



embracing
— *the* —
uncomfortable
to become
unstoppable

don't
settle
for safe

**SARAH JAKES
ROBERTS**

Praise for *Don't Settle for Safe*

If you've ever sensed there could be more for you in life, this book is the missing clue. Although Sarah J. Roberts is my daughter, I can honestly say that she is one of the most courageous people I have ever met. Her amazing book shows us the power and reward that makes the daring faith life worth the risk!

Playing it safe makes winning an impossibility. The Bible is full of men and women who forsook the safety of the comfortable for the unsettling place that leads to the satisfaction of accomplishing our God-given purpose. Sarah draws from ancient and contemporary examples to beat the drum strongly in this book.

She rallies the believer to come out of the trenches. It's an exhilarating experience to read it, and an amazing adventure to watch these principles change your life. This is a must-read! If you're going anywhere in life, don't leave home without it.

—Bishop T.D. Jakes, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author
and senior pastor of The Potter's House in Dallas, Texas

Sarah Jakes Roberts is living proof that living a daring and bold life can be incredibly transformative. In *Don't Settle for Safe* she uses the depths of her experiences as a deep well of transparency to help those in need find relief from their pain. This book will help you discover how to use the most uncomfortable moments in your life as fuel to unleash the unstoppable power that lies within you.

—DeVon Franklin and Meagan Good, *New York Times* bestselling authors of *The Wait*

Sarah Jakes Roberts is brilliantly honest and open, making us ask out loud the questions we've all had inside at some point. She eloquently challenges us to be bold and to love God out loud with no fear. This book will bless and transform many lives.

—Erica Campbell, contemporary R&B recording artist

The myth of safety and the pursuit of comfort and security has caused so many to miss the abundant, purpose-driven adventure that God has for us. Jesus did not come to earth, die on the cross, and rise again on the third day to make us safe. He came to make us dangerous to the kingdom of darkness. I'm so grateful for Sarah's voice in our generation. I love her engaging, honest, transparent, vulnerable, and passionate writing style. *Don't Settle for Safe* is a timely book that calls out the greatness in you. You will be inspired and equipped to live your one and only life wholeheartedly. God has so much more for you. Step out and take some risks. You can trust him.

—Christine Caine, author of *Unashamed* and founder of Propel

This book is not only a testament to God's love for us, it's also a guide offering practical advice to use in strengthening your personal relationship with God. I applaud Sarah's transparency in an effort to inspire and empower others.

—Cookie Johnson, wife to Magic Johnson

If you are ready to be open and honest with your feelings, identify your mistakes, and are ready to do the work needed to bring change in your life, this book will help you break everything that is holding you back. Sarah's willingness to be honest but gentle, in her way to correct you, is something I've never experienced before while reading a book. You will find yourself being who she describes; you'll even say things like "that's someone else I know; it's not me!" Thank you, Sarah, for encouraging us to be courageous and to never settle for safe.

—Michelle Williams, singer/songwriter

I am blown away by the wisdom, revelation, and transparency in *Don't Settle for Safe*. A must-read for every male and female who desires to experience the fullness of authentic God-given relationship.

—Nancy Alcorn, founder of Mercy Ministries and author of *Ditch the Baggage, Change Your Life*

Don't Settle for Safe grabs you from the first line and never lets you go. Sarah's vulnerability and transparency allow the reader to experience every high and empathize with every low. Many times I found myself in tears as her inspiring and thought-provoking honesty challenged me to look within myself in compelling ways—something we all must do to experience true growth.

—Sanya Richards-Ross, Olympic gold-medal winner in track and field

Sarah is such a truly beautiful writer and a woman of great wisdom and bravery. Each chapter in this book is a hand reaching out, inviting you to be courageous enough to grow into the person God created you to be. I love it.

—Shauna Niequist, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Present over Perfect*

I wish I'd read this book when I was eighteen. Sarah has wisdom way beyond her years. She tells the truth with staggering vulnerability, for no other reason than her passionate mandate to help readers understand their value in Christ. For many, this will be a life-changing book.

—Sheila Walsh, cohost of *Life Today* and author of *The Longing in Me*

In this book, Sarah gets to the heart of most of our issues by reminding us that, regardless of what we've done and how we may feel about the paths our lives have taken, God still loves us. She masterfully yet gently, from the perspective of one having experienced life's tough spots, connects our belief in God's unfailing love to our success in cultivating love in our intimate relationships. I am so proud of the work that my friend Sarah is doing as she shares her life's lessons with the world. I believe that she is one of the greatest voices of our generation because she chooses daily to remain transparent in her quest to reach the broken.

—Tasha Cobbs, Grammy Award-winning artist

Don't Settle
for Safe

Other Books by Sarah Jakes Roberts

Lost & Found

Colliding with Destiny

Dear Mary

Don't Settle *for* Safe

Embracing
the Uncomfortable
to Become
Unstoppable

SARAH JAKES ROBERTS



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*This book is dedicated to the One who continues to
cause all things to work together for my good and to those
hoping to believe He can do the same for them too.*

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Foreword

*Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.*

ISAIAH 43:1–2 ESV

These poignant words of the prophet Isaiah do not promise us a way around, but a way through. It is not a question of *if* you pass through waters that would threaten to overwhelm or walk through flames that would seek to consume you . . . it is simply a matter of *when*.

Redemption does not guarantee us safety in this world; it is a promise that we will never walk alone.

When I was a younger woman I didn't understand this. I wanted to avoid confrontation, exposure, and struggles at all cost. I am so

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thankful that God saw beyond my fears and spoke to the very longings of my heart. You see, everything I wanted was on the other side of my fears, and the same is true for you. It is the very reason that every God-breathed promise is preceded with the admonishment of *Fear not*.

Sarah Jakes Roberts understands this journey. *Don't Settle for Safe* is a brave book in which Sarah weaves together her legacy of wisdom with personal life experiences. Each page will encourage you to leave the relative safety of the shore and dare to navigate the choppy, turbulent waters of life.

Because you are *His*, my friend, you must choose to leave behind the shores of uncertainty. You were created for deep waters and holy fire.

Ultimately, God is more concerned with our condition than our comfort. Dare to believe this is the very reason He has allowed some things to become uncomfortable in your life, and by doing so, He reveals your true condition. I am so thankful that you have chosen not to settle. Don't fear the struggle; let it strengthen you. Thank you, Sarah, for including my words in your charge.

LISA BEVERE

New York Times bestselling author of *Without Rival*,
Lioness Arising, and *Girls with Swords*

Introduction

I was twenty-three years old when I made the choice to file for divorce. It was one of the most challenging decisions of my life so far, but I knew without a doubt that my mental, emotional, and spiritual health hung in the balance. So I did the hard thing and reconciled myself to the fact that my marriage was not and would never be the romantic, happily-ever-after tale I'd hoped for. Then I reassessed and created a new vision for my life. What I wanted in life was comfort and stability. I'd go after that dream alone as a single mother of two.

I thought that life was about arriving at a destination where all things made sense and each day had perfect harmony. I know now that I was telling myself yet another fairy tale. A life of constant comfort and stability—without any fears or insecurity—simply does not exist for me or for anyone. My heart, mind, and soul

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were searching for a place in life that did not exist: comfort. So in spite of my best efforts, situations arose for me daily that made me uncomfortable. Sure, there was a vision in my mind of who I could become if I overcame my fears, but that vision was often blocked by the insecurities that filled my head. Small challenges like presenting new ideas in business meetings made me sweat and squirm. Conflicts and trials with my young children sometimes made me feel overwhelmed.

I can remember thinking, *If I can just get over this one thing, then everything else will be smooth sailing!* But like waves on the ocean, that “one thing” I was able to overcome was followed by yet another. So how do we keep from feeling as though we’re drowning when life seems too much for us to handle? Your power to overcome is in your willingness to not just anticipate

Life’s challenges promise us endless opportunities to reassess, reevaluate, and push beyond the boundaries of comfort over and over again.

but embrace the unpredictability of life. Being afraid of the unknown does not keep it at bay.

Life’s challenges promise us endless opportunities to reassess, reevaluate, and push beyond the boundaries of comfort over and over again. No one understands that more than I do. After all, I became a mother at age fourteen. Since then I’ve been on a journey that has taught me a lot about myself. For a while I allowed other people and circumstances to control my journey, conforming as best I could to the expectations I perceived from my family and social circle. Each attempt backfired on me in grand fashion.

That journey has taught me some lessons that I hope will help

you. I hope this book will serve as your guide to transformational freedom that comes from sacrificing the notion of comfort.

Each minute that passes by is transforming you. Biologically, your hair begins to turn gray, and your skin and muscles begin making a slow, graceful dance into older age. This is the beautiful cycle of life.

On the inside, learning to change and control the way we think about what we've faced does not come so naturally. Even more challenging is having the heart to look toward the future with optimism. In fact, it takes great intentionality.

But what I learned is that God does not promise us smooth sailing. It has been said that still waters run deep, but that is only true for bodies of water that are confined to a certain space. The deepest waters, like oceans and seas, have constant waves and ripples that make them the opposite of still; they are the epitome of powerful. The ocean is a part of an ecosystem that is much larger than what the eye can see. The consistent waves of the ocean testify to the ocean's tremendous power. There is life springing forth from its depths and winds grazing the top of the water that creates an unstoppable current. What's marvelous to consider is that the same Source that created the ocean, filled it with life, and set it in rhythm, created you. You are as unstoppable and powerful as the ocean!

I trust there have been moments in life when you, too, have felt as though you were barely hanging on, when the waves threatened to pull you under. When insecurities filled your head with all of the reasons you should be afraid. I know that voice well! I've heard it many times throughout my own process. It says things like, *Don't do it! You can't handle what will come after this.*

Even as you read this book, that voice may begin to haunt you,

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trying to convince you that your life's destiny is not worth the struggle. In those moments you get to choose between staying on the comfort of land or daring to be like the deep, vast ocean that creates both fascination and fear. As you're reading this book, I will share with you some of the concerns that surfaced in my heart as I chose to dig deeper. Your surface may be different or more complicated than mine, but it's important that you recognize the necessity of that voice.

If voices of insecurity, doubt, and fear are not confronted, they will dictate your life. You cannot silence these voices or ignore them. Instead, make them your audience as you dare to defy the limitations of your past.

You've been given the gift of being on earth for a reason. Recognizing who you are and what you have to offer will help you realize that you do not have to be a slave to any preconceived idea of what your life must look like.

*If voices of
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There may be times when feeling this way actually scares you into shrinking, but you were not meant to cower and resign yourself to a routine or pattern that makes you just like everyone else. The vibrancy of your life is contingent on your ability to accept situations that isolated you and to learn and be empowered by your unique imprint. It's going to take work, and it's going to demand transparency and vulnerability. It's going to dig deep into the areas of your life you've probably never examined before. It might not feel safe, but one thing is for sure. You will be transformed into a newer, better version of yourself. Let's get started!

1

No More Excuses

I am stuck in the persona I've created. But how can I dig deep when it's taking all that I have to hold myself together? Thinking of all the broken pieces scattered around my life makes me afraid to face tomorrow. But I long for freedom. I want to find the light that leads me out of this cave. Please, God, if You can see me, send me a reminder that You're still with me.

This is the moment that will change your life forever. You are finally becoming the person you always knew you could be. I wish I could say it's because you opened this book, but it's much bigger than that. You have decided it's time for you to be free. You've stopped trying to construct a life you hope other people will accept, and instead you've decided to embrace the life that God has in store for you. Nothing has happened to you that God can't use to restore you. The first step in that restoration is recognizing the power you've always had to pull yourself out of darkness and constantly push toward the light at the end of the tunnel.

Many times you felt like quitting, but you didn't. Maybe you

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were unhappy with the present, unsure about tomorrow, and too afraid to confront the past. Maybe, like me, you've thought, *If only I hadn't expected so much, then the pain wouldn't have been so great.* You've wondered if you should lower your expectations. One of life's greatest tests is resisting the urge to cave in to the pressure of that kind of frustration. And you've resisted. You're still dreaming big.

Despite the many tears that threatened to dilute it, your faith did not dissolve. Your heart is still pumping. Your pulse is a sign that this world needs you. All of your achievements, confusion, accolades, issues, awards, and pain prepared you for the journey. You know you were made for so much more than this.

Long before you became aware that life could be more bitter than sweet, you believed that nothing was impossible. The success of this book relies on you connecting with every part of you, especially the pieces that have been buried behind a smile. I want to speak to that purest, most innocent version of you. I want to speak to the child who once believed she could jump off of her bed and fly. I want to speak to the person who was so afraid of the dark that she needed her door cracked to let in a glimmer of light. Remember how you laughed without fear of how your joy would sound to other people and cried without concern that other people would think you were weak? You were fully alive. You felt everything and didn't need anything to numb you from your reality.

I hate that you've adjusted to the pain. Maybe, like me, you grew to a place where you hid your feelings, perhaps even from yourself. But as much as I might wish away the hurts that changed you, the truth is that those hurts created some of the most

beautiful parts of your heart. That's right! You are armed with more wisdom, discernment, awareness, confidence, and joy than the innocent and delicate person you once were.

My mission is to open your eyes and help you see that longing for the past is an illusion. Your present holds more promise than anything that used to be. The cost of that vision is also the reward: transparency, vulnerability, and intimacy with God. At times you may be so uncomfortable you'll close this book, but you won't keep it closed for long. You know why? Your soul is begging for you to leave a door cracked open so that light can shine through.

*You are armed
with more wisdom,
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and delicate person
you once were.*

This is your season of change and transformation—your opportunity to grow. You are only as free as your mind will allow you to be. Taking control of your life will require you to be proactive, not reactive. But the power of this book cannot be unlocked unless it is read with an open heart and mind. For positive change to take place within your soul, no area can be off limits for examination. Daddy issues, mommy problems, sibling rivalry, low self-esteem, ambition without character, and fragile integrity are just a few of the areas we will explore. It won't be easy, but it will be worth it. You are worth it.

Growth is produced through sacrifice. It requires that you release the comfort of your last phase and learn the distinctions of the new one.

Clothes That Don't Fit Anymore

My husband and I have a blended family with six beautiful children. Touré had his three angels and I had my two. We were content with our small tribe, but as our love began to overflow, we began to dream of adding one more. And then came our baby girl, Ella.

When we were expecting our daughter, the doctor estimated that she'd be a little over eight pounds at time of birth. I didn't buy many newborn clothes because I know from experience how quickly babies grow. Ella surprised us all when she was born weighing just six pounds. So I quickly stocked up on tiny clothes and diapers. But just a few weeks later, Ella was two months old and already weighed twelve pounds. The slew of newborn diapers and clothes we'd acquired were no longer useful and needed to be given away. Luckily, she was too young to have any attachments to them.

Unfortunately, things were a bit more difficult for her six-year-old sister. When it became evident that Makenzie was outgrowing her clothes, I bought new ones, but I had to undertake a covert mission to get rid of what no longer fit. Even though the old clothes had grown uncomfortable, the nostalgic connection she had to them was strong. She refused to let go of them even though they were no longer useful.

It will take some time before she realizes that it's foolish to keep clothes that don't fit. She has yet to learn that the gift of growing requires letting go. We have to let go or we'll experience discomfort and even pain.

By now you know I'm not just talking about clothes.

Letting go is trusting that we can carry the lessons from our past in our hearts without constantly replaying the pain in our

heads. You're likely much older than Makenzie, but I'm willing to go out on a limb and guess that there are some people, things, and ideas, or maybe patterns or behaviors in your life you've grown so accustomed to that the mere thought of confronting and separating from them gives you anxiety.

Trust me, I've been there!

Youthful Ambitions

So what is it in your life that you might need to let go of?

When I close my eyes, I can clearly see two extremely different versions of me. Neither are full expressions of who I am, but both are true. On one side I see a young, insecure girl pretending she's okay. A smile is plastered on her face, but it's more of a mask than a genuine expression. The sadness in her eyes betrays her. I see how lost her soul has become. Questions plague her and fears haunt her. She doesn't yet know her incredible potential. She doesn't know that even with her flaws and struggles, she is full of possibilities. She's not looking for an opportunity to catapult her to unprecedented heights; she's just looking for enough stability to feel "normal."

Then there's the other image. She has blossomed into her womanhood. She has learned that stability can only be attained through facing insecurities. She is no longer searching for an opportunity because she recognizes that there are too many to choose from already. She is content to chase God's destiny for her life. She understands that flaws are a necessary part of life because they foster humility. She has become a student of life and a teacher to all who will listen. Her heart has become perfectly aligned with

a Source much stronger than her own will. She has met God and He has shown her the power in being her authentic self.

Both of these are versions of myself, but neither of them could exist without the other. The mystery for most of us is learning how to channel our insecurities into the empowerment necessary to maximize adulthood.

Is What You Wanted Then What You Need Now?

Stop for a minute and think about your own two selves—your young self and the one you want to be. Becoming who you want to be may demand that you get rid of old ideas about what success looks like. For me, this meant getting rid of the white-picket-fence illusion.

The presence of adolescent fears existing simultaneously with adult ambition is not isolated to the journey of womanhood. The same paradox exists for our male counterparts. From boyhood, men pride themselves on their ability to be rough and tough. When water begins to form in their eyes, we tell them to suck it up and that boys don't cry. Their youthful charm and boyish features earn them nicknames meant to be endearing, such as "heartbreaker" or "ladies' man." When we create a culture that congratulates men on their ability to hide their emotions, juggle multiple relationships, and resist vulnerability, we run the risk of producing men who internalize their fears and who break hearts rather than protect them. They, too, must learn to shed the behavior of their insecurities and trust themselves without the validation that comes from having a muscular build, dry eyes,

and notches in their belts. How do you become a man of character and integrity when all you've heard is the applause that comes with indiscretions? Life brings us all to a fork in the road when we must choose to grow up into the unknown or grow cold by staying the same.

All throughout childhood, boys and girls are inundated with images of success. The most popular narrative painted a picture of a demure, educated, well-dressed, and well-behaved woman who captured the attention and heart of a powerful man. That man, through love and devotion, provided a comfortable life and a home bordered by the proverbial white picket fence. And they lived happily ever after.

Some of us followed the socially accepted trajectory toward such "success." It didn't take long, however, before we realized that even the modest goals of high school, college, career, marriage, home, and family take a lot of work. Unexpected events often delay or detour our desired accomplishments, and we begin to see that this thing called life requires an uncanny resolve to maintain peace in the middle of the raging storms. So what happens when, on our journey toward obtaining the white-picket-fence ideal, we lose touch with ourselves?

For me, the white picket fence represents the illusion of safety and normalcy that keeps us from facing the issues we've tucked away in our hearts. Of course hiding from our human frailty comes in all different shapes, sizes, and packages. Some of us swear off the notion of love altogether, others hide behind successful careers, and many feign an enjoyment and exhilaration that comes from being unchained to real morals or convictions. The bottom line is you'll never know who you can become if you create a life that requires you to pretend you're already comfortable with who you are.

Dangerous Comparison Game

Occasionally, we get a glimpse of how much our covetous perception of other people's lives was shaped by a very limited perspective. We knew our best friend wasn't perfect, but we never guessed she had a secret addiction. We were thinking our neighbors had it all together and then we learned their marriage was just as broken as ours. Our coworker with the most enviable house in town goes bankrupt. We learn that no one has life completely figured out and everyone is a little bit broken.

But mediocrity is comforting until it becomes debilitating. Witnessing dysfunction in other people's lives may make us more comfortable with our own, but this dangerous knowledge can also strip us of the motivation required to pursue a deeper level of self-intimacy and transformation.

You cannot point the finger at other people's shortcomings to justify your own. God doesn't grade our lives on a curve. He's given each of us a certain measure of faith and power to have an incredible life. Each of us has an opportunity to dust off the shame, fear, and pain that threatened to bury us and reemerge with strength and tenacity.

Resist the Urge to Lower Your Expectations

Moving on takes effort, intentionality, and discipline. If you're going to gather the broken pieces of your life and build again, you must be willing to clear your heart and mind of excuses. Your comeback will become another setback if you focus on all the reasons you could fail.

Excuses are comfort zones. Life is never short on excuses.

With only a little bit of effort, we can come up with justifications that ultimately leave us bitter, broken, or numb. Of course, many of us don't see that those justifications have been creeping into us for quite some time. Have you experienced a time when you should be flourishing, but somehow your past experiences with trauma lured you in to settling for the safety of immobility? Maybe you convinced yourself that staying the same meant you'd never hurt again either.

We choose to view our future through the lens of past disappointments. That perspective isolates us inside paralyzing fear.

Once our lives have been disturbed by pain, we create a list of personal dos and don'ts out of trepidation. "I'll never trust, try, love, write, believe, hope, sing, laugh, dream, etc., again." Our list of "I'll nevers" is false protection against another letdown. The walls our fears erect are as unstable as the excuses that created them. Placing our hearts in a fortress will not keep pain at a distance. Pain touches every life, but if you're open, it will also teach you a valuable life lesson.

Maybe you convinced yourself that staying the same meant you'd never hurt again either.

Name Your Pain

If you're going to combat the negative mentality that ultimately sets you up for failure, you must battle excuses with truth. A lifestyle of excuses didn't happen overnight; it was practiced until it became a perfected and comfortable norm. So if we're going to create a new precedent in our lives, we have to understand how

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our previous pattern was birthed. You cannot change a past you won't confront.

There are two essential truths that will help you realize the potential of restoration. The first is this: you must name your pain. Every pain we've experienced has changed us. No matter how many times you say, "I'm okay," if you haven't accepted and admitted that you've been hurt, you're not healing; you're reverting.

Regardless of what our pride may have us believe, moving on does not mean allowing our lives to go back to the way they were. By definition, *reverting* is going back to a previous state or re-acquiring original features. It's important that you know this: your heart will not return to its original pre-hurt state. *Nor should it.* Doing so would mean that you would have to relinquish the wisdom, growth, and experiences that were designed to make your heart stronger. In haste to move past pain, we often choose the identity most accessible to us, and it's generally a modified/amplified version of who we were before we became acquainted with disappointment. When pain shackles us to difficult memories, we may ignore our wounds and stifle our cries for help. We choose to say we're okay when in actuality, we're just numb.

As you acknowledge your pain and discover how the experience changed you, do not forget the second truth our restoration requires: survival empowers; it does not confine. The mere fact that you're holding this book in your hands is a testament that your spirit is not broken. In spite of your most critical thoughts, something in you knows you have more left than you've lost. The true testimony of survival is not in what you survived; it is in how you were able to truly live again. What good is surviving a break if you still choose to live with a cast? A cast was never meant to be a permanent fixture in your healing.

So you've received the gift of survival. The next step is learning how to use it, which will force you to exercise faith like never before. The moment you begin to reestablish faith in your life, fear will try to rear its ugly head.

Most people struggling to overcome their fears have had an encounter with disappointment so great that every dream they can conceive is contaminated with the toxic anxiety of failure. When your mind becomes cluttered with the possibilities of "what if," there is no room for faith. Living life prepared for the worst possible outcome is like living in a cage—it's not freedom. Over time, you will recognize the difference between guarding your heart and restricting it. You'll learn to stop talking yourself out of the good things God has promised to all who live according to His purpose.

You, my survivor friend, will not settle for a life dictated by insecurities or previous experiences. At this very moment, you are changing the trajectory of your life. You have access to power that is capable of working within you to free you from any mental and emotional bondage that has convinced you a better life is not within your grasp.

Keep the Promises You Make to Yourself

We cannot tap into that power and hang on to excuses at the same time. Your heart, mind, and hands must be free to lay hold of all that is ahead of you. Understanding the psychology of your excuses is pivotal in having permanent victory over them. So, my question to you is:

When did you learn to give up on yourself?

When my daughter began school, she had difficulty differentiating between appropriate times to socialize and moments when focus was mandatory. She's an intelligent and witty little girl, so my husband and I knew we could speak to her practically about the matter. At the conclusion of our conversation, she said, "I'll try my best." My husband's response left me evaluating my own language. He told her that the word *try* leaves room for failure where it isn't necessary. His statement crystalized in my mind, and I realized how often we relieve ourselves of the discipline required to manifest our goals.

Shedding excuses is a discipline that must be practiced with our thoughts, communication, and actions. There is only room for language that declares: *I will!* I'm so glad my daughter is learning this now. We must learn to practice integrity with ourselves before we can reasonably expect to receive it from anyone else.

We must learn to practice integrity with ourselves before we can reasonably expect to receive it from anyone else.

So I'm working on keeping the vows I make to myself. Even small ones like "I will *not* eat dessert when I go out to dinner." After the meal, waiters walk by carrying delicious desserts ordered by other patrons and my resolve weakens. The smells tempt me and I begin internally bargaining. I reason that chocolate comes from a bean, which makes it a vegetable. I recount the nutritional value of vitamin D to justify the ice cream. Before I know it, my spoon is poised and I'm prepared to break the promise I made to my waistline and myself just hours before!

Instant gratification often results in long-term disappointment. The many broken promises I have made to myself have created

wounds I am still discovering. Growth occurs when we confront our personal experiences and how they've changed us.

You can create a new pattern and move forward with determination like never before, but you must learn what's stopped you in the past. If the challenge to heal and become whole has been issued by people other than yourself, then your journey will always require permission before progression. Don't allow your destiny to be determined by a democracy. Your immediate circle may not know how to coach you through your heartbreak or, even worse, they may need the company of your misery to distract them from their own need for healing. Avoid the temptation to make your healing contingent on approval and validation from other people. Those who have overcome did so not because it was convenient for other people, but because they simply could not stay in the place where pain met and left them.

Maybe you have made the decision to move forward with your life before. But this time you're not going to try. *You will.* Too much depends on it. As we unravel the lessons of your past, I challenge you to open yourself up fully. Don't allow the fear of facing old decisions and memories make you resist change. You're strong enough to confront your own truth. It may require admitting you've been wrong, or maybe abused, but remember the paradox of the insecure little girl and the confident woman. The bridge from who you once were to who God has ordained you to be is created from bricks of vulnerability, humility as strong as mortar, and a master plan so perfect, even the things that once hurt you will serve in making you better.

Your willingness to let go of the excuses and vow to move forward just laid the first brick, but there's still work to be done. In the next chapter we'll focus on the areas in our lives that we

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know are present but often choose to ignore. We all know that we aren't perfect, but we've avoided necessary change. Until now! It's time for some intense self-evaluation so that you can recognize the vulnerabilities that exist in your process.

2

Find Your Weeds

When I close my eyes, the questions swarm around my mind like bees in their hive. Why me? When did I change? Can I ever go back to the way things were or was too much damage done? Please, God, if You're still looking over me, help me to retrace the steps that led to my brokenness so that I can discover the lessons You want me to learn from these wounds.

Our beautiful blended family is made up of six children who are each talented, kind, and unique in their own right. Twenty years separate the oldest from the youngest, so we're pretty much in every stage of parenting, all at one time. Not too long after the birth of our daughter Ella, we noticed that we were all trying to adjust to our new identity as a family and really needed some quality family time. My husband and I were tired, our children each needed affirmation about their irreplaceable roles in our lives, homework routines were altered, dinner was a matter of which restaurants could deliver, extracurricular activities were nonexistent, and did I mention my husband and I were tired?

Family Outing

Touré and I knew that we needed to go the extra mile to make sure our family bonded as a unit, so we decided it was time for a family day. There was only one possible day that was free for everyone: Sunday. My husband is a pastor, and having grown up in church, I grew accustomed to Sundays being reserved solely for church services and after-church naps. However, because we were still trying to find our rhythm and balance as a family with a newborn, he made the difficult and necessary decision to have a guest speaker for Sunday. We each loaded our vehicles with children and set out to spend the day enjoying brunch and a movie. Our oldest daughter, Ren, was in the car with me as we listened with agony to our newest family member, Ella, wailing uncontrollably in her car seat.

The moment I pulled into a parking spot and turned off the engine, Ren unbuckled and rushed to rescue her baby sister. It didn't take long before our other four children surrounded Ella, hoping to calm her down from the ride. As we watched our six children walk just a few feet ahead of us toward the restaurant, I grabbed my husband's hand. I was locked in a trance watching our daughter carrying her baby sister in her arms, trying to calm her. Anyone watching might have seen it for what it was—an incredible older sibling holding her baby sister. But for someone who'd experienced teenage pregnancy like me, it might've seemed like the interaction between a young mother and her new baby.

Before I knew it, I was seeing a vivid flashback of me with my baby son, Malachi, when I was just fourteen years old. In an instant I remembered how uncertain I felt about my potential during that time. You could have never told that young girl her

journey would become a witness to grace for so many people. No, in that moment all I was trying to do was survive.

It took a few days before I could express to my husband what I experienced that day. As if I were having an out-of-body experience, I told him about the moment that made me flash back to that period in my life. I tried to make the observation sound casual, but the more I verbalized my feelings, tears became inevitable. “It must have been really hard to have a baby at fourteen,” Touré said.

Together we talked about the difficulty that I’d silently endured during that time. During my pregnancy, I was surrounded by thousands of people each Sunday. Membership at our church topped more than thirty thousand. I have four siblings and many friends who have become like family, but still, I wrestled with many, many difficult emotions alone. Being raised in an environment with a built-in platform caused me to be even more self-conscious than the average teenager, which is saying something. I began to wonder constantly what other people saw when they looked at me. I became so obsessed with other people’s opinions of me that I didn’t take time to truly examine my heart.

I withdrew on the inside and sought validation through what looked like success on the outside.

I’m learning that surviving painful experiences is good, but the danger comes when we don’t take time to actually recover. It’s surviving a broken bone and then choosing to live with a perpetual limp rather than undergoing surgery to fix it. Eventually you can learn to function in such a way that won’t exacerbate the break, but the rest of your body has to overcompensate to make

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up for the immobility of that broken bone. Before you know it, you've robbed yourself of the recovery that would restore the full function of your body.

Guard Your Heart

This is what happens to all of us when we don't take time to find and pull the weeds that are created after we've experienced difficulty in life. One of my favorite scriptures in Proverbs speaks directly to this issue: "Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life" (4:23 NLT). Of the many lessons we learn from life and in school, the one that often gets the least amount of discussion is learning to guard your heart. We learn mathematical equations, linguistic skills, vocabulary, and science, but how much more valuable is the skill of keeping negative thoughts and experiences from taking root in the heart?

As I've meditated on the need to guard the heart, I've begun to think of my heart as a garden worth cultivating and protecting. The Bible shows us so many examples of gardens created for both beauty and sustenance. We also see that such beauty attracts predators. In the garden of Eden that predator came in the form of a serpent. Remember how God told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply? By providing the garden of Eden, He gave them an example in which to model their fruit so that they would understand what was worth multiplying on the earth.

We all know that Eve's desire to know and see more than what God provided ultimately allowed the serpent to distract her from her purpose. Eve's sin was not that the serpent got into the garden. Her sin was that she allowed the serpent to have access to her

mind. Guarding your heart does not mean that bad things won't happen to you. It means that you won't allow those bad things to take root and produce fruit in your mind. Weeds of fear and insecurity leave only room for internal negativity and hopelessness.

If we want to guard the garden of the heart, we have many options to keep potential pests at bay, but there isn't an enemy to gardens more constant and nagging than weeds. Weeds spring up in gardens where healthy plants have not been cultivated. The same is true in our lives. There are times when we've been wounded and, whether through preoccupation or neglect, we've ignored certain areas. Then issues spring up and we wonder why.

At this point in your journey, your heart is probably a garden full of both fruit and weeds that your thoughts, emotions, and experiences have produced. It feels good to see all that beauty and fruit, but I challenge you to look for the weeds. And be willing to pull them out by the roots or risk spoiling the beauty and fruitfulness of your heart.

There are weeds in your life you are aware of and others that you are still discovering. Those weeds could be blocking you from having meaningful connections and liberty in your life. After you identify and pull out the weeds, you have to implement a plan of defense against them. You must filter your thoughts and actions with the knowledge that those weeds produced an unhealthy pattern in your life.

The Weed of Defensiveness

The weeds were thick in my life when I set out on my mission to survive after my teen pregnancy. I told myself I could not afford

to make any more mistakes. Of course, I made *plenty* of mistakes after my pregnancy, but instead of owning them, I ignored anyone whose presence would serve as a reminder of the higher expectations I once held for myself. I was slowly but surely disconnecting from family and friends as my life was choked by the weeds.

Turns out I can't stand being wrong. It's one of my least favorite feelings. I hate it so much I'm embarrassed to admit that I've become stubborn about it. If you would have asked me five years ago if I had a problem admitting when I'm wrong, I would have said no or it doesn't happen frequently enough for it to be an issue in my life. The truth is that it happened frequently, but I was so blinded by pride that I couldn't answer truthfully. It wasn't until I met my husband that I began weighing the possibility that I don't do everything perfectly. This is where you can insert my dramatic facial expression of pure shock.

But God brought me a partner in life who is much more than a cuddle buddy. He's a God-given mate so intimately connected to me that he's able to point out the inclinations and patterns that could be detrimental to our relationship and my personal growth. That's the way God designed it to be.

When we met it had been more than a year since I'd left an unhealthy relationship. My heart had finally come to a place where I felt genuine inner peace and confidence. Then along came Touré—a man every bit worthy of the title “Prince Charming.” We began to go beyond the surface talks of courting and really began to lay the foundation that has sustained our relationship. I can remember how completely vulnerable and naked I felt the first time he pointed out an area I needed to work on. My first reaction was to deflect and respond with a list of his qualities that could use some improvement. On the inside my pride was

screaming, *Please don't tell me I'm not perfect!* I knew I wasn't perfect by the sheer fact that I'm human. Still, I didn't like it.

God regularly uses the safety of my relationship with Touré to knock me off of my high horse and force me to take a deeper look into my heart. When Touré noticed that I am often very slow to admit when I'm wrong, I took some time to process his observation. Perhaps, I rationalized, it's not that I have a problem admitting I'm wrong; it's just that I need to first justify why I have the right to be wrong. In other words, I was defensive. Our disagreements would generally begin with me taking time to explain the path that led to my error rather than admitting one had happened in the first place.

After a few more times of him bringing up this behavior, I decided to really trace the source of this weed in my life. Turns out my pattern of not admitting that I was wrong was rooted in a fear I've held since becoming a teenage mother. One of my greatest fears was that my life would be judged by the decisions that led to me becoming a teenage mother. In response, I resolved to distance myself from that time in my life. This overcompensation ultimately led to me placing more value on being right than on learning from being wrong. I thought that I could balance misconceptions about me with a narrative of a girl who had turned her life around and had never made any other mistakes. I wanted to convince people I'd achieved perfection after imperfection. But how ridiculous is that when life is full of experiences that can teach us lessons through our mistakes?

Fast-forward years down the road and the result of my insecurity was a woman who has a hard time apologizing to people affected by my choices. That's just one of the many things I've discovered from tracing my action to the emotion in my heart that produced it.

How About You?

What are your weeds? What thoughts and behaviors are keeping you from enjoying the full beauty of the heart God has given you? Your willingness to seek them out will transform your heart, producing compassion and creating opportunities to extend grace to others. The only way to remove the weeds is to combat them with humility. The fruit of such examination is not constant shame; it's simple humility and grace.

What keeps us from taking a moment to pause and reflect on the steps we've taken in life? For me, this "weeding" meant facing some ugly truths. That I wasn't the confident adolescent I pretended to be. That I felt lost. That I was in a situation bigger than I could handle on my own. So instead I sought external validation. Of course others' opinions can never offer true inner confidence and self-acceptance. Yet like a drug that provides a temporary high, validation from others offers a distraction from the insecurities that scream within us. The desire to relentlessly seek praise from other people is a sign that there is an emptiness within us that can only be discovered by honest self-examination. Sometimes we can't even fully comprehend what our lack is because we're too busy pretending we don't have any.

Making Good Decisions

Everything from your style of communication to your moral compass has been shaped by life experiences. Those experiences, positive or negative, have made you who you are today. Until you begin to question why you think and feel the way you do, you'll

never be able to have a thriving life. You can't afford to allow actions that are rooted in fear or insecurities to continue to flourish in your life. Fear-based decision-making will only produce more fear. It's important to recognize that the external successes in life are not necessarily a reflection of a healthy soul. In fact, many people are able to capitalize on their insecurities by creating outlets that attract popularity and wealth.

While some people amass riches and attention, their insides are often haunted by fear. This is why it's important not to compare your life to what appears to be working for other people. True success cannot be seen with the human eye, but it can be felt through genuine warmth and connection. We live in a culture that often celebrates outward achievements with little regard for internal prosperity. I am reminded of Jesus' words: "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36 ESV).

Many of the indicators we use to determine triumph over difficulty are tangible, but our greatest accomplishment comes when we have the ability to master our souls. Having an awareness of your issues and guarding your life against them is pivotal in the pursuit of soul mastery. If you're like me and you struggle to admit when you're wrong, you'll have to find the humility to apologize before you even think about justifying what happened. You'll have to examine arguments from other people's perspectives. You may have to begin saying things like, "I apologize that we've disconnected on this. It's important to me that we're able to get on the same page. Please tell me how my actions affected you."

With an open heart and mind, we must be willing to accept that some situations aren't about right or wrong; they're about peace. If only life was as cut and dried as right and wrong. When

it comes to connecting with other people, remember that while your actions may seem right in your eyes, they may be wrong in the eyes of someone else, and most important, in God's eyes. In other words, despite your best intentions, sometimes the people in your life will be hurt by your actions. There will be times when you make decisions and your eyes aren't opened until after damage has been done. This does not make you a bad person; it means that you're human. But if you're constantly walking away every time you hurt someone, you'll never experience the power of love that restores trust and fosters forgiveness. Their hurt doesn't mean you should walk away. Actually, it's an opportunity for you to own your mistake and offer them the restoration you never received.

Contrary to popular belief we do not just stumble into our decisions. Every emotion is connected to a thought and those thoughts produce action. Consciously or subconsciously, we've actively played a role in perpetuating whatever disdain we've

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come to associate with certain areas of our lives. And if we don't think of our past, present, or future with compassion and care, we'll ultimately resent the parts of our hearts that need love the most.

Before delving into the layers that have created your sense of identity, there are a few factors that are imperative for you to remember.

The first is that from the moment you were conceived in your mother's womb, God called your life beautiful. He knows and sees everything about your life. He sees the decisions you have yet to make and the ones that have left you

hurting. If you're still struggling to accept that truth, I understand why. It may sound cliché and overly used, especially to people who've grown up in church, but it's only because it's the most powerful concept one can ever fully master.

As you read this book, there may be times when you feel the weight of facing your truth is too great. There may be times when you question whether or not you have the courage to open the doors of your heart that you've been comfortable keeping closed.

Remember this: you are strong enough to confront your history. Don't turn away from your brokenness. Remember that you're not doing this alone. God foreknew this moment would come. Every now and then we need a reminder that someone else has defeated a giant we must face. Allow this book to be that reminder. Instead of counting the reasons you have to be afraid, give yourself permission to be brave. You've already survived the trauma, but you can't transform your pain into purpose until you're willing to pick it up again. Roll up your sleeves, wipe your tears, and boldly embrace your truth.

You cannot begin to guard your heart until you fully know your heart. Beware of looking solely at the noteworthy accolades you have received, for that is a recipe for pride, not true confidence. Instead take a journey from your childhood to present day and see all you have become. Recognize there have been moments where you felt like giving up, but you found the strength to keep moving. Think about the times you knew you should have walked away but convinced yourself to stay. How did you get to that place? Remember this isn't an invitation for shame. It's a plea from your heart to look honestly at what has shaped it. It's an opportunity to pull the weeds from the garden of your heart. Pulling those weeds will make the garden of your heart fruitful and beautiful.

3

Learn Your Patterns

She was so afraid . . . that girl I used to be. She thought that she was just one opinion, one lie, one truth away from having the most vulnerable parts of her life exposed. Her fear convinced her to hide away the essence of her soul and even the prayers that would make her whole. She caved into the pressure to be like everyone else and robbed the world of the wealth assigned to her truth. She was a lonely girl, that girl I used to be, but one would never know it because she wore a disguise so popular that it eventually became her worst enemy. Her disguise was the lie she told herself and the truth she was unwilling to face.

“What Had Happened Was . . .”

For as long as I can remember, whenever someone in my family prefaced a story with “what had happened was . . .” we knew we were in for a long, dramatic, and hilarious story. Those four words might make grammar teachers cringe, but for us they signaled a trip down memory lane. We anxiously sat on the edge of our seats

waiting to hear all the narrator's fabulous details. In moments like those, facing the past wasn't scary.

Those stories often left us laughing until we cried. But when life deprives us of laughter and leaves only the taste of salty tears and painful memories, those four words, *what had happened was*, are slow to surface.

When teen pregnancy was no longer a stranger's issue but my reality, I didn't think back to "what had happened was." I became so consumed with distancing myself from my mistake that I failed to learn from it. Hindsight is only 20/20 for those who take a moment to look behind them.

I spent many years trying to maintain a persona, which is problematic because I could not discover my authentic identity as long as I was pretending. There's nothing wrong with not having figured out who you are, but so much can go wrong when you pretend that you have. There is a recurring theme that I have discovered when listening to the stories of people from around the world. We want so badly to convince ourselves that we have it all together that we miss the opportunity to truly come to a place of inner peace. It's okay that you don't have all of the answers regarding your life. Faking joy in the face of misery or peace when you have inner turmoil is dangerous.

Had I looked back in the months after my teen pregnancy, I would have learned that I cared too much about the opinions of my peers. While this may seem like normal teenage behavior, what made my mentality unhealthy was the lengths to which I was willing to go in order to satisfy others' expectations of me. This observation may not have prevented my teen pregnancy, but it would have helped me avoid subsequent painful life decisions I made from that point on. The same need for acceptance and

validation would haunt me when I emerged in different social settings. I could have become more self-aware of my tendency to gain attention and acceptance by any means necessary. That revelation would have allowed me to place limitations on how and to what lengths I was willing to indulge in certain relationships.

Oftentimes our disposition for not looking back is rooted in the fact that we can't change what happened. Maybe you have set boundaries for the people you've allowed into your life but haven't set boundaries for yourself. Such necessary boundaries develop character and integrity. You must be willing to ask yourself if you're making a decision from a place of fear and insecurity or from the strength necessary to maintain your esteem. Fear-based decisions yield devastating results. If you've chosen to maintain an unhealthy mind-set out of fear of starting over, you will never be able to realize the full potential of your life.

Now, let's take a moment to dissect your pattern. Are you surrounded by people who constantly take from you but add very little to your life? Ever wonder why these types of people are attracted to you? Better yet, have you ever wondered why you continue to attract those types of people? Many people feel a sense of value when they are needed by other people, even if that particular need turns into codependency. It may be because you once felt indispensable and now only feel comfortable in relationships where someone cannot survive without you.

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Perhaps you have a difficult time being vulnerable in relationships. You may have a history of choosing friends and partners who are emotionally unavailable to you. Their emotional unavailability makes you feel rejected, yet you can't seem to walk away.

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Oftentimes this is an indication that the connection you long to have with them needs to start with rebuilding the connection you have with yourself.

Or perhaps you have a difficult time receiving love. It could be because abandonment issues have made you believe that people are unreliable and will ultimately walk away. Did your toxic relationship with a parent affect you more than you'd like to admit? Do you have a history of giving yourself to people who fail to see your value? Are you struggling with forgiveness? There could be countless scenarios and situations that have created your pattern, but you must be willing to search for the patterns that have developed in your life that reflect the current state of your soul.

As you dig beneath the surface, you'll begin to understand how your current patterns are truly just manifestations of past emotions.

There will come a time in all of our lives when we face issues that make us feel incomplete. How we process those feelings of inadequacy and learn to form a proper defense against them is critical in moving forward. The facade of recovery where hurt still exists creates an infection that viciously spreads from our hearts and through our actions. Eventually it becomes the standard for what we deem acceptable in our lives.

In order to avoid repeating toxic patterns, we must be diligent in understanding the circumstances that produced them in the first place. Many of us long for intimacy and acceptance from other people, but we fail to master the type of self-discovery that allows us to achieve intimacy within. How can we ask someone to love our hearts if we don't even know?

There are many variables that make the thought of unraveling our decisions and retracing our steps frightening. If we're going

to commit to achieving a positive outlook on things that once devastated us, we will have to believe that the worst things that happened to us have the potential to work for our benefit. Many of us unwittingly give our power away by living in a version of our stories that only leaves room for us to be a victim. There are moments in life when we find ourselves victimized, but such a moment does not have to become our identity.

No Longer a Victim

The word *victim* derives from the fifteenth-century Latin word *victima*. In its original context the word was used to denote a creature killed as a religious sacrifice. The meaning of that word has since evolved to its current definition, “a person who is hurt, tortured, or killed by another.” While both definitions hold similarities, there is an important word in the fifteenth-century derivative that has not passed the test of time: *sacrifice*. At some point between the fifteenth century and the eighteenth century the definition began to focus more on the pain that exists and not the sense of loss that leaves many feeling as though they’ve been sacrificed.

The poison that taints our memories of the past didn’t just come from the hurt we experienced; it also came from the sacrifices we made to endure those moments. While we strive to take a look back at our history, we may mourn the things we feel we lost. That loss may have been even more extreme than the pain of the hurt.

Some of you had an outside perpetrator who victimized you. Others had unhealthy, internal thought patterns that you allowed

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to have too much control over your actions. Still others of you may have become so comfortable in your decisions that you chose to turn a blind eye to that destructive behavior. Though the crimes may vary, the shame that comes with feeling as though we've been robbed is universal. That feeling of loss halts us from ever reliving those moments again. But, I've got good news for you. The moments that left you feeling shattered are the most instrumental in producing your healing. That may be a thought too unfathomable to conceive, but it creates a beautiful and necessary vulnerability.

It can become so easy to set boundaries for the people we allow to come into our lives, but very rarely do we take a moment to create boundaries for ourselves. These necessary boundaries develop character and integrity after our downfalls.

Maybe you rationalize that looking back is pointless because the past is past and we can't change what happened. Though this is true, we can avoid subsequent mistakes and patterns through self-introspection.

Hindsight Is 20/20

You know how people say that hindsight is 20/20? I did not always understand that. Like many people I tried to avoid looking back as much as possible. I wish I could tell you that it was for some noble reason like I was so optimistic about my future that my past didn't matter. No, my unwillingness to look back was rooted in the fear that I would not like or understand what I saw about myself. I did not want to face the memories that made me feel shame. The problem with avoiding the lessons of our past is that we're bound

to repeat them in the future. An unexamined past will always threaten to contaminate the potential of our present.

Fortunately, I've learned that looking back does not have to be painful. When looking back over my past, I had to learn to do so with compassion, understanding, and love. I was often my harshest critic when recounting the twists and turns of my life experiences. Once I came to a place of self-acceptance and awareness of God's love, I was able to look back over my life with sensitivity.

It's important that you learn to handle your heart with care. Regardless of how tough or strong you feel you are, there are delicate parts on the inside of us. If we do not learn to respect our vulnerability, we cannot teach others to do the same. Of course I haven't always had that revelation. I could not become aware of the power my past possessed because I was constantly running away from it. I hoped that I could distance myself from my choices and decisions in such a way that they would no longer be a part of the fabric of who I am. If you are like me and have made choices that you haven't always been proud of, you may have been tempted to do the same. I hope it encourages you to know that you aren't alone.

I also hope to challenge you in this chapter to discover the silent, toxic patterns that produced outcomes in your life that make you shudder. Behind the shivers of shame and regret that often make us run and hide from our history are the keys that unlock futures more beautiful than we can fathom.

I have a history of living my life too concerned with how other people viewed me. I cared so much about what people thought of me that I never took time to assess my own thoughts. If I experienced something with someone, I did not consider how that experience affected me, only how/if it would alter what that

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person thought of me. My pattern of seeking acceptance and validation was rooted in fear of rejection. My fear of rejection was a result of feeling inadequate. A mind-set of inadequacy convinced me that the only way I would receive validation was to create an illusion of perfection and confidence. The manufacturing of this illusion began long before adulthood. It first surfaced when I was a preteen entering into adolescence.

Moments That Trigger Shame, Pain, Embarrassment

The problem with illusions is that they're constantly confronted by reality. When those moments occur one must choose between standing on their truth or finding another space for their facade to live. I became disloyal to my truth in hopes of receiving acceptance from my peers when I was a teenager. I would lie or conveniently withhold the truth about my teen pregnancy. I did not want my son's existence to complicate friendships or relationships. In school environments where people were not privy to the full scope of my life, I was just a "normal" teenager.

However, as I mentioned, illusions are always confronted by reality. That moment came for me when I was in the lunchroom of my high school with my older sister Cora. A heated debate about teen pregnancy ensued and my sister became argumentative. The subject matter obviously hit very close to home and my sister did not appreciate the negative remarks that were being made about teen mothers. I sat in the corner of the room praying that God would perform a miracle and I would discreetly evaporate. My prayer was interrupted by my sister blurting out something to the

effect of, “Well, my sister’s a teenage mother and she’s not a hoe!” There it was. My truth laid bare for all of my classmates to see. I was mortified. As embarrassing as the moment was, I look back now and realize that no one really cared.

The memory sticks out in my mind as if it just happened yesterday. However, outside of an initial awkward silence, I don’t remember anyone treating me differently or shunning me. Perhaps I was more concerned about my truth than any of them were. That reality should have changed my ability to engage with the world, but it did not. I still continued to live life more concerned with how people would handle my truth than taking time to fully embrace it myself. This was a pattern that followed me through adulthood.

What Are Your Patterns?

Have you ever taken time to consider your own emotional patterns? As we talked about thoughts producing emotions and emotions producing actions, we must go one step further and consider the repeated thoughts that create recurring emotions and therefore yield habitual actions. Understanding those patterns will require opening the dark closets of our hearts and dissecting the memories we thought were buried. We must begin to ask ourselves: Why did this happen to me? What did it teach me? How do I keep it from ever happening again?

I doubt there is a more insecure time in a person’s life than the teen years. Pimples begin forming, bodies begin changing, voices begin to crack, emotions explode, and communication is non-existent. Being a teenager is culture shock! It’s one of the first times

Don't Settle *for* Safe

we're unsupervised in the outside world. This exposure allows for connection with other people. Adolescence was probably one of the first times you realized just how many variables it takes to produce a successful life. Adolescence reveals the unprecedented discipline, social stresses, expectations, and familial changes that are an unavoidable part of life.

You probably had your first encounter with the unlimited dilemmas of life during your adolescent years. It is during this time that each of us begins to recognize how painful and disappointing life can be. If you're fortunate enough to have experienced a childhood that was free from trauma, then adolescence is when you begin to realize that your history may be an anomaly for some people. We often believe everyone was raised in a similar environment to our own. As our worlds begin to cross-pollinate, the exploration of other people's history becomes intriguing. When you're a teenager, you realize that the mysterious world of being a grown-up is more complicated than it seems. No longer can adults talk over your head; we often learn hard truths that jade our perspective. Suddenly experiences like divorce, job loss, abandonment, and rejection are no longer temporary ailments that can be cured with lollipops and kisses.

We begin to want explanations about, or shelter from, the issues that plague us. Our naiveté and pain can give us harsh views of the world that scar our adulthood. The problem with our teenage years is that often our observations are valid, but our perspective is very limited. It's not until we're older that we begin to tap into the compassion necessary to learn from those observations.

As a parent, I'm beginning to see more clearly just how challenging adolescence is. Though you have some idea of who you

are, you're unsure of how you compare in the world. The need for acceptance often creates personas that we manifest from insecurities. Those personas follow us through adolescence and into adulthood until we're no longer sure who we are at our core.

Of course, when I was a teenager, I did not realize just how little I knew about life. I felt pressure to define myself. I was ambitious. My parents may have considered it rebellious, but they're not writing the book so we'll just go with my side of the story. Ambition is great, but ambition without wisdom is like a car with no brakes. You may get where you're going, but you'll cause a lot of damage along the way. My ambition led me to break many of the rules that existed in my household. I wanted what I wanted so badly that I didn't care what it took to get it.

It wasn't until I was filing for divorce after four years of marriage that I realized that my ambition was raw material that needed to be studied, shaped, formed, and directed with intentionality. Later on, that ambition allowed for many wonderful opportunities in my life, but it was not until I recognized the blessing and the curse of it that I was able to fully use it for good.

The patterns in your life will determine the difference between the destruction of your life or the construction of it. It's up to you to choose.



Unfortunately comparison does not leave much room for appreciation of the positive things that may exist in the world. That's because teen years almost always center on our deficiency. At the core of our wondering are the questions: Am I enough? Did I receive enough? Can I compete when I don't feel like I measure

up? Often frustrated adults fail to remember what it was like when they were in those formative years and fail to convey that that level of self-inquiry exists long after your age no longer has “teen” at the end of it. The earlier we’re able to identify our insecurities, the better we’ll be at guarding our decisions against them. The last thing you want is to create a life that has been built on fear.

Teenagers quest in hopes that they will discover what they wished they had received. That search for fulfillment often leads to even more disappointment. The holes in your life were not meant to be filled with substitutes for real love or the affirmation of attention. The holes in your life that have made you feel the

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most empty were created to be filled with the knowledge of God. You may not always recognize the knowledge of God when you’re in the midst of sorting through the messes of life, but His sovereignty is all about taking issues that once seemed hopeless and producing life anew. Accepting the knowledge of God is not just believ-

ing that He is real, but trusting that even your darkest moments were created so that light could shine through you.

Good Patterns

Of course not all patterns are bad. Some patterns are so virtuous that they should be refined and held for a lifetime. The greatest gift you can give yourself is the ability to identify patterns that have created themes in your life. Those patterns may not go away

completely, but it's possible that you can begin to recognize them and diminish the power they have to control your life. I've had to work extra hard at pinpointing my emotions and expressing them when necessary. When you notice a shift in your mood, take a moment to truly take inventory of what led to the shift. Don't just chock it up to being off-center. Find the root of what's blocking you from having complete joy. You would be surprised how much simply expressing those emotions can relieve you.

Prayer's Power

For me, that's the power of prayer. It's not about fancy words or auspicious speech. Prayer is about the peace you receive when you invite God into what concerns you. Sure, He already knows everything, but His power is not unleashed until you're able to express to Him where you are. Not sharing your troubles with God is like driving in a car with navigation, but not inputting the address to your destination. If you haven't tapped in to the system that is available to you, you spend more time lost than necessary. Open up to Him and admit that you've discovered some parts of you that have been lost or confused in the process.

God will grant you the wisdom and discernment to see the patterns that prohibit you from experiencing true satisfaction in Him. You don't have to be limited because of what you haven't seen. For instance, just because you were raised in a home where abuse was prevalent doesn't mean you can't have fulfilling relationships. You can create a new culture for your family. You can do anything you put your mind to if you are willing to transform your mind by releasing the paradigms that trapped you.

Mercy in Reflection

Mercy Ministries, headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee, is dedicated to helping young women confront traumas that have the potential to oppress and depress them. I had the privilege of visiting this amazing place. It's a safe place for victims of unfortunate life circumstances, often teenagers, to come and be enveloped by the love of God. During their stay they're able to meet with other girls who have had similar struggles. With the help of counselors, special guest speakers, and a team of support staff, the young women are encouraged to examine their lives without judgment or shame.

I could not help but wish I had been able to stay at a place like Mercy when I was pregnant with my son. Much of what these young women are able to accomplish in the months that they are there it took me many years to learn. Before that thought could even begin to form regret in my mind, it was replaced by the peace of knowing that it doesn't matter how long it took me to have peace about my past; what matters is that I arrived.

Regardless of how much time has passed since your trauma, it's never too late to look back on your life and learn. To be reminded that God has created rest stops along your journey that offer you the same level of safety and breakthrough available to the girls at Mercy. The truth is that it doesn't matter whether you're in a shelter, a mansion in Beverly Hills, or a home in Minnesota; you will not magically come to a place of peace in your life. It takes great courage, intentionality, and work to confront unhealthy patterns.



Before moving on to the next chapter, I want to challenge you to take a moment and reflect. Can you remember areas in your life where you felt shame, pain, or embarrassment? Are there specific memories attached to that? How did your perspective on yourself and others change as a result of that? Recognizing the root of your pattern is the only way you can eradicate it from your life.

Once you begin to realize some of the unhealthy patterns associated with your life, you have to wage a defense against them. That defense will have to come in the form of combatting those thoughts or emotions with a prevailing healthier thought. For instance, instead of saying, “God can’t use someone like me after all that I’ve done,” you have to pray, “God, my breath is a sign that You need me on this earth. Show me how my life can make this world a better place. I’m willing to sacrifice my pride, ego, and plans for Yours.” Vulnerability with God releases the power that negativity has over your life. There are some issues in our lives too great for us to handle on our own. We need divine interventions to remind us that there is a resource available to us that supercedes the obstacles around us. You’re not fighting this battle on your own. God has a perfect plan and will for your life. Trust His plan, which includes joy, peace, and love. That’s the transformational thinking that provides a light in even the darkest tunnels. As we journey through that tunnel, we will take a look not only at your role but also at how the role of family and friends has defined your ability to function in the world.

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