

To
Be Broken Into
Freedom:
A Spiritual Journey

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to all those who struggle with mental illnesses in its many forms. I also dedicate this book to those mental health professionals, family members, and friends who step up to support people with mental illnesses to encourage recovery.

ENDORSEMENT

Thanks Rene for sharing your very powerful story of God's
grace, and the
friendship and support of his people, in the midst of
enormous struggle. I
am sure that God will continue to use your special gifts along
the way. Keep
up the fight my friend.

God's blessing and strength be with you,

Bill Reimer, Regent College, Vancouver, BC

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1 Introduction

When I first renewed my Christian walk, I came to believe that I would never experience sorrow to the degree that I had previously. I was wrong! In fact I was wrong about a lot of things. Up until then I had an easy life. I knew very little about practicing faith, hope, love, and humility. During my dark and troubled journey, I would come to a deeper understanding and practice of these virtues by learning to hold onto my promise from God for me to be broken into freedom.

In this story, I have kept away from most of the problems I encountered with the unreasonableness of my former worldview, in case you are going through what I experienced. You will have enough problems of your own. The real issue – “can I trust in God’s goodness?” – I did not leave out, because it was central to me growing up in the faith. All other challenging difficulties were an outgrowth of this main issue.

In this book, when I use the words dark or darkness, I mean chaos, disorder, or confusion unless otherwise indicated. With them I mean to convey a lacking of the comforts normally associated with feeling God’s presence. This kind of darkness has to do with blind spots, or bends in the road; hence the need for faith in and commitment to the truth to navigate them. This darkness is accompanied with testing, weakness, and temptation. This kind of darkness isn’t evil in itself; instead, it’s the machinery that God uses to make souls alive to His grace when they persevere.

The journey described in this story is divided into five stages:

- The first period started in March of 1992 and lasted until December of the same year. It was my introduction to the severity of God's discipline in my life.
- The second period started in January of 1993, and lasted until August of the same year. It involves my march towards desolation and diagnosis. It was bitter sweet.
- The third period started in September of 1993 and ended in May of 2001. This period marks part of the road to recovery. It was very difficult to navigate through.
- The fourth period started on May 1, 2001 and ended around May 2009. It marks the gradual return to the land of the living. It involves leaving behind some major bends in the road that had tested my faith.
- The last period began around late May 2009 and continues (well past the twentieth anniversary of having mental illness). Just like Abraham the father of faith, I had to search out my promised Land. By late 2018 God had dislodged the BIGGEST blocks I had towards loving others. Most of the negative symptoms from my MAJOR mental illness had become manageable. I am glad I waited for God to gradually move in my life. I am glad I never gave up!

It has been commented that in the early going this book gets

a bit heavy. This is true; when suffering takes place it is not a light subject. Yet, I hope that the reader will persevere. Some might think that suffering of any kind cannot be justified for any reason, and that the reasons I provide to motivate my suffering in the opening chapters are insufficient. Reading my other books one may be inclined to think differently.

It has also been commented that I appear to be too hard on myself through most of the events that are recorded in this book. I admit that I was very hard on myself before my Dark Night or journey and for a long time in it, but as God continues to purify me I find this attitude becoming less and less of an issue. I am celebrating grace more deeply as time goes by.

A word of caution before you begin to read: Many of the events, circumstances, and abstract symptoms described in this book, can be viewed in a myriad of ways. It is my hope that you will be patient and slow to close your mind to the explanations I give for them. Looking along a ray of light in a dark tool shed is different than looking at the same ray sideways when it reflects off the dust in the same tool shed. During my dark journey, I questioned whether the hand of God, the demons, my illness, my environment, my medication, my body, my spirit, or some combination of these caused certain events that I witnessed. Many times I was mystified as to what caused what.

It may appear while reading this book that I point to a reality or unreality but do not fully describe it to the satisfaction of

some. Describing color to a blind person, or sound to a deaf person is just as difficult.

Note: I use the words “spirit” or “soul” interchangeably when it comes to the non-physical part of a human’s makeup. With them I mean that which exists as consciousness, thought, feeling, and will, and is distinct from the human body.

All the events written about in this Manuscript are true to the best of my knowledge. I have written down my experiences as accurately as I can remember them. Since my memory can play tricks on me, there may be some errors. I might also be off on some of the dates by a few weeks or months here and there. As far as my theology is concerned: if I contradict a healthy interpretation of the Bible anywhere within this manuscript, I am wrong. I am most grateful for the gift of the Bible and the encouragement found in it.

Finally the reason I have written down my experiences is to inspire others going through difficult times to draw courage from them, and therefore persevere. If I can make it through deep and humbling waters with God’s grace, so can you. My prayer is, “that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.”¹

¹ Ephesians 1:18

2 Snapshots From The Early Years

As a small child I grew up in what was then Apartheid South Africa, and eventually immigrated to Canada in 1976 with my family. There are many memories from which I could choose to share. One will see that I was willing to do both good and bad to fit in and belong. Here are some that I'd like to share with you.

My First Communion:

On the day that I was to participate in my First Communion, all dressed in white, I remember the Priest asking us children some questions about the faith in front of the whole congregation. I eagerly raised my hands and on two occasions was asked to give answers to certain questions. The only question I now remember being asked was: Where is God? I of course answered correctly. But when it was time for me to receive my First Communion, there had been a mix up in the paper work, and so I could not participate in it like the other children until a little while later. I would later see this event as God's way of saying that I wasn't ready for relationship with Him then, but that He knew I would later be ready for a friendship with Him (many years down the road).

A Would Be Peace Maker:

I started out as a happy boy for the most part, but also a loner on the play field at recess. At the end of each recess a bell

rang, and we were all expected to line up in front of our home classrooms. One warm day, the bell rang, and most of the kids started to line up except a few who were wrestling on the lawn nearby. As I watched I saw the principal far off walking towards the kids that were wrestling. Wanting to spare my playmates from getting into trouble, I decided to break up the fight and proceeded to divide and warn the combatants. We all quickly got into the line up as the principal was upon us. But the principal had seen me break up the wrestling match, and so got a hold of me by one of my legs, and held me upside down as he slapped me a number of times to discipline me. I definitely did not like what he was doing, thinking that I had done a good deed in breaking up the fight.

After the incident, I remember thinking to myself that if only I had of had a knife in my pocket when the principal was slapping me. My desire was that he would stab himself upon the knife while he spanked me. I know that I was very unrealistic back then, and I do see things differently now. I would not want the principal to stab himself on a knife in my pocket for such a small thing such as a spanking that may or may not have been deserved on my part.

A Would Be Curser:

As a child we used to live on a dead end street in a town called Springs in South Africa. Most of the families on our short street had children about my age. Most were English speaking and went to the same school. One day as I found

myself at the entrance of our street I came across two groups of kids – one English (British Descendants), and the other Afrikaans (Dutch descendants). They were calling each other names. One of the English kids invited me to call the Afrikaans kids names too. Even though my mother was of Dutch origin, I did so loudly, loyally and with much zeal. I used the African word for “f- -k you” which is “footsack” and said to them “Afrikaners that are bad bananas” in Afrikaans. As you can see the swear words have similarities. As I participated the Afrikaans kids left...and I felt very disappointed that the fun was coming to an end so quickly. But there would be many other opportunities.

A Second Attempt At Being A Curser:

As a part of our school activities, the best athletes from all the surrounding schools would compete in races at a local stadium somewhere in the district that we lived in. Those kids that did not participate (like myself) sat up in the stands and cheered their respective school teams on. Only problem was that I saw this as an opportunity to continue the cursing and swearing at the Afrikaners like I did above. I started shouting out (as loud as I could) all the foul things I could think of at the Afrikaners. A very short while later an adult came over and sternly told me to stop it. This never to the best of my memory re-occurred as we left for Canada not long afterwards.

On Having My Bubble Of Pride Burst:

This was my day. Ever since I tasted leadership in Cubs as a

section leader I had begun to hunger for more. When I knew that the next step was Scouts I knew that I wanted the challenge. After winning the Cub of the year trophy I felt really good about myself. Imagine, "I-WAS-VOTED-CUB-OF-THE-YEAR." It started going to my head. My pride was visible here, but I had a much deeper problem with pride than just this that I was not aware of for the longest time.

"Can I please join the Scouts next year Dad?" I had pleaded many times that year. At the end of the Cub year I had even proudly told the adult Cub leaders my plans and they had seemed to rejoice with me.

And this was the day.

This was my day.

Years later, I couldn't remember anything else about that day except the events that transpired that night at the Scout meeting my parents took me to.

I was full of happiness and excitement as my Dad dropped me off at the King's Men Hall in the town of Devon that we lived in near Edmonton, Alberta.

I felt this was my day, smiling to myself and thinking, "I made it to the Scouts! Yes...oh boy! Only good things can happen from here onwards." I took big confident steps into the old hall, and almost ran to where the adult Scout leaders stood talking amongst themselves. Even before I had the attention of the closest adult my mouth was open with a confident look of glee.

“Hi, my name is RENÉ, and I spent SEVEN YEARS in Cubs.”
That wasn’t really true. I had only spent about three years in Cubs. But to my mind it sounded better to say, “I spent SEVEN YEARS in Cubs.”

They all looked at me and nodded to show that they understood. They welcomed me, and then seemed to ignore me. None of them looked upon my credentials the way I wanted or expected them to. So, thinking that they had not heard and understood, I tried to clear away the confusion and repeated the last part of my last sentence with more emphasis: “I SPENT SEVEN YEARS IN CUBS!” I looked with hope into the faces that stared at me.

But all they did was nod and softly tell me to join the other boys scattered about. I almost began to pout as I realized that they weren’t as nearly impressed with my credentials as I was. Didn’t they see that I was SCOUT OF THE YEAR MATERIAL? Shouldn’t I tell them I was CUB OF THE YEAR? I was confused, but decided to make the best of it and introduce myself to the other boy Scouts. Maybe they would see me in a better light. Clearly I thought without any doubt that they would naturally, sooner or later, begin to see my LEADERSHIP abilities.

As the night progressed we were divided into groups or sections that were asked to choose leaders and assistant leaders. I tried to become the leader but a more popular kid got voted in instead. I started to pout, but one of the boys tried to cheer me up with the possibility of being an assistant.

I brightened up, put my name forward, but another boy was chosen instead of me. I was heart broken. I went home that night sobbing and pouting about how unfair life could be.

On the way home, I met an older boy named Perry, and I naturally sought consolation from him. But he gave me none. Instead he sinisterly asked me: "Do you believe in God?" I said that I did. He then tried to argue me into seeing that God was unfair and not worthy of being loyal to. I did not like where this kid was coming from and declared even more loudly that I believed in my God and went on my way nursing my hurt pride.

After awhile it did not matter to me that I was not section leader and I enjoyed my years as a scout anyways.

A Would Be Backslider:

Years later in my teens, I remember putting forth an argument to my Dad that His God was not necessarily my god, and basically concluding that I did not need to go to church with the family anymore. My Dad wisely said that I could have my way, but instead of going to church, he would give me garden work to complete while the rest of the family was at church. I hurriedly changed my mind wanting to avoid the work, and once again participated in Mass like I used to.

The Passing Passions of My Late Teens And Early Twenties:

As a young person I was caught up in the concerns of the popular culture of my day. I worshipped the opposite sex to the point of idolatry. I loved the free and righteous West,

especially the Americans and hated those godless communists. I loved the weapons of war (especially those from the West). I loved Michael Jackson's music. I loved the Edmonton Oilers Hockey team to the point of worship and equally hated the Calgary Flames and the Montreal Canadiens because I saw them as threats. In the summer I loved to play tennis and watch professionals like John McEnroe and Evan Lendl play on TV. I was loyal to the Coke Classic soft drink and hated Pepsi Cola (and loved asking others what their opinions were on this very important matter). I loved mathematics and wanted to become either a math teacher in the school system or a professor in a college or university. These are the things that were important to me for some time. As you can see they were really serious.

Part I: The Promise

By faith Abraham, when called to go to the place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. (Hebrews 11:8)

My child, if you aspire to serve the Lord,
prepare yourself for an ordeal.
(Ben Sira 2:1, Jerusalem Bible)

3 Pride Goes Before The Fall

I was born into nominal Christian family. My Dad believed, my Mother wanted to go to church but only found Jesus later in life. As I grew up I believed the Scriptures with childlike faith, but I did not have a connection with God, or what some describe as a personal relationship with God through Jesus. With the onset of puberty, I became like the prodigal son, dead in my trespasses, and separated from God in my sins. I never outright rejected or disowned Jesus with words, but my life was not orientated towards Him.

Later on in the summer of 1989, just before I started a MSc. program in mathematics at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, I discovered Jesus because of the prayers my mother and father said for me. It was a life-changing encounter with the Most High God, and it filled me with joy and anticipation of good things to come. It was the most important emotional high point in my life.

Shortly after deciding to follow Jesus, someone gave me a little red book to read called: *The Greatest Thing In The World*.² Although I came to God because of His love for me, my motives for seeking God out had more to do with me wanting to love others than with me wanting to be loved. This little book inspired me to love, and so I began to dig down into my little heart to love people with my kind of love.

² Henry Drummond, *The Greatest thing in the World*, World Bible Publishers, Inc.,

Having very little character (the ability, knowledge and willingness to love), my efforts to love did not last too long. At first, I tried reading the chapter on love in the Bible called 1 Corinthians 13 every day, but that got too difficult because I tried to force things. I approached love the same way I pursued other interests at the time: I pursued it with pressure, hardness, anger, ignorance, hatred, and being hard on myself. So, I gave up quickly and opted for a shallow love life. Instead, I decided to read the rest of the Bible. Unfortunately my motives to love slowly gave way to an empty desire to have a reputation of being knowledgeable about spiritual matters including the Bible.

I may have been a new creation because God touched my heart, but years of living life on my own terms had wreaked havoc on my spiritual state. The emotional high point surrounding my conversion did motivate me for a while, but I could not sustain it – my heart was far too shallow.

At the end of the summer of 1991, I moved to Vancouver, BC to begin a Ph.D. program in mathematics at UBC. I was to study Optimization and Non-smooth Analysis with Dr. Philip Loewen. I lived on Campus at a residence called VST, and met two special people, Michelle and Fran, who were to become good friends. I joined a Christian club on campus called University Christian Ministries (UCM), and started to attend an Evangelical church called University Chapel. All were good influences.

I was not happy in Vancouver, even if I did not admit it to

myself at the time. I did not like Vancouver, and this contributed towards my desire for something new. The something 'new' did not appear until February in 1992 when I went to an *Overflowing Grace Conference*, put on by my church, University Chapel.

I saw the message from the conference as something new. It was not! Essentially, the message was that God's grace (His empowering presence) was available to the humble. But the problem was that my understanding and practice of humility and pride were altogether unbiblical, besides I didn't know it at the time but I had a lot of pride. I also wrongly believed that God's grace would make life easier, but with God's grace, more responsibilities and heavier crosses are inevitable with spiritual growth. So, I started to have even more pride because of my slant on the new ideas I encountered. So much so, that Jesus had to do something drastic about my situation. Otherwise He would have to spit me out of His mouth because of my pride. ³

My pride showed up in me judging people and having a lack of compassion and active love for people because tolerance and love spring from humility. I don't want to give a full account of what my pride was like during this time, because I didn't see it in myself until later on when God opened my eyes to it (For a detailed look at what my pride looked like before and after my dark journey see my self-help book called *Dismantling the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil So Love*

³ Cf. Revelation 3:16

Can Thrive as it gives many personal examples).

The person who avoids challenges and problems that can bring spiritual growth is losing out on what life has to offer. Moreover, we can't solve all our problems on earth here at once. Yet, this is what I wanted to do with what I learned at the *Overflowing Grace Conference*. I thought that all my struggling would disappear with God's grace – how foolish! We ought not to delight so much with increasing our knowledge, but rather in doing God's will which is to love. We think that the more knowledge we have the easier life will get. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."⁴ If there are no struggles or efforts then chances are there is no love because one is seeking gratification instead of facing relational challenges.

One of my favorite passages at the time was the following:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.⁵

Unfortunately, I was unaware of the true condition my heart was in at the time. Humility finds joy in the truth; truth joined to grace. It was so easy for me to bring a Bible verse like this to mind often, to find joy in it, to think that all was well. If you have never seen your own pride for what it is, like me, you will also fall into the danger of being a hypocrite. You will

⁴ 1 Corinthians 8:1

⁵ Philippians 4:8

think that you are doing one thing when in reality you are doing the opposite. “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!”⁶

I remember dismissing life in the ordinary sense of it. I wanted more – I still remember praying to God that I might become a martyr. I was really out to lunch; life is difficult enough as it is. I also wanted to be a modern day apostle. But my motives were wrong – I wanted to be recognized as an authority when it came to interpreting Scripture. If I had studied the lives of the New Testament apostles, I would have learned that they had the hardest of lives. They were made out of stronger stuff than I. Where I was soft they were hard; where they were soft I was hard. They were much more passionate, more loving, more wise, and more humble than I was at that time.⁷

In this brief span of time I remember going to a basketball game, and while there, I looked at the people who surrounded me and judged them to be proud without evidence. I started walking more and more in the flesh as opposed to the Spirit thinking I was more special than others.

Being cautiously aware that one can sabotage God’s will for one’s life should not be overlooked, or disregarded. I thought I could do no wrong, but landed up hurting people, pushing people away, and I sabotaged my future because my pride was growing with leaps and bounds.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 10:12

⁷ Cf. 2 Corinthians 11:23-27

Yes, it is true that Satan and his kingdom are our real enemies. But we can participate in their cruel plots to hurt, limit, restrain, and curse what God wants to bless. But it is Satan who leads us into folly, temptation, and sin in order to lead us away from God. Satan is our true enemy. Satan's best weapon is lying to us. He wields power over us to the degree that we believe him. Anything done out of pride will bear bad fruit and that is what I did here. If we think we are invincible which is what I really believed (which is a lie from the pit of Hell) then I am sabotaging God's will for my life, giving Satan a foothold in my life... and in that sense I am an enemy of myself.

Adam the first man was created in the image of God and therefore good, but he fell into sin along with his wife Eve. Consequently, all of humanity has inherited these two attributes – the capacity to do good deeds, but also attracted towards doing evil.

God warned me one day while I was sitting, semi-interested, in a math class at UBC. The Holy Spirit put a "foreign writing" into my mind. It was not like anything I'd ever experienced before and it said for me to feed God's sheep.

Much can be said about these words in relation to Saint Peter, but what did they mean to me at the time? I merely shrugged them off with a very complacent and insensitive attitude saying that I already did enough. At this point in my walk, if I chose to obey the command, in all likelihood I would not have had to go through the discipline of a Dark Night (or

journey) like Saint John of the Cross described in his writings.

Jesus requests this from His sheep that think that their crosses are too small for them. That they have mastered the basics in Christian living, that they are too good for the world, and are bored with what they think God has asked them to do:

You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so that you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so that you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.⁸

I thought I was rich – and that I was knowledgeable, but my theologizing had become rigid and legalistic because I lacked the willingness to grow in loving people. I majored on minor points, and minored on major issues. I was also jealous of my friend Fran because she was doing God's will by witnessing to others. I suspected unfairness from God on His part, but that was not the problem. I was simply getting delusional and more lazy!

Looking back on the *Overflowing Grace Conference*, I now realize that there was a lot of good in the seminars.

The conference seemingly had all of the answers to my

⁸ Revelation 3:17-19, (emphasis mine)

questions. I was very impressed with the speakers. So I bought the tapes recording the sermons given there. I started to listen to them over and over again, copying parts of them out on paper. I became obsessed with the material.

The fact that I thought I knew and understood it all after the conference. Combined with me buying into the belief that one couldn't lose one's salvation once one was saved. Made me dangerously lower my guard when it came to mortifying my own sins especially my pride. This became a volatile mix, and made me theologically and relationally unstable.

I even ventured to ask why I didn't have the main speaker at the conference as my pastor in Edmonton Alberta when I lived there. I was full of self-importance. What a mess!

I may have thought I had the answers to life's questions, but God would soon change the questions.

