

Living Hope

Stories & Songs of Inspiration

By Monique Lisbon (Living Hope Resources: Ashburton, 2025)

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REVIEWED BY GORDON PREECE

The name Monique Lisbon is likely to be well-known by many Equip readers. More than Monique Christensen, her relatively recent married name. In her younger days, the talented musician, singer and writer was known for her daringly vulnerable and honest stories of child-sexual abuse. In this beautifully packaged and arranged hard-back she presents a wide range of ten new and old songs with an introduction tracing her musical and painful sexual abuse and mental health trajectory over at least three decades. It is a painstaking, paradoxical, and heroic journey of faith and hope, that should be honored by the Christian community.

The introduction succinctly traces Monique's creative career and its turn to a more positive, but still very real, direction. Her first album, *Only the Suffering God* (1992) draws on Bonhoeffer's well-known phrase 'only the suffering God can help' under dark the shadow of death. Only a suffering God can be good. Fittingly, I write this on Good Friday.

A number of books and albums about healing from abuse followed. This evolved into a new, more positive album and book on *Matching Baggage* (2022-3) emphasising flourishing

relationships and a forward-looking approach to her self and life.

When like many musicians she struggled, after the demise of CDs (I still miss cassettes!), with distribution through streaming platforms, their miniscule returns and atomising of musicians' output making albums more difficult to distribute, let alone when linked to books as Moniques have been. Hence this beautiful book, the first of more, has a page long note about the inspiration or lived experience behind the song lyrics and QR codes linked to music videos and song downloads. Even a digital dinosaur like myself managed to access these easily.

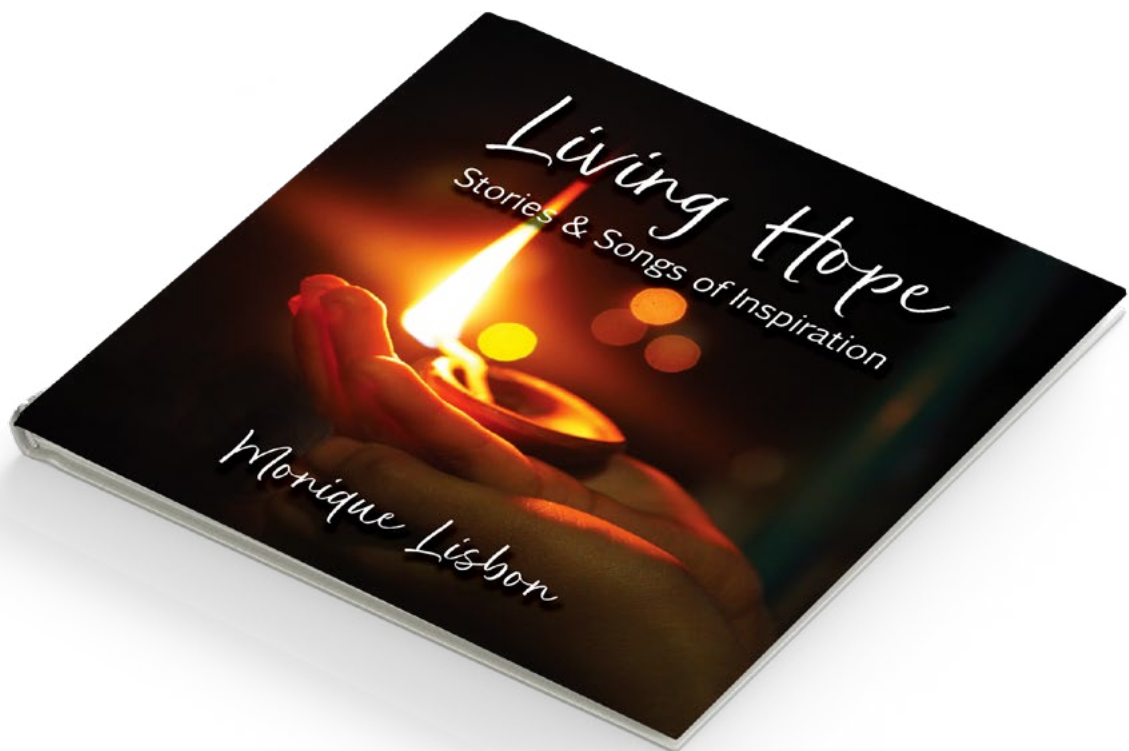
Put starkly Monique depicts the first volume as being about how hope emerges 'in the midst of self-entitlement, relational distance, being held in pain, running from reality, nearing the end of life, finding a life partner who 'complements', [not in the sense of hierarchical complementarians!] rather than 'completes' us, in the age-old paradox of godly self-sacrificial giving.'

The first song, *First World Blues* is a challenge to the over-positivity and sometimes absolutizing of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy instead of seeing it as one of a range of tools for

dealing with trauma and abuse or just a day of the downs. The song, my favourite on this album, starts with a bang, and continues through a day from postmodern hell full of irony and pointing to a higher and more mature perspective.

The second song, *A Hundred Words*, is a clever, but self-critical bouncing off the Icelandic idea of 100 words for snow. Monique sets this in the context of manipulate relational language and practices like love-bombing, gas-lighting and ghosting producing icy shutting out from relationships, known previously as the silent treatment.

Numero 3 is the deeply moving *Safety Net (For Sylvia)*. It started over 20 years ago, as a tribute for her therapist and was revived and concluded along with her therapy at the end of 2024. It starts from the premise that recovery from abuse and trauma requires a safety net, but proceeds through the therapist, and we might add supporters, and God, 'holding the hope'. My wife uses this phrase in training her mental health carers. Think, I'd suggest of the four friends who carry the crippled man up the stairs of the crowded house Jesus is teaching in, and lower him down through a hole in the roof to his feet. The faith and



hope Jesus responds to is not only the cripple's but his friends.

Song Four, *Circles*, builds on the previous, but while from a similar time, moves forward from a life of daily drama and distress to trusting in a world of 'Ordinary Glory' Monique now holds.

The fifth song, *Cave of Hope* goes back 30 years, to someone Monique is no longer connected to. It recognises now that safe relationships are not static, and non-challenging, but have the comfort of allowing a sifting of words and feelings, as friends move forward together.

Number 6 *Walk with Love (for Omi)* Monique's gutsy mother as she goes through the hard process of moving out of home to an aged care facility, which is adequate, but not home. The extended family work together to help her know that they walk with her, even if sometimes, particularly in such painful transition, it doesn't always feel that way.

Number 7 *Phoenix (For David)* is a much more than usual love song for her now husband. From his struggle to stay alive, and even take the temptation to suicide somewhat lightly, as if his life doesn't matter, over two years he comes through, after their lightning romance, together they

can celebrate the anniversary of his Phoenix-like breakthrough to life.

Number 8 *Without You* is also for David, and should take away whatever concern you may have about the quick romance, for it celebrates Monique's development by age 53 when they met, that she lived, survived, and even sometimes thrived without him, as she's learnt to stand on her own two feet. They are equals, not two halves, waiting for completeness of their weakness.

Number 9 of course, recognises that even in our strength, we need So Rare a Person as Jesus, on the Cross, friendless and abandoned, friend and Saviour to Monique and us.

Number 10 ups the paradox ante threaded through the book. For Monique faces the hard question of How Love is Born, in the light of her one-time infatuations with Michael Leunig's poetry, cartoons, even prayers, even putting them to song. Only to discover, belatedly, that Leunig's sister Mary had been sexually abused by him as a child and his projection of gentleness was just that. Monique's humble response to this is 'In the most unlikely place. Love is always born'. To those disillusioned by others like John Howard Yoder, Picasso, Chavez, even Orwell (see

Wifedom) we must examine ourselves, and allow some others to do so also, if we are to love. ■

Gordon Preece is Director and Commissioning Editor of Ethos.