Because of family I’ll never be able to fully thank, friends that could
never be replaced, and a blog that encouraged more people than I’ll
ever get the chance to hug . . .

For the tears I cried and the ones I held on the inside. For the truth
I wanted to erase and lies I thought I had to tell.

Then there are the two hearts that grew inside of me that protected
me from dangers I’ll never know.

The insecurities I thought I could never love and the past I tried to
escape. Because I believe all things, even our missteps, work together
for the good of those who love Him.

I gave Him my pain.
I gave Him my shame.
And He gave me the grace to heal.
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Sarah Jakes, Lost and Found
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Foreword

I NEVER THOUGHT as I rushed down the hall to the delivery room to visit my newly born daughter that the day would eventually come when I would be writing a foreword preparing your heart for one of the most riveting experiences of her life and my own. At that time I hadn’t been established as a writer myself, so I guess it was totally beyond my imagination that a day like this would come. Who would’ve thought that this little bundle of purity and protoplasm would bud and blossom through thorns and thistles and ultimately evolve to the degree that she has indeed been transformed.

I came into the hospital room; I had not long to refresh myself after her mother’s labor. Neither my wife nor I had caught even a minimal amount of sleep. So I was back at the hospital, dressed in a black suit and a black clergy shirt as it was Sunday morning, and I had in my hands a brand-new red and white ruffled dress for the baby to come home in later. She was the newest member to the Jakes clan. I also had in my other hand a worn Bible whose pages promised the Savior would never leave me nor forsake me. He didn’t leave me.
But I would come to learn that His promise wasn’t to my wife and me alone but would also extend to our seed!

Later I would lift her up into my arms and feel her fragile little body fit neatly in my hand, almost like the Bible I had when I arrived. Little Sarah, laying in white sheets, cooing from her crib, was almost as red-faced as the dress I had bought her. She looked up at me with walnut-shaped eyes that were almost as dark as a fine piece of onyx. She smiled a coy smile that would later be the catalyst from which I would become solidly and sometimes completely wrapped around her little finger. Some of you will remember I wrote the book *Daddy Loves His Girls*. I guess it is the way that many fathers experience waves of that protective love in the presence of their daughters. Anyway, her toothless grin radiated sunshine from her bed, and I can still remember the sweet scent of fresh baby oil and powder coming from her body. She was simply amazing!

What a surprise she was to us all. Her older sister was less than a year her senior. I had already been juggling twin boys, and now two girls, in my arms simultaneously. I was a struggling pastor who had lost his job at a chemical plant and was fighting to feed my family between feeding a small flock of church members in a rural area when she was born. At that moment I was uncertain that I would ever be able to adequately feed either the church or the children the way I desired. But I purposed in my heart to give both my best! Still, none of those bleak realities diminished the dimples on her cheeks or the effervescence of her radiant eyes as she stared at me from the crib.

Given the turbulence of the times in which she was born to us, I should’ve known that this was the beginning of an adventure as wild as an Indy 500 race car on an oil spill! I can assure you of one thing, there was seldom a dull moment back then. So when Sarah tells her story, all I can say to you is fasten your seat belts; you are in for a real ride!
Foreword

Given our meager fare, and my concern with girding, guarding, and guiding my family, I was more preoccupied with provisions than purpose. This is a common proclivity among men. I looked at her and thought to myself, *How am I going to feed another mouth?* Still, as I gazed at her somehow she distracted me from my focus on my responsibilities, and I found myself smiling at her little face.

For a moment I was wondering how this new arrival would affect our lives, and not just how she would add to our already strained budget. To all of this she just looked at me, opened her mouth wide, and yawned! She was something else. She was totally oblivious to the world’s economy, my layoff from the job, or anything else. It was nap time to her. That was all that mattered, and she just dozed off, fast asleep in my arms, leaving me to figure the rest out!

These were the early years of our lives. It was the beginning of a saga that would often be filled with uncontrollable laughter, as all my children have a real sense of humor. And at other moments we had an unspeakable concern and anguish as we steered all five children through the turbulence of adolescence. And if that weren’t enough to make your green eyes blue, we would be destined to figure it out while adjusting to living in the public’s glaring eye. We had gone from a simple rural life in a small town to life in the very fast lane of a cosmopolitan city. It was a world as foreign to us as a sky loft apartment on the planet Mars! But I guess it doesn’t matter the backdrop, life is always an adventure from which only the strong survive. All of us have a story to tell. But not all of us survive to tell what happened and how we triumphed over the many tragedies that happened along the way.

The path we were to travel was as curvaceous as the West Virginia roads where Sarah made her entry into this world. Even back then we had some battles, but none of those challenges prepared us for
the category-five storms that hit us when we loaded up the truck, like the Beverly Hillbillies, and headed to the bright lights and bustling highways of Dallas. In a few short years we would lose both my wife’s mother and my own. Illness would strike my wife multiple times and back pain would drive me to surgery.

I was too young myself to understand that all storms have an expiration date. I didn’t know that tough times are a part of life. That there is an end to tears and that they do dry up with faith and prayer. Little did I know that after deep pain and heartburn beyond belief that wisdom falls like the morning dew and that we would collectively become eyewitnesses to the transformation of a human soul from the best front-row seats imaginable. These are the seats you sit in when the drama you see on television and read about in the papers is now being acted out in your house!

I guess I should at least warn you. Do not expect a Sunday school storybook filled with Christian colloquialisms and religious rhetoric. Nor are you about to read a stereotypical memoir of young ladies’ or little girls’ experiences while growing up. Instead you will see the perspective of one little girl whose childhood was nearly stolen by “grown woman” experiences. But today she has become a tool fit for the Master’s use.

I will leave you now for Sarah to share the life lessons that have come our way. I pray that it ministers to you as it did to me. And I pray that your thirst is quenched at the living well of Christ’s eternal spring, as He deserves the glory for this book and the outcome of this story. It is to that eternal fountain that both my daughter and I invite you to come. Come and drink from the place where lost souls are found and lost passion is reborn. This is the gushing geyser of truth that may very well ignite your dreams to flourish as you encounter what God does with a child whose parents’ prayers are answered in her response to His sovereign call. No matter how
Foreword

bleak the night, hold on. Joy really does come in the morning. For a moment we almost lost her to the dark night. But like the father of the prodigal son, her mother and I are thrilled to see her come back down the road. My daughter was indeed lost and found!

Bishop T.D. Jakes
Introduction

*Getting Lost*

AS THE MOTHER of two elementary-age kids, I’ve learned that over the course of a school year a lot of things go missing. A backpack, water bottle, jacket, hat—you name it—simply doesn’t make it home after school one day. My casual questions about the location of a particular missing item are usually met with a blank stare by my son or daughter.

The first few times, this was very frustrating. It felt like I cared more about a *Dora the Explorer* lunch box than my daughter did. Or that I would miss my son’s basketball more than he would. But then I became acquainted with the secret that almost all parents learn to utilize in recovering half their child’s possessions: the lost-and-found shelf at school.

Even if the recovered items are small or seemingly trivial, I still love the feeling of finding something that was lost. Who hasn’t left their car keys in a jacket pocket or forgotten their phone in a waiting room and felt the relief and gratitude for finding it—then made the mental note not to let it happen again?
Introduction

So much of our lives revolves around the pain of what we’ve lost. And the joy of what we’ve found.

From time to time, we all lose things. Yet some things we aren’t always able to locate and recover. Lost time is certainly one of these. And everyone who knows me will testify that time management is one of the areas of my life where I need the most improvement. No matter how hard I try to be on time, it rarely happens.

In the hours before I’m scheduled to be at an appointment, time ticks by so slowly. Then inevitably something comes up and it seems like someone has pressed fast-forward on my life. Suddenly I’m racing around my bedroom to get ready, hoping I won’t be embarrassingly late. A quick look in the mirror and I’m off to the car.

Then once behind the wheel it hits me: I don’t really know where I’m going. But once I’ve mapped out the best route to reach my destination and am on the road, I finally relax. I know I’m going to be a little late, but it won’t be too bad, maybe by just a minute or two. I turn to my favorite radio station, humming the words to my favorite tune. As soon as my heart reaches a steady pace, however, the cars in front of me begin braking. One by one the red lights appear, signaling my biggest fear.

I’m going to be very, utterly, embarrassingly late.

The traffic is at a standstill for as far as the eye can see. My exit is just a couple exits up from where I am, though, so I start veering off the highway. Surely I can find a side street that runs parallel with the highway to help me reach my exit. Turn after turn, decision after decision, I end up more lost and even later than I would have been had I just stayed on the highway stuck in traffic.

I hate it. I hate feeling like maybe I wouldn’t be so late if I had not started doing the laundry or had just waited to paint my toes. I wouldn’t be so far behind had I not walked the dog and washed the
Introduction

car. If only I hadn’t become impatient and tried to find an alternate route. If only I had planned to be early for once.

Sometimes I find myself wondering just how much I have lost in life because of the moments when I tried to find my own way and ended up more lost than ever. What if I had waited to fall in love? Or if I had just finished that course, would I have graduated by now? I wonder who I could have been had I never taken a wrong turn on my life’s journey. Without all those wrong turns and unexpected delays, who would I have become?

As if these questions aren’t enough, I also feel taunted by the idea that I’m late. Can you relate? The later it seems we’ll be, the less important the destination becomes. We think to ourselves, “I can’t fix my life now—I’d have to start all over”; “I can’t dare to love again—it’s too late”; “I made a wrong choice, and now I’d rather stay here than try again.” How often do we become lost in the maze of our own mistakes? How stubborn have we become that we refuse to ask for directions or assistance along the way?

Too often, life has a way of making us believe that each wrong turn means we’ll never end up at our divinely appointed destination. But that’s not true. We must take a moment and stop our questioning and what-ifs to realize that time, like life, isn’t about how much we have; it’s about what we do with it.

It’s a funny thing, feeling lost. It makes you feel like you’re out of control. Being lost is most frustrating when you know you have an appointment to keep. When you get lost on a casual day, it becomes an adventure, an unexpected few moments to relax with some quiet time away from others.

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Sarah Jakes, Lost and Found
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Driving around and getting lost can become an exhilarating escape when you don’t feel like other people are watching the clock and wondering where you are. The burdens of the day, weighing on you so heavily that you’d rather be in a car taking the long way home than to admit that your reality is worse than your fantasy, slip away with your favorite song on the radio and the sun warming your face.

Sometimes you find yourself when you get lost.

If you had told me the girl who got pregnant at thirteen and felt like the black sheep child of America’s favorite preacher would now be a twenty-five-year-old single mom, divorcée, author, motivational speaker, TV personality, ministry director, and senior editor, I never would have believed you. But knowing it’s true, that I’m all these things and so much more now, I’d say the only way to get your bearings and find yourself is to trust that you were never really lost. Amid all your twists and turns, perhaps you simply haven’t discovered the right direction yet.

God loves the lost. And He loves to help us find our way when we turn to Him and ask directions. Jesus talked a lot about lost things. About a poor woman who lost her only coin and then swept every inch of her house until she found it. About a compassionate shepherd who noticed that one of his sheep had strayed from the other ninety-nine and needed to be rescued. About a loving daddy who let his rebellious son do his own thing before he came crawling back home to his dad’s open arms.

Often we think about our salvation experience as one of being lost before we are found. And this is true. But I also think that even though we may be found, sooner or later we’ll turn down a side street looking for a shortcut, finding ourselves lost again. Just because our salvation is intact doesn’t mean we always know where we’re going.

No matter how lost you feel, it’s not too late.
Introduction

You can still get to where God destined you to go.

He’s waiting to find you no matter how often you lose your way.

My life now is everything I ever needed, but nothing I ever wanted. Growing up, I dreamed of doing things the “right” way. So I made decisions to create my vision of what I thought would perfect my image. After the unraveling of each of those attempts, I found myself lost—down-to-my-knees, tears-on-my-face, scars-on-my-heart lost. I came to understand the only way I could be found was to admit I was lost. Because I realized that when princesses don’t follow directions, they can’t inherit the palaces that their Father the King has waiting for them.

We can’t find our way home unless we admit we’re lost.

In the pages that follow, I want to share my story with you. And yes, I realize that you may wonder what I, having lived only a quarter century, could possibly have to say to fill up an entire book. But I think if you’ll share my journey, somewhere along the way you will recognize yourself and your own experiences of being lost and found. And my hope is that whatever grace I’ve tasted and whatever wisdom I’ve gathered can now be given to you. My story is not always pretty, but I think you’ll agree that parts of it are beautiful. The parts where God finds me and reminds me who I am. The moments when He sees me as His daughter on a divine collision course with my destiny.

The same way He sees you.
Growing Up Jakes

OVER THIRTY YEARS ago my parents, T.D. and Serita Jakes, started a ministry that catapulted our lives onto a platform none of us could have ever imagined. In 2001, *Time* featured my father on the cover and labeled him “The Next Billy Graham.” For many years now, our church, The Potter’s House in Dallas, Texas, has remained one of the fastest-growing churches in the nation. With over thirty-five thousand members and four locations, the church has grown from fifty families to thousands of families within sixteen years.

My parents have also written bestselling books, spoken before crowds larger than the population of our hometown, and produced award-winning plays and movies. My father has won Grammy Awards and has been honored by the NAACP. Oprah has dined at our house, and Aretha Franklin has performed for my dad’s ministry. My parents have traveled the world, from Africa to Arkansas to Australia, preaching and empowering people with a message of
LOST AND FOUND

hope. I’ve been privileged to experience most of these milestones with them.

But it all started slowly and quietly, at least for me, before taking on a life of its own. I spent the first eight years of my life in Charleston, West Virginia. It’s certainly not New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, or Dallas, but it was the first and only version of a “city” I knew. Driving a few minutes in any direction from Charleston would take you into neighborhoods where people would greet you like family and offer to assist you with directions. It was a city with a small-town feel.

We hardly ever went anywhere in our town where my parents didn’t see someone they knew “way back when.” There are very few strangers in West Virginia. To this day, if my father or mother learns someone they’ve met is from their native state, they ask questions about whom they’re related to. Whether we were in a restaurant or attending a meeting, they would find two or three degrees of separation between them and their fellow West Virginian.

Everyone in school knew who we were, the Jakes kids, but our classmates never asked many questions about our family or the work they did. Their parents probably knew ours or they knew someone else who knew us. We weren’t famous or anything, just familiar. There was something comfortably secure about being known—again, that sense of being in a small-town community that appreciated its own. I felt safe.

My childhood in Charleston wasn’t like living in Mayberry, but it was a special time. I remember church trips with sweet potato pies and deviled eggs, barbecued chicken and banana pudding. The men and women of our church became aunts and uncles. They would tell our parents if they caught us kids misbehaving or give us our favorite candy when they saw us round the corner. When we ran through the church between services, someone would grab us and tell us to
Growing Up Jakes

slow down. No one considered this overstepping a boundary. They were just the village that was helping to raise us.

My sister, Cora, is only eleven months and twenty-nine days older than I am. Her birthday is July 19, mine is July 17. I suspect we figured out the math for purely selfish reasons: I wanted to prove that she really wasn’t that much older than I, and she wanted to assure me that even if it was a minute, older is older.

We were in the same grade and class for most of our lives. While we would sometimes get mad and argue like sisters do, we were also a formidable team together. You see, siblings are usually either adversaries or partners in crime. Whether dialing 9-1-1 on the alarm system when playing house or swinging on doors as budding gymnasts, Cora and I managed to have quite a bit of fun. Unfortunately, that fun almost always ended in trouble. You might think we would’ve learned our lesson after a few times, but to this day we can’t resist a good adventure.

Interestingly enough, my parents were hardly ever amused by our shenanigans. One time my sister and I grew tired of keeping one another busy with our homemade games and decided to go outside to play. After running around the yard awhile, I convinced Cora that we should drive our parents’ car. Of course, I meant we should pretend to drive, but as we sat in the car, the idea of actually driving seemed way more exciting.

The next thing I knew, my sister handed me the keys. I turned them the same way I had observed my mother and father doing it hundreds of times before. When I shifted into gear, we immediately rolled down the hill, taking out a few trash cans and a mailbox or two along our street. Thankfully, that incident didn’t result in any other casualties. Turns out that rolling down the hill in our parents’
LOST AND FOUND

Lincoln wasn’t what we should have been afraid of. The true fear should have been of their reaction!

Needless to say, Cora and I got in trouble. At the time we must have felt really misunderstood about the entire situation, because we concocted a plan. Funny how one mistake sometimes leads to another. Our plan for revenge was inspired by one of our favorite movies at the time, *Mrs. Doubtfire*.

Released in 1993, the film revolves around a married couple who decide to separate. In an effort to spend more time with his children, the father, portrayed by Robin Williams, secures a job as his children’s nanny by dressing as a much older woman. In full regalia, his character transforms from a fun-loving, somewhat reckless dad into a frumpy, wise, and wisecracking caretaker. With his alter ego’s help, he soon finds the perfect balance of responsibility and excitement.

Finding the balance was not easy, though. In one of the scenes, he has to punish his children and forces them to clean the entire house from top to bottom while he (“she”) sits on the couch with a glass of lemonade and a newspaper. This scene inspired Cora and me in the aftermath of our little joyride.

We decided that we would tell our teacher that our mother was abusing us in the same way Mrs. Doubtfire punished the children in our favorite film. Yes, our mother was making us use harsh chemicals and do backbreaking work while she sat on the couch enjoying lemonade and watching television. In hindsight, I’m not exactly sure what we thought would happen by telling that story on our mom, but somehow we were sure we’d be vindicated. Thankfully, West Virginia was the kind of place where it wasn’t difficult to investigate the credibility of such a claim.

Our teacher did not believe us. She knew too well our family and our parents’ ministry. Truth be told, she may have even been distantly related to us.
Growing Up Jakes

Needless to say, she destroyed our foolproof plan and had a good laugh with our mother about such a crazy scheme. We, on the other hand, found ourselves in even deeper trouble.

I laugh about it now and appreciate the way this incident reminds me of a simpler, more innocent time. This was the beauty of West Virginia. It didn’t take a lot of work to find the heart and intentions of the people you interacted with each and every day. They were good people.

My father once said that family is love’s gymnasium. I instantly knew it was true. We learn how differently people show their love in their relationships with family. Since we’re so close in age, my sister and I have always been a pair who shared a special bond. People always thought she and I were the twins in our family. But our brothers Jamar and Jermaine are the actual twins. Eight years our senior, they hardly ever ran in the same circles as Cora and I or our younger brother, Dexter. But no matter the differences in our ages, through the ups and downs of one another’s lives, all five of us learned to hold on to one another.

When I was a child, Jamar, older than Jermaine by twenty-eight minutes, represented everything I thought an adult was supposed to be. He was never visibly shaken, rarely seemed out of control, and always knew the right thing to do. If there was an emergency—say, Cora and I locked ourselves out of the house—we knew to call Jamar. He could get us out of trouble and back to Mom and Dad without a problem.
Those characteristics were also why we thought he was mean. He was always so serious and responsible, so protective over us. At the time, we thought he didn’t want us to have any fun. As we matured, we learned he was trying to save us from trouble. We interpret things so differently after the scars teach us. We could have been spared many time-outs, spankings, and other troubles had we just listened to Jamar.

For Jamar, love means having your back, especially when you don’t have it yourself. He can’t bear to watch idly as someone he loves struggles. And while he often shies away from the stage our life brings, it’s not because he’s without talent. He could easily set the world on fire with the display of just one of his gifts. He’s loyal to the cause and courageously resists the pressure to evolve before his own timing.

When we were looking for bedtime stories, gut-busting jokes, or a safe place from the monsters beneath our bed, we went to Jermaine. His love is infectious. A beautiful writer, Maine, as we call him, has always been sensitive to the power of words as well as silence. He’s careful with what he says and never hesitates to apologize if he’s offended anyone. His heart is constantly in the right place, probably on his sleeve unless he’s already given you the shirt off his back.

Jermaine, much like my mother, has always been sensitive to the feelings of others. There’s this thing about growing up in a large family: When you get in trouble, everyone in the house knows it. What’s so bad about that? Well, all of those family members have friends, and then their friends know you’re in trouble. Guess what makes it better? Those friends go to your church and have friends whom they tell, too. By the time your news has traveled all around home, church, and school, you’re in need of just one friend. That was Jermaine. I suspect that he inherited a gene from our mom that made him naturally want to hug us after we got in trouble.
Growing Up Jakes

I was the baby of my family for six years, one of the best times in my life. Then there was Hawaii. My youngest brother, Dexter, arrived and stole my spotlight. After I got over the no-longer-the-baby blues, Dexter became my ally. Cora and I didn’t always get along, you see. She often wanted to watch Saved by the Bell, while I wanted to watch The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air. Whenever she and I argued about such life-changing decisions, I brought in Dexter to break the tie. Even though he was my baby brother, I never shooed him away or made him feel like his thoughts weren’t valuable. I tried to be the perfect combination of what I loved most about Jamar and Jermaine.

Dexter, quickly too tall to be called my little brother, has always found a safe place talking to me. I take my role as his big sister very seriously. I spent many years looking out for him. Whether it was helping him with his homework or going on McDonald’s runs, I made sure he knew that, even though he didn’t have a sibling close in age, it didn’t mean he didn’t have a sibling close. The more he matured, the more he reciprocated in our relationship. He’s fiercely protective of his big sister. There’s hardly anything more in life that I want than for him to succeed.

Moving to Dallas changed many things about our family, but the core of our values and relationships remained centered on our love for one another. And we would need those bonds because we were all about to be tested.

“Girls,” my father said as he looked at Cora and me. We were about eight and nine at the time. “Your mother and I have something exciting to share with you.” They asked us to stop playing and come and sit with them. We wondered what we’d done now, because we knew something was up.

Our mother sat beside us on the brown sofa in our living room, suppressing a smile. Something like change was in the air, the feeling...
we would have at Christmas that something wonderful was about to happen, a gift about to be given. My thoughts raced through possibilities: Were we getting a puppy? Or moving to a new house? Or going to have another brother or sister? Or . . . ?

“We believe the Lord is calling us to move the church to Dallas,” my father said, managing to sound both enthusiastic and calm at the same time. “So we will be moving there soon.”

“That’s in Texas,” our mother added, finally allowing her smile to bloom.

Cora and I looked at each other with bulging eyes and childish grins. We had no idea what it meant to move to Dallas, That’s-in-Texas, but it sure sounded exciting. Cowboys and horses and open prairies and all the Wild West stuff we had only seen on TV galloped through my mind.

Our parents went on to explain that a number of other families from the church, about fifty, would be moving with us. I probably couldn’t have even pointed out Dallas on a map, but we were all so excited. Sure enough, we would get to see actual cowboys with boots and hats. Texas might as well have been a foreign country. Yes, our move would be an adventure, just not one my young mind could fully comprehend.

Always the planner and provider, our father went before us to find a home. While we were sad to leave Charleston, there was something that just felt right about moving to Dallas. When we finally boarded the plane to leave West Virginia, Cora and I were thinking of what our new room would look like and how many laps we could run through the new church before tiring out.

Within minutes of being in Texas air, we knew everything would be different. Their side roads looked like major highways compared with where we were from. And Texas highways looked like giant jigsaw puzzles, with bridges and overpasses spanning as far as the
Growing Up Jakes

eye could see. People seemed to be everywhere, buzzing here and there, from suburb to suburb—each one like a small city. Strip malls were everywhere, along with lots of construction. Where were all the cowboys?

To say there was some culture shock is putting it mildly. The year we moved to Dallas, 1996, the state of West Virginia had a population of 1.8 million. Texas’s population was 19 million. At that time there were over 1,400 reported murders in Texas—more than twenty times West Virginia’s 69 cases. Certainly Texas is a much larger state than West Virginia, but having spent our parents’ entire pastorate in our hometown, how could we have known the issues would be so drastically different from our norm?

Once we spent a few days getting settled and adjusting to a Texas summer (heat that took my breath away), our first Sunday rolled around. It would be our first time introducing new local members to our preexisting church family. It would be the first time our family would be interacting with new people in a long time. Even as a child, I could sense that this moment was incredibly important.

When that Sunday arrived, my siblings and I were swarmed by anxious children wanting to meet us, their new church family. Literally hundreds of children came running toward us, and instantly we knew that we were far from Charleston. They were so warm and friendly, but it was still a little overwhelming. I think people just wanted to know who we were, what we looked like, what type of personalities and funny accents we had brought with us from West Virginia.

The feeling was mutual, though, because we wanted to get to know them. We were dying to know what happened to the cowboys, horses, and tumbleweeds. Instantly, we had all of these friends who just wanted to get to know more about us and our family. It seemed quite harmless at that age. We weren’t concerned with determining
people’s intentions. It never dawned on us that people might not care about who we were on the inside and instead be more concerned with how successful we appeared and how they could position themselves close to us.

Something was beginning to shift—in me, in our family, in the ministry—although at the time I wasn’t sure what it was. Later that evening when we sat down for dinner, I overheard my parents recapping their first Sunday at The Potter’s House. Fifteen hundred people joined the church that day.

Most of our new church family had already been following the ministry from their homes. Many had tuned in to see this dynamic young minister, T.D. Jakes, preaching at a conference called Azusa, a contemporary spiritual gathering which honored the Azusa Street Revival that had begun in Los Angeles around 1906. From speaking at Azusa, my father soon became a mainstay on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). He also started publishing books that became bestsellers.

I wish there was one distinct moment when I could tell you the church went from fifteen hundred to over thirty-six thousand, but from my young eyes all of it was so big. Since an early age, I’ve never understood why some people criticized the size of our church. Were we supposed to put a limit on how many souls could be saved? I used to laugh at the idea of putting up a Closed sign on the main entrance to the sanctuary. I wonder what critics would have thought about that! Were we supposed to turn the people away?

Our greatest challenge in starting the church was not its size. I’m convinced it had much more to do with maintaining tradition in an ever-evolving world. Moving to Texas was so much bigger than starting a church. My father, and a few others like him, had unprecedented access to a world often shunned and called secular. But instead of supporting this progression, many critiqued it. How
do we show the world the power of God’s love when we, as Christians, fail so often to show love to one another?

I grew up hearing people call my father a thief, a liar, and a cheater. Regardless of how many times his books landed on the New York Times bestseller lists or how many speaking engagements he booked each year or, later, how many films he produced, critics popped up to insist that our groceries were purchased with money from the church offering plates.

It was so frustrating. We grew up with our father sitting in the family room asking us about our day, so tired from working that he’d fall asleep before we could finish answering. As a family we’ve sat in waiting rooms for back surgeries and knee surgeries necessitated by our parents’ bearing the weight of being human and the demands of being called, caring for others before themselves. I remember my father flying out of town on Christmas Day so that he could preach at a revival on December 26. We learned the beauty in quality, not quantity, so that lives could literally be saved by a word from God. How could you let a birthday cake compete with that?

Earlier in their lives, after they had just married but before the ministry began to bloom, my father was digging ditches to support my mom and older brothers. Three children later, it was no surprise that he had to work nonstop to support his family. I figured if he had to be gone, at least it was helping someone else to become better.
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We didn’t get that many walks in the park. It wasn’t very often Dad helped us with our homework. Which probably turned out to be a good thing, in hindsight. We cherished our time with him more and became fiercely protective. We shared our father’s voice with millions, but we were content holding his heart. That intense desire to protect his heart made us more than angry at the criticism—I think it hurt us more than him sometimes.

I constantly questioned our overall goal in Christianity. Much larger than the tradition of church, I wondered who was willing to truly carry out the Great Commission. How can we reach those people we aren’t even willing to acknowledge? The homeless, the shift workers, the children on the street, the single mothers, the addicts and ex-cons, the lonely old people, the widows and orphans. How can we save someone if we don’t hear his or her cries for help?

Are we all not just flesh, bones, hearts, and spirits searching for a purpose greater than ourselves? We may not always get it right, but do we have to constantly infect the wounds of others by picking at their weaknesses? I have no heaven or hell to put anyone in. I just have this belief that God didn’t call me to police His kingdom. How can we be on the same team, yet allow our differences to make us competition? How can we ever show the power of God to heal if we insist on constantly bruising one another? I’ve seen so many people lose their way in ministry because they were unwilling to pretend to have it all together. How can we represent a God who loved us enough He died for our sins, yet undermine His sacrifice by further crucifying those who need Him?

Do we have to constantly infect the wounds of others by picking at their weaknesses?

Sarah Jakes, Lost and Found
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Growing Up Jakes

We’ve all watched in shock as people we admire have their darkest struggles and secrets exposed. Yet instead of admitting that we, too, have a weakness that required God’s touch, we leave people in their misery.

I was never comfortable with the isolation of those whose sin revealed their humanity. I would rather be an outcast in a room of hypocrites. Tradition thinks that rebellion is the disease; I know now it’s the symptom. By definition a rebel is someone unconventional. I didn’t feel like the “ordinary” church girl, so I refused to conform to a role that wasn’t genuine for me. I wonder how different things would be if we gave people the room to be who God created them to be and not what we want or need.

One of my favorite stories in the Bible is about the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine and goes back for the one lost sheep. I have been that lost sheep. In fact, I probably will be again before my time on this earth is done, but I am sure of one thing. My biggest fear wasn’t that I wouldn’t survive being lost; it was that I was alone. The moment I found God, I wasn’t where I was supposed to be, but He knew that. I wonder what was keeping me from Him. I was the one lost, and I knew God had the way out, yet I was still afraid. It’s amazing how the opinions of the ninety-nine keep the one from coming back. I was afraid I’d be judged. My father’s ministry—and my Father’s ministry—was never meant for the ones who knew their place. It was for the ones who had lost their way.

School presented a different set of circumstances. It seemed like the least cool profession for a child’s parent to have was being a pastor. My classmates’ parents were doctors, firemen, lawyers, policemen, corporate executives, flight attendants, and restaurant owners. When I couldn’t avoid the question any longer, I would say, “My parents are in ministry.”
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At that time, there was no clear frame of reference to explain full-time ministry. This was before the days of Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, and Rick Warren. This was long before my father’s name became well-known to most people. The Internet wasn’t a huge phenomenon accessible to most kids yet. They couldn’t just Google my father’s name and learn the full scope of our ministry. Most kids didn’t even realize that there was a need for the doors of a church to be open on any day other than Sunday. So in school we were just Cora and Sarah.

Some of the parents and teachers knew, of course, but hardly any of the kids seemed to know or care. Most of them did not attend our church, nor did they spend their time watching television broadcasts of other churches. There was no way they could understand what it was like for people to stop us in the halls at church on Sunday and tell us our dad said something that literally saved their lives.

I’m not sure I fully understood or appreciated our parents’ ministry myself. I just knew that I often got tired of going to the church to do the same thing over and over again. Sure, it was nice spending time with our friends and making jokes throughout the services, but the heart of our family’s mission was often lost on me. I just felt like we went to church for a living. And despite the fact that my parents loved helping people, it was hard work.

Few understood the work that goes into ministry, the preparation necessary to prepare a safe place for people to come and have a corporate encounter with God. And even though our church was larger than ever before, at the time it only meant there was more to do. When the doors of The Potter’s House opened, my parents had to make sure the lights were on, the bathrooms were stocked, and the vans were gassed for the homeless ministry.

Someone had to run background checks on the volunteers in children’s church. The sanctuary must be cleaned and cleared of the
remaining tissues from the funeral last week. The carpet must be vacuumed from the wedding on Saturday. The women’s ministry must raise funds to host an event for the ladies in the church.

Then there are all the ministries outside the church. Ministering in our communities throughout the greater Dallas–Fort Worth area is a full-time job in itself. Preparing for international mission trips to extend help and share faith around the world required more than just a Sunday meeting after church. While they had lots of help, my parents were ultimately responsible.

They knew and taught us through their example that to whom much is given, much is required. The larger their stage grew, the more they were intent on serving. And our stage was definitely growing. Hundreds of new people, and eventually thousands, began joining our church.

The ministry’s growth didn’t keep us from finding a way to wreak a little havoc. Cora and I, along with our baby brother and older twin brothers, spent most of our summers roaming around the church while our parents worked. Too young to be trusted with anything important around the church, we found our own way to further our entrepreneurial endeavors. My good ol’ partner in crime, Cora, and I were soon back to our usual scheming.

Early one weekday morning, before all the staff of aunts and uncles came in, we were at the church with our mom. As she prepared for her day, we grabbed our backpacks and went to the kitchen. Usually we would watch television, color, or play games for a while, but not this time. With our backpacks in tow, Cora and I emptied our piggy banks and bought all the snacks out of all the vending machines. Our plan was simple. We were going to raise the price and sell them back to the staff. Other kids had lemonade stands; we had vending machines. Of course, our profitability was short-lived, even if our ingenuity was well respected.
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In the quiet hallways of our church, surrounded by the fifty families from West Virginia that relocated with us, we were reminded of home. Unlike Sundays, when thousands of families swarmed us, these familiar faces knew us too well to be mystified by our presence. They understood that we were just kids, my parents just people.

Like most children at that age, I understood the basic fundamentals of our faith, but its necessity wasn’t always apparent. I wouldn’t learn until much later that the value of constantly going to church as a child is to remind you where to go in times of trouble as an adult. But when you are young and go to church more days in a week than you attend school, church becomes a competition. Who dressed the best? Who could shout the loudest? Who could sing the best? Who was the best at imitating this elder or that deacon? These were the games that we played all service long.

One of my first true encounters with God came on a Sunday evening service when we hosted a guest pastor. Toward the end of the message, the congregation was visibly moved. After engaging in intense worship, the visiting pastor looked at one of our family friends and spoke directly to a situation in her life. There was no way he could have known those things, as their paths had never crossed.

The moment he pointed his hand toward her, everyone around us stretched out their arms to them, signifying corporate prayer. Something about that moment made me stretch out my small hands, too. I wasn’t sure exactly what the sermon text had been or even the title of the sermon. I did understand, however, that the atmosphere had completely shifted. Something was different.

It was as if, for the first time, I understood what it was like to be connected to Someone greater than myself. I felt the presence of God before I knew it was Him. Of course, we would laugh and maybe
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joke about it later, but I knew that what I felt was real. I just didn’t know the day would come when it wouldn’t be so easy to find Him in my life.

Even those times when we didn’t understand our parents’ praise, we could feel their worship. Those were the moments when the soil of our souls was tilled, and God honored the prayers of our family by placing a seed inside of us. It would be many years and many battles before any of us would see whether our giggles turned into silence, silence into whispers, and whispers into prayers.

When you grow up in church, you never know whether those seeds will actually develop into anything. Will they fall on rocky ground? Or will they take root and send a tender shoot peeking through the ground? Over the course of the years, I’ve seen so many of our friends lose their way and never come back to church. We publicly play into the speculation, wondering where things went wrong for them, but secretly we know it could just as easily be us.

In youth service we sat in a circle, said a phrase, and passed it on. By the time the phrase reached the last person, the original message was almost always distorted. It was how we learned the danger of rumors. At the same time, this game was being played in the adult service. Except there, the messages weren’t always distorted. During group trips with friends to the bathroom, I’d overhear that the lady on the front pew just got out of jail. Or while helping set up for the
next service, I’d learn that one of the deacons had just left his wife. Sometimes they were shameful truths, like mine would soon become; they were the secrets we tell and the crosses we bear when the hymns are over and the benediction has come to an end.

Because of those moments of whispered half-truths, I always had one desire:

Avoid the tales of the pews.

At a young age I learned that people smile big, hug tight, and then go home and drown in their tears. I learned that sometimes you go to church to be healed, but if you aren’t careful, the people's approval can become more important than the message. As much as I didn’t want to be a whisper, a rumor, or a stare, I soon discovered this would be very difficult for me to avoid. I didn’t want to risk exposing an inevitable flaw and being observed under such intense scrutiny.

But it wouldn’t be long before my name would be the one passed around.

When we were all children, singing in the choir was par for the course, but when we got into our teenage years, they held auditions for solos and even the choir itself. Turns out I’m not much of a singer. Once while singing in the youth choir, I couldn’t remember the words for the life of me. It was okay, though; since I knew it had to be about Jesus, I just hummed along and made up my own words. This plan worked beautifully until the song ended abruptly. There I was still singing words that had nothing to do with that song’s lyrics in a pitch that would make the quietest of dogs bark.

To this day, I haven’t reconciled that I honestly and truly cannot sing. I don’t mean that I just shouldn’t have a solo, either. I mean that I shouldn’t be allowed within a hundred feet of a microphone. Yes, it’s that bad.
How tragic that we often allow the image of perfection to cloud the need to show where His strength was made perfect in us.
As if my lack of vocal talent wasn’t enough, it turns out my rhythm wasn’t that great, either. That ruled out anything music-related; and honestly, reading the Bible didn’t seem all that interesting at that age, so I couldn’t imagine myself preaching like my father.

I was content to fade into the background of the spotlight.

There in the shadows backstage, I stuck with the people I knew, the ones who were like me, still finding how they could fit into the roles that we saw played before us each Sunday. We looked at ourselves. Our thoughts, emotions, and feelings accelerated us toward young adulthood. It became difficult to understand how we could play church and conquer temptation. So instead of fighting the flesh and rising to the standard of what it appeared Christianity required, we chose to be ourselves. We began the mission to explore fully the limits of our humanity before sacrificing them for the politics of church whispers.

Having only been exposed to our limited worldview of church and adolescence, we had no way of knowing that the whispers would come anyway, even outside the church. Isn’t it amazing how we can hear the booming voice of the preacher, the sound of instruments blaring, and our choirs singing with gusto and still all we hear are the whispers?

We focus so closely on the whispers that we miss the overall message. As Christians we must strive to be like Christ, never forgetting that the word strive suggests struggle. We are all imperfect and no one is without flaws, and fortunately, ministry isn’t about leading people to ourselves. It’s about leading them back to the One who saved us. How tragic that we often allow the image of perfection to cloud the need to show where His strength was made perfect in us.

Entering adolescence, I was the least likely of the five Jakes children to ever be in ministry. I saw the toll it took on my parents to
subject their lives to the needs of other people. I heard the things they said—usually what other people were saying about them—when they thought we weren’t listening. And as their ministry reached more and more people, and their stature in the public spotlight grew, we read the stories in the news. I couldn’t imagine how the long days, lengthier nights, and relentless scrutiny of people were worth it.

In 2001, my father was named America’s Best Preacher by *Time* magazine. I was thirteen years old, and suddenly there was only one question everyone wanted to ask me: “Are you going to be a preacher like your dad?” I hardly knew what I was going to wear to school the next day, much less whether or not I ever wanted to become America’s Best Preacher.

With no visible route into ministry, I dedicated myself to my studies and hanging with my friends. Though some of them possessed the talents displayed throughout the church, many of them weren’t comfortable fitting in traditional molds. Sometimes it’s easier to never go down a path than to risk being rejected. But just because it’s easy doesn’t mean it’s right.

I have seen countless people hurt by church because they didn’t fit the acceptable roles. Whether it was the things they whispered to themselves or what they heard whispered about others, some people stifled their voices, talents, and ideas because they knew their ideas were too innovative. When our youth ministry wanted to take popular songs we heard on the radio and give them a Christian twist, the older members of our congregation looked like they had been personally attacked. It seemed like the idea of updating our traditions so that we could attract a younger audience was out of the question. No wonder we doubted ourselves and our contributions.
Our insecurities create holes inside us that make us believe we can’t be used. In our everyday lives, change is celebrated. Manufacturers remodel their vehicles to create sleeker and edgier designs. Cell phones once considered a luxury have become a necessity and home landlines seem like quaint antiques. The world is constantly evolving around us. Creativity brims in every area of our lives, but it isn’t always accepted within the traditions of our church walls. So often people cling to ideas of perfection and lose the innovation that someone who recognizes their areas of growth can bring.

How, then, can we teach a generation that transformation doesn’t come overnight and that the process may be difficult, but with God we never struggle in vain? This message has been lost on so many people who have the heart to serve but then also carry the shame of mistakes that makes them hide.

I know because I was one of them.

In 1973, An American Family debuted on PBS. The television show was revolutionary for its time. It centered around the Louds, a seemingly normal family that had sensational secrets. Over time, the show covered a range of situations the family encountered, from the parents announcing their decision to divorce to their son revealing that he was gay. This show is often considered the first foray into reality television.

It was undoubtedly the beginning of a phenomenon. Millions of people were enthralled with the idea that people who looked relatively
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normal on the outside struggled with these incredible secrets behind closed doors. Now more than forty years later, reality television has documented almost every aspect of a person’s life. From Survivor to Swamp People, Big Brother to The Bachelor, and Sister Wives to yes, Preachers’ Daughters, we have found a certain comfort in realizing that, in spite of all the nuances that divide us, trouble does not escape any of us.

If our favorite celebrity or our next-door neighbor has their own set of problems and crises, then it helps us see that we are not alone. Unfortunately, we don’t always share this message when we talk about our walk with Christ.

As an adolescent, I didn’t see anyone serving in ministry who vocalized how I felt. I wanted to understand how you get from point A to point B. I wanted to believe that there were other people like me in the pews of the church. People who ached with intense emotions and didn’t always understand why they did what they did. People who made mistakes even while longing to do the right thing.

It was easy to find someone to create mischief with. It proved to be a bit more difficult to find someone willing to admit that they wanted to do right, to be a better person, but had no idea how to start.

When you’re a teenager, how do you determine what being a Christian looks like if someone doesn’t offer to be as transparent as the reality television world we live in? If we are to make it easier for others to find God, we must be more diligent about sharing our stories—openly and honestly. As I looked around our weekly church
gatherings, I couldn’t find the trail of bread crumbs between the two worlds, church and reality.

If we discuss only our victories and not our struggles, we allow others to believe that you can win a war without engaging in battle. In fact, it is winning the small fights that allows us the grace to win the ultimate battle: finding a way to use our insecurities and pain to fuel God’s purpose for our life.

Like others who were unclear on where they fit in the world or how they could squeeze into the preconceived notions of what a Christian should be, I had to find my own way.

Outside of being T.D. Jakes’s daughter, I still had yet to discover who Sarah was. Fortunately, when it came down to guiding me, my parents were my parents first and my spiritual leaders second. I know this must seem completely reasonable from the outside looking in, but so many pastors’ kids get lost in the shadow of the church. Somehow, though, I think my parents understood that forcing God on us would not be nearly as effective as our finding Him on our own.

For many who grow up in the church, the moment they recite a Scripture, sing a hymn, pick up drumsticks, or hit a note on the piano, they are thrust into ministry. Yet so many of these same children end up resenting ministry as adults. When they encounter the kind of trouble that often leads others closer to God, they can’t admit their struggles because of their position.
in the church. Instead, they feel they have no choice but to forsake their position and the church.

How can we learn about grace every Sunday, but when the teacher needs it, we send them away? Surely if doctors can catch colds and lawyers can be sued, ministers must find themselves needing grace. To say that pastors’ kids can’t get in trouble is like telling a policeman he should never have to call 9-1-1. Just because you help others doesn’t mean you never need help yourself.

And I was about to need a lot of help. So much that it would take my family’s faith to the breaking point. Not yet fourteen, I discovered I was pregnant.