In those dark hours, I can't even pray. I can only repeat, over and over, "Please, Lord." That's when I begin to write. The first draft is always in my head.

Last winter, I had a terrible accident. I slipped on a sheet of ice and shattered my knee cap. After surgery and physical therapy, I was told to join a gym. I didn't want to. Every step hurt.

I joined Dawson's Family Recreation Center because I live in the neighborhood, and the gym is reasonably priced, safe, easy to navigate, and welcomes everyone, regardless of age or fitness level. (I'm not the only woman in black leggings and a really big shirt!) I've found encouragement there among staff and patrons, friends who've reared their children alongside mine, folks I've worked with in school concession stands, or sat by at the pool or park.

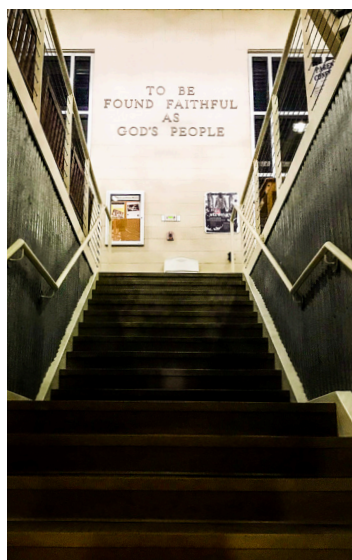


I've lived in Homewood for more than 30 years. I can see our tiny, first house from the one we live in today. Our family is a part of the community, and we've learned over the years that Dawson is a good neighbor.

My first encounter with Dawson was 20 years ago. Church members helped my elderly neighbors take down their Christmas tree. I never forgot that. I've watched Dawson answer the question of who is my neighbor again and again—by feeding the hungry, reaching out to Spanish-speaking mothers and children, taking loads of kids to camp, and by providing young men with courts for early-morning basketball games.

When I exercise, I love to hear their back-and-forth ribbing of one another. It reminds me of my own children.

For a while after the accident, I could only ride a stationary bike. Now, I walk on the elevated path in the gym 28 times around the court, two miles, and I watch the clouds and people through the large windows. I've observed little acts of kindness that have moved me to tears—help for an elderly woman who could not park her car, a bike accident where an older child comforted a younger one, and a man who pulled over to buy a warm cup of watery lemonade just because a kid was selling it.



After a few months, something happened. To distract myself from the pain, I began to pray as I walked.

At first, I used prayers that were familiar to me from *The Book of Common Prayer* and the liturgy I participate in every Sunday morning in my own parish, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church. I prayed for the poor, those who mourn, the dying, the friendless, the hungry, the homeless, and for those who are alone. I prayed for my family, my church, our community, our country, and for people all over the world. I prayed for you. Each lap became a prayer litany, a labyrinth of meditation.

For me, working out at Dawson became a form of worship, a dedicated time for prayer. The words chiseled over the front entrance to the FRC say: "To Be Found Faithful As God's People." Dawson has been a faithful neighbor to this Episcopalian, a friend, and a much-needed prayer partner.

The Baptists did, indeed, let me in. I'm grateful. †



Melinda Rainey Thompson is the best-selling author of five books. Her new book, *If I Were The Boss of You*, has just been released. Melinda is an author and speaker and is an Assistant Lecturer in English at Birmingham-Southern College.