

No Longer an Empty Well

My journey of restoration
by Cher Lorentz

I used to think of brokenness as something that happened to you—a tragedy or an illness. I had compassion for others who might be broken, but not for myself. I was not broken. I was strong, and I resolved to stay that way. It was lonely many times, being strong, but it was safe.

I had come to Christ when I was 7 years old, but somewhere along the way I alternated between going my own way and seeking God. After I married and began raising my children, I got involved in a wonderful EFCA church. I was active in ministries for almost 25 years, but I struggled with emptiness and a feeling of missing something.

It seemed that I was seeking God's plan through His Word without really being able to access the author. I believed there must be something wrong with me for God to be so silent and my spirit so dry. However, I hid these struggles. On the outside I was working hard and doing well.

Then, about three years ago, through caring friends and a trusted Christian counselor, I began a new journey with God. His Spirit showed me truths about myself and exposed some lies I had believed since I was very young—lies that began as a result of wounds from sexual abuse.

As God brought His difficult but wonderful healing to my mind, I began to experience freedom in my spirit. The more healing He brought, the more of the true me emerged. As my emotional health has grown, so has my capacity to move out of the way and let God reign in all of me. My times with Him are now blessed with joy, tears, forgiveness, hope and an incredible outpouring of His love.

I am also more willing to let others see the real me. I laugh more and have more freedom to create and design. I still have periods when I get in the way, but they are less frequent as I deal with issues in real time. God is healing me; He is transforming me into the likeness of Christ.

Just as my friends were for me, let's ask God to show us personally and corporately how we can

be safe places—places where those who are wounded and broken can find God-healing, restoration and the joy of living in God-designed community.

It's hard to capture how gut-wrenching and yet wonderful it all is. Facing complete despair and deliverance in the same day is miraculous. It's a wild ride—this life.

Cher Lorentz is director of EFCA Leadership Conferences and a member of Watertown (Minn.) EFC.

My Grim Pride

Lessons that God taught this pastor
by Rev. Chuck Redfern

I'm a living parable of how God hacks down grim pride and replaces it with refreshing humility.

The seed for pride burrowed in when I read church-growth literature while pastoring a puny body prone to giant brawls. According to those books, "leadership" solved everything. *Yes, that's it: the almighty leader! If only these combatants appreciated moi.*

I barely noticed that my original delight in ministry began fading—which makes sense: Pride, by its very nature, saps us of joy in its effort to dominate. In contrast, humility prompts us to empathize and revel in the accomplishments of others.

The seed sprouted and grew when my family moved and worshipped at a church in a supposedly "cutting-edge" denomination. All talk was leadership and numbers. Never forget those numbers.

My pride soared when a denominational official called. A nearby church that I'll call *The Chapel* had been whittled to about 30 people. The district superintendent was scouting for a new pastor so he could summarily remove the current one. Would I take on a church with no pay?

Sure. I'd once sensed that I'd pastor that church. God was validating me.

We arrived—and discovered layers of friction, beginning with fury over the denomination's cavalier dismissal of my predecessor. Most walked out and formed another, independent church, leaving us with 12 quivering adults. I was a tense, unpaid pastor by night and a corporate IT salesman by day. I rarely saw my son.

Yet we defied the odds: We grew, achieved solvency and became a hub of reconciliation. We thrived more when I contacted my predecessor and apologized for failing to listen to his side. We sponsored multi-church conferences and amassed \$14,000 in savings, giving me a salary.

Until it all collapsed.

Meddling denominational officials questioned my loyalty and effectively shut down the conference ministry. Then I startled everyone in the wake of a divine encounter: God allowed me to see life as He does, to recognize how He's other-oriented, not self-interested (or even church-interested), and how He flourishes in alluring joy.

I changed as a result of this encounter with God. First, the constant tension lifted; I finally relaxed. Second, the prism through which I viewed ministry shifted: I stopped viewing all issues through the lens of leadership. I was here to serve God and these people. Didn't the Son of Man come to serve and not be served (Matthew 20:28)? Before, I had ministered from a platform of tension; now, I could minister on the basis of peace.

Many church members commended me on my new-found joy and peace—and then proceeded to walk out the door. That didn't make sense until I remembered research on dysfunctional organizations: Groups feel lost with the removal of the dilemmas on which their identities cling. This particular group had functioned on anxiety. People felt lost when their pastor—their former mentor in stress and strain—relaxed and laughed.

Attendance and finances plunged, forcing me into a part-time job. My new-found joy diminished. Then came bone-chilling words while I prayed on a Sunday morning. I said out loud: "God, I feel like I've lost everything."

I heard him respond internally: *And you'll lose the church too.* I wept.

The tumbling finances mandated a full-time job if I was to stay, but I couldn't do it. I had already cheated my son out of a father through bi-vocationalism. Not this time.

We left in February of 2003, with my joy shattered. *The Chapel* closed for good about a year later.

My pride was now rubble. I sat in a pew for well over a year, seemingly doing nothing. Looking back, I now realize that God was embedding the lessons of that divine encounter, quietly navigating me through the paths of confession and forgiveness. My son came first: I apologized for depriving him of his father. Then came my wife: I would never again let a church strain our marriage.

Author Phillip Yancy helped me with those meddling denominational officials. In *Whatever Happened to Grace?* he defines forgiveness as “letting go.” I envisioned a huge bird beating its wings in a futile attempt to fly, clinging to a colossal weight. I was that bird. I opened my talons and let go.

The peace I experienced during that moment with God began returning, now on a firmer foundation.

It was funny: Pride had led me to vein-popping tension; confession and forgiveness brought deep elation. I was laughing at myself. If I had only known this as a pastor. . . .

I eventually stumbled across a conflict-riddled Congregational church about an hour away and light years from the “cutting edge”—a church that needed a full-time interim pastor to bring healing and biblical teaching. I served those people for almost two years, only leaving after the Bible became their manual.

Now we’re in Marlborough, Conn., serving an Evangelical Free Church. I love ministering in joyful humility with Jesus’ priority—which is to serve, not be served. Of course we want to grow and reach the lost, but “numbers” can easily become an idol. Our worship of numbers will drive away people.

I also relish putting my family first and savoring my son’s current description of me: “My dad is the craziest dad around.”

May it ever be so. May grim pride never burrow again.

Chuck Redfern pastors Fellowship Community EFC in Marlborough, Conn.

Breaking My Pastoral Pride

Yes, I pastor a small church.

by Pastor Bill Kynes

I struggle with pastors conferences. They always seem to depress me. Gifted preachers expound God's Word with eloquence, insight and passion—telling stories of God's gracious power at work in their churches, which are having worldwide impact.

I find myself wishing I had those gifts and those stories. I wish I were there on that platform. Yes, I confess I sometimes wish I were not Bill Kynes, but Bill Hybels.

As pastor of the same church for the last 21 years, a church that has yet to break the 300 barrier, I still set up chairs for the prayer meetings. I doubt that I'll change the world. I sometimes wonder if I've failed.

But of course, I *have* failed, in many ways. God is not surprised by that. And I need to repent when my pride raises its ugly head, because it does so every time I feel envious, self-pitying, judgmental.

A position of prominence, glory and acclaim is not what the gospel calls me to. The apostle Paul reminds me that I follow a crucified Messiah. Jesus, too, was tempted to seek glory in this world—the devil offered Him that. But He chose instead the way of the cross. In humility He became nothing, and in His death he brought life (John 12:24).

In my better moments I remind myself that pastoral ministry is a vocation of faith: seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary, the supernatural at work in the natural, the heavenly in the mundane. I must trust that in my weakness, God can work in powerful ways I may never see.

Each person I serve is precious in God's sight, and all service in Christ's name has eternal significance (Matthew 10:42). God is using me for His purposes, just as I am. Gospel ministry is indeed glorious—not in the way the world defines glory, but because it is about the hidden glory of Jesus Christ.

As ministers of the gospel we must find our joy in seeing the work of God in the lives of others, just as Paul speaks of his converts as those “whom I love and long for, my joy and crown” (Philippians 4:1).

My pride, as well as my false image of pastoral success, must be broken—continually. In biblical terms, they must be crucified with Christ. But we have this promise: Those who are crucified with Christ will be raised with Him in glory.

Bill Kynes has served as senior pastor at Cornerstone EFC in Annandale, Va., since 1986.

No Room to Boast

On our knees before God

by Brian T. Whitaker

Throughout time, men and women have experienced moments in which they had to be broken before God. From Eden to Babel, from Nineveh to Israel, those who stood proudly before the Lord were lovingly and painfully humbled. Our prideful hearts despise the place of humility, yet humility is where the Lord most wants us (Micah 6:8).

When we truly look at who we are in relation to God, there is no room for boasting in ourselves. We cannot hide the depravity of our souls from this One who sees us and knows us (Psalm 139:1-4) . . . and has forgiven us (1 John 1:9).

Listen to these cries from Scripture:

- Isaiah: “Woe to me! . . . I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (Isaiah 6:5).
- David: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love; according to Your great compassion blot out my transgressions. . . . The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise” (Psalm 51:1,17).
- The Jewish tax collector: “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13).

Being broken in the hands of a loving, sovereign Father is part of how He molds us into the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). God has a history of redeeming and using such broken people—including both patriarchs and prophets, kings and commoners. When that happens, God alone gets the glory:

- Hannah—broken through her inability to conceive, rather than being broken of pride—poured her heart out with such fervor that Eli thought she was drunk; in God’s timing she bore Samuel, one of the greatest prophets (1 Samuel 1-2).

- Elijah despaired to the point of death when Jezebel swore to kill him; only then did he hear the voice of God and the clarity of His plan (1 Kings 19).
- Paul pled for the Lord to remove the thorn in his side; instead he found the joy of weakness in the hands of our mighty God (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

When we are humble before God, we experience His best for us (James 4:10 and 1 Peter 5:6). This naturally brings us also toward a proper humility before people, in obedience with the Scriptures:

- “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2).
- “Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble” (1 Peter 3:8).
- “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment” (Romans 12:3).
- “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (Colossians 3:12).

One who stands in pride before God and before others robs himself of many blessings and joys. One who remains humble before God will enjoy deep intimacy with the Father. One who remains humble before others will experience God-honoring relationships that bring joy and fulfillment.

A church whose leaders are on their knees in humility before God and one another will, in His hands, be unstoppable in influencing the world for Christ.

Brian Whitaker is pastor of worship at Highland Community Church in Wausau, Wisconsin.

Resources for the Broken

Order from NextStep Resources
www.nsresources.com or (800) 444-2665

The Blessings of Brokenness: Why God allows us to go through hard times, by Dr. Charles S. Stanley (\$11.99). The author shines light on the process of being broken. He reveals the ways we protest against it and then offers an inspiring look beyond the pain to the promise of blessing.

Brokenness: The heart God revives, by Nancy Leigh DeMoss (\$9.59). Every great movement of God is preceded by a season of humility and repentance, of getting honest with God and others about your true spiritual condition.

Confessions of a Pastor: Adventures in dropping the pose and getting real with God, by Craig Groeschel (\$15.99). Is the real you getting lost because the fake you is just so annoyingly impressive? Read the personal journey of the founding and senior pastor of LifeChurch.tv, one of the country's first multi-campus churches.

Finding God When You Need Him Most, by Chip Ingram (\$10.39). The president of Walk Thru the Bible offers life lessons for practical application when you're working through the "raw deals" that life offers.

Leading With a Limp: Turning your struggles into strengths, by Dan S. Allender (\$15.99). The author shares his shortcomings as a church and educational leader, as an idealist, and as a follower of Christ, stating that the best leaders are people who accept their imperfections and learn from their mistakes.

Liberating Ministry From the Success Syndrome, by Kent Hughes and Barbara Hughes (\$10.39). Frustration in Christian work often results when efforts are not evaluated from a biblical perspective. This book is for anyone in ministry facing the disappointment of unmet expectations.

Principles of Spiritual Growth, by Miles L. Stanford (\$6.40). Spiritual growth doesn't happen

overnight. This book takes you back to the basics of the Christian life—the cross of Christ, faith, purpose, discipleship and more—to help you build your life on a solid foundation.

The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up, and Burnt Out, by Brennan Manning (\$11.19). Behind our facades of order and self-assurance we harbor inadequacies that can find healing only in Jesus, the One who embraced, healed and offered grace to those most marginalized: the ragamuffins.

The Roots of Endurance: Invincible perseverance in the Lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon, and William Wilberforce (Book 3 in The Swans Are Not Silent series), by John Piper (\$11.99). These three men suffered lifelong opposition for the causes of gospel truth, missionary zeal and political justice—all without becoming bitter.

TrueFaced: Trust God and others with who you really are, by Bill Thrall, John Lynch, Bruce McNicol (\$9.59). God's way to an astonishing life begins as we start living as He sees us, standing with Him to work on our issues together.

Working the Angles: The shape of pastoral integrity, by Eugene H. Peterson (\$12.80). The author calls pastors to abandon their preoccupation with image and standing, administration, success, and economic viability, and to return to the three basic acts critical to pastoral ministry: praying, reading Scripture and giving spiritual direction.

The Wounded Healer, by Henri J.M. Nouwen (\$9.56). The author combines ministry case studies with stories from diverse cultures and religious traditions. He portrays how personal woundedness can serve as a source of strength and healing when counseling others.

Other Resources:

Spirit of Revival magazine—a biannual publication that calls people to renewed faith, vision and spiritual power. Order from Life Action Revival Ministries at www.lifeaction.org/soro or (269) 697-8600.

Marriage Savers—a ministry that equips communities—principally through local congregations—to help men and women prepare for lifelong marriages, strengthen existing marriages and restore troubled marriages (www.marriagesavers.org). Home of the Community Marriage Policy™ (see “Marriage-Saving Churches” on page 28 of the winter 2007 issue).

Web sites:

internetmonk.com—the Web space of Michael Spencer, who explains: “I am on a post-evangelical journey, discovering what it means to be vitally connected to Jesus. That process is always worth sharing.”

www.peacemaker.net—the Web site of Peacemaker Ministries, which equips Christians and their churches to respond to conflict biblically. Visit their site for information on resources and workshops.