

Shattered

Moving Beyond Broken Dreams

By Rita Schulte

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Many of the names used in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of those individuals.

In Loving Memory of my parents Albert and Rose Alesandrelli

and

For Mike, Ashley and Michael, may the words of my heart sustain you through the losses of life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The vision for this work was birthed long before a single word was ever written, and before the desire ever entered my heart for such an undertaking. Looking back now, it's been twenty years since loss first knocked on the door of my heart, and God began to teach me about sorrow and suffering. The road was long and difficult, as the grief journey always is. But God is not about wasting the stories of our lives—or our losses. So he began writing this story, even when I had no idea what he was up to. Then, somewhere along the line, as I walked through those dark and lonely days of grief, a feeling deep within my soul began to tell me that one day God would reveal the grander plan and purpose for the breaking of my heart. Today, I know, and am content with the answer.

Over the years, I have had the privilege of sitting with some pretty amazing women in my journey as a counselor. Their stories have confirmed for me the message that has been stirred in my own soul for years—that at the heart of our deepest pain lies loss, and those losses, be they great or small, have placed us in a battle for our hearts. So this book is a tribute to them—for their faith and courage to press on and reclaim their hearts in spite of overwhelming sorrow and suffering. They have each taught me so much about matters of the heart.

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PART ONE

LOSSES' ASSAULT ON THE HEART

“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat . . .”

—Jesus, Luke 22:31

CHAPTER ONE: THE NECESSITY OF BROKENNESS

“Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?”

—Tina Turner

“I have come to bind up the brokenhearted.”

—Jesus

The Winds of Change

It was a rainy Virginia day, warm enough to sit outside with a cup of tea but too dark and dreary to really enjoy it. Just the kind of day that surrounds one in melancholy. And that morning I had a reason to be sad. My faithful companion, my dog Spanky, had died the week before.

Wait, I am going to open a book about grief and loss by talking about my dog? I am. In the pages that follow I will share more of my story, about the seasons of heart-breaking loss that led me to write this book. But loss comes in many forms, and that morning on the porch, my sadness was about more than the loss of a pet. Spanky’s death represented the loss of an era, a snapshot of my life that I would never fully reclaim.

Sometimes we don’t notice how loss affects our heart. It can happen slowly, yet before we realize it, the effects of our grief have become catastrophic and the death of our hearts inevitable. Loss throws us off balance, sometimes causing us to lose our way. If enough time goes by, and we don’t repair the distance between what we know intellectually about our grief, and what we *feel* deep within our souls, we’ll find that along the journey we will have sacrificed something precious at the expense of protecting ourselves from pain. That something is our heart.

The closing of one chapter of life gives way to the birth of another, offering us hope and promise—but not without cost, and certainly not without a glance backward, and a twinge of sorrow. Which brings me back to Spanky.

We brought Spanky home as a puppy, a gift to our son on his seventh birthday to comfort him after the death of his grandmother. He is grown now, a young man beginning his own journey. Our home is quiet, void of the cacophony of children's voices and the sense of security provided by my parents' presence. Another twinge of sadness. There was a time not so long ago when my soul was in mortal agony over the very thought of losing them. Where did the years go, and how could the pages of my life turn so swiftly?

Telling the Story

Everyone loves a good story. Stories are full of adventure, passion, love, and mystery. But the stories of grief and suffering aren't usually happy, and they are not always easy to tell. So we don't. We bottle them up, push them down, and close up shop. And our pain sits, sometimes for decades. We don't pull it out or look at it, and so we miss the opportunity to really understand the event or series of events that were responsible for breaking our hearts.

Yet we must tell the story to walk the healing path. That is why I wrote this book—to help you understand your own story of where loss and grief have affected your journey, and more importantly, to show you where those changes will help you find and connect with the heart of God. The choices you will make will be difficult ones, but if you stay the course, freedom *is* possible.

How do I know? Because I have walked a journey of loss myself that has spanned twenty years.

The first real tragedy in my life, the one event that broke my heart, started one morning when my children were still young. The day started as usual with my morning devotions. I opened my Bible randomly, as busy moms are prone to do, and read John 11:25, where Jesus says to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” For some reason I kept thinking about it all day.

The phone rang late that night—always a bad sign. My dad said something was wrong with Mom; it seemed like she had a heart attack. At the hospital, the doctors said it was a massive seizure brought on by a malignant brain tumor; she wouldn’t live through the night. My mother had been battling cancer for four years at that point. There was nothing else they could do. So we prayed.

My mom didn’t die that night in the hospital. God granted us two months with her, calling her home on my son’s birthday. Holding her in my arms as she lay dying felt like someone was pouring boiling acid over my soul. Tragic events do that. Try as we may to come up for air, we often find ourselves drowning in fear and overwhelming sorrow, questioning everything we believe.

That verse in John 11 haunted me, gnawing at my soul and pushing me to find answers. Did I *really* trust that “he who believes in me will never see death?” I thought I knew the answer—but this loss brought me to a crisis of belief, hammering me to the core of my faith.

Over the next twelve years, the losses piled up. My children suffered a near fatal parasail accident. Close friends and family died – eight in just one painful year. My father-in-law was diagnosed with cancer. And then my own dad was diagnosed with bone cancer—and that was when the bottom dropped out. All I could see was an endless string of dead tomorrows covered in broken dreams.

My parents were a secure and comforting presence in my life. After my mom's death, my dad became an idol. And God will have no idols in our lives. He would use my loss to begin a process that would ultimately shape and redirect my life, but not without even greater suffering.

Caring for my dad in our home for two years was difficult. Not because he was difficult, but because so much happened to him. He fell twice and broke each of his hips, lost control of his bodily functions, had a heart attack, and was in agonizing pain. I couldn't ever leave him alone. His illness consumed my life, and as I watched him stripped of what he once, it broke my heart. My world became very narrow and isolated. So many dear friends and relatives I loved were dying, and in the process I was losing heart.

The Place of Brokenness

If we are honest, we know that suffering and sorrow are inevitable parts of life. Loved ones die. Dreams crumble. We lose things that were once important to us. The happily-ever-after life we dreamed of is often a far cry from the reality we live.

How we respond to loss and change determines what happens to our hearts. It also determines if we live—*really live*—the life that Christ has called us to. If I am honest, I will

admit I let a lot of living go by trying to *make* life work, struggling to figure out, make sense of, and answer all the questions. Perhaps loss was a necessary part of my journey; it certainly caused me to see suffering as a necessary ingredient in my life, whether I had all the answers or not.

As I mentioned, God would have no idols in my life. The very place I tried to avoid—the place of suffering—was the very place he led me to so that he could evidence himself right in the midst of it all.

Brokenness must have its way in each of our lives in order to move us from death to life. Every spring tree leaves come to life as tiny new shoots; they grow and flourish, showing us signs of life and hope, only to die each fall. Life gives way to death, but from death something wondrous occurs. The leaves produce a majestic display of bold and resplendent color. They become most vibrant as they are dying.

Jesus makes a similar analogy in the gospel of John when he says, “I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it *dies*, it produces many seeds” (John 12:24, italics mine). This is the power of rebirth through the process of death and dying. Jesus, the immortal seed of the Father, chose to take on mortality. His glory, hidden and buried beneath the earth, like the seed, breaks forth from the dust of death to display a bold and resplendent life.

Shall we expect the Master to work any differently in our own lives?

While most of us won't be fighting for a place in the suffering line, I hope there is comfort in knowing we can learn to move through this journey of brokenness to find healing and wholeness. **We need only to change our perspective on loss and suffering. If we are willing to allow them to become our tutors, they can and will produce in us that same bold and**

resplendent life that Jesus is calling us to. If we have the eyes to see, we will come to know and understand that brokenness purifies our vision and chisels away all that keeps us from fully knowing the heart of God.

Brokenness is not only a necessary process in the life of the believer, it is a *gift*. I bet that's not an easy line to swallow, as you read this book ravaged by the effects of loss. I certainly didn't accept it easily. Early in my Christian walk, surrounded by pain, the idea that God was offering me gifts through my suffering made me angry. Maybe there was something wrong with me, I reasoned, because I didn't have enough faith to want to walk through a towering inferno with a smile on my face and a song of praise in my heart.

But somewhere along the journey of loss I began to consider that if God was good, he was not out to break *me*. Instead, he was out to break my confidence in all the ways I was trying to make my life work apart from him. Loss was simply the vehicle he used to get my attention.

It was then that I began to see suffering and pain in a new light. I could accept this process of brokenness as a gift from my heavenly Father, much like adults who grow to appreciate the discipline they received as children from their parents. It was not pleasant at the time it's received, as the author of Hebrews reminds us, but it is necessary in the molding and shaping of character, producing righteousness in all who are trained by it (Hebrews 12:11).

If you and I want to recover from the losses of life, we must catch a vision for the greater role that we were designed to play, and a bigger purpose beyond ourselves and our losses. In other words, we must slowly begin to see with eternal eyes that which is so difficult to see when loss first assaults our hearts—the story isn't finished yet. This is a journey, not a race.

How to Use This Book

In many ways, the chapters in this book have written themselves as the pages of my own life and the stories of others around me have unfolded. To live again, really live, we all had to find the courage to reinvest our hearts into what stirs our passions. The heart of that passion flows from our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is not a traditional book on grief. Our time together will focus on the *heart* and the phases it must traverse through this journey. We won't explore the process of dying, nor will we formally address the traditional stages of grief. I won't list tasks the griever must accomplish to achieve closure or provide a nice, neat formula for recovery. That's all important information, but "stages" can suggest a sequential order to our movement through life and loss that for many is not experientially true.

The heart can't always follow rules, so instead, many find themselves revisiting these stages or experiencing them in very random order. My own journey with loss has shown me that still, many years later, I have not moved beyond the struggle with some of these feelings. In fact, there are some days I actually feel as if I am falling backward. I don't understand the "whys" of some of the things that have happened, and some days I still find it hard to accept them. But through the years, the stages of grief have helped guide me toward the path of acceptance. Anger has thankfully given way to forgiveness, and depression is now an infrequent guest. Sadness, however still remains, forever standing guard at the doorway of my soul and reminding me that to love deeply always requires something of the heart.

But in order to experience healing, we must be willing to pass *through* these stages of grief. We must be careful that our work doesn't become intellectual, mechanical, or task driven. This is a very real possibility if we are not willing to examine what lies beneath—how loss affects our *hearts*.

Being *sensible* or *practical* about loss will not accomplish this. Attending to the matters of the heart is elusive and abstract, sometimes barely visible even to the griever. Therefore, somewhere along this journey we must develop an *awareness of the heart* by learning to “notice.” We must shift our focus from being rational and intellectual about our losses to that which will sustain long-term healing. For that to be accomplished, we must be willing to crack open the hard shell we have built around our hearts, explore our brokenness, and expose our wounds. Only after that difficult work is complete can we allow Christ to revive our hearts through his healing power. Just as the sculptor carefully chisels through layers and layers of stone to uncover a precious form, so the griever must lend careful time and attention to rediscover the music of the heart buried under the weight of grief.

Our work will not be without task or toil. In the following chapters we will attempt to find strength and meaning in the midst of our pain. You will find various exercises throughout the book to help uncover and process your losses. There will be verses, questions to ponder, and suggestions for things to do so that through thought, prayer, and meditation (as well as action) you can press into the heart of the Savior. Meditate on the foundational verses. Search the Father's heart, listening for his still, small voice so that you may begin to experience his presence in the midst of your pain.

You may want to purchase a journal to record your insights on how God is speaking to you through these verses. You can also use your journal for the “things to do” assignments. Be intentional and deliberate with your work, and set aside a time each day to be alone with God, for it will be in those intimate moments where the real healing work of grief will be accomplished.

Because we were created as three-dimensional beings—body, soul, and spirit—we need to take an inventory of how loss impacts us at each of these levels. I will ask you to notice, pay attention to, or be mindful of your experiences within each dimension. Being mindful is nothing more than becoming fully aware of your present state of mind and body. The skills that need to be cultivated for us to be mindful begin with “noticing.”

Start to pay attention to your thoughts, feelings, and any physical sensations that you experience along this grief journey. Find a place in your journal to record them. Noticing will give you a window into your soul and help you connect with your hurt and pain—a very important first step in this most difficult process.

CHAPTER TWO: THE BATTLE FOR THE HEART

“My heart is wounded within me.”

—Psalm 109:22

“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.”

—Isaiah 53:4

“Bringing our heart along in our life’s journey is the most important mission of our lives—and the hardest.”

—John Eldredge

Entering the Wilderness

Making our way through grief can feel very much like wandering alone through a desert wilderness. And wilderness journeys always require something of us—our time, our energy, our physical comfort, and possibly our very lives. Those of us who make it out and manage to keep our faith intact go on to experience growth and spiritual maturity. Those who don’t, forfeit their hearts and souls for a cheap substitute. We are, after all, architects of our own choices.

Looking back over the landscape of my own journey through brokenness sometimes seems entirely too painful—better to avoid those not-too-distant yesterdays. But choosing to be faithful to follow the call of my heart, I press in to identify the pain. Drifting back, I can remember wondering on those dark days of grief if I would ever make my way through the dense haze of sorrow to once again embrace desire. There have been times during this difficult season of midlife when brokenness seemed to be my only companion, leaving me with a deep and profound sense of emptiness. Loss does that, it’s as if someone takes a sledge hammer to your soul, leaving you feeling more dead than alive. Then, ever so slowly, something begins to stir the

heart, lighting the fire of hope and giving us the courage to press on. Light begins to invade the darkness and movement toward healing begins.

Sitting on my porch, watching the rain and remembering where God has brought me is not unlike many other mornings spent in search of him, mornings when my heart was broken. Except that today I am different, changed through this process I have come to know as brokenness.

I became a counselor to connect with the hearts of the wounded through the narrative of their lives. And as I listened to their stories, I realized how similar they are to mine.

Each life is a uniquely fashioned story, and each story contains a common thread: the cry of the heart to be *passionately known, unconditionally loved, and fully alive*. It's what we were created for, but it's often far from what we experience, especially when loss first assaults our hearts. The journey can be long, and painfully personal. But it is also about transformation, a changing and molding of the heart.

In order for this transformation to occur, we must first be willing to grant the Father a window into our soul. **If we're faithful to stay the course, transformation will flow from two sources: the choices we make about how we will handle our pain, and our willingness to be personally responsive to how God is leading us through this journey of brokenness.**

Our first challenge, then, is to obtain a decided heart. That means that we must choose whether what's happened *to us* will be the most important part of our story, or whether it will be what happens *in us* in response to our loss. If we choose the former, we will be tempted to define ourselves through the dark and cloudy lens that loss engenders. This can lead to self pity, regret, bitterness—even addictive behavior—to hide the pain, thus hindering our growth and movement.

But if we choose the latter, we will enlarge our capacity for God to work in our hearts, and we will be willing to accept the darkness in order to embrace the light—for both are intricately woven with loss. If we find the courage to choose this path, the most important part of the story will be yet to come.

More Than Answers

One thing we can all be assured of in life is loss. From the moment we take in our first breath, the process is set in motion. Jesus himself told us that in order to gain life, we must first be willing to lose it (Matthew 16:25). That truth somehow becomes obscured, however, when we think about *loss*. It implies suffering, it evokes fear, and it suggests the abandonment of control—all of which make us incredibly uncomfortable.

Loss tells a story—the story of our hearts. It’s the stuff good movies are made of—and precisely why they move us to tears. We’re interested in the heart-wrenching stories of others because somewhere between the lines we’re reading from the script of our own sad tale. We see ourselves. We see our losses. And we feel vulnerable.