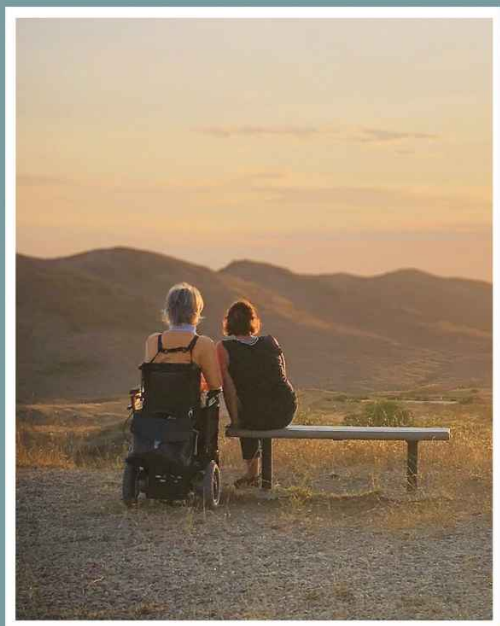


Conversations about  
Life's Chaos and **Amazing Grace**



# Sunday Evenings with Joni

Ruth Schleppi-Verboom

Foreword by **JONI EARECKSON TADA**

# The Woman in a Wheelchair

I first met Joni Eareckson Tada in 1986. Joni was thirty-six; I was seventeen. It was the summer I had graduated high school. And in all fairness, when I say met her, it was not exactly that. Far from it. It was me and 20,000 other people in a crowded stadium who all came to see her and hear her speak. I like to think that she noticed me—this tall seventeen-year-old girl in the front row, but she probably didn't.

Joni was once seventeen too. A confident, athletic, tall girl, who, like me, had just graduated high school. She was enrolled in college for the fall and was enjoying her summer break at home. When I look at her pictures from those days, she sparkled. Living life to the fullest. Horses, sports, music, friends—all of that. One sunny day, she and her sister decided to go for a swim in the Chesapeake Bay, not far from their home. Both Joni and Jackie were good swimmers and had been there hundreds of times. The warm day was perfect for a dip in the crisp, cool waters of the bay. Jackie was already in the water, swimming

away, while Joni was getting ready to jump in. The girls and their world seemed careless and light.

Until it wasn't.

Joni miscalculated the depth of the water when she dove off a raft, thinking it was deep enough, but it was actually shallow. A tragic miscalculation and the next thing she knew was that she couldn't move her body. Joni lay in the water, still, with her face down. In a split second, after her dive, she'd broken her neck and her world was never the same. The minutes that followed must have felt like ages, when Joni could not turn herself around and when she felt as if she was slowly drowning.

Meanwhile, Jackie had swum a good distance away from Joni and had no idea what happened. By a blessing in disguise, she was pinched by a crawfish and turned around to warn Joni. While scanning the horizon, she knew something was wrong when she saw Joni floating on her stomach.

Bless that snappy, little crawfish!

Jackie quickly swam back to Joni and turned her over.

I can only imagine the big gulp of fresh air Joni took—the first breath of a whole new life. Joni eventually wrote down her story in a book, which I'd read three times by the time I was seventeen. (The book later became a movie.) Joni had traveled from California to the Netherlands to “meet” me (and the other 20,000 fans) at a Christian festival, called the *EO Jongeredag*—a huge gathering of young people who wanted to learn more about God and see the woman from California, who could sing, paint, and speak of Jesus as you'd never heard before.

The morning of the festival featured music, speakers, announcements, and all the things that make a good event, but it seemed that everyone in the stadium was there for one thing—to hear Joni speak. The anticipation was tangible. Finally, it was time. Around two in the

afternoon, Jan van den Bosh—a longtime friend of Joni and the emcee of the event—said the words we’d eagerly awaited . . .

“Ladies and gentlemen, a warm welcome. Here she is! Joni Eareckson Tada, all the way from California!”

The crowd applauded in unison when Joni, ever so smoothly, rolled and twirled her chair onto the big stage, followed by Ken, her husband.

Joni was stunning. Just beautiful! With a bright smile and clear voice, she greeted us. Ken, standing next to Joni, looked handsome and strong, letting her talk and shine.



I was awestruck. She was all I had hoped for: confident, and fun, and oh-so-Californian—something coveted by the Dutch because California was far away and synonymous with beachy, glamorous, and sun-kissed film stars. Coolness, strength, and happiness obviously came with it, we figured.

California was the dream, and Joni and Ken were pretty much our Barbie and Ken! I still remember what they wore: knitted sweaters with cables and colors and patterns; the sweaters you hope to find in trendy thrift stores today, if you are lucky.

All 20,000 of us hung on every word they said, mesmerized. And in the evening, we would watch it again on national television, when Joni’s performance was aired. I can’t even remember what she said, or which songs she sang, but I remember how she made me feel.

So good.

There was something different about her. Not her wheelchair, her beauty, her flawless presentation, or her fame. No, not even the

matching sweaters. It was her happiness that beamed forth. It was authentic.

I knew about Jesus and was brought up in a Christian home, but that summer day in 1986 was the first time I truly understood the source of such happiness: a beautiful and true relationship with Jesus.

And I wanted what she had.

# The Painting

There is a quote that captures something I have always felt but never found the words for:

*We will meet and talk with friends  
and speak of everything and nothing.  
We will laugh and reminisce  
and no matter how light the conversation may all seem—  
we will remember that day fondly.  
Forever.<sup>1</sup>*

That.

At my dinner table. And I am happy.

These words capture my longing so beautifully, and I wish I could give credit where due, but I don't know the author. It could be among Shakespeare's verses, but instead I read it on a plate in Anthropologie's sale section. Yes, I know, an unromantic \$18.95 was all it took. Needless

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1. Author unknown.

to say, I had to buy it, and for many years the plate hung on my kitchen wall.

Until it broke.

By then I knew the quote by heart. It captures what I love and cherish, and not just because I like to eat (which I do very much), but because what I long for is the togetherness the words describe—the gathering.

Some might call this “entertaining,” but it’s more than that. Entertaining sounds burdensome, a tedious task, and that’s the last thing I want when I have people over! I want them to hang out at the kitchen counter while I cook, and lounge on my couch where we drink our tea and sit with me at the table and eat. Nothing formal nor fancy—just warm, welcoming togetherness.

Jan Steen, a seventeenth-century Dutch painter, captured this feeling well. In a time when paintings were a way to flaunt one’s wealth and importance, Steen’s work depicted messy tables and joyful gatherings. Presence over pretense.

I’m not a painter, but I can set a fine table. I will prepare you a place, and then we’ll talk about everything and nothing, laugh and reminisce. With fondness.

So, it was only a natural continuation when I got to know Joni (not with a crowd of 20,000, but in person) to invite her to our house.

To my table.

Because by then, it was the year 2007 and we lived in California. As a filmmaker, my husband, Helmut, had a longtime dream to make a movie and live and work in California. In an adventurous mood, we sold our home and business in the Netherlands and moved with our two young sons, Dyde and Romeo, to Los Angeles in 1999.

*Let’s try it, we said, and give it a year.*

But one year became three, and three became eight, and eight became twenty-five. Soon enough our two daughters were born, Brontë and Lente, in 2001 and 2002. And in those years, we raised our family. Helmut made movies as an independent filmmaker and found his sweet spot as a freelance director in Los Angeles, while I steered our home. Building the nest, as I like to call it.

One day (hop-hop, we are now in 2007), a producer friend asked Helmut to film a series for Joni & Friends.<sup>2</sup> Joni was still my hero. I listened to her radio shows and read her books, but I had no idea her home and office were so close to our home in Calabasas. To my surprise and bliss, the woman I admired from afar was practically my neighbor!

Long story short: Helmut filmed Joni, then he met Joni's husband, Ken; and I (oh, happy day) met Joni, face to face this time.

A party seemed the perfect way for the first steps toward this goal. Helmut likes to have people over as much as I do and we decided to have a New Year's Eve party—for food, togetherness, and, of course, for Joni and me to become best friends.

By now, Helmut and I attended the same church as Joni and Ken, and I had the audacious plan to invite the whole church family to the party, along with—wait for it—our kids' friends from school, a few neighbors, and a couple of other friends. It honestly got out of hand and the group grew in number and diversity: young kids, fine diners, believers, nonbelievers, old friends, new friends, and Joni.

Not an easy task for the hostess! I was a bit nervous, wondering how to make everyone happy and Joni impressed . . .

The craft store came to my rescue. *We can paint!* I thought, inspired by Jan Steen's happy gatherings. I picked up small canvases, brushes,

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2. The nonprofit Joni founded in 1979 to bring help and gospel hope to people with disabilities around the world.

and paint and turned our dining room into an arts and crafts studio.

And what I hoped for happened. On New Year's Eve, everyone gathered around my table to paint. Young and old, new and longtime friends, all connecting over mini canvases and brushes; laughing, reminiscing, and speaking of everything and nothing—just as I love.

Joni liked it too, and with a determined mind of an artist, she picked out colors and brushes. We built a makeshift easel to hold her canvas, and Judy<sup>3</sup> handed her clean brushes, which Joni would hold in her mouth. With the brush controlled by her lips, teeth, and tongue, she started to paint a gorgeous bright blue sky, followed by a twirling green circle. A canopy, perhaps? Then, after mixing colors into a deep hickory brown (still with her brush held in her mouth) a humongous, well-defined tree appeared on the canvas.

I worked on a Christmas tree on my little canvas, and one might think with the advantage of ten moving fingers it would not be difficult. But it was, and comparing my canvas to hers, I gave up on my attempt at a Christmas tree.

Pointing at her tree, Joni said, “That’s your tree, from your backyard.”

That’s Joni. A keen observer. I hadn’t realized she’d noticed our tree during her brief time in the backyard. But there it was, a California live oak that had stood for hundreds of years, wide and tall—unmovable as a house. Almost inconspicuous in its greatness. Strange how that sometimes happens, when things become so obvious and large that we don’t see them anymore. Yet, Joni noticed.

I didn’t. You see, our front door and its steps were not wheelchair friendly. To bring Joni into our home, we had to navigate the uneven

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3. Judy Butler is a close friend of Joni and has been Joni’s right hand and executive assistant from the beginning of Joni’s public ministry: <https://joniandfriends.org/news/judy-butler-retirement>.

terrain of our backyard—full of gopher holes, hidden roots, and slippery slopes.

My goodness, I was nervous about that too, but Joni didn't seem worried. While I only had eyes for dangers and snares, she navigated effortlessly around the gopher holes, roots, and hillside and still noticed our monumental tree.

My favorite place to sit was underneath that tree. There was a fountain where birds would come to splash and drink and a sandbox for the kids to play in. A swing hung from one of the high branches, and in the afternoon, the canopy of leaves shaded the children and me from the Californian sun.

It was as if the tree loved us as much as we loved it, watching over our home and the hill where our goats and chickens roamed.

I often wondered if Jeremiah knew a tree like mine when he thought of a tree planted by the water:

*“But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD,  
whose confidence is in him.  
They will be like a tree planted by the water  
that sends out its roots by the stream.  
It does not fear when heat comes;  
its leaves are always green.  
It has no worries in a year of drought  
and never fails to bear fruit.”  
(Jeremiah 17:7–8 NIV)*

Oh, to be like that tree—life-giving, firmly planted, unwavering. Fruitful—with an attitude.

But our tree was not like that, because a few years after that

gathering, it fell during a storm in the middle of the night.

*Thump* was all the sound it made. One firm thump, and in a split second, it was gone.

As it fell, the tree crushed everything in its path—smaller trees, bushes, and the bright white oleanders beneath it, but it somehow missed the chicken coop. The sound woke me up, and when I looked out the window, I didn't even notice what was missing. Until I saw the monster roots, exposed and standing almost eight feet high, with the tree itself flat on the ground.

I was shocked to see the tree I once trusted for its stability, shade, and strength now lying in ruins. It was gone without any resistance or steadfastness.

*THUMP.* Followed by stillness and devastation. Every time I look at the empty spot where the tree stood, I think of how its leaves are no longer green, and its branches won't bear fruit.

And then I look at Joni's painting of our tree, which she gave me at the end of the New Year's Eve party. It was when we stood outside on the patio, looking at the tree.

"I noticed your tree right away, Ruth—what a beautiful, strong tree," she said and handed me her painting.

I love that painting so very much. Every time I look at it, I'm reminded of the evening our friendship began. When we talked of everything and nothing and reminisced on Jeremiah's tree planted near the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear, it has no worries, and it never fails to bear fruit.

Over the years our friendship grew. Joni became my mentor, my friend, my prayer partner, and so much more. From her I learned what it means to be like that tree with its leaves always green. And therefore, she is still my hero.

## The Painting

She is like that tree, and not because of lofty circumstances or noble virtues. But getting to know her, I can tell she does not fear when heat comes, whether it is pain, cancer, or any form of suffering. She is planted by the water and sends out her roots by the stream.

Her life is blessed because she trusts in the Lord, and her confidence is in Him.

As you turn the page, I invite you into our conversations in which Joni and I spoke of everything and nothing and where I learned about strong roots.

It is my hope that you and I will be like that tree—planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream.

Let's go.



## CHAPTER 3

# 80/20

Joni has Covid!

Remember the pandemic that brought frailty and peril to all of us? Nowadays, Covid doesn't seem to be a big deal anymore, and when I say, "Joni has Covid," you probably say, "Yes, and?"

So, allow me to take you back to early 2020, when this unknown virus grew to be a ubiquitous danger to so many, and we were all so afraid.

The mysterious virus had fallen upon the world, and we had many questions and very few answers. Countries were in lockdown, and thousands of people were dying. Political parties were divided more than ever.

*Do we vaccinate or not?*

*Mask or no mask?*

*Churches and schools open or closed?*

*Washing groceries or not?*

*Six feet away!*

The world is a mess.

And you just heard that your best friend with limited physical abilities and a compromised immune system has Covid.

The message came to me from three different channels in the early morning on a rainy day in November. The first email came from Joni herself. The email was short and to the point, with a note of gratefulness. She's that way. Rain or shine—grateful she will be. "I have Covid, I don't know what will happen, don't come to my house, God is good." Something like that. I cried.

The second message came a few minutes later. Our friend Kathleen—in a church prayer group email—asked us to pray for Joni. So, I prayed and cried some more.

The third message was via text from the group chat of all the Get-Up and Get-Down people. That's what Joni calls the women who help her in the morning and evening. "Joni has Covid," the chat read. "Who can help?"

I didn't cry this time, but my head spun. Round and round my thoughts went. *Is this it?* I thought.

After all, it was Covid. And it was Joni.

For the past couple of months, we had all carefully avoided Joni being exposed to the virus. And now it had happened. I hadn't seen Joni for some time. The moment we understood enough of the risks of the virus, Ken carefully sequestered Joni and himself to minimize her exposure, and only a few of us Get-Up and Get-Down Girls were able to help on a regular basis. And Ken, of course, but nobody else.

They took me off the list. I was not safe because however careful I was, there were too many people in our house. Six, to be precise. All my children had moved back home, and thus we were all more exposed to the outside world.

Joni had been working from home, because like all offices, the office of Joni & Friends and the International Disability Center were closed, and everyone worked from home.

I cocooned at home too and was very careful. Just in case Joni and Ken needed me. I missed my evenings together with Joni terribly.

As someone living with physical limitations, Joni's health is compromised. Take for example her lung ability. She does not have the muscle capability to cough up or breathe deeply on her own and is therefore vulnerable to pneumonia.

Her immune system works differently too. When people move their bodies, their lymph and white blood cells move, making them less susceptible to viruses and bacteria than Joni is. And the list goes on. When it comes to Joni's health, both Ken and Joni are very knowledgeable, and Ken has always been a great gatekeeper for her. I was grateful for Ken's precautions, but I missed her very much!

A mutual friend of Joni and I had just died from Covid, and on the news, we saw the ominous reports in Italy and Wuhan. Remember those? Body bags in the streets of Milan?

The next morning, I received a fourth email. This one was from Joni. I didn't cry.

"Ruth," she wrote, "Ken was just diagnosed with Covid too and has an appointment for a plasma treatment, the same one I had. It takes almost all day. I will be alone in the house with no help. I have somebody who can help in the afternoon. He will sit outside on the porch just in case, but he must leave at 3 p.m. Do you think you can come over at 3? And sit on the porch? You don't have to come in, I will not expose you to the virus but would like you to be nearby. Just in case, you know, if I need help until Ken Tada comes home,

please?” (She always calls him Ken Tada. I think it’s sweet. That’s how I think of him too. He is not Ken; he is Ken Tada.)

“Yes, I can!” I responded, without giving it a second thought. Of course, I would be there! And of course, I was not going to stay outside!

The next day at 2:30 p.m., I drove to their house. It was a short drive, fifteen minutes through the mountains. I was nervous. Excited even. And afraid.

I was thrilled to see her, but how would she be? How sick was she? Was she going to die? What were her symptoms like? Like a cold or worse? Would she be able to cough up and breathe? How could I help? What if I didn’t know what to do?

*I am not going to cry*, I decided.

When I parked my car, I saw an older man sitting in Ken’s chair on the porch. I recognized him as the husband of one of Joni’s other helpers.

Ken loves to sit in that chair. Especially on Sunday nights, when Joni and I were in her bedroom, he’d unfold the chair and light up his cigar. He’d have his Bible in one hand, his phone in the other. On Sunday evening, Ken and his friend did Bible study together over the phone. I’d seen it a hundred times—Ken, chair, cigar, blanket, Bible, phone.

I greeted Mr. X from a safe distance. He nodded, friendly, and through the closed front door he said: “Bye-bye, Joni,” and left. We passed each other on the driveway, six feet apart. I walked up to the front door where the floral wreath at the door pretended it’s a sunny day like any other. When I passed Ken’s chair, my hand touched it slightly. It felt respectful to do so, as if the empty chair was worried about Ken too.

I knocked at the door and Joni answered with a soft “hello.”

I opened the door, and stood in the doorway. We just looked at each other. She was masked up. I was masked up.

No hugs, no kisses, no touching.

“Hi, Joni.”

“Oh, Ruth,” she said. She seemed happy to see me. A person.

I told her right from the get-go—with a voice that wouldn’t take no for an answer—that I wanted to be inside.

She seemed relieved; I’d be a welcome distraction in the stillness of the empty house and the long hours of waiting for Ken’s return. She directed me to the other side of the room, at the far end of the couch.

Joni looked better than I expected. Tired, weary, and congested, but the plasma she’d received earlier in the week seemed to work.

Together with God. God and plasma.

The house felt different. It was chilly with the windows open, and it showed that other things had more urgency than the usual tidying up, switching on lamps, and filling vases with roses from the backyard. Joni has such a keen eye for detail and beauty, and she’d often ask us to be her hands.

“That stack of mail on the table, can you put it in the basket over here?”

“Did you see the rose from my window? The yellow one sticking out? Would you be so kind and cut it and put it on the vase at my desk?”

Their house always feels warm and welcoming. Cared for. But not that day.

“Ruth, it’s so good to see you. Tell me, how are you?”

*Joni, Joni. With everything on your mind, you still think you need to take care of me!*

But then I realized small talk might be a welcome distraction—small talk about our normal lives, not our Covid lives.

So, we talked. About nothing and everything. About the rain and Thanksgiving. The children and laundry. Carefully avoiding the silence and the thing that was on our minds most: *Is Ken okay? Will he come home, or will they keep him in the hospital?*

Ken had been gone the whole day. In the early morning, he had taken a Covid test, and when he tested positive, he called the hospital and was able to make an appointment. He left home soon after. Joni had undergone the same plasma treatment earlier that week, and she felt already a little bit better, as she explained. Her breathing remained more difficult than usual, and she was exhausted, but she said, “I’m not feeling too bad.”

An understatement. We all knew she wasn’t out of the woods yet, but Joni was optimistic, grateful, and her glass was half-full, as usual.

Time passed very slowly that afternoon. We continued our conversation, both trying our best to fill the silence with chitchat, to keep us distracted from the terrible things we both thought of. Until finally—it was a couple hours later and already dark outside—Ken texted Joni to tell her he was on his way home.

*He is on his way.*

*He’s okay; she’s okay.*

*It’s going to be okay.*

Not long after his text, we heard the garage door open and close.

A car door opened and closed.

Footsteps, slow with determination.

Kitchen door opened wide, and there he was.

Ken Tada. Smaller than I remembered. Tired. Pale. But Ken.

He walked straight to Joni. And Joni, who had been a pillar of strength, optimism, and great conversation, collapsed in his arms.

“Oh, J,” he said, his voice breaking a little.

“Oh, Ken Tada, you are here, I’m so glad you’re here, you are here!” I heard her say before I snuck out of the house.

It was the first time I’d left without bidding farewell.

A few moments later, in the smallness of the car as I drove through the expansive mountains, all I could say was a silent prayer:

“O God. O God. Please hold them very close.”

It was only the next day that Joni texted me. “Ruth, I have no help to get out of bed, but would you be able to help me with lunch, so we can give Ken Tada a break?”

I made chicken soup and a salad, grabbed some fruit and packed my basket, and found myself driving through the mountains once again. I felt lighter, excited to see them again.

In the following weeks, both Joni and Ken recovered from Covid. The plasma treatments did wonders for both, and while the world fought and recovered from Covid, so did they.

It took its toll, but they were well.

Amazingly well.

Miraculously, wondrously well!

Since they both had been through Covid and had built up antibodies, they were able to expand their inner circle. Soon we were picking up our Sunday evenings again.

Which I loved, of course. But I couldn’t help but wonder if she was a tiny bit disappointed.

If she had rather died . . . ?

In all fairness, Joni has been through a lot. She’s the longest living quadriplegic the world knows of, a cancer survivor (twice), and a bearer

of intense chronic pain, daily. Her lung function, immune system, and every other system tries its hardest to keep up, just as her heart beats overtime to support her paralyzed body. So yes, it's no secret that her body will not survive another twenty years. Her body is tired.

Was she tired too, of life? It's awfully blunt to ask, I know, but did it come to your mind too?

And don't forget there is more. There is another side, a most glorious side—that is to be with Jesus when we leave this world behind. To be in heaven, where there is no pain, no tears, no Covid or cancer, and no tired bodies. Joni wrote books about heaven, our home. She lives and breathes for Jesus, and it is her ardent desire—when she leaves this world behind—to be with her Savior. Forever and ever.

So yes, with that in mind, I think it is the right question to ask. I just wasn't sure how to ask it. Carefully weighing my words, I waited a few weeks. Our Sunday routine was almost back to normal; Covid seemed like a thing of the past. One Sunday evening, I collected all my subtleness and tact and asked her the question I had on my mind for all those weeks.

“Joni,” I said, “I'm not sure how to say this, and do not want to sound rash or inconsiderate, but . . . if I may ask . . . did you ever so slightly think when you contracted Covid, did you perhaps ask God, if this would be it? I guess, what I am asking is—were you happy that this *might* be it?”

There really was no polite way of asking, and Joni didn't mind. Not at all.

She said, “Ruth, I did think of that when I first tested positive. But then I thought of my life and of all the help I have. It made me think of all the people around the world who have been alone since Covid started, without the help or friends around them. And I realized if I

feel so miserable, how much worse must they feel without a Savior? There is still so much work to do, so many people who need to hear about Jesus too.”

This was not what I expected to hear. She had Covid, was weak and tired, and still felt no self-pity, still had eyes for everyone else. This left me puzzled, and I had to think about this and what it meant to me.

The week flew by, and the following Sunday was a good time for more questions. I was well prepared.

“Joni,” I said, “remember last week? How I asked you if you wished you had died? And do you remember your answer to me?”

She nodded.

“I don’t think that way, Joni. I probably should, but honestly, I think it’s unfair that you and Ken had Covid.” I looked at her, and she looked at me, encouraging me to continue. “I would be angry, Joni. You have been through so much and it would be so easy for God to keep Covid from you. Weren’t you, you know, ever so slightly angry with God?”

She still looked at me as if to say: *Angry? With God?*

“Annoyed at least?” I asked.

And without judgment, only grace, she said: “No, I wasn’t. I really wasn’t. You know, Ruth, I learned something at a time when I was angry with God. I was angry and disappointed, and I told God. He answered me by teaching me how to pray differently. This was a long time ago, and I learned it early on, and it has helped me ever since.”

Then she started to explain how she prays 80/20.

This is what it means: If a prayer is 100 percent, Joni divides it into 80 and 20 percent. Twenty percent of her prayers are for her problem—how difficult it is, how she wishes it to be different, for God to please take it away, whatever, cry it all out. All she wants to say about

her problem she says in the 20 percent.

“That’s it. With that He knows how I feel about it,” she explained.

The other 80 percent of the prayer is for God. She asks Him what He wants. And she listens. She asks Him how He feels about it. What He wants to teach her, if there is a verse He wants to show her. She asks: “How can I be joyful in this, Lord, will You show me? What do You want me to do? How can I help? What should I pray? Teach me to trust You in this.”

That’s her 80.

*What nonsense!* I thought. *There is nothing wrong with my prayer, but . . .* My inner dialogue tried its hardest to keep me away from this 80/20 formula. I don’t want to pray like this. I’d like to think that I am a fine prayer warrior, especially when life is difficult. I talk and talk and tell God everything that bothers me. I use many words, weighty words, to make sure God knows how I feel. Eighty percent (if not more) of my prayer is about me and my problems. Blah-blah-blah.

What Joni was telling me is the world upside down.

If my prayer is five sentences long, I use all five to get my point across to God, as if He is hard of hearing or does not already know all about my life.

If Joni’s prayer is five sentences long, she uses only one sentence for the problem, all other sentences are for God.

And that is all there is. 80/20.

For this chapter at least.