

Getting
PAST
What You'll
NEVER
Get Over

Help *for* Dealing *with* Life's Hurts

— John F. —
Westfall


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This book is lovingly dedicated
to Frank and Laurel Westfall,
who lived the adventure
with faith, courage, and tenacity.
You gave me life and then
encouraged me to live it abundantly.
Mom and Dad, thanks to you
I know who the Shepherd is.

Contents

- Acknowledgments 9
1. The “Get Over It” Fallacy 11
 2. Baby Steps to a New Reality 23
 3. The Myth of Normal 33
 4. The Joy of Depression 55
 5. It Can’t Happen Here! 69
 6. Fear: The Tie That Binds 83
 7. Regret: The Heart’s Bungee Cord 99
 8. Guilt: The Great Immobilizer 111
 9. Anger: Getting Mad without Going Mad 129
 10. Bitterness: Drinking Poison and Waiting for Others to Die 147
 11. Life’s Unfair—What Will We Do about It? 167

Contents

12. Walking in the Light while Living in the
Shadows 177

13. Glancing Back while Moving Forward 197

Steps for the Journey: The ABCs of Self-Care 211

Notes 219

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I

The “Get Over It” Fallacy

It has been said, “Time heals all wounds.” I do not agree. The wounds remain. In time, the mind, protecting its sanity, covers them with scar tissue, and the pain lessens. But it is never gone.

Rose Kennedy

When are you going to get over it?” How many times had I heard that question? I wanted to say, “soon,” or “any day now,” or “I’m already over it.” I really did. It might make things easier for everyone else, and maybe it would help me not feel like such a negative whiner.

There were times when I wondered what was wrong with me. After all, everyone else had bad stuff happen and they seemed to bounce right back like the inflatable punching bag I had as a kid, which was shaped like a clown with a bright red nose. It tipped back when punched, then seemed

to magically right itself. Of course, I also discovered that if I punched too hard it came flying back and hit me in the face with its red nose.

Growing up, I assumed I was supposed to be like that toy: when I was knocked down (figuratively or actually), I'd try to bounce back without letting anyone know how much I hurt. But we are human, not inflatable punching toys. We don't immediately bounce back, and the pain, scars, and bruises in life are real—and they often really hurt.

Perhaps no one wants to hear this, but I'm going to say it anyway: the truth is things happen to all of us that we will never get over.

It took me a long time to finally admit this to myself, and now to you. I've spent a lifetime trying to snap out of it, pick myself up and dust myself off, keep a stiff upper lip, and never let them see me sweat. I believed “things aren't as bad as they seem,” and when all else failed I could “whistle a happy tune,” so no one would suspect I was afraid.

Popular “Wisdom”

There are plenty of witty and superficial answers and advisers encouraging us to “Get over it.” *Good Morning America* even featured a segment about celebrating a national Get Over It Day, based on the assumption that all of us have something to get over.¹ The day chosen was March 9, which happens to be midway between Valentine's Day and April Fool's Day. The originator of the idea, Jeff Goldblatt, explains, “Get Over It Day is the day to finally get over that ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend, those stressful school- or work-related issues, any fears, insecurities, embarrassing moments, bad relationships,

etc.”² His website sells wristbands telling us to get over it, and even provides helpful hints like: “If you’re not sure what you have to get over, just ask your friends what they’re tired of hearing you complain about.”

Someone told me about another fool-proof solution. This one pointed out that there are really only two simple steps to follow to get over anything: (1) “Get over it,” and (2) “Stay over it.” In the music world, even the Eagles command us in song to “Get Over It.”

Have you noticed how much of our popular wisdom is really dumb? Life is too important and meaningful to be measured and controlled by the pithy clichés of shallow people. I’m ready for a new perspective that takes seriously the amount of courage needed just to get up and keep living in spite of the wounds, brokenness, and blows the world dishes out.

I’m grateful for the everyday people who have learned to get past the things they’ll never get over. Whenever I meet people who are rebuilding broken parts of their lives, it gives me hope and encourages me to find a way to get past the painful experiences I’ve endured.

Over the years I’ve met many people who have become my heroes. Their experiences of loss and hurt are all different, yet as they share with me, I find their efforts to get past these things can be an encouragement to all those who are going through difficult times. Their brokenness was often incurred in only a minute, but the shock waves of pain went on and on—and still go on. Yet each one of these people is discovering

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the power to get past what they will never get over. That gives the rest of us hope to live past the losses we've known.

While we recognize and appreciate fellow strugglers, let's resist the temptation to compare and measure our various levels of hurt, and put away our "pain-o-meters." Say, for example, I suspect my brokenness may not measure up to the degree of hurt you've endured. It doesn't matter what kind of brokenness we've experienced. Is relational brokenness less significant than physical brokenness? Of course not. I've come to realize pain is pain—and it hurts.

In order to get past our brokenness, we must recognize it for what it is and set aside the need for an instant fix. Then by God's grace we can begin the journey toward freedom and joy that can be ours no matter what we've been through.

Not long ago I was talking with a friend in our neighborhood Starbucks, sharing some of the pain and frustration I felt. As my friend patiently listened, I was struck by the emotional intensity I was expressing. In the back of my mind, I probably felt a little skeptical that the future would ever be different. But when I was done unloading, he blurted out, "Aren't you glad you won't always feel the way you do now?"

I thought about that for a long time. When we are in the midst of pain and loss it is natural to assume we'll always feel that way. This may be one reason it is so difficult to have hope. But we aren't doomed to be stuck in our pain. Our lives will change, our feelings will be different, and we'll have opportunities to feel and experience life differently.

Think about it. If a person is doing very poorly, circumstances will eventually change. The flipside is also true: when things are going great for someone and they're on top of the world, that will also change. We don't always have everything

going our way. Therefore, when we are down we need folks around us who can encourage us and help us become strong. Then when our change comes, we can be the encouragers for those formerly victorious friends who are now suffering like we once were.

If everything stayed the same, we could justify despair. But in the Bible, God says, “Look I’m doing a new thing, can’t you see it?” (see Isa. 43:19). I want to see it, don’t you?

When I was a kid, my brother Richard had a few carrier pigeons and I had a pet duck. I named my duck Dudley after the main character in the first book I ever read, *Dudley Duck in the Well*. Sometimes my dad would turn into our driveway really fast, which often made me worry about Dudley’s safety and his future health. But I didn’t need to worry about the pigeons. At the first sign of our Chrysler station wagon they would fly away, returning a short time later when all was safe and quiet.

Dudley lacked the pigeons’ awareness and flying ability. He would often stand in the middle of the driveway, head down, intensely focused on something important like a scrap of soggy bread, and never look up or see the looming threat of the car. Time after time I would run over and shoo Dudley onto the lawn, where he’d waddle around oblivious to the dangerous world around him.

I like to think of myself as being like Richard’s pigeons. I feel alert, active, free to fly off on an adventure to deliver messages before carefully finding my way back home to the safe “coop” of my familiar surroundings.

Unfortunately, most of the time I’m probably more like Dudley the duck. My attention gets stuck on some small thing and I keep my head down while I fuss and quack. Soon

I start to become oblivious to my surroundings, my perspective becomes distorted, and I don't pay attention to others in my life nor am I very clear about oncoming threats. It's only by God's grace that some caring person helps me get out of the way.

Are We There Yet?

"Are we there yet?" We drove our parents crazy with that one simple question. The problem is, we're still asking it. Maybe I'm afflicted with "Destinationitis Syndrome." That is the disease of perpetual longing for completeness while experiencing frustration and discomfort along the way. It grips us when we want to get over something, but find the journey too long and difficult.

Michael Yaconelli, in his book *Messy Spirituality*, says it's important for people to admit they are unfinished.

Unfinished means incomplete, imperfect, in process, in progress, under construction. Spiritual describes someone who is incomplete, imperfectly living their life for God. The construction site of our souls exposes our flaws, the rough-hewn, not-finished faith clearly visible in our hearts. When we seek God, Jesus begins to take shape in our lives. He *begins* a good work in us. He *starts* changing us, but the finishing process is more than a lifetime process. The work of God in our lives *will never be finished* until we meet Jesus face to face. . . . It isn't about being finished and perfect; spirituality is about trusting God in our unfinishedness.³

Perhaps it is when we are uncomfortable with our "unfinishedness" that we focus on outward appearance and surface

solutions, because they might help us appear more together than we actually are. We can fool some people into thinking we are further along than we actually are. The result of this type of thinking is our culture’s obsession with shallow appearances—to the neglect of inner character development.

Shortcuts and Shallowness

We have witnessed the turmoil of businesses and financial corporations that focused on short-term results to give an appearance of success while their true corporate culture was eroding beneath their shiny public relations façade. And in education, the pressure for the appearance of achievement can dominate a school system until the system gets exposed for its fraud and deception. A school district in one of our major cities was recently exposed for widespread cheating on tests. The cheating was done not by students but by teachers, administrators, and superintendents who conspired to falsify scores on standardized tests in order for it to look like their students were improving. Evidently this was done in order to receive millions of dollars in educational aid. From the top down, there was pressure to make things look good. Teachers were encouraged to change students’ wrong answers on tests so their scores would improve. Shocking? Not really. Perhaps it’s easy to shrug off these incidents because they have become almost normal in today’s world.

What about us? Will we overcome the temptation to take shortcuts on the path to wholeness? Several years ago, I led an organization that sponsored a charity 10K run. Each year a few hundred folks would gather on a Saturday afternoon in Seattle, where we would take off on a good run for a good

cause. There were people of all sizes and shapes and quite a variance in athletic ability. Each year I was usually the least prepared and most out-of-shape of any of the participants. That didn't stop me. As the race promoter, I was busy talking up a storm, trying to get everyone into a running mindset. I talked trash with the obviously in-shape runners and laughingly challenged them to keep up with me.

One year, as the race approached, I had read in a runner magazine that top runners sometimes indulge in "carb-loading" before a race in order to keep up their strength. I figured what worked for top athletes might work for me. So on race day I took my son Damian to Philipi's Pizza on the Ave near the University of Washington and ordered not just a large pizza but also a big pasta dinner complete with loads of cheese and extra breadsticks. Stuffed, I dragged myself out into the midday sun, feeling more like lying down and having a nap than running a 10K.

When we arrived at the park where the race was held, I wasn't feeling too good. But if this worked for great athletes it surely would work for me. So I put my discomfort out of my mind and got down to schmoozing people.

I had a race strategy that consisted of running as fast as possible for about 100 yards to get out into the lead, and then finding my comfortable pace and waiting for others to catch up with me. So when the race began I bolted to the front, sprinting ahead of the pack.

They say distance runners sometimes experience "hitting the wall" late in a race, and they have to push themselves forward to finish. I hit the wall at around 85 yards. Not 85 yards from the finish line, but 85 yards from the starting line. The anchovies and pepperoni from the pizza were dancing a

tango with the pasta, while the garlic breadsticks were trying to cut in to dance as well. I was a hurting puppy with a long way to run. At around the 1K marker, I had been left in the dust by all the other runners. Even young parents pushing strollers ran by me like I was an old Roman statue. It was embarrassing. I had to get a new plan.

Jogging around a bend, left alone in the proverbial dust, I suddenly became a genius. I took off through the woods, winding my way across the rugged terrain until I emerged on the other side, right in the runners’ path. Once I was back on the path, it didn’t take long before the lead runners were gaining on me, but I didn’t make eye contact as they passed me for what was now the second time. Huffing and puffing, I remained stoic as all the rest of the runners went on by (probably questioning how I could possibly have gotten ahead of them).

It wasn’t long before I was all alone again, left to myself and my stomach cramps. I thought if that shortcut worked so well once, it might work well again. So off I went through the woods and back to the front of the pack of runners. When I finally crossed the finish line on this 10K run, I had perhaps traveled a legitimate 3.5 kilometers. I had been passed repeatedly by the true runners who, until they read this account, never knew my secret. I’m not proud of cheating in the race, but I realized how easy and tempting it is to take shortcuts and maintain an image.

Unfortunately the combination of those two things, shortcuts and image, undermines the good possibilities for a life well-lived. Paul writes, “You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?” (Gal. 5:7). It is important to realize that our lives matter. Our real

lives—not the false images we might project for others to see. I want to be a person of substance, but that will require me to confess my tendency to try to “beat the system,” get back to the steps leading to health, and persevere even when I’m tempted to leave the path and go my own way.

My friend Jake is really very thoughtful and caring while cultivating an easygoing, happy way of relating. At first I was amused by his bubbly enthusiasm, but then I started to get irritated, thinking that no one could be that positive all the time. One day we were talking, and he asked if I wanted to know his secret. Of course I did.

He told me that in his business of sports marketing and publishing he had developed a persona that helped him become quite successful. I leaned forward to glean the secret he was about to reveal to me. “I’ve taught myself how to act like Formica Man,” he said. He explained that like the Formica tabletops and counters that were popular when we were kids, he acted as if he were three feet wide and only half an inch deep. “Besides,” he said, “I’m shiny, and have a hard shell finish that easily wipes clean.”

That got me thinking. At least Jake recognized what he was presenting to the outside world. How many of us are functionally Formica men and women, while at the same time we long to be much more? We are protected from damage by our hard surface and free from care and worry because of our shallowness, but we can’t help but wonder if our life could be much more real and significant.

I thought about it, and the next time I was with my friend I asked him if he wanted to know my secret for success. He did, so with hushed tones, as if I were revealing the secret to a lost treasure, I told him that while he might be Formica, I was

living my life as a one-of-a-kind, antique piece of distressed, unfinished furniture. At first he looked a little confused, then we talked about how the scars, marks, and blemishes of distressed furniture are actually the very things that give it character and add to its value. Our unfinished condition allows hope that there is more to come, and we realize our value is only going up with every passing day.

Up Until Now

Sitting in the seminar room, I couldn’t take my eyes off the artificial hand protruding from the sleeve of the speaker’s jacket. He was sharing from his experience of how he approached long-term emotional struggles. As a person who has struggled with depression most of my life, I was open to finding a new approach. What he said made sense to me: “I always say, up until now . . .”

I thought about the implications of those three words. Instead of saying “I’m depressed,” I could say, “Up until now, I’ve been depressed.” That leaves the door open for the possibility that in the next hour or day, perhaps I won’t be depressed. I realized that I was quick to label my feelings and thoughts in a way that might hinder me from seeing new ways to behave or respond. I started to think of the possibilities:

Up until now, I’ve been a control freak.

Up until now, I’ve been angry.

Up until now, I’ve struggled to trust God.

Up until now, I was a thoughtless friend.

Up until now . . .

Well, you get the idea. Whatever we might have been doesn't need to continue to define us. There is always the possibility

*Healing begins
when we recognize
our brokenness and
see it for what it is.*

we might be different as we go forward in our life. That doesn't mean we will magically or instantly experience change without hard work. But the door is open for healing to begin and new health to emerge.

Healing begins when we recognize our brokenness and see it for what it is.

Freedom begins when we understand we can get past the hurts we'll never get over. Life may not be the same, but it will be good and maybe even a whole lot better.

2

Baby Steps to a New Reality

I was feeling pretty good. It was a perfect sunny Seattle day and I was driving my red Miata sports car with the top down. In Seattle we don't get too many chances to do that without being rained on. I was giving my friend Kay a ride to an appointment in Greenlake, just north of the city.

As I drove around the lakeshore, Kay suddenly started looking around with concern on her face. "I think there's a fire—I smell smoke," she said. Dismissively I half-jokingly said that of course there were fires; we were at the lakeshore, and people were probably building fires to cook hot dogs or marshmallows—and I kept driving.

She grew increasingly agitated, insisting that the "fire" was very close. Finally, just to pacify her, I pulled off the road and stopped the car. Sure enough, there was a lot of smoke all around us. I opened the trunk—and a fire was burning in the trunk of my little car.

Kay wanted to call the fire department, but I insisted on putting it out myself. The flames were growing while I pulled out golf clubs, groceries, a tray of frozen foods, my computer bag, and a lot of flaming trash. I finally was able to extinguish the flames with my hands and assorted objects I found in the trunk.

What a mess! I had just bought five pounds of fresh blueberries that had now burned down into a mixture of molten plastic and charred remains of fruit. Grocery bags were burned up, my golf bag was destroyed along with various golf stuff, and even a golf club. My computer was saved, but not the bag it was in. By the time I emptied the trunk and put out the fire I was covered with smoke, ash, and smelled like an old campfire.

Then I thought of my life. So many times I'm cruising along, thinking I'm in control and living large—while I completely miss the trouble festering right behind me. I seem to have a pretty good defense system, so it is easy for me to make a quick response that deflects problems. I am also skilled at finding others to shift blame to. "It's not me—it's them!" I say, or, "If it weren't for them, I wouldn't be in this mess!" Thus I remain in denial about my circumstances, and miss an opportunity to see myself as others see me and work toward healthy solutions.

Seeing Clearly

No matter how I may portray the issues, it is still denial and we all experience its effects from time to time. I'm intrigued to observe how many people are amazingly perceptive—when it comes to other people. They have insight about people's

behavior, habits, communication, and foibles. Yet often these same folks are apparently blind to what is happening in their own lives. In order to grow it is important to see what's real in the world around us—and also in the world within.

I believe that the single most important trait of maturity is the ability to recognize reality. This is also the antidote for denial. When we clearly see the realities of our own lives, it is possible to leave behind childish things and thinking.

The Bible says we are like children peering into a looking glass: our perceptions are distorted, but someday we will see clearly, face-to-face. “When I was a child I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. But when I became a man, I put childish ways behind me” (1 Cor. 13:11).

Life has a way of breaking into our well-structured frame of mind and forcing reality upon us. When I was suddenly terminated from a job I dearly loved, I felt as if I'd been emotionally and relationally assassinated. I found myself floating in a world of pain, sorrow, anxiety, and shame. Each morning I'd lie in bed telling myself that this didn't really happen, and it was all just a big misunderstanding. Surely the people who betrayed me would realize their error and come quickly to reinstate me. Everything would be fine.

Of course it wasn't fine. They didn't reinstate me, and everything wasn't going to be all right. Life as I knew it had careened off the track and crashed in a fiery pile. We had to relocate across the country, and financially we were ruined. My marriage was tested and stressed and I felt like a hollow shell of the person I had been just a short time before.

Fortunately, we had some people in our lives who loved us and encouraged us as much as they could. But it took a long

time for me to look with clarity at the betrayal and destruction in my life.

We all need the perspective of wise people. People who care for us enough to not only listen but also speak clearly into our hearts and minds. The Bible encourages us to speak

*As denial fades
away we are free
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the truth in love (see Eph. 4:15). I am discovering that to do so helps us to see reality about ourselves, others, God, and life itself. As denial fades away we are free to step out in courageous ways. We can start to take the necessary steps that lead to growth and health.

In Exile

Over coffee, a friend was sharing with me about her experience. “Ever since divorce entered our family, I feel like I’m in exile. Even though it was my adult child who divorced, we are all affected—and now I don’t know how to act, what to say, how to respond. There are new rules for relating and I feel lost, alone, and powerless to make a difference—I just wish we could all go back to being a family again.” Living in exile is not fun.

There are times in our lives when every one of us feels as if we are in exile. Changes in circumstances beyond our control, or even the results of our own dumb choices, leave us in a strange, foreign place.

Exile is that foreign place, the uncomfortable and unfamiliar land where we’re no longer certain about what we know and who we are. It’s a forced dislocation. We would not consciously choose it, and we hope it will end at any moment.

There are literal exiles in our land, people who have come to this country fleeing oppression or persecution in their homeland. Some are political exiles, but there are also economic exiles. Folks who were unable to survive in their homeland seek the opportunity, money, and resources of a new country, hoping to one day return home with the means to provide for their families. Migrant field workers, who harvest our crops for a few dollars a day, can be deported when the harvest is complete.

Even our college students can experience exile. They find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings in order to pursue their education. This fall our nearby University of Washington will be full of students who will struggle with loneliness, confusion, and disorientation. Behind the façade of “Husky Fever,” many will drink too much or experiment with drugs and sex as they try to adjust to this new life apart from family and old friends.

Some of us are exiles through unforeseen circumstances: job change, layoffs, unemployment, accidents, or health crises. These events beyond our control occur, and suddenly we find ourselves in a foreign land. We can’t seem to change things and we can’t stand the way things are.

Then there are relational exiles, people who feel cut off from others, often people they love. They can’t seem to find ways to reconnect or to heal the rift. In marriage, the reaction to this exile is often to gaze longingly at the green grass on the other side of the fence, mindful of weeds and dry spots in our own yards. The seeds of envy sprout into resentment and jealousy, giving way to fear and bitterness.

“If only they were different, I’d be better!”

“If only I were over there, then my life would fall into place!”

“If only he weren’t so much of this, then I wouldn’t have to be so much of that!”

I’m beginning to think that “if only” and “what if” and “I can’t” are all the battle cries of a person in exile.

In the Bible we read about the Hebrew people being in exile (see Jer. 29). Defeated, they were taken to a foreign land and surrounded by strangers who spoke a different language, held different values, and ate strange food. They were living in an unfamiliar place, facing the unknown, dealing with the uncontrollable, and thinking it was completely unfair . . . just like us.

In the midst of such seemingly hopeless situations, the prophet Jeremiah brings words of encouragement to help us prosper even in times of exile.

First, remember who has promised to carry you (see Jer. 29:4, 7). Contrary to popular opinion, we are not merely helpless victims being carried by the enemies and forces of life. Even as we go through the loneliest, darkest, and desolate times, the Lord is there carrying us, especially in our times of exile. Psalm 139 asks, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” (v. 7). Jesus said, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). It is important when we feel abandoned and alone to know that God is right there with us, and in fact has carried us even into exile.

Next we are told to build houses, celebrate marriages, and become a family (see Jer. 29:5). This seems mundane and not very spiritual. What’s the point? None of us knows the future, or how much time we have. The bad times will come to an end, and so will the good times. Our tendency is to put our lives on hold and make no plans, because we don’t know

how long we will be here. Why put down roots if we won't be here for the harvest?

I think I have wasted a lot of time waiting for things to change before I would get started. I sympathize with the Hebrew people. Like me they wondered why they should put down roots, make plans or decisions, or prepare for an uncertain future. This was reinforced by the false prophets whom they sought out to predict a quick end to their time in Babylon; consequently they felt “in-between” and unable to move forward with their lives.

The Lord also says to those in exile, “Plant a garden” (v. 5). This is a very earthy reminder that no matter what our situation, we are not totally powerless. And no person or circumstance has the power to rob us of the opportunity to consider alternatives in life. I talk to many people who feel like they are “in-between.” I understand how feeling like that makes it easy to put off living because change *might* be coming—so we sit in exile, waiting.

I often talk to people about plugging in to their church or community, such as a small group or another ministry, to invest time and attention helping others. Too often they tell me they haven't found a place to get involved, pointing out that they don't know how long they will be there, so they are staying on the sidelines. Then one year, three years, five years go by and they are still on the sidelines, watching life go by, missing opportunities to discover roots and growth and family and love right where they are.

We may not have asked for our circumstances, but they do not have the power to keep us from living every single day to the fullest. It is important to start where we are, not where we wish we were. Richard Halverson, when he was chaplain of

the United States Senate, was a guest preacher at our church. After he spoke, I overheard a man asking Dr. Halverson if God would be able to use him where he worked. His response was, “Don’t worry about whether God can use you where you are. I know he can’t use you where you are not.”

So plant a garden and put down roots. Make a home; plan a family. Discover the truth that we can be at home anywhere in the world, with any people in the world, because we know the One who carries us and cares for us. I’m sorry to say that I have probably missed out on a lot of good, just because it wasn’t what I was expecting or what I had planned for my life.

Baby Steps

Bill Murray played the part of an obsessive-compulsive, anxiety-riddled yet loveable mental patient named Bob in the movie *What About Bob?* His psychiatrist (played by Richard Dreyfus) told him all that was needed for recovery was a grasp of the “Baby Steps” theory of psychology. We all laughed knowingly as Bob shuffled through the movie muttering, “Baby steps, baby steps, baby steps.” Although it was a silly movie, there was also some truth in it, truth that can assist us in getting past what we’ll never get over.

Baby steps don’t seem like much. They often go unnoticed or are blocked by the enormity of our struggles. Yet each seemingly insignificant step gives us confidence to take another, and then another.

It is often only in hindsight that we can look back and see, perhaps even celebrate, how far we’ve come. Too many times I am desperately searching for the big answer that will solve all my problems. Sometimes my stubbornness leads me to

dig in and refuse to even consider small steps because they aren't enough of a solution. It usually takes a wise friend to point out that everything worth doing begins with small, seemingly insignificant steps.

The ability to recognize and affirm small steps in ourselves and in others is a sign that we are beginning to heal. Whether we are rehabbing our broken body or rehabbing our broken spirit, there usually is a decisive point when we take a first step forward.

We need other people's encouragement because we don't have perspective. Only time and experience give us perspective. I don't need people who have completely figured things out; I only need them to be a day ahead of me on the journey. Then I don't feel so alone and helpless.

Groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, Divorce Recovery, Employment Networks, and Grief Support can be effective because they invite people to share the journey toward wholeness. There is strength in growing together not only in spite of our great problems but even because of our problems. Burdens shared become lighter. Walking together through life's darkest times allows people to discover that their life is more significant than this present overshadowing difficulty, and they are esteemed and valued for who they are, not judged solely for what happened to them.

The ability to recognize and affirm small steps in ourselves and in others is a sign that we are beginning to heal.

Getting past what we'll never get over starts with small steps. When my wife Eileen struggled with agoraphobia, she became overwhelmed by panic attacks and couldn't stand to

be in a crowd. She might suddenly jump up and run out of church or a restaurant, or refuse to enter a theater, believing that she would die from the suffocating panic.

Her world grew smaller and smaller. She quit her job, pulled away from friends, and turned down invitations to parties, all the while feeling shame because she wasn't like everyone else. Her therapist tried to encourage her by reminding her that she wouldn't always feel this way. Still, it was hard for her to believe him.

I remember the day we stepped from her apartment and slowly walked down the sidewalk to the corner mailbox. There she mailed a letter, and the two of us sat down on the curb next to the blue box to rest. As we sat there in the late afternoon sun, we promised to remember that moment. It was the first of many steps that led her up and out of her debilitating illness into a life of meaning and hope.

Was it a big, huge, miraculous step? Not to most people who drove past us that day. But to us, that baby step was gigantic. We'll never forget it.