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FOREWORD BY *Tina Knowles Lawson*

LEARNING
TO



FINDING YOUR CENTER
AFTER THE BOTTOM
FALLS OUT



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THE STRESS OF LIVING IN A DO-DO-DO WORLD



*I*t felt as though every nerve in my body was popping. Imagine large, strong hands slowly applying pressure to a family-sized package of uncooked spaghetti noodles. I was the spaghetti. Breaking down one piece at a time.

It was a morning like any other. On August 27, I got up and cooked breakfast for my husband, Rudy, and our daughters, Morgan and Ryan. The school year had just started, and the girls were excited. I called them to the table, and as they sat down, I rushed to the bathroom to put on my makeup before I took them to school.

“Hey, I’ll take the girls this morning,” Rudy volunteered.

“Great!” I told him. “That’ll give me a few more minutes to get ready so I can finish my makeup in the restroom instead of the rearview mirror.” We laughed.

Rudy and the girls finished breakfast, and we all said goodbye with our usual hugs and I love yous. I finished putting on my

makeup and then opened the bathroom door to leave. Without warning, a horrible wave of nausea swept over me like a bad flu. I felt so sick I could hardly walk or think straight. I'd never felt anything like it before, but I knew I couldn't go anywhere that morning. I called the office of St. John's Church and asked our secretary to reschedule my early appointments.

"If I lay down for a couple of hours, I'm sure I'll feel better and be in this afternoon," I told her.

Minutes later, however, I had an uneasy feeling that something was happening to me. I watched my hand pick up the phone as if I lacked control over it and hit the redial button. When my secretary answered, I mumbled almost incoherently, "I'm not feeling well, and I don't know when I'll be back. I'm taking a leave of absence or medical leave or a sabbatical or something." And I hung up the phone. I struggled back to bed and lay there feeling like every nerve in me was short-circuiting.

Days passed with me in bed, overwhelmed by a sensation of falling, spiraling, and spinning into a pitch-black tunnel day after bleak day. I felt sheer panic as I tried reaching out to grab something—anything!—to stop my fall, but my hands found nothing to hold on to. The feeling was so intense, all I could do was hope that I would finally hit bottom.

I Never Saw It Coming

Around our house that awful day is called "the crash." Now that I have had time to reflect, I realize that it had a catalyst. A complex mix of stress, disappointment, grief, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and discouragement had been building up for weeks, months, and years, but I discounted the warning signs.

Most summers, Morgan and Ryan were involved in all kinds of activities. For some reason the summer of the crash was different. Normally, my summer workday ended at 3 p.m., which allowed me to pick up the girls from camp or wherever they were. That summer, however, the girls came to church with my husband and me every day.

I served as copastor with Rudy. We basically split the responsibilities down the middle along our lines of interest and gift-ness. I was teaching two Bible studies a week and preaching every other Sunday, and I was responsible for women's ministry, spiritual formation, and pastoral conversations with the women. Additionally, I served as the head of public relations for the Bread of Life, our nonprofit organization that provided a daily meal to the homeless community we served in the church.

The girls had learned to pack their books and toys when they accompanied us to work. That summer they made beaded bracelets and necklaces that they sold to the business people who attended the Wednesday noon Bible study. In addition to their coloring and crafts, the girls learned basic office tasks like helping to fold bulletins and found creative ways to occupy themselves. Instead of leaving in the afternoon to spend time at home with them, I thought, *This is the best of both worlds. The girls are with us, and we can stay at church and get more work done.* It was the perfect arrangement for a performance-addicted perfectionist!

Many times our family would run out for a quick dinner and then return to the church to work. When we finally returned home each night, Rudy and I often would talk about issues at the church. Then we would get up the next morning and put in another ten- or twelve-hour day.

Our church was growing at a rate of about five hundred people per year. (We had started the church with nine members.) Rudy and I had served this three-thousand-member congregation for years. We had no idea how understaffed we were or the toll it took on us individually and as a young family. We had a handful of committee volunteers who helped us to keep the wheels on the bus, so to speak.

I often felt exhausted not just from the work but also from the emotional trauma that I experienced vicariously through meeting with parishioners and hearing their stories. Vicarious trauma is like secondhand smoke—it can be deadly to those exposed to it. Two years before the crash, two very dear friends had died. Both times I rose to the occasion with my self-proclaimed vow: *I have to be strong for them, and then I can fall apart*. To this day I have no idea what gave me that notion, but I didn't take the time to process the pain. In fact, I had never allowed myself to grieve any of the losses I'd experienced, whether deaths, business setbacks, failures, broken relationships, or other disappointments. My way of coping with pain was to stuff it and keep moving.

Clearly, we were not caring for ourselves in life-giving ways. We were sleep deprived, ate too many fast-food meals, and depended on caffeinated drinks to give us a boost to keep going. All of these factors, I later learned, were “lifestyle deficiencies” that would catch up to us sooner or later. Still, I loved what I was doing. What was the problem with doing a little extra work for the Lord? I loved God and I loved the ministry. God calls us to sacrifice, right?

Meet the Good Girl

Up to that point, my life had been rooted in the biblical model of the virtuous woman found in Proverbs 31 and the belief that I

needed to be picture perfect. I had to be the flawless wife, the impeccable mother, and the textbook pastor. My whole identity was to be a “good girl” who always did the right thing and pleased the people around me. Nothing less was acceptable to me. Doing the right thing meant living by rules. If I couldn’t figure out what the rules were in a situation, I created my own rules to live by that would keep me on the perfect path of righteousness.

My personality is type A, high performing. Yet the price of my drivenness was my physical and emotional health. Forty years of buried feelings and pent-up stress caused everything to come crashing down that morning. It was as though I had built my life on a foundation of toothpicks. I lacked the tools to deal with the inevitable bumps and bruises of life, and I allowed the pressure to escalate until damage was inevitable.

I related to Martha when she said to Jesus, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” (Luke 10:40). The mantra “Good girls don’t get mad” played incessantly in my head. I had set such a high bar of accomplishment and perfection for myself that I often swallowed my anger at my own imperfection and the imperfection of those around me. I was angry that I was working so hard and it didn’t seem to matter, no one seemed to notice, and there was no one to celebrate my good and hard work. My anger was undercover, or so I thought. And even though I wouldn’t admit to the anger, my body knew. The anger showed up as pounding headaches, stomach problems, and backaches that the doctor called sciatica. I called it a pain in the assets. It all seemed to come out of nowhere.

My emotions were like beach balls in a swimming pool. I would push them under the water, but if I let go, all that pressure

and energy sent the balls to the surface and flying out of the pool with rocketlike force. I was holding down a lot of balls.

Friends and family reflected on how wound up I was. Relationships suffered—I didn't have time to “waste” talking to friends about getting together. I had things to do and places to go. Though I valued my friendships, my to-do list took priority over my to-be list. I was running on empty. And since I was meeting my deadlines, for the most part, I never noticed the growing problem.

A Journey Together

In the 1500s Saint John of the Cross wrote a mystical poem describing the “dark night of the soul,” and this season was my version of that dark night. The dark night is an invitation to enter into the mystery of our unknowing, both the unknowing of ourselves and the unknowing of God. It invites us to know and be fully known to ourselves and to know God in ways that perhaps we had never imagined. The dark night was for me the beginning of freedom.

In the chapters to come I invite you to enter into my journey. I'll explore how I arrived at this place, how things grew worse, and the spiritual practices that brought me to the other side. In each chapter I have included questions to help you reflect on your own journey or tips to help you assess where you are.

I chose to share my story because all too often in Western culture, and especially in the church, we are reticent to discuss mental health along with the related spiritual implications. It is my hope that telling my story will shed light on the resources available to someone in the aftermath of a mental health diagnosis (or any devastation that affects one's well-being) and

provide courage to wait in the darkness, because often that's where the real treasures are stored.

Even with such a diagnosis, we can learn to live into new realities that bring freedom and may even make learning to live with the disaster or diagnosis worth the descent into hell. Like the phoenix rising from the ashes, we too can rise as we discover ways of *being* in a world driven by *doing*.

PAUSE TO REFLECT

St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, also experienced a life-altering illness and its accompanying revelations. During his year of conversion Ignatius began to write insights that later would be called the *Spiritual Exercises*. Ignatius believed that the chief need in the busy world of Rome was a daily tool to observe or to pay attention to one's life, and his *Exercises* teach the practice of examen. I offer the "Pause to Reflect" at the end of each chapter as a means of inviting you to stop briefly and reflect on what may be roused as you move through my story. As Socrates noted, "An unexamined life is not worth living."

I encourage you to practice the examen as you read this book by reflecting each day in a journal or perhaps on your phone by asking yourself, *What gave me life, awakened me, or moved me in this reading or during the day? or How did I experience love?* Jot it down. Next ask, *What challenged me, left me puzzled, or stirred me? Where did I feel the absence of love?* Jot it down. Then, after reflecting on both, give thanks for the awareness that each offered. One of the gifts of reflection is the invitation to do more of what gives you life and less of the things that are not life-giving.

Have you or someone you loved experienced depression or a mental health diagnosis?

What beliefs did you have about yourself or the person with the diagnosis?

As you journal and experience your awareness, notice any stigmas or preconceived ideas you may have about mental health illnesses. Stay open to new ways of seeing as you move through this journey of learning to *be*.

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