

FOREWORD BY CHRISTINE CAINE

NONA JONES

SUCCESS *from
the*
INSIDE OUT



*Power to Rise
from the Past to a*

**FULFILLING
FUTURE**

Success from the Inside Out

Nona Jones

Zondervan Non-Fiction

ZONDERVAN

Success from the Inside Out

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Part 1

Beyond Surviving

Surviving Isn't Enough

Warning: This chapter recounts memories of a traumatic event that may trigger painful memories in others who have survived sexual abuse. If you begin to feel anxious while reading the recollection, please skip to chapter 2.

“Please take me with you. I’ll be good.”

I was just settling into kindergarten when Mom got the call that her sister had passed away. She told me she had to go back home to New Jersey to attend the funeral. When I walked into my mother’s room to find her packing her large gray suitcase, my little five-year-old heart ached to go with her. She never lifted her gaze to meet mine, but if she had only glanced in my direction, perhaps she would have caught a glimpse of the fear in my eyes.

“I don’t have the money for another plane ticket, Nona. I’ll be back after the funeral. It’s only a few days.”

“But . . . I . . . I’ll be good. I won’t ask for anything.”

“Look. I said I can’t afford to take you. Just stay here with Lee. You don’t need to miss school anyway.”

I didn’t want her to leave me. But more importantly, I didn’t want her to leave me . . . with him. Mom and Lee had been together only a couple of months when she let him move in with us, and it wasn’t long after that things became toxic between the two of them. By the time her sister died, they had been together a little less than a year, but the constant fighting made it seem like an eternity.

Lee didn’t have a job, but he got a monthly disability check from the government for being born with cerebral palsy. She invited him to move in with us because she figured that instead of him paying rent for an apartment, he could contribute that money to her

mortgage. But the amount of money he got every month was apparently less than she expected, because they regularly argued about how little money he contributed to their living expenses.

Their fighting became a constant backdrop to my daily existence, with her calling him names and him yelling back at her in frustration, threatening to leave. She would back down after he told her he was leaving, but her frustration with him continued to mount until it started boiling over at me. She would become so enraged with him that she would hit me for any minor infraction—if I left a toy on the floor or didn't walk fast enough in a store or didn't make my bed.

I never knew what would set her off, so I became extra careful at home in an effort to not make her angry. But it didn't work. My attempts at perfection never measured up, and the only thing I knew for sure was that when Lee pulled her anger trigger, I became the verbal, emotional, and physical target.

One day, shortly after I started kindergarten, Lee cornered me in the family room while Mom was out running errands. He started tickling me under my arms and along my sides, making me laugh uncontrollably. I laughed so hard that I ended up on the floor, where he kept tickling me with one hand while using his other arm to hold me down. Once he had me pinned to the ground, his tickles started moving to my private parts. I told him to stop and wiggled my way out from under him. Once I got free, he said, "You know I was just playing with you. We were just having fun." I didn't think it was fun.

Another time when Mom wasn't home, he asked me for a hug. After I gave him a hug, he refused to let me go. He squeezed me tight against his body, too tight. I remember thinking it felt as though there were something in his pants. I was too young to understand. I fought to get out of his embrace, and he laughed as he let me go, calling me "feisty" as he walked away. I remember him calling me into the guest bedroom and pulling out a hidden stash of *Playboy* magazines to show me pictures of naked women. He said the women were pretty—"Pretty like you, Nona." I took one look at the lady on

the page and immediately lowered my eyes. There was something dirty about it, so I stared at the floor until he finished talking.

Between my mom's and his arguing, the beatings from my mom, and Lee's regular attempts to touch me inappropriately, the chaos behind the closed doors of our house spilled out into my behavior in the classroom. I showed up to class both exhausted and hyper most days. I lost sleep many nights from staring at my closed bedroom door. I didn't know who would show up each night—Mom in a fit of rage or Lee in a fit of lust. Many nights I would wake to find Lee standing over me, feeling himself. Mom often told me I was a burden on her and that her life would be better if I hadn't been born, so I believed at a young age that my *own* life would be better if I hadn't been born. The seeds of suicidal thoughts were planted in me by my mother before I even had a vision for a future.

Not long into my first year of school, I had already been labeled a “problem child.” I would talk back to my teacher if I didn't want to do something, and I didn't do my schoolwork because I couldn't focus. In response to my behavior at school, the teachers attempted to discipline me by making the classroom corner my permanent home. No one ever asked me why I was behaving the way I did. They just labeled me “disruptive” and “defiant.” Nobody knew what I was battling at home. And no one cared enough to ask. At one point, my teachers told my mom that I showed signs of “mental retardation.” They said I had difficulty learning as evidenced by my not doing my school work and that I needed remedial education. Mom had the school administer a learning assessment, and to everyone's surprise, I tested as gifted. This “problem child” certainly had a problem, but it wasn't learning.

The first night Mom was gone for her sister's funeral, I locked my bedroom door. I intrinsically knew I needed that barrier between me and Lee to be safe. But as I started to slip into sleep, I heard my doorknob turn, then click against the lock. It turned a few more

times, then stopped. I pulled my blanket around me tighter, as if it could become a force field of protection, but I learned that night that a straightened wire hanger could pick the lock.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch. Click.

Silence. Darkness. Then a soft stream of light poured into my room from the hallway as the door opened. I pulled my blanket up to my nose, attempting to fade into the darkness, but as Lee made his way through my door and into my bedroom, the soft glow of the night-light reflected in his eyes. He was staring straight at me, the way a predator stares at his prey. Because that's what he was. A predator. He walked straight to my bed and ripped the blanket from my tightened grasp.

He told me he knew I'd been wanting it. And that no one would ever know. That it would be our little secret.

I told him no and asked him to please stop.

He didn't listen.

Part of me died the night Lee stole my innocence. And to this day, the faint smell of beer on someone's breath often takes my mind back to that night.

When he finished, he told me, "You better never tell your mom, or she'll get rid of you. She doesn't want you anyway."

Lee didn't break only my body that night, *he broke my spirit.*

I didn't have any brothers or sisters. I didn't have any aunts or uncles or cousins living nearby. I was entirely alone, without anyone to turn to.

Maybe that's you too. Maybe you've faced a loss or trauma or challenge by yourself, and the only power you've been able to muster is the power to simply get through it. Simply survive. Or maybe you *did* have people in your life who cared about you, but they simply missed the signs of what you were enduring. I understand that deeply and want you to know you are not alone. So many of us in this world are just putting one foot in front of the other

every day, and we look around at the smiling faces of our friends, family, and coworkers and think no one else understands. Yet despite what it may look like, many people have been where you are, and even more people are still there. You are not alone.

Children are so innocent. They trust that the adults in their life will protect them from harm. They assume the “big people” telling them what to do and what not to do have the best intentions. Innocence is a precious gift, and when parents and loved ones don’t protect our innocence, they leave us exposed and vulnerable to the bad intentions of others. This is why I believe a parent’s greatest responsibility is to cherish their child’s vulnerability.

You may have experienced a deep hurt at the hands of a loved one and are still struggling to this day to regain the part of you that was lost. You survived the trauma, but now what?

I have come to believe that the only thing stronger than the power of trauma is the power we *reclaim* when we acknowledge trauma’s effect on us. Surviving is only the beginning.

*The only thing stronger than the power of trauma is
the power we reclaim when we acknowledge
trauma’s effect on us.*

When Mom came back home from the funeral, I was an entirely different child. Before she left, I talked nonstop. When she returned, I was quiet. I even avoided eye contact with her, afraid she would see in my eyes what had happened. In my little mind, it was my fault. I had done something wrong. I was afraid she would be angry with me for what had happened. For months afterward he abused me when she had to work late. Every time he finished, he would remind me that she would get rid of me if I ever told her what “we” did. But one night she took me to work with her, and something broke inside me as we drove back home.

As we drove back home in the middle of the night, I had a pit in my stomach. Little tears formed in the corners of my eyes. The thought of going back to that house with him in it sickened me. It was the first time in a long time that my mom and I were alone. I was six years old by then, and my first-grade teacher told my mom I was still being defiant at school. I had wanted to tell her what was happening to me so many times before, but because of Lee's threats, the thought of being taken away by strangers almost took my voice away. Almost.

"Lee touched me."

Silence.

". . . What?" she said, her voice shaking.

"Lee . . . touched me."

"Touched you how?" she asked.

"Down there. And it hurt."

"Show me how he did it," she asked, staring at the road without blinking.

When we arrived home, the house was dark except for the glow of light coming from their bedroom. I walked behind my mom as she set her purse on her bed. Lee was standing in front of their bathroom mirror, shaving. My mother silently went into her closet and pulled out the little wooden bat my father bought me as a baby, then she made her way toward the bathroom. I backed out of her room, and when I was just outside her bedroom door, I heard the first blow land.

Crack!

"What are you doing?" Lee screamed. "Stop! Wait! Stop! What are you doing?"

"You touched my daughter? *My* daughter?"

"No! No! I would never . . ."

Crack! Slam! Crash!

"I'm sorry! Wait! Please! I'm sorry!"

My mom emerged from her room breathing heavily, with a look of complete ferocity in her eyes. She walked past me to the kitchen

and called the cops. After she hung up the phone, she walked back to the room, where she proceeded to curse him out between blows.

Despite the dysfunction and abuse, that night I felt as though my mom was my own personal superhero. My mom was Wonder Woman. Invincible. Strong. When the police arrived, they questioned my mom, and Lee admitted what he did. They took him away, and for the first night in months, I slept with my door wide-open. I was safe.

I was brought in for questioning and was asked to describe what he had done to me as best I could with my six-year-old vocabulary. When the questioning was finished, the officers assured me I wouldn't have to worry about Lee hurting me again. But they never contemplated the possibility that my own mother would be Lee's enabler.

Time and time again, victims of trauma are told to "move on" and "get over it" after their abuser has left the picture. People who offer this "solution" simply have no understanding of the nature of trauma. Removing the perpetrator of trauma doesn't fix the pain an abuser caused, just as removing someone from a fire doesn't heal the pain of their burns. The residual, spiritual pain of trauma long outlasts the physical presence of the one who inflicted it, and what those well-meaning officers failed to realize is that Lee didn't hurt only my body, he broke my spirit. While you can place a bandage on a cut or use a splint to set a broken bone, you can't repair *spiritual* brokenness with physical tools. Yes, I survived in the sense that I was physically intact, but the post-traumatic pain I was forced to wade through served as a constant reminder of the trauma itself.

You can't repair spiritual brokenness with physical tools.

Mom didn't say anything about what had happened to me until a few days after we left the police station.

“It happens,” she said with a shrug.

Her no-big-deal attitude, while possibly intended to help me, simply made me feel more ashamed. The woman who I had thought was my personal superhero had now reduced the most traumatic experience of my young life down to a casual stroll through the park. I felt exposed, unprotected, unworthy. And as the days went by, the emotional shame of the experience hurt worse than the physical pain. In my shame I felt that I was a mistake. I felt that I had not only done something to deserve what happened to me, but I felt that my very existence was the reason it happened.

Having Lee arrested didn’t heal me. His absence didn’t remove the presence of shame. Maybe you have been there. Maybe you’re there now. The pain of your past continues to stir shame in your present. You may have even felt guilty about what happened, but at some point that guilt became deeper, darker, and more ingrained in your identity. That guilt became like a mile-marker in your life. It is something you want to escape from, but every time you think you’ve made it beyond the pain, you look behind you to check your distance from the mile-marker that created the guilt and are reminded of how inescapable the past is. But I want you to know that, when God heals us, he removes the mile-markers of past pain.

When God heals us, he removes the mile-markers of past pain.

When guilt begins to define who we are, it is no longer guilt at all. It’s shame. We feel guilty about something we *did* and its impact on the people we care about. We can feel guilty about things we didn’t even do, simply because of its impact on the people we care about. Shame, on the other hand, is entirely different. Shame doesn’t only cause us to feel guilty about *what* happened, it also assumes the responsibility for what happened and attributes it to our *identity*. Brené Brown defines this by saying, “Guilt says I *made* a mistake; shame says I *am* a mistake.”¹ There are things in our past that we

aren't proud of, but if we allow those things to define who we are, we will live in a state of shame. As I matured in my walk with God, I realized that the things Lee did to me and the things Mom said to me had created a broken identity in which I saw myself as worthless. It was only when I saw myself through the filter of God's Word that I realized I was made for so much more than just surviving. I was made to thrive and flourish. And you were too.

I was made to thrive and flourish. And you were too.

When I was a girl, surviving meant trying to be invisible at home. I didn't speak unless spoken to. I stayed in my room unless called to another room. I immersed myself in books at a young age because in them I found an escape hatch to safe alternative realities. I didn't see people as safe, so to keep people away, I kept to myself at home, and I acted out at school to isolate myself. And it worked. I had unresolved hurts that no one cared to excavate, so I dealt with them by imploding at home and exploding at school.

Maybe surviving looks similar for you. We all have our strategies. Maybe to the outside world you're the life of the party, but to the people who know you best you're angry, difficult, or reserved. The energy you exert to make others like the person you're pretending to be doesn't leave any energy to *actually* be nice at home. Perhaps it's reversed and you're a loner in the outside world and clingy with the people who know you best. You keep coworkers at bay but won't let your spouse or children out of your sight for fear of what might happen to them because of what happened to you. You're a different person in different situations because you aren't sure when you can let your guard down. But even when uncertainty is the only thing you're certain of, there is hope and an opportunity to thrive through God. Uncertainty can breed fear, and fear can change the way we show up in the world. But the Bible lets us know that God hasn't given us a spirit of fear but instead gives us power,

love, and a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7 NKJV). In God we have hope no matter how difficult our path to healing is.

Even when uncertainty is the only thing you're certain of, there is hope and an opportunity to thrive through God.

Vernita was just eighteen when she gave birth to a baby girl in rural, segregated Mississippi, and she moved away shortly afterward. The little girl spent the first six years of her life in the care of her grandmother. She was brilliant and even learned to read before the age of three, but she was regularly punished for anything her grandmother didn't like. One time, when the young girl went to the well to get some water, she became intrigued by the water and played in it with her fingers. Her grandmother saw it and beat her so badly that the girl bled from the welts on her back. When she put on her dress for church, the welts bled through the dress, and her grandmother beat her again for getting blood on the dress.

At age six the girl left her grandmother to move to Milwaukee with her mother, but while there, the woman in charge of the house her mother lived in made the girl sleep on the porch. At nine years old, she was raped. The man who raped her took her to get ice cream, with blood still streaming down her leg. She continued to be abused and molested between the ages of ten and fourteen, when she found out she was pregnant. Two weeks after she gave birth, the baby died. In that baby's life she had built hope for a new life of her own, and when it died, her hope for the future died too. But that summer, she took an acting class for the first time, and she allowed the pain, turmoil, and emotion of her life to emerge on stage. She felt a cathartic purge as the thoughts and feelings she had kept trapped inside were finally forced to the outside.

Although her healing did not happen immediately, she discovered over many years that giving voice to her pain was the

first step toward healing from it. And her voice has become a source of healing, hope, and inspiration for millions. The baby girl who was originally named Orpah, but was called Oprah because of mispronunciation, has become one of the most recognized names in the world. And yet behind the celebrity, wealth, power, and influence is a woman who had to discover the power to rise from her past. A woman like you. A woman like me. In discovering her voice and shining a light on her shame, she was able to redefine her future and chart a path toward success on her own terms.

God hasn't made us to *merely* survive. He has made us to shine.

He sees you and your struggles and wants us all to know that our past is simply the prologue to our destiny. You may be at the beginning of your journey to healing, and you may not even believe it's possible to heal from what hurts you so deeply. I ask you to trust me for just a little while longer so you can discover what God wants you to know: you were formed in your mother's womb with a purpose and destiny that only *you* can fulfill. You are the only you that ever was and ever will be. The reason your fingerprints are unique to you is because your fingerprints are the "passcode" that unlocks the uniquely crafted, individually mandated calling on your life. How unfortunate it is, then, that so many of us live our lives as photocopies of another person when God has made us an original. I see you. God sees you. And this world needs all of you—healthy and whole.

You are the only you that ever was and ever will be.

So now, let's do the hard work together.

The Enemy Within

“What I do with my money is *my* bidness, Mary! Who you think you are sassin’ me ’bout *my* money?”

“Sunny, I ain’t sassin’! These children need to eat! You know how much they pay me to clean those houses. I don’t make enough money to feed twelve kids by myself. I—”

“See, dat’s your problem right there! Ain’t nobody make you have twelve kids! Dat’s *yo* fault! I pays fa dis house so y’all can have a roof over ya heads! What I do with the rest of *my* money is up to me. I’ll be back when I gets back.”

As he made his way through the tiny living room crowded with children of all ages, he stopped to pat my young mother, one of his favorites, on the head. She beamed with pride at the gesture as he made his way out the front door. He never glanced back at my grandmother, but if he had, he would have seen the once-vibrant woman he had swept off her feet with promises of a good life, wiping tears onto the apron of her maid’s uniform. Her eyes were tired, swollen, and blackened by the fists he regularly pounded into her head for any reason. Or no reason at all.

After years of him blowing his money by gambling and drinking after a day of collecting garbage, she knew what to expect when he returned home broke and drunk later that night. But she straightened her back, cleared her throat, and directed the army of little people living in their two-bedroom house.

“Patricia, straighten up this living room.”

“Kelly, get those dishes clean for dinner.”

“Barbara, warm that pot of beans, and start a pot of rice.”

“Dana, make sure the babies get baths.”

“Everybody else, get yourself cleaned up for dinner.”

“. . . and, Frances . . . stay in this house.”

My mom started running away from home at a young age. The ninth of twelve children, she was five the first time her mother noticed she was missing. No one knew or asked why she left. Maybe it was the sound of her mother's screams at the hands of her father. Maybe it was the discomfort of six people having to sleep head to toe in a bed made for two. Maybe she was hungry from eating grease sandwiches in the absence of real food. Maybe it was all of this and more. Mom first slipped away for a few hours to play with a neighbor, then a few hours became a full day, and a full day became a few days. Her family rarely knew where she went or what she was doing. But she would often come home to find that her parents hadn't even realized she was gone.

When she *was* home, her siblings often wished she wasn't. Mom had an anger streak that lacked boundaries or reason. In the third grade, she got expelled from school after pushing a teacher down a flight of stairs for telling her to get in line. Another time she pulled a knife on her older sister and lunged at her with every intention of stabbing her. When her father found out about it, instead of punishing my mom, he punished her sister for "starting it." Mom looked on, smiling smugly, while her sister got a beating. Rules didn't apply to my mom. Maybe my grandmother was so exhausted by the time my mom was born that she gave up, or maybe my grandfather let her violence slide because he saw his own tendencies in her behavior. For Mom, dysfunction was normal.

In her teen years, she was labeled as "wild." She did what she wanted when she wanted and dared anyone, including her mother, to question her. But her behavior belied her beauty. She was gorgeous. Boys liked her at an early age. So did grown men. When my father caught sight of her at a house party, he noticed her "high yellow" complexion and determined to ask for her number. But being a dark-skinned man, he wasn't sure whether she would pay him any attention, so he did the only thing he knew to do. When the next

record came on blaring James Brown’s “I Feel Good,” he strolled calmly to the center of the dancing crowd, just within eyeshot of my mom, and let it rip.

To everyone’s shock and delight, my dad danced *exactly* like James Brown—footwork, splits, and all. He was suddenly the coolest cat at the party, and while multiple women tried to get his attention, he walked straight up to my mom and said, “Hey, pretty lady. My name is D’Wayne. Mind if I call you some time?” Since Mom didn’t have a phone at home, she said, “You can’t call me, but we can go get a soda together,” and they made plans to go on a date a couple of days later.

Not long after their first date, Dad knew he wanted to marry my mom. That’s when he found out that his new love was fifteen. He was twenty-one. He was shocked because she looked and acted much older, so he decided not to let her age faze him. He asked my grandpa for her hand in marriage, and given the chance to have one less mouth to feed, Grandpa said yes. They wed in the summer of 1967, and it didn’t take long for Dad to find out he got more than he bargained for. After the “fairy dust” of the wedding faded and they settled into married life, they began to have minor disagreements, as all newly married couples do. While my father would simply shrug a disagreement off, Mom would become consumed with rage. Their first argument ended with her throwing everything within arm’s reach at him.

Despite the emotional roller coaster, Dad wanted to start having children right away. He was raised in a home environment very different from Mom’s, with two parents who never argued in front of their children. His father was a devout Christian and worked hard to instill character in his children’s lives. Dad idolized his father, so now that he was married, he wanted to start building his own family. But Mom wasn’t interested in settling down and raising children. She liked to party and didn’t want rules or responsibilities to infringe on her freedom. This included any “rules” about being a wife.

When Mom got angry with Dad, she would disappear for days, just as she had done as a child. When she decided to return home, she would offer no apology or explanation for leaving. She left so frequently that Dad didn't know whether she would be home after work, even if they hadn't had a fight. He also suspected she wasn't alone when she left. Dad was a sharp dresser, funny, and friendly, but he also battled his own insecurities. He was born with a leg deformity. One leg was slightly shorter than the other, causing him to limp when he walked. Kids made fun of him relentlessly. Between that and being called "darkie" his entire life, he treated my mom as if she were a prize he shouldn't have won. And perhaps because of this, he turned a blind eye to problems even Stevie Wonder could see.

Trauma changes you. It changes the way you show up in the world and changes what you accept. Both my mom and my dad brought trauma into their marriage, and since they didn't know what to call it or how to fix it, they simply entered a pattern of argue, disappear, reappear, argue, disappear, reappear. How many of us do the same thing? Even when we know something is wrong, instead of working to fix it or even just trying to *name* it, we either run away or pretend everything's okay while the house burns to the ground around us.

But what we don't fix in ourselves simply gets swept under the rug of our children, causing generational trauma. The violent way my grandfather treated my grandmother later manifested in the violent way my mother treated my father. And while my father may have thought he was being loving by not challenging Mom's behavior, he was actually enabling her self-destruction and his emotional degradation. When God made Adam and Eve, he told them to "subdue" the earth (Genesis 1:28). We weren't made to be doormats; we were made to *lead*. But when our spirits are broken, we take one of two paths: we run or we succumb.

What we don't fix in ourselves simply gets swept under the rug of our children, causing generational trauma.

Running is what we do when we physically remove ourselves from whatever triggers our unresolved pain. Maybe we hang up on people when we get angry, or maybe we leave the house in a fit of rage after an argument with our spouse. Either way, we are leaving the situation instead of addressing the root of what triggered our anger in the first place. This was my mom's method.

My dad, on the other hand, would succumb. This happens when we shut down when confronted with something that triggers our unresolved pain. Maybe we tune out the person trying to tell us we hurt them, or maybe we simply nod and say, "I'm sorry," to try to move on from the issue. Neither running nor succumbing fix the brokenness that leads to taking those actions; they simply become entrenched in our identity. And this is why the path toward healing must begin with self-awareness.

When our spirits are broken, we take one of two paths: we run or we succumb.

"Congratulations, again, ma'am. Our entire team is so happy for—" Click. Dial tone.

"Wayne! Wayne!" Mom yelled for my dad at the top of her lungs.

"Yes? What's wrong?"

"I hope you're happy now! I can't believe I let you do this to me."

"What's the problem? What did I do?"

"That was the doctor's office. I'm pregnant."

The day Mom got the call that she was pregnant, Dad couldn't contain himself. They had been married for thirteen years by then,

and he desperately wanted to be a father. Mom, on the other hand, didn't want children, and she cried at the news. She was angry. The thought of having a child made her feel trapped. She had promised herself she would never be like her mom—stuck in a house full of children, working two or three jobs to feed them. She had even avoided babysitting her nieces and nephews because she didn't want to be tied down with a child.

But my dad couldn't have been more excited. He called all his family and friends to share the good news. He even went to the corner store and bought cigars in anticipation of the day to come. But what happened next was not part of his plan.

Six months into the pregnancy, Dad developed severe stomach pain and began vomiting blood. He went to the local clinic to run tests, and when the results came back, the doctor asked him to come in for a meeting.

“Mr. Collins, the news isn't good. I've looked at your X-rays, and I see what appear to be large tumors in your stomach. I'll need to do a biopsy to confirm, but what I see looks like cancer.”

“I don't understand. Cancer? Isn't that an old person's disease? I'm thirty-four. That can't be right.”

“Cancer isn't based on age, sir. I'm really sorry to give you this news.”

“Well, what else could it be? Maybe my stomach is just swollen. Is there something else it could be?”

“From what I see, I'm afraid not. I want to do a biopsy just to be sure, though.”

“If it is . . . if it is . . . cancer . . . what would my options be?”

“Let's talk about that once I confirm what we're dealing with, okay? Just lie back. This is going to be a bit uncomfortable, but I need you to be still. I have to put this tube down your throat to get to your stomach.”

As Dad made his way home that night, he didn't want to believe what he knew to be true. He could hardly see the cars in front of him through his tear-blurred eyes. How could he have waited thirteen

years to be a father, only to never meet his daughter? His heart broke at the thought of never seeing me. Never holding me. Never sitting in the auditorium to watch me graduate from high school. Never locking arms with me as I nervously look up at him before he walks me down the aisle.

The next day he got the call that confirmed the doctor's suspicion. And it was even worse. The cancer was advanced and aggressive.

"How long do I have, doc? I have a baby girl on the way."

"I . . . I would say six months at the most. I'm terribly sorry, sir. I really, really am."

Dad hung up the phone and broke down. When he gathered himself, he determined to fight back as hard as he could. For me. He had kept his health issues private up until that moment. He hadn't even told Mom. Once he did tell her, she couldn't believe it. He slowly began to tell family and friends his diagnosis, adding, "But I ain't going nowhere before I hold my baby girl."

He expressed to several people that his greatest fear was that I wouldn't remember him, so when I was born in the summer of 1982, he gathered all the energy he had and began an Olympic sprint of memory-making. He loved baseball and bought me a personalized, child-sized baseball bat with the intention of teaching me how to play the game. In an effort to savor every second, he hardly let anyone else hold me, change me, feed me, or take me out of his sight. He hoped this might permanently imprint the look of his face and the feel of his embrace in my mind.

Despite being given six months to live, Dad was there on my first birthday, dressed up in a clown suit to make me laugh. His normally athletic frame is visibly gaunt in the photos, and his usually deep ebony complexion was noticeably pale and ashen. But he did everything possible to make me smile that day. And it was the first and last birthday he was able to spend with me.

Every parent imagines that their children will outlive them, but no parent imagines that their children won't remember them. My dad waited thirteen years of marriage to become a father. He endured Mom's constant anger and abandonment because he believed the fruit of his patience would eventually yield children. I imagine he must have been angry to know Mom denied him the gift of fatherhood for so many years, only to have death deny it again once he had finally attained it.

The pain my dad had to contend with is unimaginable, yet many of us have contended with similar pain, the pain of broken expectations. You expected one thing to happen, only to have the complete opposite happen. And it hurts. You expected your spouse to be faithful, only to learn they had an affair. You expected your child would be safe in the care of a loved one, only to learn they violated your child's innocence. You expected a friend to repay the money you loaned them sacrificially, but instead of repaying you, they've been sharing their latest vacation pictures on Instagram. When we don't have the tools to excavate *and* extricate the pain of broken expectations, the residual hurt seeps into and infects our relationships. This is why the most difficult work we have to do is in ourselves, not in others.

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My grandparents and parents are case studies in this truth. Before dysfunction ever showed up at my doorstep, broken expectations took up residence in each of their lives. My mom's father had determined to get more out of life than his sharecropping parents, who were just one generation out of slavery. His move up north to New Jersey was his way of putting that dream into practice. He envisioned landing a well-paying factory job and promised my grandmother a nice home, exotic trips, and a lifetime of romance. But his reality in an America where black people were legally barred from well-paying jobs consisted of being denied every job he applied

for, except the one job he didn't want—garbage collector. He collected garbage in the sweltering heat of summer and bitter cold of New Jersey winter, while his white boss called him “boy” and often didn't pay him his full week's wages. He lost his legs later in life from the damage caused by walking miles in waist-high snow for hours at a time.

Grandpa returned home smelling like garbage every day, and despite the love that twinkled in Grandma's eyes, all he could see when he looked in them was the reflection of disdain and shame he felt for himself. The first time he hit her, he was immediately sorry and shocked, but as his self-loathing became more entrenched, he transferred his anger to her with daily pushes, slaps, and punches. Grandma grew up in the generation that didn't “air dirty laundry,” so she tried to hide her bruises beneath layers of makeup, making her look years older than her actual age. He continued to beat her when the children came along, creating an atmosphere of fear and helplessness that chiseled my mother's temperament from birth. Although my mom was labeled “wild” for her defiant behavior, I've wondered whether her behavior was just a cry for help, as mine was.

My father had been ridiculed for his dark skin his entire life, so he often dressed in layers of clothing before going outside in an effort not to get darker from the sun. When he met my mom, he was already nursing his own identity crisis.

Each of us are part of a generational tapestry of pain and dysfunction, and we must confront what lies within us before we can address what's happening around us.

Each of us are part of a generational tapestry of pain and dysfunction, and we must confront what lies within us before we can address what's happening around us. For some of us, the dysfunction was overt and left the type of physical, emotional, and psychological scars that everyone around us can see. But for others of us, the

dysfunction was subtle. Alcoholism, addiction, neglect, poverty, and criticism are things that can damage our spirit. These can manifest themselves in a multitude of ways, such as a lack of trust in others, no matter how trustworthy they prove themselves to be, or a need to buy only name brand clothes and shoes to combat internal feelings of being “less than.” Dysfunction has touched each of us, which means we all have an opportunity to experience the healing power of God’s grace.

Shortly after Dad’s funeral, Mom moved us to Florida, following a guy she had struck up a new relationship with. That relationship ended shortly after we arrived there, and a string of boyfriends paraded in and out of our lives over the course of two years. Then Lee moved in with us. I was four years old and clearly remember the day I met him. He was white, and I remember being excited to show him to my friends when he picked me up from school so I could say I was half white. Lee was more like a kid than an adult to me. He would get on the floor and play whatever make-believe scenario I was acting out with my Barbie and Ken dolls. As an only child, I had a busy imagination, and Lee was always willing to enter my imaginary world. I started calling him Dad because I desperately wanted a father. What I didn’t understand was that Lee’s befriending me was simply him grooming me for what he really wanted.

Our past is not a linear chronology of events. Our past is an intricate web of experiences, relationships, beliefs, and reactions we live through, both firsthand and vicariously through the experiences, relationships, beliefs, and reactions of the people who shape us. The journey to rise from my past required gaining an understanding of how generational layers of dysfunction shaped me. The complex interconnections among the stories of my grandpa, grandma, mother, and father have proven foundational to the narrative of my own life

because why I do things can always be traced back to who taught me to do them.

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In what ways have the people in your life shaped you? When you face a challenge, what similarities do you see between how you behave and how those who raised you behave? I see my mom in me during times of distress, because when I'm hurt, I run away. I'll hang up in the middle of a heated conversation, leave the room in the middle of an argument, or simply block a person's number when I no longer wish to engage with them. My first inclination is to run when I'm hurt, rather than addressing what's hurting me and seeking a solution and the root of that response is a fear of rejection. I often believe that the other person is going to abandon me at some point, so I do it for them instead of waiting for the inevitable. It's a defense mechanism that allows me to maintain some type of control over the situation, even though it still ultimately hurts.

Maybe you grew up with a father whom you could never please. No matter how many awards you won, he was always disappointed that you didn't do more. Maybe your mother constantly criticized your appearance. You would put on your nicest outfit and work hard to look your best, but she always managed to point out the tiniest imperfection. Maybe it was a teacher who never called on you when you raised your hand, causing you to doubt whether what you had to say mattered at all. These experiences become woven together into our identity over time.

When I was eleven, I broke my toe on a chair leg while chasing a friend around a room. The pain was unbearable, and when we arrived at the doctor's office, the first thing they did was touch my toe. Big mistake. I screamed like a banshee from the pain and told them never to touch that toe again. The problem was that repairing the broken bone required them to touch it, causing tremendous pain. Have you found yourself similarly refusing to allow anyone to touch your

wound? When they get too close and manage to push on your wound, you yell, scream, isolate yourself, or cut them off, whatever you have to do to keep people out of your broken places.

A great leadership assessment I've taken and used with my teams in business is called a 360 review, which gathers candid feedback from an employee's manager (above), peers (across), and reports (below) to provide an accurate assessment of how the employee is perceived. It's effective at uncovering blind spots because while you might be able to dismiss or explain away *one* person's feedback, it's difficult to do that when everyone in your professional circle says the same thing. An area I have consistently scored low in is "receptivity to feedback." In other words, I have a difficult time with criticism. And it's absolutely true. Similar to not wanting that doctor to touch my broken toe because it hurt, I don't take criticism well, personally or professionally, because it touches my deepest pain, the pain that I'm unworthy.

I grew up being physically punished for the slightest infraction, so I developed a perfectionist mentality in an effort to avoid Mom's anger. I tried to anticipate what she wanted me to do, and I would do it "perfectly" to make her happy. But when I carried this approach into my professional career, I didn't anticipate that "perfection" is in the eye of the beholder. When I was appointed to my first executive role at age twenty-three, I spent *hours upon hours* preparing reports with the hope of achieving perfection, only to present them in a meeting and have people ask questions I had never considered. Colleagues also routinely overlooked my extra effort to make the presentation look "pretty," instead focusing on the facts and figures. I left meetings devastated from benign questions and felt personally attacked when someone didn't agree with a recommendation I made. My position on the organizational chart said I was "successful," but I felt defeated and undervalued.

Our past pain manifests in our present, and this is why self-awareness is key to defeating the enemy within ourselves. Self-reflection is critical to progress.

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Perhaps you're fighting with a spouse over how much money they've spent, or maybe you're irritated with a coworker who never follows through on projects, leaving you to complete the work. The question you need ask is: Why does this bother me? When it comes to your spouse, are you truly low on money, or does seeing a certain number in your bank account give you the type of security you should have only in God? Why do you keep picking up your coworker's slack? Is *your* job truly at risk if they don't complete their work, or does having them lean on you in a crunch make you feel as though you matter and you need their validation?

The brokenness in us can lead us to take *personally* what we should take *seriously*. The distinction is that when we take something personally, we make the issue about our identity. In the case of the spouse who overspends, if our anger is coming from the fear of financial problems making us "look bad" to people, we have taken their behavior personally. If, instead, our anger is rooted in the concern for our family's future, we have taken their habits seriously. The difference is found in asking the question: Do I feel this way because of what this *says* about me, or do I feel this way because of what this is doing to the people I care about?

The hurt within us is the filter for everything around us.

Past hurt can cause us to see life through a lens that views everyone and everything as out to hurt us, not because they truly are but because the hurt *within* us is the filter for everything *around* us. Just as my grandfather saw my grandmother as the enemy, despite her only wanting the best for him and their family, the hurt we use to filter the people and situations in our lives will make our friends our foes. When anger, insecurity, jealousy, and revenge well up inside us, we have to acknowledge their presence and evict them through

prayer. The present pain we don't evict will eventually evict our future purpose.

The popular television host was very successful according to the trappings of success that defined his life. His highly rated shows took him around the world to enjoy the best food and experiences life had to offer. Yet on June 8, 2018, Anthony Bourdain hung himself in his extravagant room at Le Chambard hotel in Kaysersberg, France. He was in France filming a new season of his popular show *Parts Unknown*, a trip that included exquisite food, expensive wine, and laughter with his crew. No one suspected what was in his mind. Maybe he didn't either.

Bourdain's suicide was called an "impulsive act" preceded by "troubling signs." His toxicology tests were negative for narcotics, and his colleagues who traveled with him were mystified when they learned what had happened. How does someone who has everything decide that their life is no longer worth living? We will never know what was in his mind, but if a man who seemed to have everything can feel he has nothing worth living for, we are *all* vulnerable to the impact of unaddressed trauma.

Maybe you have been using the deception of deflection. You tell jokes or blow up at people in hopes of creating enough buffer to keep people from getting too close and touching your wounds. But our journey toward self-discovery will begin when we decide to work on what's broken inside us instead of using deflection as a defense mechanism to keep people away from our pain. Doing this will require us to take an inventory of ourselves—the fears, hurts, bitterness, and unforgiveness we're incubating in our hearts. When we become self-aware, we can finally put a name to the enemy we're fighting.

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Start by grabbing a notepad and recounting the scenarios in which you behaved with loved ones in ways you regret. Maybe you lost your temper with your child, or maybe you've been taking solace in conversations with an old love that would destroy your spouse if they found out. Once you have an example, it's time to get honest and ask yourself the tough questions. What was the story in your mind that made you take that course of action? What were you afraid of? What part of your identity felt under attack? What was at stake that you had to protect and fight for? Now let's go a level deeper. *Who* taught you to fear that thing? *Who* challenged your identity that way before? *Who* made you think the thing you were fighting to protect was vulnerable?

When you've gone through this exercise, it is time for us to explore the next most important question: *Why*?