

FOREWORD BY BETH MOORE

I'll
See
YOU
To-
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**Building Relational
Resilience When
You Want to Quit**

HEATHER THOMPSON DAY
SETH DAY

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Introduction

Dear Reader:

There are two sides to everyone we meet. There is the side they present us with, which is typically their best side. Generally, it's their confident side. Their charming side. Their inquisitive side. Their friendly side. Their outgoing side. Their "has it all together" side. But what we see of the people we interact with every day may not be entirely who they are. When they hit the punch card and go home, the person we see at the workplace or at church may have a completely different side. It's their lonely side. Their bitter side. Their unconfident side. Their awkward side. Their depressed side. Their disappointed side. Their unforgiving side. Their triggered side. Their hurt side. It's the side they don't post about because no one would click "Like" on it.

How do I (Seth) know this? Because I have two sides. I have the side that has gotten so used to saying the right words but struggles with how to live up to them. I have the side that truly, genuinely cares about people and yet also doesn't trust them. I know what I want: a life with a community I care about. But the reality is that with relationship comes

vulnerability, which means a “willingness to show emotion or to allow one’s weakness to be seen or known; willingness to risk being emotionally hurt,”¹ and to be honest, I rarely feel risky. Do you?

It’s not hard knowing what to do. It’s hard for us to do it. Here’s the thing: for years you’ve probably known what needs to change in your life, but knowing something and doing something are often what separates most of us. We know we need to go to the gym, but how many of us do it? We know we should probably talk to someone about our anxiety, and we will get to it *next week*. I’ve had a card for a therapist’s office in my wallet for over a year. Why do I never actually make the appointment? We know we want to prioritize God. Spend more time with family. Update our résumés. Call that old friend from high school. Finish the book we began reading. We know what we are supposed to do. But how is it that only some people actually do it? If we could just close the gap between today and all we should do tomorrow, our entire lives could look completely different.

I didn’t graduate college until after I had two of my three kids. They came to my graduation. For years I knew I wanted to go back to school, but I didn’t know how to do it until I looked at my children. That’s what loving relationships will do for us. They will provide the *how* to what we already know. What if the purpose to our lives is simply to care about someone else’s? What if the only thing more fulfilling than doing it alone is doing it together?

My wife, Heather, and I couldn’t be more different. While we were writing this book, I tweeted:

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My wife's writing process: Candle burning. Cup of tea.
Total elegance. Single tear streams down her cheek.

My writing process: Adderall. Red Bull. Music
blasting. Empty cookie carton. Slight feelings of rage as
I access past trauma. Pacing.

Are . . . are we unequally yoked . . . ?

In this book we won't just give you two perspectives. We will also give you our two sides. The side we are still working toward and the reality of where we are. Heather will tell you what tomorrow can look like. I will be honest with you about today. I am awkward and shy in large gatherings, but Heather flourishes. I prefer solitude. Heather seems to finish anything she starts. I want to quit before I start most things. Heather is carefree and will strike up a conversation with a stranger over breakfast. I sip my coffee quietly while scanning for anything that looks out of the ordinary. Heather is social. I am skeptical. I am a former pastor and campus chaplain. Heather is a communications professor who has spent the last decade studying how we can enhance our relationships. I've spent the last ten years trying to figure out how to even have one.

Heather is quick to shout from the sideline, "Get back up!"
I will whisper in your ear, "It's okay to stay down."

We share from two different experiences because we've lived two very different lives. She's my wife, my better half, but she's also my opposite. In our ministry we have always been each other's greatest complement. We will speak to your pain and your brain. Together, we will encourage your present and your future. If you naturally identify with Heather, I am going to challenge you to get uncomfortable with other

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people's pain. Likewise, if you instinctively gravitate toward me, I invite you to find your inner Heather. What if our two sides are what make us real people? What if confidence would be a detriment without some insecurity? What if risk would be a danger without some healthy fear? What if you aren't two different people? What if you are balancing two sides of what makes us all human?

I will tell you what happens when trust gets broken. Heather will help you pick up the pieces. Every Seth needs a Heather. Every person deserves one cheerleader. And, yes, we could have written this book individually. Each of us sharing from our own perspectives. But we realized it would have only been half of a book. Part of the story. One piece of a reality that is incomplete. When Heather wanted to write about how relationships can save us, I replied, "If only it were that easy."

It is not always that easy. No one knows that more than I.

In every person are two sides. In these pages you'll be safe to bring both of yours. There is an implied promise in the word *tomorrow*. It means there is more than you can see today. So whether you keep community at arm's length or have dozens of friends at the tip of your fingers, there is a promise in this book for both the socialite and the skeptic. What if there is more to your life than what you can see today? What if the night eventually gives way to morning? What if there is a bigger picture to all of us than any single mirror can reveal? But I can't prove all this in just an introduction.

Which is why *I'll see you tomorrow*.

Your friend,

Seth

CHAPTER 1

Loving Yourself So You Can Love Others



*The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to
choose one thought over another.*

WILLIAM JAMES

“I quit.”

It was almost midnight. I (Heather) was sitting at the back of the bus, riding home after my final track meet of the season. I placed my hood over my head and hoped it would signal to those around me that I didn’t want to talk. Tears streamed down my cheeks. My entire life up until this point revolved around becoming a college athlete. And I had done that. I had a scholarship to run track at a small Christian college in Indiana. But nothing had gone as planned.

There were so many nights I sobbed in my dorm and was

asked “Can you be quiet?” by my roommates. God bless their ministry.

So because I was nineteen and dramatic, I picked up the phone and called the only person I knew who would answer my call at midnight and then do something totally irrational: my mother. Takes one to know one.

“Please, come get me,” I whispered into the phone.

I didn't want to spend another minute on that campus. I have never felt more misunderstood than I did my freshman year of college. Maybe that is why I am the type of college professor I am today. I don't want to just teach students; I want to serve them. I serve them where I often felt most hurt. When a college freshman cries in my office, I don't roll my eyes. I know what those tears feel like. If you want to know where God may be calling you, look back. What gaps did you fall in? How can you fill them so someone else doesn't? I didn't have many friends my freshmen year. Not true, meaningful friendships. I had some great teammates. I met some precious people. But I rarely felt like anyone there fully understood me.

One time in college my friends and I went to Red Lobster. We dressed up and I thought it would be like the movies, where we laugh so hard we cry and then go back to campus and share our deepest, darkest, and crap. I wanted to bond. I had been expelled from my last Christian school experience in middle school, and so I intentionally chose a Christian college where I could try my hand at a do-over. Jesus said to love one another and build his church, and I desperately wanted to do that. I was so loved at my secular high school. My friends weren't Christians, but they gave me community. They let me belong. They made me feel safe. Maybe that's why I teach at a Christian university. I

want to stand in the gap of the kid who would never feel worthy enough to lead a chapel.

It's similar to what Charles Wesley wrote in a hymn: "I the chief of sinners am, but Jesus dy'd for me!"¹

Halfway through dinner I realized this was a coup. The girl down the hall started screaming that this wasn't my small-town high school and I wasn't queen bee. (First of all, babe, this wasn't Harvard. This was small-town Indiana, so let's all just relax.) I was outmanned and outnumbered. I shoved a cheddar biscuit into my mouth and swallowed my pride. This wasn't my first rodeo. In my Christian elementary school there was an I Hate Heather Club. Thank God my husband, Seth, never joined. My relationship with Seth is unique. He is not just my husband. He has always been my best friend. He is the person who gets me. Even in sixth grade, before Seth loved me, he liked me. When other kids said I was "too much," he said they were jealous. When I was told by a teacher I was too loud, he would whisper, "You're hilarious." Some of my fondest memories are being eleven and jumping on my trampoline outside with Seth laughing and shouting and repeating lines from movies we didn't even understand. Seth calls me out on my stuff, but he also reminds me of my potential. I was lucky, at age eleven, to have a friend like him.

When people say adult friendships are hard, I say amen. Except for a handful of people, every deeply meaningful relationship I have is with people who have known me since I was navigating the I Hate Heather Club. I guess friendship is forged in foxholes. There are very few people from my college days at either university I attended that are a part of my daily life. I was told I'd make my best friends in college. If that's true, I'm screwed. But I have learned how to make a couple of truly

vital adult relationships with people who let me fill in all our blanks. We don't need a sorority. But we do need relationship. We need genuine people in our corner that we pledge allegiance to. Whatever you hate about your life right now, whatever darkness you can't see through, whatever painful church experience, toxic job culture, or family dinner you can't see yourself on the other side of, there is another side. Pain and praise. That's our lives. There is praise on the other side of your pain. But when we are still in pain, it is hard to see that.

"Please, come get me," I whispered into the phone that night, and then held my breath as I waited to hear what my mother would say.

And so, at 2:00 a.m. on a small Indiana campus, my mommy came and got me. Together, we collected everything I had brought with me to college—my dreams and my clothes—and put them in the back of her Chevrolet. We drove home. Here I was, doing the only thing I wanted to do my entire life—run track—and yet I quit after my freshman year. I quit what I loved, not because of what I was doing but because of who I was with. I emailed my truly fantastic coaches and told them I wouldn't be back the next school year. Sometimes I'll see some of the few relationships I made that year pop up on my Instagram and I smile. They went on to make more memories at that school, without me. As it turns out, living your dream doesn't really matter. Not if you feel alone.

This is the problem with living in situations where we don't feel loved or even liked, and especially when we don't feel safe. It robs us of joy. It is hard to see what's good when our relationships are bad. When we don't feel safe, our brain spends a lot of energy focusing on potential threats. And, dear one, you have only so

much energy, and there are oh, so many threats, even if we aren't in the middle of a coup at a Red Lobster.

When we don't feel safe at church, we don't want to serve. When we don't feel safe at work, we want to quit. When we don't feel safe in our country, we aren't sure how much we want to contribute to it. When we don't feel safe in our marriage, we have no place that feels like home. And when we don't feel safe with our family, holidays aren't holy. On Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, right after food and water, is safety.² Food, water, and safety. Only after we feel safe can we look for ways to belong. When people don't feel like they belong in our churches, maybe it isn't because they hate religion. Maybe they are leaving what hasn't made them feel safe. And, beloved, that's on us, not them.

When we feel safe we can spend the energy we aren't wasting calculating potential threats on thinking of creative ways to be even more productive. We take risks when we feel safe to take them. We look for how we can belong to our organizations and what loving ways we can serve our churches. We will even put in more work at our jobs. But when we must watch our backs as well as our fronts, our eyes get tired.

I tweeted the other day, "Do we hate our lives? Or are we just really really tired?"

And one person responded, "The fact that I can't answer this question tells me all I need to know." Sound familiar?

What if we *don't* actually hate our lives? What if we are just really, really tired? I am a professor of communication at Andrews University, and I believe the single biggest predictor to how well you feel your life is going right now is not what you are doing but who you are with. When we don't have healthy, positive relationships with others, we make rash decisions at 2:00

a.m. We are more likely to quit even the things we love. We don't see the track. We see the bus ride home. We don't see the scholarship. We see tears and cheddar biscuits. When you don't have people to hold you, you end up holding yourself.

Researchers at Carnegie Mellon University found that what makes us thrive is having relationships. They concluded, "Past research has shown that individuals with supportive and rewarding relationships have better mental health, higher levels of subjective well-being and lower rates of morbidity and mortality."³

The Fraying

It is very difficult for me to cancel work but oddly much easier for me to cancel people. I think part of that is because I am already under so much stress in my career and family life (thank you, pandemic) that a single error on part of a friendship makes the whole relationship feel more draining than it was. Some of what I have felt were draining relationships were simply my entering relationships drained. It is hard to give what we don't have. So job, church, friends, family, whatever you want from me, I probably don't have anything left.

One time I called a friend for advice because I was experiencing some relational drain. I have only so many close relationships. The people I am close to, I am extremely close to. Five of my six deepest relationships are with people I have known for a minimum of ten years.

My sister Natasha was never the type of older sister who is embarrassed to be around her younger sibling. When her friends

came over, she would tell everyone to sit down, because they just had to listen to me tell this hilarious story. If there was ever a day in my life I doubted that God had a plan for me, my sister would set me straight. I can remember being eight years old and her telling me I was special. So if the girl down my college hallway was wondering why my self-esteem was so high, she could blame Natasha.

My best friend, Scarlett, and I have been friends for nearly two decades. And she's been there for it all. When I was sixteen, I got my driver's license. I picked up Scarlett, who was still fifteen at the time, and we headed to the nearest quality dining experience. Thirty minutes later we strolled into a TGI Fridays with enough savings to fund our own meals. I ordered steak skewers. When we were finished, I asked for a to-go box for my leftovers.

"Oh, darn," I said. "I don't have any steak sauce at home, so this won't be as good when I eat it later."

I went to the bathroom before coming back to the table to meet Scarlett and collect my belongings. As we headed to the car, I noticed she was walking funny.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked her as she beelined for the door.

"Here," she said as we got outside. There, in the broad sunlight, my best friend reached down her pants and removed a half-used bottle of steak sauce.

"You shoved steak sauce down your pants?" I asked her confused.

"Yes," she said nonchalantly. "For your leftovers."

We both erupted in laughter. I can still see us in my mind, with tears coming down my face as I clutched this bottle of steak

sauce my best friend had just lifted from a TGI Fridays. She was willing to get a misdemeanor for the sake of my leftovers, and I had never felt more loved. To this day there is not a girls' weekend Scarlett and I spend together that I don't bring up the image of her hobbling out of that restaurant with a bottle of sauce down her pant leg. I am laughing even as I write this.

I understand you may be judging us. We were teenagers. We were stupid. I assure you I have done far more offensive stuff than eat the sauce from my friend's denim. I do not condone theft. I stole an ankle bracelet at thirteen, and it broke when I went to put it on in the car. I hadn't even left the parking lot. I never stole anything again. I knew for a fact that God had just struck that Jezebel medallion. I went home and read from the book of Isaiah—"In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents; the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarves" (3:18-19 *ESV*)—and I prayed for forgiveness. Even confessed to my parents. Three dollars and ninety-nine cents was not worth my soul, and I left my life of petty theft behind. Hallelujah!

I tell you this story to illustrate the longevity of some of my friendships. Sure, these women may look put together now in their nice houses and with their fancy titles, but I know where they came from. I know where the bodies are buried. Casual friendships are one thing, but some of the people I call friends are people with whom I share a long, complex history. My friend Jewel is someone I have been friends with since the third grade. We were both expelled from our Christian middle schools on the same day (as I told you, the steak sauce is the least of your worries). She knows me probably as well as my own sister does.

My friend Vimbo I met at summer camp. I was nineteen.

She was fifteen. Today, she is thirty-one. For over fifteen years she has been the collector of my secrets, the giver of my hope, and the protector of my peace. My friend Cortney I have known since I was twenty-two. We are nothing alike politically. I wouldn't watch the news with her if my life depended on it. But we are both so much more than who we vote for. She is truly one of the sincerest women I have ever met. I would trust her with my life. I love her like she shares my bloodline. It's going to take more than politics to separate her from me, although I would like to give her my reading list.

My friend Tiffany is my newest relationship, but what we haven't experienced in years we have more than made up for in hardship. We met when both of us were at the most difficult season of our adult lives. My spirit recognized her instantly, and I knew beyond a doubt that God had sent me someone who would make me feel at home though the place I was living was not my home. If I was throwing a birthday party for myself that first year I lived in Denver, Tiffany would have been the first name I put on my list. And if I am being honest, I would have struggled to come up with many more. I was surrounded by people and yet I had very few people. My desire for you at the end of this book is to be able to put names on your list. This year we are going to throw ourselves a birthday party, and by the end of this book, our goal is to have the confidence to write more than a single name. This year we are going to stand back up. But not by our sheer will and self-reliance. Self-reliance is a myth.

Relationships are crucial. They are a fundamental. They are literally what gives our lives meaning and purpose. We can survive our darkest days when we stay connected with our dearest people. And yet when I am overworked and underpaid, when I

am against deadlines and swim lessons, when my dad's health is poor and my finances are tight, it is easy for me to enter even these most intimate relationships feeling strained.

Recently, I was drained and saw something a friend had said that really offended me. I remember the second I read it my face got hot. Being stabbed in the back is deadly, but what cuts more deeply is being stabbed from the front. *Was I being dramatic? Was I reading this incorrectly? Why would she say that?* Have you ever had one of those moments where it takes your brain a second to catch up with what happened? And so you just stand somewhere getting mental error codes because it doesn't add up, and your brain struggles to make sense of it at all. It was like watching your grandma use her iPhone—could not compute. That's where I was emotionally, and so I picked up the phone and called the person who has known me the longest and asked if I was overreacting.

"Oh, no," Jewel said. "You can call her out. You have grounds for that."

See? This is why I called her. Of all my friends, Jewel is probably the quickest to side with me, no questions asked. These are good people to keep around, by the way. If I'm standing, Jewel is standing. If I'm crawling, Jewel is crawling. If I'm going through hell, she is laying down beside me.

"Or—" Wait what? I thought. Are we landing this plane in victim valley or what?

"Or," she continued, "you can look past this single event and choose to see this issue within the scope of your ten-year friendship and just choose to love her beyond this isolated incident."

My spirit clapped within me the second she said it. I didn't even fight it. Jewel was right. My friend was still wrong, and yet Jewel was still right. She has always given solid advice, but

this was tweet worthy. I had wanted to stand up for myself. My instinct was to make a big deal of this. I watched a talk show in college once, and I never forgot this one episode where the host said, “People can’t walk over you unless you lay down first.”

I was ready to march. I was ready to school my other friend on a lesson in loyalty. Let her know that I had boundaries and she had crossed them. I was already frayed, and I was entering a painful situation with very little elastic left. I think that’s what happens to us a lot of times. We don’t have the mental energy to do the work relationships require, and so we just burn them or mute them or block them. That is much less taxing than making peace with them. Adult friendships are hard because adults are exhausted.

Jewel is a woman I have known since I was nine. I think she may be the only person I could hear saying something like that.

Lesson number one: find your Jewel, be honest with your Jewel, and trust their counsel. I am serious about this. Who are you sharing your internal scripts with? You have to share them. These internal stories we tell ourselves will eat us alive if we don’t ever seek outside perspective.

Jewel reminded me that the only way we got from nine years old to thirty-five years old still on each other’s recent call list is by not doing isolated incidents. We measure our relationship in the scope of its entirety. I had probably thrown Jewel under the bus at some point in our twenty-five-year run called friendship. I said *probably*, but that’s because this is my story. I have absolutely done things to hurt our friendship. I’ve been the villain in someone else’s book. And now I know why Jewel continued to be my friend. Because though we have had incidents, we never had a pattern. Incidents can be forgiven; patterns must be broken.

And yet when it felt as if I were the rightful victim, I was quick to forget what all my friends had probably already done for me. So much of life is just deciding when to say something. And then regretting what we said, or what we didn't. This time, I don't regret it. I didn't say anything. I didn't march. I didn't call her out. I didn't subtweet or give a lecture. I just let it go. And I am so glad I did. Because there hasn't been another isolated incident with that friend yet.

Sometimes we all screw up. Sometimes we are all a bad friend to someone. Sometimes we let jealousy override our empathy. Sometimes we don't invite others when we should have. Sometimes we are human beings filled with errors. Sometimes we are trying to make ourselves feel like the kingpin or queen bee. A series of incidents—maybe I am just a bad friend. But one? Should we define anyone by one single choice? Maybe, depending on how awful that choice was. But not always.

Today, I know the value of being thirty-five years old and still being able to call my friend from third grade. I know what it feels like to have my brain not be able to process someone's betrayal. But I also have known loyalty. The scale can't tip only toward the negative. I must also weigh the positives. It's priceless. Jewel knows me. She gets me. She knows when what someone else says about me is true and when it's totally uncalled for. She is one of my favorite people to process with simply because she has seen me in so many different situations. And you don't get to that point without laying down a time or two in between.

It's okay to end relationships. Sometimes we may have to. But I do wonder if, in our quickness to protect ourselves, we haven't lost something greater. The ability to have friendships and romantic relationships and jobs that span decades. No one

gets to year ten without having some drama in between. We need each other. In fact, I don't think we will survive this season without finding a team we can lean fully into. The good, the bad, the ugly. What we can't do alone, we can do together. So what if, instead of always saying goodbye, we started saying, "I'm going to process this. I need some space to think it through. I'm hurt and I need to walk away right now. But *I'll see you tomorrow.*" There is an implicit promise in the word *tomorrow*. It means that life has pages, and pages don't determine endings. Some experiences are for a season, but hope belongs to the morning.

I'm Fine

I was alone in a hotel room. It was almost midnight. The air was humid and the decor hadn't been updated in decades. The room was so quiet. No loud partygoers were frequenting this small town, even though summer held its most popular months. It was a Chautauqua formed in 1873 by members of the Methodist Church. I had bad cell service—I think they do that intentionally. It was the kind of place you go to reconnect with God and find yourself.

Here I was, finding myself. Or maybe I was losing myself? If you read my last book, *It's Not Your Turn*, you know already that sometimes it takes being lost to realize how deeply you need to be found. I can hardly provide words to express how scared I was. My entire abdomen tightened suddenly. I felt there should be a warning before your body gives that kind of siren. I wanted to cry, but the pain was so intense my eyes couldn't make tears. *God help me*, I whispered over and over. *What is happening to me?*

My stomach felt as if it was actually twisting. *Which side is my appendix?* I wondered. It was as if someone with burly hands were wringing my insides, and the more I gasped, the harder they squeezed. I have given birth three times, and the intensity in my gut was on the same playing field as what I experienced then. Except I wasn't pregnant, and I didn't know what was happening.

God help me, I whispered.

I was in the middle of speaking for a weeklong teen evangelistic series in Lakeside, Ohio. I had seen God move in powerful ways and started to genuinely worry I was being physically attacked by the devil.

God help me, I repeated.

This felt like torment, and I was considering calling for an ambulance. But, instead, I picked up the phone and called my mentor, Jose Rojas. It was late and this was inappropriate, but I wasn't sure who else would know if I was amid some type of supernatural spiritual warfare. I had never seen *The Blair Witch Project*. My parents didn't even let me watch the Harry Potter movies. I was a sitting duck.

Jose answered the phone, and I choked out what was going on inside this little hotel room near Lake Erie.

"You are not being attacked by the devil," he said calmly. "You are being attacked by yourself."

"Are you sure? Because I feel like I should call for a medical evaluation," I said through a clenched jaw.

I was hoping he would bring some anointing oil. A crucifix might be a bit much, but I'd never been in this situation before, so it was probably best to have all hands on deck. I was pretty sure Lucifer himself was about to run up my ceiling. I'm a Protestant, but I was open to a jar of holy water if it meant

the twisting feeling in my intestines would go down to a level seven out of ten.

“I have been hospitalized with your same symptoms at least three times before,” he said in a very low, calm voice that clearly wasn’t picking up the 911 urgency of my current situation.

“The Lord is near, but you are a human being. And your body is reacting to the stress you’re under,” he said.

“I’m not stressed,” I responded.

“Stress often has no warnings, Heather. It will just sit in your system patiently until your body breaks beneath it. It should pass within an hour. I have had episodes that lasted days. But if this is your first time, you should notice it gradually lighten.”

As he was talking, I noticed I was no longer in complete agony. My body was still curled into a ball, but more so in a defensive position. I looked at the clock. Seventy-five minutes had passed. I was still in pain, but we could hold off on any surgery. Still, I was open to a Xanax.

He prayed with me and repeated some scriptures. My mentor is so wise. I often race to my prayer journal to write down the little gems he passes out so I won’t forget them. He is a walking fortune cookie.

“Listen to your body,” he said before leaving me with his parting words that I have never forgotten. “And eat some papaya.”

This was the first time I felt my body physically buckle under the stress I was putting on myself. Since then I have read countless articles and watched several YouTube videos about people experiencing physical symptoms due to acute stress. Apparently, there is a powerful connection between our guts and our brains. In fact, the part of your body that contains the largest area of nerves, outside of your brain, is your gut, and there are shared

nerve connections between your digestive tract and your brain.⁴ I wasn't being tortured by demons (classic Christian leap, though, am I right?). I was stressed and needed to eat some papaya, which, by the way, is traditionally used to treat ulcers. Papain is a natural digestive enzyme in papaya that helps the body to process foods that could otherwise be contributing to irritating the stomach lining.⁵ I'll move on since this isn't a health food guide, but I know that was a whole sermon for someone.

I didn't even know I was stressed. I was *fine*. I had just finished defending my dissertation a few months earlier. I had been at optimal functioning up until the moment I wasn't. That same day I had preached two sermons, submitted a *Newsweek* article back to my editor, and negotiated some logistics with my new employer as I prepared to move across the country. I had put the finishing touches on a book proposal, in between telling seventeen-year-old kids at a Christian summer camp that their relationship with God was about more than their sexual purity. See? I wasn't stressed. I was *fine*. Sure, life was a bit chaotic that summer, but I didn't have time to focus on any of that.

I mean, yeah, that may be a lot for most people, but not for me. I am a pusher. That's what I do. I push through. I am resilient. I am self-reliant. I put the car in Drive and get to the destination. I have no idea why my gut decided to turn on me like this, because I am a strong, independent person who is not stressed (stop me when I'm getting warm). I was *fine*. I had mastered the art of driving seventy miles an hour on a freeway while air slowly seeps out of all four of my tires. This was no biggie. I'm the strong friend. I'm the one you call at 2:00 a.m. when you are ready to leave your toxic relationship. I throw open the passenger-side door and tell you to get into the car. We are

riding on rims and have a cracked windshield, but where there is a will there is a way, baby! I am not the unstable person with a physical manifestation of a deeper mental issue. I was *fine*. And yet here I was, with my airbags deployed and my gas tank on *E* in the middle of an evangelistic series that was about to come to a screeching halt. I was *not* fine.

I called the event organizers in the morning and told them I had to reduce my schedule. I sat in shame and gnawed on papaya in my empty hotel room while thinking a demon would have made for a better story. At this point I'd take Casper the Friendly Ghost if it meant I could shift some of this blame. But I had done this to myself. I was the lunatic driving the car. My self-reliance could be the death of me.

My refusal to slow down, my objections to acknowledging where I was hurt, my need to be the steady hand in every room are the very things that debilitated me. The problem with always being the strong friend is that, after you have carried everyone else to safety, who is left to carry you? No one dives in for the life-guard. Part of being a strong swimmer is knowing when to float. I'd like you to take some time with Seth and me and to float for a bit. Let's slow down and assess the damage. Let's take stock of where we are today before we go chasing tomorrow. What if we have to love ourselves in order to love each other? What if empty glasses can't fill other people's jars? What if none of us are meant to be self-reliant?



This book contains twelve chapters, and I'd like you to join us for each of them. I don't want you to miss anything, because each

concept will build on the next as we discover that not only do we need to learn to love each other but we also need to remember to love ourselves. This book is about hope, and as you read it, we have included questions at the end of each chapter for you to engage deeper with yourself and, if possible, someone else.

As you continue, I would like to challenge you with this quote from bell hooks in an interview she did with Maya Angelou in 1998. She said of reading, "For most people, what is so painful about reading is that you read something and you don't have anybody to share it with. In part what the book club opens up is that people can read a book and then have someone else to talk about it with. Then they see that a book can lead to the pleasure of conversation, that the solitary act of reading can actually be a part of the path to communion and community."⁶

I purposely invited Seth to write this book with me because I knew it would be incomplete if he didn't. I didn't want to write a book about relational community alone. That defeats my very purpose. I believe we are better together and not just figuratively. How can I tell you how to get back up if we don't explore why people fall? I didn't write this book with Seth because he is my husband. This is not a marriage book. I asked him to write it with me because he is the one who taught me that not everything can be pushed through. Seth has taught me to listen before I talk. He has challenged me to give reverence to people's pain.

I would say, "We have to keep moving," and Seth would say, "Not until we acknowledge why our bodies are standing still."

I am so honored to pen words beside him because he is so deeply reflective, so acutely attentive, and so preciously committed to Christ, despite never having an easy hand. My relationship with Seth has made me a better human being. I have no doubt

that writing with him will give us a better book and a more realistic and complete story, because that is what relationships offer us: wholeness. This book is about assessing the damage of where you are today so you can keep believing in tomorrow. I would have just focused on tomorrow. Seth reminded me that some of us can't see past today. What if, just as this book would have been incomplete without Seth's perspective, our lives are incomplete without a relational view? What if our churches are only as honest as our diversity? What if our politics are only as practical as the varying demographics that engage them? What if we can't have all the answers on our own? What if questions are a vital part of how we can better connect to ourselves and with each other? What if the greatest stories allow for more than one narrative? The first step of Alcoholics Anonymous is admitting you have a problem. And, oh, Houston, do we have a problem!

We have a "push" problem. The myth of self-reliance is going to destroy us from the inside out. The ideal of American success and fortitude is that we grit our teeth and claw our way back to the top. If you get knocked down, then you must stand back up. But does anyone know what they are standing for anymore? For money? For independence? For followers? What are we standing for? We aren't just working for the weekend; we are working for the vacation. We glorify stories of people who sacrifice everything to claw and crawl their way to independence. But what if humans weren't meant to live independent of one another? What if the most holistic sense of individuality is created by deeper community? I don't want you to crawl. Not today. Today, I want to lay down beside you.

Our lives weren't meant to be pushed through. You can't push through divorce. You can't push through insecurity. You

can't push through grief. You can't push through stress. If our goal in life is to somehow find peace, we must stop pushing. You can't push toward peace. The very definition of peace is freedom from disturbance.⁷ Sometimes that disturbance is our need to fix it or our need to find something to alleviate the pain we are experiencing. Trying to push your way toward peace will always cause you to push right past it.

What if peace isn't something we find but rather something we let find us? When we stop disturbing all the water with our flailing arms and pumping legs, we let ourselves rise to the surface. The sun glows on our skin and we lie in a bed of blue and just breathe there for a while. A light breeze. No waves. No more disturbance. The water fills our ears so we can't hear anything. Our eyes lock onto a few clouds and we just rest peacefully in it all. What if peace is something that can be experienced only when we finally surrender? What if standing alone isn't what human beings were created to do? What if we were meant to stand together? What if brotherhood and sisterhood is worth standing back up for?

"The Lord is near," my mentor said, "but you are a human being, and your body is reacting to the stress you're under."



I read something Michael Jordan, arguably the greatest basketball player to ever play, said about how he handles high-pressure games. "The only way to relieve that pressure is to build your fundamentals, practice them over and over, so when the game breaks down, you can handle anything that transpires."⁸

What are our fundamentals? What are the basics that

we know to be true without having to think? What if we practiced those even in times of ease so that, when the game breaks down, we can handle anything that transpires? I think what God showed me during that week in Ohio was that in tandem with the ministry of presence is the ministry of our own absence. It is a healthy thing to know that God will still be God without me. That should be a fundamental. Our absence is a reminder to ourselves and others that we are, in fact, not God. That God wants us to co-labor, but with four tires and a tank of gas. Our exhaustion is not evangelism, and our hurry isn't holy. In fact, we worship a God who commands our rest and therefore commands our absence. Rest should be a fundamental habit of the Christian spirit. We must take a day off.

“Remember the sabbath day,” the Lord wrote with his own finger, “to keep it holy” (Ex. 20:8 KJV). Your rest is holy. Your peace has a purpose. Your absence is a ministry. God never asked you to be the steady hand in every room.

God says, “My own hand laid the foundations of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens” (Isa. 48:13). I'm sorry, but do you see *your* hand in the text?

Job says, “Which of all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind” (12:9–10).

The Lord says, “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isa. 41:10).

Put your little, shaky, approval-seeking hand down. Stick it in your pocket and let it rest awhile. Your hand is not what is important here. It is the hand of God that saves. The Lord is

near. But you are a human being, and your body will react to the stress you put it under.

I'll See You Tomorrow

All around us, the world is breaking. Piece by piece, person by person, each of us is struggling to figure out how to survive today. My students say to me, “I am one small push or unkind word away from totally self-destructing,” and if I am honest, on many days, so am I. Life feels like one giant off-season. It feels like all I see is loss at every corner. I’m trying to do everything I can to not let my body break beneath the stress it’s under. And it is on days like these that Michael Jordan said we must remember the fundamentals. What have you decided is a fundamental?

In the documentary series *The Last Dance* that chronicles the history of Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls, Tim Grover, who spent fifteen years as Michael’s personal trainer, tells the story in episode eight of when Jordan lost to the Orlando Magic. The team felt defeated. Tim said that he turned to Jordan as they are walking off the court and said, “Just let me know when I will see you.”

It was the off-season. They had lost. It was time to go home and wallow. This chapter had ended.

But Jordan said, “*I’ll see you tomorrow*,” and walked off the court.

I guess that is why Michael Jordan is Michael Jordan. When everyone else went home, he said, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

What if that is what we all need right now? What if today isn’t the day for self-improvement? What if today isn’t the day

to be the steady hand? What if today isn't the time to offer your "fix it" or reconcile all that's been broken? What if today it is okay to lose? Maybe today you lost your job. Maybe today you saw a Christian post something that makes you embarrassed to be one. Maybe today someone abused your goodness. Maybe today you discovered they cheated. Maybe today your child left for what feels like the last time. Maybe today you scared yourself because you thought about how easy it would be to die. What happens today may require us to stop. To lie down. To play dead where we are mid-crawl. But, again, there is an implicit promise in the word *tomorrow*. And I want you to remember that. Today, maybe you can't. So *I'll see you tomorrow*.

I spoke at a conference with Seth Franco. He told the audience that when he was in high school, he had been struggling with depression, and a teacher pulled him aside and said something like, "If you ever have a night you don't think you'll make it through, promise me, you'll give it till tomorrow."

Seth had been an emotional kid who struggled with chronic physical pain. He has hip dysplasia. Like Michael Jordan, he was a fantastic basketball player. He played in college, but the pain in his hip socket made it impossible for him to take his game to the next level. One night as an adult he was at the end of his rope and wanted to take his life, but he remembered the voice of his teacher: "If you ever have a night you don't think you'll make it through, promise me, you'll give it till tomorrow." Her voice came flooding back to him, and moved by the memory, he did just as she said. He didn't take his life. Instead, he fell asleep. The next morning he learned that Universal Studios was filming a movie about basketball in Harlem. Seth Franco didn't know it, but the night he wanted to end his life was the second night of

a three-day tryout for the movie. He tried out and was cast for the lead role.⁹

Seth Franco was also the first white player since 1942 to tour with the Harlem Globetrotters. He did eventually have to have surgery on his hip. But while he was in a wheelchair, he spent his time practicing basketball tricks with his hands. He now tours the country and tells kids about faith and challenges. He tells them how what we feel today isn't always what we will feel tomorrow.

"My story is just like a basketball," he says. "You can get pushed down in life, but the harder life pushes you down, the higher you soar."¹⁰

However, while that can be true, sometimes being pushed down just leaves us on the floor. So if we've been pushed down, let's weep. Today, we can scream. Today, we can call up whoever's left and run through what all went wrong. Today, it may feel like the devil's attacking you. Today may feel like failure. But *I'll see you tomorrow*.

Our world is a rubber band that has been stretched so far that the edges are frayed. We are all one push or one unkind word away from breaking. We are collectively standing at the edge of a cliff and hoping no more ground beneath us wavers. Our hearts can't handle one more thing. *God help me*, we all cry in unison.

My Christian experience so far has been with the God of "daily bread." I haven't met the God of "excess" yet. But I know a lot about the God of little by little. The God of patience. The God of "just enough." In Matthew 6:9–11, when the Lord taught the disciples how to pray, he taught them to say, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily

bread.” And that is the God I have known. The God of “daily bread.”

If today all you have is enough energy or hope or faith for just this one single day, what if that is all you need? The thing about a God who provides daily bread is that there is more coming tomorrow. When it feels as if we have expended all our resources, thank goodness that the God of yesterday, today, and forever says, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”



Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy. (Ex. 15:6 ESV)

ENGAGE

- *Today, what are your hopes for tomorrow?*
- *What was a time you didn't think you'd make it through?*
- *Share a low moment from your week. What is one area of your life that doesn't feel so fine?*

CHAPTER 2

Do What's Possible



It can take years to mold a dream. It takes only a fraction of a second for it to be shattered.

MARY E. PEARSON

“Get off the hood, Cecil!”

Those were the words that my (Seth) mother yelled with her window cracked open just enough to let her words out but not enough to let the crazy man in. The air was thin. My mother was breathing heavily, and the cold seat buckles signaled she was in a rush to make her exit.

Cecil was my father.

It is still difficult for me to call him that. What is a father anyway?

The answer probably looks different for everyone. We make sweeping statements about fathers, though, and people nod their

heads because no one wants to be the one to say out loud, "My father wasn't like that." For some kids their father is the man with the briefcase who maybe doesn't talk much but always comes back home at the end of the day.

My dad was the opposite. Lots of empty words, very little time at home. I haven't spoken to Cecil in three years. But you wouldn't know that if you looked at Facebook.

He is the first to comment on a sermon: "That's my boy!"
Still, so many empty words.

My relationship with my father is complicated. I don't have bitterness or anger anymore. I forgive him. I think I even understand him. But in a lot of ways, he is the reason I still struggle so deeply in relationships. It is very difficult for children to trust strangers when the people they know best are so untrustworthy. *Trust* is the hardest word for me to say. Some people choke on *I love you*. My muscles get tense with *I trust you*. Trust takes time and repetition and effort. I think that's why there is so little of it. We are all still recovering from the last time we mustered it.

It's interesting how tiny moments from our past can make such an impact in our present. We go through life every day wondering who we can truly trust.

Should I really give my credit card information to this person over the phone?

Should I tell a friend what I'm struggling with at home?

Should I trust my coworker to know my ideas?

Should I let this person babysit my children?

Is this church safe?

Will these people take whatever piece of myself I give them and extort me with it later?

A lot of our life is deciding who we can trust and making

good instinctual decisions on who we can't. Think about how much energy all of that takes. And for kids who grow up not fully knowing who they can trust in childhood, it can be difficult to learn to trust themselves. It can be difficult to learn how to make decisions that we trust in, because life is filled with uncertainty all the time. As Heather already mentioned, things are only getting more stretched, stressed, and uncertain. How do we deal with it?

Heather jokes that watching me pick my cereal in the morning is painful. I can't make up my mind. Often with even simple choices, such as what I want to eat, my brain doesn't react quickly. It's a symptom of complex trauma.¹ People who experienced reoccurring trauma in childhood struggle with concentration and decision-making. Heather said that stress can impact our brain's ability to handle the everyday pressures life can bring, but past trauma can put stress on steroids. Stress, according to therapist Jamie Marich, is essentially anything that disturbs our balance. She wrote, "In other words, stress is anything life brings our way that has the potential to upset our balance. Thus, traumatic experiences are always stressful, but stressors are not always traumatic."²

Most people will experience varying degrees of stress. But some of us will also experience varying degrees of trauma. I certainly have stress in my life, but I've also experienced trauma.

Kathryn Millán gives some examples of what trauma symptoms can look like. I want to share some of them with you in case you are wondering if this relates to your situation.³ Trauma can cause anxiety, increased irritability and anger, and sleeplessness. You may find yourself often shut down or unable to reach a goal. You may struggle with depression or have a change in appetite

or be unable to concentrate.⁴ And, yes, I also struggle with these things, but right now we are talking about you. Stay focused.

How it impacts our relationships is that it can make us distrustful of others. We may even avoid our friends and loved ones. We chronically feel unsafe. The thing about trauma is that it doesn't just make us distrust untrustworthy people; it may cause us to distrust even trustworthy people. If you are like me, you may have trouble bonding or being vulnerable with people you have bonded with. It wasn't until graduate school when I studied human service counseling that I started to be able to articulate what I had thought were just my quirks. What if it wasn't just that I was angry? What if I was still healing? Have you ever cut yourself? It hurts if someone touches it. Your skin is healing. People must be gentle. It can also hurt when people trigger our past pain. We are still healing. It's okay to be gentle.

Cecil sitting on the hood of my mom's car is one of my first memories of going to church. He sat on the hood in an effort to control her. He was always trying to do that, even long after she left him. Once he couldn't control her anymore, he tried to control my image of her. Even in adulthood. He would rewrite memories and add himself into them as if he had been there.

A few years ago, he asked if I remembered the time my older brother, Tyler, and I were attacked by bees. He told an elaborate story of carrying us back to my granny's farmhouse and then pulling dozens of stingers out of our bodies.

I remembered what happened. I remembered the stings. But it wasn't Cecil who carried me. It was my mother. She wrapped my brother and me in her arms and ran through a swarm of angry bees until she got us to safety. It was my mother who

removed the stingers. Someone must have told him the story later. When he tells it now, though, he has removed my mom and inserted himself as the hero. It's interesting to think about, honestly.

Gripping the sides of the family Ford, he yelled, "If you're going, you're going to have to go with me on the hood of your car!"

This time his words fell flat as my mother glanced behind and looked at each of my brothers and me sitting in the back seat before taking one last look at Cecil. He was still glued to the windshield, trying to obstruct her vision. I thought she would put the car in Park. No place could be this important. But I was wrong. Slowly, putting the car in Reverse, the car started to roll backward. My mother had made a decision that day that I think probably impacted a lot of the decisions she would make for years to come. She was going to church. And nothing was going to stop her.

Cecil's yelling turned to visceral screams as my mom flipped the car into Drive. He was losing control. He was losing her. As she drove down the driveway, my brothers, Tyler and Coty, and I watched my dad jump off the hood of the car. My mom wasn't backing down. *What was so important about this place?* I wondered. *What did Cecil know that we didn't?*

I called my mom last night to give her a heads-up that I would be sharing this story with you. I was nervous because it's personal.

"He landed in a ditch," she said. "But he was fine, jumped right back up. You left out the time he pulled my spark plugs."

We both laughed hysterically. That is one of the other side effects to abnormality: laughter. People are sharing stories over dinner. You pause and share one from your childhood that you

still get a kick out of. Everyone's face goes still. The room falls silent.

"I am so sorry," they mutter.

But you weren't looking for apologies. You thought you were just bonding. There can be healing in a chuckle. I think a lot of people who survive abnormal experiences such as this can look back and joke about it. How else do you make sense of crazy? There is power in our laughter.

Though the church building was new to me, the feeling of it wasn't. It was the same feeling I had when my mother came into my room to calm me down after another night terror. It was the same feeling I had when we would go to my aunt Michelle's house for the weekend to escape all the fighting. It was the same feeling I had sitting on my dad's mom's porch. I loved my granny and she loved us. Those places were peace for me. And church was peace for my mom.

Stained Glass Windows

I thought about all this when I pastored. How you never know what another person went through to even show up at church. You have no idea how difficult it may have been for them to get there. We should be incredibly welcoming when strangers step through our doors. Our faces may give them the first smiles they've seen in a long time. The greeters may be the most important part of your church service. You have no clue who is missing a spark plug. Everyone has something on the hood of their car.

Nothing significant happened in the service that day that Cecil rolled off the hood. I couldn't tell you what the sermon

was. All I remember was how hard it had been to get there and how happy my mother was to be there. That was the day she traded late-night cries for late-night prayers. She traded today's pain for tomorrow's hope. She gave up broken promises for a promise of restoration. She left tainted words and found stained glass.

The phrase "I'll see you tomorrow" doesn't mean your relationships in life will all be perfect. In fact, you may be trapped in unbearable pain. The pain of a divorce. The pain of a betrayal. The pain of abandonment. The pain of broken trust. The pain of our own choices. The pain of a world that hasn't moved past racism. The pain of isolation. But on the other side of that legitimate pain is a knowing laughter. On that day my mother taught me one of the most important lessons I ever could have learned about faith: waiting for the ideal shouldn't prevent you from looking for what's possible. This is what it means to say, "I'll see you tomorrow."

What if, as human beings, we are stuck on a set of ideals that can't happen in a sinful world? That because we have been hurt today, it must rob us of our hope tomorrow? Jesus said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). If human suffering was never God's original plan for the human race, life here on earth at this present moment isn't God's ideal plan for his creation either. Eden was ideal; earth is what became possible. What if you are so stuck on what wasn't ideal that you miss what is still possible?

My mother did what was possible, but it wasn't ideal. And growing up without a father present wasn't ideal for my brothers and me, but it was possible. Her choice to leave wasn't financially ideal either, so she picked up a few extra jobs and

relied on family members to make it possible. Even as I write, I realize how much time I have wasted focusing on what wasn't ideal without searching for what was possible. Just as Heather had to learn to look for patterns and not isolated experiences, I had to stop focusing on the isolated incidents in my life. They may shape me, but they don't define me. For people who have experienced deep traumas, they can become stuck in trauma for decades after a troublesome event occurs—like a movie that just keeps playing over and over again. The deep pain caused by the trauma of betrayal, abuse, or abandonment was never God's ideal plan. But what if, with intensive counseling and new positive relationships and the redemptive work of the Holy Spirit, joy can still be possible? What if those one or two negative relationships from your past have kept you from forming ten others throughout the years that could've been positive? What if your disappointment today doesn't have to be the catalyst for tomorrow?

Stained glass changed the trajectory of our lives. What is so beautiful about stained glass is that during the medieval period it was more than a collage of beautiful colors in the walls of cathedrals. All the broken shards that were fused together told a story. Since 85 percent of the population couldn't read at that time, the stained glass portraits served as teaching pieces of art.⁵ They captured scenes from Scripture that the clergy could use as an illustration to strengthen the people's faith. Stained glass windows not only told stories but directed the natural light to where it was needed. Stained glass portraits take time. They don't happen overnight. It takes time for an artist to create something from all the shards on his table. Every piece must pass through the artist's hand before it's placed with the others. What if our

lives aren't all that different? What if God can make something beautiful out of all our broken pieces?

It Came to Pass

Scripture often uses the phrase “it came to pass.”⁶ This phrase, for example, regularly appears throughout the biblical story of Joseph (Gen. 37–50). What happens when what we hoped for tomorrow isn't just a day away? For Joseph, it was years, and yet it still came to pass. “It came to pass” represents something more than a single moment in someone's life. One commentary explained, “It hints not only that [events] happen, but that they are so soon over; they come, but they ‘come to pass.’ We do not always realize that, but it is always true. We are not conscious that the earth is moving round the sun, or that it is revolving daily on its axis, yet it is true. Summer and winter, day and night, do not cease, there is perpetual movement.”⁷

One of the final times in the story of Joseph that we see the phrase “it came to pass” is in the last chapter of Genesis: “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive” (50:20 KJV).

The story of Joseph is one that understands “this, too, shall pass.” It is one where he needed to press his sharp edges more firmly into God's hand instead of hiding them from him. If you're in a season where you are sitting in the pain of your promise, know that this, too, shall pass. Know that God is in the business of working with what is possible, not with what's ideal.

Shortly after that visit to church, my mother made the

decision to leave Cecil. To leave all of it. All the screaming, all the verbal and physical abuse, all the unpredictable behavior. She packed all of it up and stuffed it in her suitcase, and for years, wherever she went, I am sure she carried it with her. But you would never know it. That's the thing about meeting people: you have no idea what they've been through before they crossed your path. It wasn't too late for my mother, and it isn't too late for you. One woman changed the lives of her three sons and made a different tomorrow possible for them. We only get to tomorrow by living in today. We do what is possible, even if it's not ideal. Just as Scripture reminds us, "this, too, shall pass."

It Wasn't Ideal

Eighty percent of single parents are mothers.⁸ The number of single mothers has risen over the years as divorce continues to climb at alarming rates. Dads disappear. Moms are left to carry it all. They must go to work, take care of the house, and raise the children. Meanwhile, the kids are left to watch. Little boys are raised to be tough and unbroken. That's what we've heard all our lives. Men train little boys to do manly things. They build campfires and pitch tents. They go fishing and teach you how to bait your own hook. Men patch holes and paint walls. But in my house, my dad was called Mom.

After my mother's season with Cecil came to pass, life didn't slow down. Growing up as the middle of three brothers, life was exciting. We weren't wealthy, so we never went to Disneyland or had extravagant family vacations. It was just my mother and her three boys. Looking back, my mom faced a greater struggle than

we did. We had no dad to give us “the talk” or to teach us how to drive a stick, which meant my mom wore many hats, whether she wanted to or not. I learned to be a man from my mom.

My understanding of manhood came in the cards my mother dealt me. I know how to be a dad because of my mom. I make my wife's coffee first, because growing up I had a mom who ate last. I raise my daughter to be strong, because no one ever showed me that girls are weak. My son holds the door while people pile into the car. He's copying me. I copied Mom. Life is filled with jobs I don't want to do. Challenges that are easier to ignore than face. I face them anyway. People think that men are brave and don't back down, but it was a woman who taught me that. My mom is a fighter. She taught me to be a fighter too.

She showed me that God can make beauty from ashes and mountains from dust. Faith for me wasn't a man in a pulpit; it was a woman getting three kids dressed and using her last five dollars for gas. We got to where we were going on half petrol and half prayers. People argue over a woman's place in church, which I think is odd considering how many women have single-handedly brought entire families to heaven. Ask one in three kids in America who their shepherds are. My mom was my first pastor, and God ordained her. The world certainly needs more dads, but many of us have been sustained by moms.

I don't want to paint the picture that life suddenly became easier when we found God. My life has been anything but easy. For my entire adolescence I was depressed from my father's absence and then my brother's cancer. I would lose another seven years of my life before I started to feel like myself again. By my early twenties I found myself living in a trailer in Chattanooga, Tennessee, with no heat, inebriated almost daily, and wondering

if I would ever feel whole again. My pain tormented me and prevented me from seeing a future for myself. My pain had me questioning if I would ever finish college or if I had the tools to be a dad. My pain numbed me to the point where I would cry out, *God help me. I just want to feel something again. I want to feel you again.*

It was at this time that all of my feelings started to compile, and my body reached a point that it could no longer function. I quickly learned that whatever emotions I held in would eventually manifest themselves physically if not properly dealt with. Just as Jose Rojas said to Heather, “Stress often has no warnings. It will just sit in your system patiently until your body breaks beneath it.”

The combination of a poor lifestyle and deep grief caused me to start experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I woke up one morning and experienced the symptoms of vertigo. Everything was swirling and shifting around me and my balance was unsteady. My body was telling me that it had put up with enough. This wasn't something another beer was going to fix. I was twenty-one years old, and the last thing I wanted to do was talk about my feelings with some stranger who was getting paid to listen to me.

My life was put on hold and I was rushed to Michigan, where I visited every doctor you can imagine to help me figure out what was happening. I had brain scans and spinal taps. I was put on antidepressants and lost the ability to drive. Finally, I was put on six medications by one doctor in an attempt to correct my symptoms. I even went to the University of Michigan's hospital. For the most part, none of it helped. The root of my problem wasn't physical, though my issues were manifesting physically.

My problem was psychological. My brain couldn't carry my body any longer, pretending that I was okay. I wasn't okay.

By the way, during this time, nothing made me angrier than when someone would say my physical issues were a manifestation of my mental issues. I couldn't drive. I couldn't hold a job. I couldn't continue my education. I was constantly dizzy. I couldn't work out. This did not feel mental, and it infuriated me to hear that as a diagnosis. And yet the same summer I was at the end of my rope is the same summer I reconnected with Heather.

Slowly, I started to feel better. Sitting on Michigan piers with her made me feel less dizzy. Over the course of that summer, which turned into the fall, I weaned myself off of every antidepressant, anxiety, and sleeping medication I had been put on. For the first time in five years I started to feel like a person again. My relationship with Heather helped me to live again. I am not someone who will say all of us can get off prescription meds and just go to a small group. There are mental health conditions that we need medication to handle. As a former pastor, I am telling you, prayer plus prescriptions may bring you divine intervention. But I am also saying that relationship was part of my health journey that a doctor couldn't have prescribed for me.

I still struggle with seasonal depression. I probably always will. But opening myself back up to human beings after years of closing myself off has given me my life back.

I want to say this before you read the rest of my story. Relationships have been the greatest pain of my life, but they have also answered my deepest prayers. My PTSD and dysfunction and grief and self-hatred did not stem just from Cecil. Unfortunately, those pieces are much easier to talk about than the story I am about to share. The greatest trauma of my adolescence

was not my parents' divorce or my absent dad. My grief digs much deeper. My wounds run much further. There are spaces in my life I can't even laugh about.

Till Tomorrow: Tyler

My adolescence was plagued by my brother's cancer. During his junior year of high school, Tyler had to face another round of chemotherapy. He was going to have to endure another season of his life being put on hold to face his worst nightmare, our worst nightmare. It was during a surgery that a doctor accidentally hit an important nerve in his back with a surgical instrument. This error caused Tyler to be paralyzed from the waist down. Not only was Tyler going to need several more rounds of chemotherapy, he was going to have to do it from a wheelchair. No more job at the mall. No more parties. No more basketball.

Tyler was fed up and begged us for a handgun. He wanted to end his life. He was in so much pain, paralyzed, and bloated from all of his treatments that he reached the point where he didn't want to live anymore.

One day I was helping him get dressed in the bathroom and he burst into tears.

"Look at me!" he cried. "I'm so ugly. My face looks like a balloon. I just want to die."

He had lost everything, and yet, somehow, Tyler went on to learn what it meant to live with what was possible. Without hope, he had nothing.

Maybe you feel the same way. I'll let you in on a secret: sometimes God gives us more than we can handle. Sometimes

the ideal gets totally obliterated. And so we look to do what is possible.

Heather thinks that self-reliance is a myth. I agree with her. There have been so many moments and experiences my body couldn't handle. I needed my mother. I needed my brother. I needed my friends. There are times in my life when I should have reached out for support, but my instincts, as an introvert and untrusting of others, kept me suffering in silence.

Solitude isn't a bad thing; in fact, we all need moments of solitude to process and recenter ourselves spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. But *moments* of solitude are much different from living a *life* of solitude. Don't confuse solitude with isolation. I used to use the two words synonymously. I would say, "I like my alone time," but really I was just lonely. We need support. We need hope. We need prayer. We need people.

Tyler's story doesn't end with some miraculous healing, but it does end with what was possible. I wish I could tell you the day it happened, but I can't. I just remember a slow shift in Tyler's focus, even though he was in so much pain, still wondering what tomorrow would bring. This wasn't an instantaneous, sudden revelation. This was a gradual heart transformation. But I knew that prayer was at the center of it. He started to find purpose again, even though he was still surrounded by so much darkness. His chemo treatments proved successful, and he was adapting to life in a wheelchair. He was googling how much it would cost to have handicap equipment installed in his car so he could learn to drive with just his hands. He even said that he wanted to become a physical therapist so he could help people just like him.

And then, at one of his checkups, the doctor noticed the

tumor had come back. This time the cancer was all over his body. His spine, his bones, everywhere. It was a terminal diagnosis that gave him just a few short months to live. He was eighteen years old. The silence in the doctor's office that day was deafening. Total and complete silence. Our family buckled in pain. There was unspeakable brokenness. Our hope in restoration was shattered, and it didn't matter where we stepped, because every inch would cut us somewhere.

Prayer didn't bring healing. Our songs didn't bring strength. The anointing oil didn't bring any miracles. Over the next few months my brother's diagnosis proved true and his condition worsened. His body started to shut down as the cancer killed him from the inside out. Tyler was dying. We were too. Watching a teenager die is a process that steals every ideal. My life would never be the same. My mother's would never be the same. My little brother, Coty, would never be the same.

Even though Tyler's body was weakening, he decided he would still look for what was possible. Looking beyond this life, he turned to the possibility of what believing in the resurrection meant for him. During a time when he should've turned back to his feelings of anger and resentment toward God, he turned to the possibility of being with family someday in heaven. He looked beyond today and hoped for tomorrow.

During the final moments of his life here on earth, I remember sitting by his bedside as he slipped into a coma.

The hospice nurse said, "It won't be long now before he passes away."

I had never experienced such a deep loss like this before. And I had zero coping skills available to me to handle it. It shook me to the core of my very being. Just before Tyler took his

last breath, he suddenly came to consciousness one last time. We were all amazed at what was happening.

He pulled me to his side and whispered in my ear, "Seth, at all costs you have to be there."

He went on to explain that even though he was dying, he was okay because he had found another possibility. He had found a different kind of hope. He had found a hope that says, no matter what happens today, *I'll see you tomorrow*.

He asked for the telephone, and one by one he started calling everyone he could think of in that moment. He called his cousin, his friends, his physical therapist. He even called our dad. Everyone. He told all of them that they had to be there too. That he had found a hope that was greater than pain. I know this may sound hard to believe as I tell it to you now, but all you would've seen is belief if Tyler would've told it to you then.

It wasn't long before Tyler slipped back into a coma. Moments before his passing, another supernatural incident took place. He started to shake his head violently, as if he were warring against something inside of him, something that was trying to steal his peace. And that's when it happened, a moment that our family will never forget. I am not exaggerating with the next words that came out of Tyler's mouth.

While shaking his head, he said, "Satan, get out of this room! Jesus is my King!"

As we all crowded around his bedside, it happened again.

Tyler started to shake his head back and forth. "Satan, get out of this room! Jesus is my King!"

And then, on November 18, 2004, just two days after his nineteenth birthday, my brother Tyler passed away. I am not

trying to be a spiritual fanatic by telling you this story. I am telling you this story because it happened.

I am telling you this story because it opened my eyes that, until your last breath on this planet, the devil is trying to steal what's possible.

I am telling you this story because it testifies to the power of the gospel. That a nineteen-year-old boy on his deathbed can still find a "possible" amid life's greatest fear: death.

I am telling you this story because not all of your earthly relationships can find healing. Some will survive, but some will die.

I am telling you this story because it happened. And it taught me that bad things happen. And one day, if you'll let it, hope can still sit beside all of it.

This world will never give you what's ideal, but it also can't kill what's possible. I now have no doubt in my mind that heaven is a real place. Tyler was paralyzed and dying when he decided to dedicate his life to what's possible. We were baptized together a few months before he died. It was quite moving—his eighteen-year-old body being carried into the baptismal tank. And I've carried his faith with me ever since. His commitment created my possible. Scripture doesn't say that with God all things are ideal. It says that with God all things are still *possible*.

I see the world differently, not because of how Tyler died but because of how he lived. The decisions he made then changed the course of my life now. And I'm grateful to have been his brother. I truly believe people will be in heaven because of Tyler. Maybe the only reason I will be in heaven is because of Tyler.

What the devil means for evil, God can use for good. "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but

not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor. 4:8–9). Joy is still possible.

I'll see you tomorrow.



May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had. (Rom. 15:5)

ENGAGE

- *Who has kept you from growing?*
- *Think about something in your life that isn't ideal. What is still possible?*
- *What does it mean, practically in your life, to be hard-pressed but not crushed?*