

Wounded Healers

*True Life Stories of 12 Courageous Women
touched by the Healing of Jesus Christ*

By
Wounded Healers' Authors

Sue Alexander
Alison Beale
Jean-Ann Cooper
Courtney Diehl
Michele Dudas
Denise Gardner
Jade Getchell
Susan Hamilton
Sue Leonard
Therese Shelesky
Tammy Stewart
Amanda Summers

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Dedication

*This book is dedicated to our Lord Jesus Christ
and those He blessed us with to bring the book to fruition.
May the stories bring Him glory and bless women in
need of hope, encouragement and healing.*

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INTRODUCTION

I remember sitting by the fireplace in my front room praying for each of the writers whose personal blogs linked to a website the Lord moved me create in 2013. Daily devotionals, weekly Psalms, discipleship writings, and various life stories offered from each of the writers populated the Women of the Way Ministries site. As I read the life stories over the first year, I felt a tug from the Holy Spirit, but it wasn't clear what I was being led to do. Then, during a quiet time, there was a stirring in my heart. God clearly spoke about the need for this book, a book where each writer would not only share their testimony with you, but also share their trials and triumphs. Moreover, in spite of seemingly insurmountable challenges, share how God had changed their lives for the better.

It took some time to gather the twelve writers featured here. Several were bloggers from the Women of The Way Ministries portal website, others were friends of the bloggers and a few were women who crossed my path at some point in time. Though many were eager to share their story; others were initially unsure of disclosing the details of their lives to the world. Some were downright frightened that family and friends might come to know a dark side of their past that had been a secret. However, with lots of prayers, and by the grace of God, they stepped up and said, "Yes!" I readily commend each and every one for their courage!

The stories you will read include tremendous heartbreak and loss. Challenges that, without the power of the Lord, would have been insurmountable. Each and every one of these women pinpoints the

moment that God showed up in their lives. Moreover, the timing in each case was, of course, perfect.

As you move from story to story, you will recognize challenges that are similar to your own, or to one of your family members or friends. Stories of deceit, betrayal, mental illness, eating disorders, and the loss of relationships and loved ones. In some cases, the challenge remains, but these women had the courage to transform from victim to victor in Christ, Jesus.

I hope you find that “Wounded Healers” is an appropriate title for this book. You will come to know that the wounds are deep, and the scars are still there. However, the scars are part of each woman’s identity and prove they survived and are thriving in the Lord’s love, grace and forgiveness.

These wounded women have poured out their hearts in hopes that someone like you, might do as they did and seek the Lord Jesus Christ for hope, encouragement and healing.

My prayers go with you, my friend.

Therese Shelesky

A personal thanks to my friend and *Wounded Healers* writer, Jean-Ann Cooper, for helping me capture just the right words for the Introduction of *Wounded Healers*.

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The Awakening

Sue Alexander

My eyes were struggling to adjust to the bright lights that glared overhead. Slowly the room came into focus. It looked like a hospital recovery room, and my husband peered over me intently, his expression serious. Alarm bells went off! Where was I? How did I get there? *What happened to me?*

I learned that I had been in a psychiatric hospital for six weeks undergoing electro-convulsive therapy, formerly known as “shock” treatments. Before they began I had completely lost touch with reality, and that morning in the recovery room when I “awakened” was the first time I had been fully conscious in weeks. I was an active wife and mother, one of the pastors of a successful and growing church, and a vital member of the community. I looked at my husband in shock. *How did this happen?*

This was 2011 and the 2008 recession had hit our mountain ski town very hard. Many people were experiencing severe financial crises, and when I preached earlier that year I had said, “I did not know that so many people I care about could all be hurting at the *same* time.” I now realize I was struggling and overwhelmed, too. In addition to working long hours in full-time ministry, I was also desperate to find nursing care for my aging mother in another state. Also, one of our daughters was in a life crisis, so there was plenty of stress in my life. But I had a long history of facing tough problems and overcoming them, including my husband’s early alcoholism and a fractured marriage, my brother’s

Sue Alexander

untimely death, heartaches with kids and some financial reverses, but this time, challenges were coming at me from every direction and all at the same time. It was the perfect storm, and I was in the center.

The previous year I had experienced some heart problems which did not turn out to be serious, but were frightening enough that I had become hesitant to exercise outdoors alone and my world began to shrink. The cardiac issues also resulted in a doubled dose of the drug Xanax I had taken for heart palpitations for over thirty years, and it was a lot for my small size and weight.

Xanax can be addictive, mainly because it is so effective at reducing anxiety. Calming relief comes very quickly, but unfortunately dissipates rapidly leaving one waiting for the next dose. I did not dream this prescription drug, which had helped me for so many years, could be dangerous or might be part of the reason I ended up with a psychotic break.

Before I was hospitalized, my level of anxiety was so high that I could not sleep, barely ate, and I finally was so out of it that I required full time care. My husband had to take the pills away from me and dole them out. He frantically sought medical care and eventually took me to a Denver hospital.

It was a very distressing time for him and our daughters as they wondered if I would ever “come back.” Together they made the difficult decision to approve the ECT treatments, and gratefully they worked!

After six weeks of treatment I was able to return home to begin to reconstruct my life with my husband’s help. I felt like Lazarus! The first thing I had to do was embrace the story I was hearing second-hand, but everything felt so surreal. It’s a good thing I trusted the story-tellers or I would not have believed the tales they told. For example, I left our daughter’s home in Denver in the middle of the night after I was released from the hospital and went for a walk in the neighborhood, and I did not remember a thing! It was the dog that woke up my husband to alert him that I had left the house, and I am sure my family wondered if the hospital dismissal was warranted at that point!

Along with the facts came a flood of *shame*. I started the blame game, and I pointed at me. Shame is different from guilt where we feel

we *did* something wrong. Shame tells us there is something inherently wrong *with us*, and I believe as women we are often quick to take responsibility. It was very difficult to return to church, as it doesn't get more humbling than being in a psychiatric hospital. Instead of sitting in my usual place in the front, I slipped in the back, imagining what people might be thinking. It would have been easier to say I had cancer. People would have hugged me and told me they were sorry.

Sad to say, we are uncomfortable with mental illness and often don't have language for it.

I spent a lot of time that autumn recovering alone, but the one relationship I diligently pursued was with a therapist. Because this whole experience had been frightening for my husband, he became anxious if I seemed to have a "down" day, so I was reluctant to share my feelings. My therapist helped me recognize I could experience a negative emotion and not slide back into the abyss of anxiety and depression. She encouraged me to feel and acknowledge my emotions, as burying emotions is the least healthy thing we can do, because we bury them alive! I would share my concerns and she would respond, "Sue, that's a *normal* emotional response for this particular situation." Normal became my favorite word!

Three good friends had taken turns caring for me before I was hospitalized, and they seemed so astonished at how well I was doing, I finally begged one of them to tell me how *bad* it had really been. One reluctantly told me I had stated emphatically, "The devil has won, and I belong to him." I cringed when I heard I had denied the God I loved and served and Who had been so faithful to me over the years.

I went for a walk in tears that blustery fall day. But it wasn't long before God's gentle, quiet voice whispered in my heart, *I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.* (John 10:28) I was overwhelmed with the comfort and love that filled my aching heart. God had kept me. God had not let me go. *He* knew that my words were not my true heart's intention. I was sick. And He had taken care of me.

Suddenly I could see that the few fuzzy memories of the hospital were not the whole picture. God was there! The following weekend

Sue Alexander

a phrase in a worship song caught my attention, “You danced over me when I was unaware.” Tears flowed again. Not tears of sadness this time, but tears of joy! Waves of truth washed over me as the words I will never leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5) came to life for me.

One thing was certain: I could *not* return to my old ways. I could not resume my unbalanced, too busy life. I realized that I could not *allow* anxiety and fear to dominate my mind. The Bible says, *Do not let your heart be troubled.* (John 14:1) I realized that I had choices and I learned to be very vigilant over my thought life. Upon reflection, I realized how often I had not *monitored* my thinking and was often unaware of what was going on in my mind. I believe this is true for most of us. Our minds are so often busy, thinking of the next meeting or errand, or constantly distracted with buds in our ears and our eyes on our phones.

Through Dr. Caroline Leaf’s enlightening book entitled *Who Switched Off My Brain?* I learned that when we think negative thoughts over 30 toxic hormones are released into our bodies. There is even a specific “fear” hormone called ACTH. Over the years I had flooded my body with a toxic chemical bath that affected me down to the cellular level. In addition, *repeated* negative thoughts build very strong pathways in our brains and then our negative thoughts become *automatic*. No wonder the Bible says we are to *take our thoughts captive.* (2 Corinthians 10:5) This means we cannot allow them free rein. We have to lasso them and replace them with the truth and with scripture. We *can* change our thinking, and we can actually change our brains!

When we think positive thoughts, like gratitude, compassion, forgiveness and love we release good chemicals like serotonin and dopamine. It is our *choice* every day to choose the chemical environment of our bodies, and making these choices has been some of the hardest work I have ever done.

In addition to becoming aware of my thinking, I realized that for much of my life I had been propelled by my schedule, barely pausing to take a breath. A full, scribbled calendar meant I must be accomplishing something! Our culture has made busyness a virtue, and it can be accentuated in the Christian world because we believe we are busy

“for God.” I realized, too, how much of my identity was wrapped up in “doing.” Now I had to learn to “be,” and to thoughtfully plan spaces in my life. If I started to feel anxious I had to deal with it *drug* free. Time with God, long walks, and deep breathing slowly replaced the little peach pills. The day finally came when feeling stressed felt foreign to me, whereas before it had been my norm. That’s when I knew I was making progress!

It might not surprise you to learn that I went through a period where I was afraid I might go backwards. Simply driving my car the first time was terrifying, and later it took all the courage I could muster to drive to Denver and face the city traffic. If I felt afraid to do something, I had to face it and do it! Fear is a terrible taskmaster, and it took practice to wrestle back control. And if I couldn’t remember something, I felt a twinge of fear. But then I would have lunch with someone my age and realize that it was probably normal!

God was also very gracious to give me reassurance. During my recovery, I taught a class called “The Voice,” which was not about music but rather hearing God. One week I cut pictures out of magazines, laid them out in the room, played quiet music and asked the participants to ask God to speak to each of them through a photo. I was not planning to do it myself, but I ended up joining the group and one photo jumped out at me. It was a picture of two little Japanese girls in kimonos walking under an umbrella. It looked as if the rain had stopped, but the umbrella was still up. I heard God say, “You can put the umbrella away, Sue. The storm has passed.” I have that picture framed in my office today, a constant reminder of God’s promise to me.

As I prayed about what might have contributed to my illness, one thing God revealed was I had unwittingly started to trust my own competency. Years of effectively ministering to people had caused me to rely on myself rather than on God. Early in my life with Christ I learned that the Bible teaches *Without me (Jesus) you can do nothing.* (John 15:5) Consequently, I had consciously depended on Him through all sorts of trials and difficulties and as I ministered to others, and it was amazing to watch Him work.

This shift to self-reliance did not happen overnight. It happened

Sue Alexander

subtly as I became good at what I did. God's word says, *If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall.* (I Corinthians 10:12)

But I was too busy to pay attention. There were many times when I would hurry out the door in the morning to meet someone and tell God I was glad He understood that I didn't have time to spend time with Him. But after the harrowing breakdown, dependence on God became my norm again.

When the one year anniversary of my hospitalization approached, I felt unsettled and made an appointment with my therapist. She was discerning and said, "Sue, you may not have conscious memories of this time, but your *body* does. We remember on a *cellular* level." She also said, "Grief, or remembering, is like a television set that turns on in the corner of your mind. You don't get to turn it on, and you don't get to turn it off. Sometimes you can distract yourself, and sometimes you need to pay attention." It was very good advice. She suggested I pay attention and write something to commemorate the anniversary, and I ended composing the following Psalm:

Why pause to remember when memories often carry pain?
Our deeper selves are calling to us silently,
shouting all the same.

Fearfully made, the Psalmist tells me
so complex, so deep, unmixed.
A part of self that is mysterious,
but present, nonetheless.

God was there in shadows, watching,
measuring every ounce of pain.
*He drew the boundaries of my desolation
And brought me back to me again.*

He has taken what was broken,
changed my life in many ways.
Life was lived too often mindless,
now I treasure all my days.

How can I begin to praise Him,
thank Him for my life restored?
Living life with all my senses,
Even better than before.

Now my heart is here to serve Him,
Now my mind can praise again.
Wholeness...spirit, soul and body
Amplified to praise His name!

Yes, God drew the boundaries of my desolation. I can honestly say that five years later, I am grateful for this dark experience. I share my story freely because so many people struggle with depression and anxiety and other mental health issues and believe the lie that they are unique and they are alone. Too many Christians are disheartened when told they should “just believe” or that depression/anxiety is sin. But the brain is an organ, like the liver or the heart, and things can go wrong.

Yes, our thinking can make us sick. But sometimes there are very real, organic issues in our brains. Because *electricity* helped my brain to work again, there was obviously a very real *physiological* element involved. It wasn't all in my “head.” Neuroscience is exploding today, and we are just beginning to understand the complexities of the brain and what we call the “mind.”

Prescription drugs for anxiety and depression are used by millions of people in our country, and I am not against drugs per se. Many have been helped by these drugs. But they can be misused. They can be over-prescribed. When too much is taken for too long, the effects can be serious like they were for me. I am simply saying be careful.

Your story may be different from mine, and in reality not everyone gets a happy ending. Some people have similar experiences but continue on to Alzheimer's or dementia. But for those of us who come out on the other side, the great challenge is to *live differently*.

Every day I ask God to bring people across my path who can be encouraged by my story, and I make sure they know the great part God played in it. I love Jesus' name *Emmanuel*, which is translated “God

Sue Alexander

*with us.” One year I kept my undecorated, but lighted Christmas tree, in my living room well into January. It was a sweet reminder to me that Jesus wasn’t put away with the Christmas boxes. He is *always* with us, and I will *never* forget the weeks He was Emmanuel, *with me*, in the loneliness of a spare room in a hospital in another city. And I will be forever grateful.*



Sue Alexander

Go and Love

Alison Beale

I'm broken. Are you?

I believe we are all broken people because we are human. We love, we hurt, and we make mistakes. Brokenness is often recognized by its side effects on our lives— pain, anxiety, loss, anger, and jealousy, to name a few. The most dangerous kind of brokenness, though, is the kind we don't recognize. The kind defined by entitlement, lack of gratitude, and the selfishness of living only within the confines of our own lives. It can manifest itself in complacency, a lack of compassion, or an inability to feel true happiness, because what we have is never deeply satisfying. It's easy to always want more in our culture, because there is so much out there for us to want—newer, better, or more extravagant things than we already have. Don't get me wrong; it's not "wanting more" that's the issue. It's healthy and productive to have goals to work toward and it's natural to want things. The problem comes when we feel entitled to things and everything becomes about us, because entitlement is an unhealthy perspective and I believe that selfishness leads to an empty heart.

Let's talk about my life for a minute. My parents are divorced, and I grew up in an environment of unending, stressful family drama. I graduated from Belmont University. It's a good school, but it's definitely not Harvard. I live in a one-bedroom apartment and drive a Honda Civic with a dent in the side. I can't afford to shop at Whole Foods, even though I'd like to. I only buy clothes off the clearance rack. Maybe one

Alison Beale

day I'll have enough money to get venti drinks at Starbucks whenever I feel like it.

Well, does that sound spoiled or what? Yes, the perspective is one of entitlement. If I thought like that, I'd never be happy because I'd never be truly satisfied. I have acted both selfishly and unselfishly throughout my life. I have found that when I act selfishly and feel entitled, things don't go my way. I become grumpy, disappointed, and even more hyper-focused on my "negative" situation. There were many times when I threw fits, acted ungrateful, or acted like some tiny problem was the end of the world. While this still happens on occasion, I now realize that my attitude of entitlement caused me to live with blinders on and from the wrong perspective. When I was so caught up in my own world, I was unable to see the beauty of the world around me. That's not something I want to miss out on, because there is so much to appreciate!

Now, let's look at my life from an enlightened perspective. I am privileged. My life, like anyone else's, hasn't been without its challenges. But I have always lived a very comfortable life, having a loving and supportive family, a college education, no student loans, a home, a reliable car, a job in a field I love, pets, spending money, clean water and a fridge full of nutritious food. This week, my biggest struggle was when my dryer stopped working and I had to set foot in the laundromat. At first I was annoyed, but I forced myself to remember that I am not entitled to a dryer. It is a privilege. Just like I am not entitled to my loving and supportive family, who is always there for me. Not everyone has that, so I am very blessed. My college education? I was unbelievably privileged to attend college without having to worry about paying my own tuition. While college is the norm for many people in America, it is not even an option for some. My job, my car, my home, access to healthy food and water? I am not entitled to any of it. But I have the good fortune to be able to drink a ton of water every day, take hot showers and have a toilet. I am lucky, and I am one of the few with these privileges.

Our perspectives, outlooks, goals, and passions are all influenced by people and experiences that shape who we become. Personally, I have been shaped (and by shaped I mean flipped, crushed, moved, and put

back together in a new way) by global missions. Classic— privileged American white girl visits third world country to help and has a life-changing experience. Cliché? Maybe. But how do things become clichés in the first place? Repetition, widespread experience, truth.

I have traveled to Port-au-Prince, Haiti and Kijabe, Kenya on mission trips where I learned what true happiness is. I've learned it from people who have nothing, materially speaking. That irony is not lost on me.

I stepped out of the Port-au-Prince airport, looked around, and felt like I had been punched in the stomach when I observed the run-down area around me and looked over at the group of people hanging around the airport. It somewhat resembled a run down, deserted festival— tattered tents, dirt ground, broken fences. I was met with desolate stares. Although my mission team surrounded me, I definitely felt out of place. We got on the bus and began our drive to the hotel. Our guide told us that the rubble on the street was from the earthquake that had occurred three years prior. I looked out the window and saw endless tents—"tent cities," as they are called. Most of the people living in these tents were still displaced from the earthquake. The environment was very stimulating, but I was experiencing some culture shock. That first bus ride was the scariest drive of my life; I had to close my eyes a few times as we frequently were inches away from hitting goats, cows, children, and motorcycles. To add to the culture shock, we were told that it is seen as an insult to the driver if you wear your seatbelt.

Our hotel was the nicest in the city. In America, it'd be considered a crappy motel. But it was charming, and I was just happy I didn't see any giant spiders. The first night, I had a hard time falling asleep, mostly because of the sound of fighting dogs that filled the city. It was vicious, and the worst was when I heard the whimpers and yelps of dying dogs. I remember lying awake thinking that I wasn't sure I could handle it, and I seriously doubted my decision to come to Haiti. Now, those doubts sound ridiculous. Oh, I didn't think I could handle witnessing the poverty and distress that is reality for millions of people? Luckily,

I quickly realized that being out of my comfort zone was a good thing. There's a lot to learn in this world, and living in ignorance is no way to go through life. My first big realization was that no substantial personal growth happens when you're comfortable. I then knew I needed to "get comfortable" with being uncomfortable.

Going to Haiti, I thought I'd be entering a country of grief-stricken, unhappy people. I have never been more wrong. The people and children I observed, spoke to, and played with were the epitome of beauty. Their joy was contagious and their genuine gratitude was inspiring. Our team was building a house for a wonderful woman named Kazi and her family. Kazi's son-in-law, Wilson, helped us build the house. To this day, thinking about Wilson makes me smile. He has no idea how much he changed my life. I even named my cat Wilson, after him. Weird? Yeah, but I love this guy. Wilson was quiet for most of the week we were in Haiti. We all assumed he didn't speak English. On one of our last days, a few of us sat in the house with Wilson during our lunch break, sharing crackers and protein bars with him. We noticed on our first day that the Haitian workers didn't stop to eat lunch, so we essentially forced them to accept some of our food and take a break every day. Wilson was wearing jeans and a polo shirt, one of his few outfits, and had on shoes with holes in them. My immediate thought was that shoes with holes aren't safe for a construction site, but the sad realization set in that he didn't have a choice. He was thin — too thin. Seeing this incredible person, while processing the fact that his slight form was due to malnourishment, hurt my heart. It hurts even now to think about. Of course I was aware that malnourishment is a serious problem, but I understood it on a whole new level when it looked me in the eyes.

As we ate, we started talking with Wilson and found that he actually spoke very good English. His voice was quiet and gentle, but he spoke with great passion. He was in his late twenties and going to school to become an engineer. His wife Stephanie had recently given birth to a baby boy. Wilson spoke of his marriage to Stephanie with joy and told

us how important it was to him, despite marriage being something that is not commonly valued in Haiti. He told us about Kazi's love for Jesus, saying, "She wakes up every day so happy and thankful for what God has blessed her with."

This is a woman who has next to nothing, and it was so beautiful to hear about the joy that God brings her. Wilson shared his love for God with our group as well, saying, "I'm constantly praying... in the morning, when I am working, when I am eating, and at night. I am so grateful for what God has blessed me with and that I have the opportunity to work and go to school."

Before I went to Haiti, I didn't realize what a privilege it was to be able to work and go to school. Work and school were normal, expected, and routine for me. Hearing Wilson say how grateful he was to be able to work (as in physical labor building houses in intense heat!) was a much-needed reality check for me. Before singing and dancing for us, which were Wilson's favorite activities, he shared one more beautiful lesson.

"Christians, no matter where they live or what they do, are all united and part of an embassy of God."



Alison Beale

I traveled to Kijabe, Kenya in May of 2014 with the wonderful organization Love Africa. Love Africa has been active in Kijabe for several years, so they have great connections in the area. My group and I were able to do some valuable work as a result. One man they partner with is John Njane (pronounced John Johnny, which is fun to say). John Njane has dedicated his life to helping his fellow Kenyans and fully embodies Psalm 68:5, *A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy dwelling*. He has taken in a dozen orphaned boys off the street, started programs that teach women to sew and farm, runs a local shop, helps build houses for those in need, delivers food to several widows every month, and just helps anyone and everyone in any way he can. This guy is the closest thing to Superman the world has.

Part of our group spent one morning delivering food to widows with John. We brought sacks of food to their homes to make sure they at least had enough food to feed themselves and their families for a few weeks. Although the women were elderly widows, most of them cared for grandchildren or orphans they had taken in. Since they aren't physically able to make the journey to get food and carry it home, they rely on John Njane to help feed their families. These women were so wonderful, loving on us as if we were their own children. African hospitality is profound. They each wanted a picture with our group because John prints out the photos and brings them back to the women. Such excitement over taking a photo with us! They were so grateful to John and to our group for bringing them food, spending time with them, and giving them photos to remember us by.

One thing that struck me right away in Kenya, just as it had in Haiti, is how much people value spending time with each other. In the United States, we rush around, make plans, and focus on how busy we are, hardly making time for others like we should. Spending time with people we love should be our priority, not something we pencil in to fit our schedule.

When we arrived in Kenya we were told about "African time." Essentially, everyone is always late and events or meetings rarely start on time. Interaction with people and building relationships is their priority. Having a great conversation or spending time with someone

they care about takes priority over anything else. It was refreshing to experience such a loving, people-centered environment instead of the task-centered environment I'm used to in the United States. As we visited the widows, it was so clear how special we made each of their days just by stopping by and showing we care about them. I also realized it went both ways. It was special to us, too, because of how special it was for them. It really is that simple.

John took us to the home of the poorest family in the village, a woman who takes care of fourteen orphans. Until recently, there had been fifteen orphans, but one of them passed away. When we arrived at the home, she wasn't there. But three young children were, perhaps aged twelve, eight and two. The oldest was mentally disabled, and each child was covered in dirt: dirty clothes, dirty feet, dirty faces. The oldest child was only wearing a long shirt. The middle child comforted the crying toddler. The worn look in his eyes resembled that of someone much older than eight. My heart broke as I saw them alone, while their caretaker was most likely off doing what work she could. John told us that being home alone meant the woman could not afford to send them to school for that term. "What is the cost of school?" a person in our group asked. John said, "For a three-month term it costs about \$4 per child." In that moment I experienced a sinking feeling, the kind where it physically feels like your heart and stomach drop. I was devastated and ashamed. All it takes is \$4 to send a child to school. I thought



Alison Beale

about how quickly I spend \$4 and how little value that amount of money has to me. In Kenya, \$4 means an education, which is the only thing that gives those children a fighting chance at a bright future.

We walked into their home, which was a hut about half the size of my one-bedroom apartment. Fifteen people had to live and sleep there, and to put it in perspective, only about three of us walked through the hut at a time because otherwise it was too crowded. There was one old bed frame with springs, and John said that it was a luxury for



whichever child got to sleep on it. The rest slept on the dirt floor. There were no pillows, and maybe three tattered blankets. I don't think there was a dry eye in our group. Realizing those living conditions were reality day in and day out for so many people was stifling, heartbreaking, and overwhelming. I felt helpless. I could help them somewhat in that moment, but what about all of the others? The millions of people living in those conditions? The millions dying from starvation, contaminated water, or lack of basic medical care? Who would help them? We need more people like John Njane. Let's be those people.

Since my visit to Kenya, I have learned that John successfully arranged for a couple of mattresses to be given to that family. Does that solve all of their problems? Of course not, but I was elated to learn that their quality of life was lifted even just a little bit.



On my fourth day in Kenya, part of our mission team visited Kijabe Hospital. People from all over the country come to this hospital because it is the best available. Traveling to it is a huge commitment and is no easy feat. The hospital was decent, but would be nowhere close to acceptable in the U.S. I was grateful that the staff is able to care for so many people, but sad that this is the absolute best care available and people sacrifice so much to travel there.

The children's ward was heartbreaking. We talked to patients and mothers with sick babies. Most of the people were happy to see us and didn't mind talking to us. I was impressed with their openness. If I were in a hospital, especially with a sick child, I would not want strangers conversing with me. Even in the worst situations, Kenyan people are friendly and kind.

At the hospital I was with Kim and Karla, two of the girls on my team. We met Mary, who was staying in one of the rooms with her eight-month-old son Gavin. We sat down next to her and said, "Hello," not knowing that her story would shatter us.

A few months earlier, while she was washing clothes in the river, Mary's three-year-old son and baby Gavin were alone in their house (a small hut). The three-year-old found matches, accidentally lit one, panicked, and threw it on the bed. Gavin was lying on the end of the bed as the entire bed caught fire. Gavin's legs were badly burned. Mary lost her house and everything she owned, but her children made it out alive. She pulled down the blanket covering Gavin to show us his wounds. I felt a wave of devastation. I just wanted to cry and hold him. One leg was discolored and he had no toes. His burns were starting to heal. His other leg was amputated from the knee down and the doctors had gradually been placing skin grafts on his leg, which took a while because it was so small. They had another month left in the hospital. Mary didn't have money or a house and wasn't sure what she was going to do once Gavin was released. How was she going to pay for her son's medical bills? Despite her situation, she was so hopeful and grateful, saying, "God has blessed me by protecting my children and keeping them alive."

I fought tears during my entire conversation with her. I figured the least I could do was not cry so I could be hopeful with her. I was so inspired by her hope, her trust in God, and her positivity. After enduring all of that hardship? Knowing that her child's life would be an unimaginable challenge? I found myself sitting there asking God how this could happen. Why did this have to happen to this innocent baby and wonderful woman? This tragic accident would affect not only them, but her other child who lit the match as well. It was an accident that he'd be reminded of every day. While I was sitting there angry with God, she was sitting there thanking God for her blessings. Her attitude was a wake-up call—I had some work to do on my perspective and myself.

We commented that Gavin looked like a happy baby, and she said that it was the three of us who were making him happy. She said she hadn't seen him that happy until we visited. She asked us to visit her again, which we did when we went back to the hospital a couple days later. When Mary saw us she said, "You came back, you came back! You love me and my son."

Earlier that day, Mary had been speaking with a representative from an organization that deals with burn victims. She was hoping they would accept Gavin as a patient and help him. "The acceptance process can be long," she said, but she was praying that it would come through for them. We sat on the bed with Gavin, and she told us again, "He never smiled until you came to see him the other day. He usually doesn't smile because of his pain."

She also said she told her husband that Gavin had American friends now. Mary was so grateful for everything: for us, for God, for her children's lives. One thing I noticed across the board with the hospital patients I met was how grateful and hopeful they were despite their circumstances. Instead of being angry with God, they were thanking Him. Their ability to recognize their blessings even in the worst of situations was inspiring.

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Romans 12:12

Mary made it so clear that Kim, Karla and I touched her and Gavin's lives, and that's an amazing thing to know. Spending a little bit of time

with them went such a long way. I may not be able to save all of Africa, and the amount of help needed in the world is overwhelming, but this situation is a reminder of the incredible impact I, as one individual, am able to have on people that God places right in front of me.

The most powerful moment of my life happened on my last day in Haiti. We had finished building Kazi's house and were returning for the blessing of the house by a pastor. Members of the community came to pray together over Kazi's new home. Kazi was overjoyed. She danced around, giving us all hugs and kisses. It was clear to us that we had helped an incredible woman with contagious joy. I can't even put into words the amount of gratitude she showed.

On that trip, I had completely fallen in love with Anderson, a five-year-old boy in the neighborhood. When I first met him, he was so shy that he would barely look at anyone. That quickly changed. He loved the attention we gave him, and he came to hang out with us every day. We had a lot of fun playing with him, and it was hard knowing we'd be leaving him. I had grown so attached to him in such a short amount of time. It hurt to know he'd probably continue to come to Kazi's expecting to see us.

As we all stood around Kazi's home during the blessing, I felt Anderson knew that we wouldn't be coming back so I went over to see him. He jumped into my arms, putting his arms around my neck and burying his face in me. He wouldn't look at anyone. It was then that I knew that he knew we were leaving. It killed me. I tried so hard to hold back my tears, but that proved to be impossible. I started to cry while I was holding him. I am a person who hates being vulnerable, so this was my worst nightmare. I was holding Anderson, so I couldn't cover my face, and I was crying in front of about thirty people. Because I felt vulnerable, I panicked. All I could do was stand there. As a wave of panic ran through me, Kazi came over. I was wearing a tank top with a shirt over it, and she took the bottom of my shirt and wiped my tears. She gave me the biggest hug and just held me. With her on one side of me and Anderson on the other, I was completely engulfed in love. I have

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never felt more loved, comforted, and safe than I did in that moment. It didn't matter that I hardly knew Kazi. It didn't matter that Kazi and Anderson didn't speak the same language as me. It didn't matter that I came from a completely different lifestyle and background. Love is universal. God's love is universal.

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28

Anderson, Kazi, and Wilson live in Haiti and live a completely different life than I do, but they are my family. Mary, Gavin, and all of the wonderful Kenyans I met live across the world, but they are my family. The people I met on these journeys healed me in a way I never knew I needed to be healed.



I went on these mission trips to help those in need of things necessary for survival: food, water, medicine, and shelter. I was able to help provide these things and had great time along the way. Here in the United States, most of us have what we need to survive, but many of us lack what we need to really live. The joy, appreciation, gratitude and love for God, for life, and for all blessings is abundant in Haiti and Kenya. The people I encountered may not have enough food or clothing, but they possess happiness that is unmatched by anything I've experienced

or witnessed in the U.S. I am so grateful that I got to take some of that joy home with me. I still get caught up in the minuscule problems that come along with daily life, but I see things differently now. I am different than I was before I went to Haiti and Kenya. There's no way you can experience that kind of love and not come back with radically different perspectives, dispositions and priorities.

It's easy to be selfish and to act with our own interests in mind. It's easy to be complacent and comfortable. It's easy to live in our own bubbles and ignore the fact that there are people in need — whether they are in our community, in our country, or on the other side of the world. By living a self-serving life, however, it's also easy to be unsatisfied and to always want more. My hands are by no means 100% clean of this selfish lifestyle, despite my experiences that have taught me to live otherwise. I am not saying we need to forget about our wants and needs, nor am I passing judgment. But, if there is one thing I've learned, it is that we should live for others. We ought to be conscious of the needs of others, and we should strive to do everything in our power to help where help is needed. Just because something is not a problem in our immediate lives does not mean it's not a problem. We have to show love and we have to care, even when it's hard, inconvenient, or uncomfortable. We are all broken people, but God heals and we can heal one another on an earthly level as well. We are called to go and love, a simple calling, just not always an easy one. But by living for others, I believe you'll find the happiness and satisfaction you're constantly trying to find by living for yourself. I know I have.

Alison Beale



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A Case of Mistaken Identity

Jean-Ann Cooper

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. Proverbs 3:5-6 NIV

For years, I lived a life of mistaken identity, trying to define who I was by any other means than finding my identity in my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Had I prayed Proverbs 3:5-6 into my life at an early age, the story I am about to tell you may have been much different.

From the time I was a little girl, I had a people-pleasing streak as wide as a six-lane highway with no off ramp. Being accommodating, unconditionally loving and accepting of others is the right thing to do, but it can also lead to a path of ruin if we are not careful. In my case, it resulted in a life of mistaken identity. My life was defined by the man I was with, the job title I held, and the size of my paycheck.

Don't get me wrong, my people-pleasing skills worked to my advantage countless times. I took great pleasure in being known as the "go-to girl." Whenever there was a committee to form, a project to complete or an ugly task to be done, the battle cry was, "Just ask Jean-Ann. She'll do it!" People trusted me, and that trust made me feel needed and appreciated and loved.

I possessed an odd combination of strong leadership skills with an unbridled willingness to be led around as if I had a big brass ring in

Jean-Ann Cooper

my nose! I was strong and self-reliant, for sure. It was easy for me to stand firm and say, "Oh, hell no!" about an issue I disagreed with, but I did not have a clue about how to turn down a simple request.

I remember my first coed dance like it was yesterday. I was in seventh grade at Palo Verde Elementary School in Phoenix, Arizona. For several weeks leading up to the big dance, all the kids in my class had mandatory dance lessons on Thursdays after school. The boys learned how to ask a girl to dance, and the girls learned the proper way to accept their invitation.

The dance instructor looked like a drill sergeant and had a personality to match. She wore clunky shoes and pointy glasses. She wore her hair up in a bun that was so tight; her eyes slanted up at the corners. She was deadly serious when it came to teaching our gangly group of twelve-year-olds the waltz and the foxtrot. None of us liked the lessons much, but the mere idea of dancing with a boy had my girlfriends and me giddy with excitement!

The big night finally arrived. I loved my white dress with big red and pink California poppies on the skirt and a wide pink ribbon sash for the belt. My white Mary Jane patent leather shoes were perfect, and Mom curled my hair just the way I liked it.

Before leaving the house, my Mom sat me down, held my hands and said she wanted to share some advice on how to make sure I had a great time at the dance that night. She was my best friend. I trusted her, so of course, I could not wait to hear her secret.

"When a boy, any boy, asks you do dance, you need to accept his invitation."

"Any boy? MOM!" I said.

"Yes, any boy. I don't care if he is tall, short, fat, skinny, cute or not. If that young man has mustered up the courage to ask you to dance, you owe it to him to say yes. If you dance with the first boy who asks you, I promise, you will dance all night."

Mom was right. After accepting the first few invitations, I danced to nearly every song and had the time of my life! It was years later that I realized my mom was not as interested in my enjoying the dance as much as she was teaching me the value of being considerate,

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inclusive and welcoming. She wanted me to be attractive, not just pretty.

My parents intended to raise my brothers and me to attract the good things and good people in life by being kind, open, honest and trustworthy. I remember countless times when I was leaving the house to go to a high school dance or a party; Mom would call out, “Don’t worry about being the prettiest girl, be the most attractive girl and you will have a great night!” She wanted people to be drawn to me for all the right reasons—for who I was not how I looked. She wanted me to attract others by being a magnet, not a model.

Sadly, the unintended consequence of the magnet vs. model concept was that I never learned how to say no. To anything. Or to anyone. I mean, there could be red flags flying, and warning sirens blaring in the background, and still, I would say, “Yes! Of course! Absolutely! Happy to!” Nothing got in the way of my trying to please everyone.

And so it began...

After dating a handsome young man for a few months, he asked me to marry him and totally swept me off my feet. Of course, I said yes! Why wouldn’t I? He professed his undying love for me and wanted to be my husband and the father of my children....SWOON!

Then came the wedding day. I was dressed in a beautiful white gown and clinging to my father’s arm in the back of the church waiting for the wedding procession to begin when my dad turned to me and smiled. I smiled back as the tears streamed down my face.

“Honey,” my dad said, “you do not have to do this.”

All I said was, “Daddy, start walking.”

I could not bear the thought of leaving my future husband at the altar! Moreover, disappointing all of our guests was out of the question. I worried more about what other people would think than what a failed marriage would do to my life.

We had only been married a few months and were still giddy newlyweds when I unexpectedly came home early from work one day. He’d recently been laid off from his construction job, and to say he was flipped out about our finances would be an understatement.