

HEALING
WELL
and
LIVING FREE
from an ABUSIVE
RELATIONSHIP



From Victim to Survivor
to Overcomer

DR. RAMONA PROBASCO



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Dr. Ramona Probasco, *Healing Well and Living Free from an Abusive Relationship*
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Events in this book are described to the best of the author's recollection. In some cases the names and details of the people and situations described have been changed or presented in composite form in order to ensure the privacy of those with whom the author has worked.

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To my precious children . . .

No one gets to choose their childhood, but we all get to choose our response to it. Growing up, you each found yourself on a path that offered plenty of excuses for you to give up, to compromise, or to blame. Yet none of you have done this. Overcomers do not deny their past or their pain. Rather, they choose to heal from it, learn from it, and share with others who desire to listen. Each of you, in your own way, is doing this. You are the impetus behind my decision to heal well and live free. This choice, inspired by your love and grace, has changed my life forever. We are overcomers. We are free!

I love you dearly, Mama

To you, the reader . . .

Your courage and commitment to healing well and living free is one of the greatest gifts you can choose to give yourself. It begins with a decision that only you can make. It results in an outcome that will impact your life in ways unforeseen at this point. What I can assure you is that you will not walk this course alone. I will lay out every step along the way and pray for strength to carry you onward. You are much stronger than you realize. You are worth every bit of effort this will require. You deserve everything healing well will bring. You deserve to be free!

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Foreword

This issue of domestic violence has been something that has been glossed over, set aside, and quite honestly ignored for years. I ask myself why . . . is it because in our male-dominated world it is not an issue that in large part directly affects us as men? I am aware that violence behind closed doors happens to both men and women. Statistically, however, women are disproportionately more likely to be victimized by a male, treated as an object, exploited, and abused. Regardless of one's gender, it is a crime and a travesty that mandates our collective attention as a society and as individuals. We must no longer look the other way.

This issue has infiltrated all socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups. Therefore, domestic violence affects all of us either directly or indirectly. Since one in four women in the United States will be a victim of domestic violence at some point in her life, all of us either know someone who is caught in the perils of this evil, or we ourselves have been or are experiencing trauma of this nature.

It is only now in the area of social media, and with the help of the enormous platform that is the National Football League, that these deplorable incidences have been and are being played

out before us nationally. Domestic violence is a conversation and a concern that is now easily a top-five hot button issue that needs to be addressed in our society. As a man and a former NFL player I am saddened by the conduct of my peers and my younger, current contemporaries; and as a husband of over twenty years and a father of three daughters I cannot accept where things currently stand. My heart breaks for the children who grow up hearing and seeing this horror. How can a child grow up unscathed when he or she witnessed abuse in their home? The answer is . . . they can't.

This is why I lend my name and support behind Dr. Ramona Probasco. To me she is a picture of courage, willing to be vulnerable and transparent through her own painful past in an effort to lift others out of their current dark reality. I firmly believe the tools, training, resources, and experience she provides in this space is a part of the solution our society needs to move the needle in a more positive direction.

Ray McElroy,
former NFL player and Chicago Bears chaplain;
author; speaker; CEO of A Ray of Hope on Earth
non-profit organization; co-owner of R.M.M.
Renovation and Restoration LLC

Preface

Until you call it what it is, you're going to call it what it's not.

Dr. Ramona

For many years in my marriage, I did everything I could to try to save it. To me, promises are sacred. When I said, “I do,” it meant forever. I come from a long lineage of never-say-die stalwarts. And in many situations, this is an admirable trait. But in an abusive marriage, it can be a deadly one. Like many who experience abuse from their intimate partner, I called it everything but that.

Abusers were those scary-looking people in prison mug shots whose cold, blank stares send a chill down your spine. And victims were those weak, indecisive, afraid-of-their-own-shadow kind of people who didn't know how to stand up for themselves. So when I married my tall, dark, and handsome heartthrob (and I'm not embellishing a bit here), I practically levitated as I walked down the aisle. The thought that three years later he'd pick me up like a rag doll and throw me against the headboard of our bed was as inconceivable to me as splitting an atom with a butter knife. No way, not me. Not him. Not us.

What I didn't realize is that my experience was textbook in many ways. I minimized the verbal, emotional, and physical assaults, calling them everything and anything but abuse. I was not a victim, and he was not an abuser. I truly believed I could love him into wellness. But until you call it what it is, you're going to call it what it's not. I did just that. If you're anything remotely like me, you may be doing the same thing, saying things like, "We have a communication problem," "We need to learn how to resolve conflict better," or "We're just going through a stressful time." These are just a few of the erroneous phrases I used to minimize the abuse I was enduring—and ones I commonly hear when working with clients who have experienced abuse from their intimate partners.

I don't intend to advise you on whether or not to remain in your relationship. You alone can decide that. This book is actually the by-product of years spent pursuing authentic healing in my own life. As I began to notice seedlings of a new and healthier life growing in me, I started to share what I was learning with others struggling as I once did. As months turned into years, I began teaching graduate students what I had learned and what I had found to work in my life. I was then invited to speak on the subject matter. After all this, I was still shocked when one of my workshop attendees asked where they could purchase my book!

This book is my story—my story of how I got into, through, and out of an abusive marriage. At the same time, it's more than that. In a very personal, straightforward, honest sort of way, I pull back the curtain and let you see the secrets I held, the battle I fought, and the surrender that inevitably saved me from myself. Abusive relationships can leave emotional scars that seem inconceivable to truly heal from. What I discovered is that we can heal—and not just heal but heal well. Healing well is the precursor to living free. As a woman of deep faith, I believe we were created for freedom. Abuse in marriage is the kryptonite to freedom. Abuse, regardless of how it manifests itself, will destroy the trust and, in the end,

can destroy the relationship. More importantly, it can destroy you, and you matter.

The comforting news is . . . you can heal. You can make intentional decisions and take one step at a time to move forward and not merely move on. My heartfelt desire is that you will allow me to come alongside you as you courageously take each step. With your permission, I'd like to be a sort of sojourner supporting you and encouraging you in your journey.

What I can promise you is there is life, a great life, awaiting you. There is life after abuse. But to heal well and live free, you must choose to do so. It won't just happen. It will take effort and commitment on your part. It will be, perhaps, the hardest endeavor you have ever achieved.

This is not going to be a casual, poolside read. I have included questions at the end of each chapter that I encourage you to thoughtfully answer at your own pace. Please consider working with a counselor who has an accurate, truth-based understanding of abuse in the context of an intimate relationship. Abuse isolates us from others. One of the greatest gifts you can give yourself is to connect with trustworthy people who can support you as you work through this book.

I understand that not everyone who reads this book may embrace faith in God. My desire is not to talk you into believing in God. Issues of this nature are matters we all get to decide. I simply share my story and how having an accurate understanding that I am fully loved and accepted was a huge catalyst to deep healing in me personally. I'm not here to pressure you. I'm merely here to love you where you're at. No more, no less.

I recognize and fully acknowledge that abuse takes place in all sorts of relationships. My heart breaks for all victims. However, because the majority of abuse is perpetrated by a male toward a female, I have utilized the pronouns *he* to represent an abuser and *she* to represent a victim. This is not meant to disregard the pain

experienced in other contexts; it is merely a way to communicate with clarity. Domestic violence is also commonly referred to as intimate partner violence, and it is broadly defined to include all acts of physical, sexual, psychological, or economic violence that may be committed by a family member or intimate partner. You will notice that I use these terms interchangeably.

I'm so proud of you for considering the pursuit of healing well and living free in your own life. You will never regret your decision. You are meant to live, *really* live, and to love, *really* love.

Now I'll begin with one particular day in my story when I could no longer call it what it's not . . .

Introduction

Something Broke Inside Me

“I can’t do it this time,” I said. “I can’t come back.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because this time is different. This time something broke inside me.”

These are the words I exchanged with my former husband shortly after one of his most ferocious physical assaults. What started as what, for some couples, might be a typical husband-and-wife disagreement had escalated into something dark and ugly.

Ben—his name has been changed for privacy purposes—and I were scheduled to attend a business meeting. I was almost finished dressing, but Ben was still stretched out on the bed.

“When are you going to get ready?” I asked. “People are counting on us.”

He offered no response.

This was not a new argument for us. Ben would often back out of commitments at the last possible minute, while I always tried to keep my promises. As the minutes ticked by, I struggled to remain calm, but my stomach was in knots.

“We’ve got to go. You have to get ready,” I said, my anxiety intensifying. I could tell this wasn’t going well, and I knew the pattern. We could be headed for a family outing to Disneyland or to an event at which we were the featured speakers. At the last possible minute, Ben would stall, change his mind, and back out. Or at least lead me to believe he might back out. It was exhausting.

Ben’s temper was unpredictable. Sometimes he could be persuaded. Other times he would fly into a rage if I questioned him. His emotions could escalate quickly, going from zero to one hundred in a matter of seconds. I never knew if it was safe for us to discuss things or to disagree, and this not knowing kept me on edge.

That particular night our bickering continued as I finished my makeup. When our argument hit its peak, he cornered me in the bathroom while I was sitting on the toilet. By the time I saw the darkening anger in his eyes, I had no way to escape.

Ben is a big man, 6’2” and 250 pounds. When he is angry, his jaw clenches, and he puffs out his chest. It is almost like seeing one of those sharks on the Discovery Channel circling its prey before it attacks.

As he approached me, his face contorted in anger. I was trapped. Ben lunged at me and grabbed my head in his hands, driving his thumbs into my eye sockets. I couldn’t move, couldn’t get up. I remember thinking my skull might crack. I feared my head might split open from the enormous force. The pain was excruciating.

As I struggled under his grip, his thumbs dug even deeper into my eyes. To this day, when I close my eyes, I can remember the horrible feeling of his thumbs rolling around in my eye sockets. I could not escape. He had me cornered. I just wanted it to be over. That was the last thing I remember.

After Ben left the bathroom, my youngest daughter, age eleven at the time, came running in. I’d just stumbled into the shower, trying to “wash away” what had happened. I remember my daughter

crying and pleading, “Just leave him!” She was desperate. “You can do it, Mom! We can do it together!”

This was a horrific moment for her and for me. It affected me emotionally and physically. I could tell that something was terribly wrong with my vision. For the next several days, everything I saw was blurry. The sides of my skull throbbed, as did my eye sockets. I was petrified that my vision would never recover.

Thank God it did. But something happened that day that would change my life forever. At the precise moment when my physical ability to see was impaired, my internal ability to see came into focus.

Something broke inside me. My nearly twenty-year fight to make our marriage work was gone, and the pain I felt inside for my kids was unbearable. Mentally, emotionally, and physically, I was totally depleted. But at the same time, I could no longer silence my own voice.

I might not have realized it then, but a couple days later when I finally told him, “I can’t do it this time; I can’t (emotionally) come back,” I took my first step toward freedom. All the years of trying to “save the marriage” and “love him into wellness” had brought me to one unmistakable conclusion: it was time to save myself. It was time to love myself enough to believe that trying harder was no longer an option and that he was never going to change. On that day, with bruises still marking my face and neck, I made my first step toward healing well and living free. I chose me.

This is my story. And you might ask, “How can you go from being tossed like a rag doll to writing a book about healing from domestic abuse?” To be completely honest, the fact that I’m here now writing my story is shocking even to me!

Today I am whole again. I have learned to listen to my own voice and to honor and respect myself. I am free from an unhealthy, abusive marriage. My children are safe. I am happily remarried. I have a thriving counseling practice where I’ve been able to hear hundreds

of women's stories and help them along the path to healing from an abusive relationship. I even get to travel the country, telling my story and speaking about healing well from domestic violence.

There is hope for you too. I am living proof of it. In the pages that follow, I'll walk you through the actual steps I took to free myself from this relationship not only physically but also emotionally. I will teach you what I teach others who desire to heal well from the trauma that an abusive relationship causes. There is no quick fix. There are no easy answers. But there is a path to healing that you can take one step at a time.

You can heal. It will not be an easy road, but this one thing I can guarantee: where it takes you will be far better than the destination of the road you were on. Trust me. It all starts with the first step. We'll walk together. You can do this.

You may not believe that things will ever change, that your life can ever be different. But for now, know that I believe in you. And in time, you can learn to believe in yourself.

Until then, *believe in my belief.*

1

My Story

After greeting Amber, I sat in the comfortable brown leather chair in my office and invited her to sit down as well. Amber sat down warily, holding a fresh cup of hot tea. She wore workout clothes, and her brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail she'd tucked under a ball cap. She sipped her tea. After a few moments of quiet, I smiled at her, and she weakly smiled back.

Sensing her anxiety, I wanted to set Amber at ease by affirming her decision to pursue counseling. I let her know that I understood how difficult it can be to open up to a person you've never met before. Over the next few minutes, as I gently asked her questions, she began to share her story with me. It wasn't long before her tears began to flow.

You see, Amber hadn't told her story to anyone yet. And as she began to speak, I felt empathy and something else. A rising hope. Why? Because that first step—telling your story—is absolutely necessary for healing from an abusive relationship. I've been blessed to see this process hundreds of times now in my career.

Authentic healing from an abusive relationship begins with telling your story. When you tell your story, even to yourself, you're taking an honest inventory of where you are, how you have changed, and how living a secret life behind closed doors has altered you.

Your story belongs to you, and it's yours to tell. It is no one else's. It is yours alone. Telling your story will give you power over it and eventually allow you to make peace with it.

I'll go first.

You have heard about the turning point—the moment I realized something had to change. Now come with me as we turn back the hands of time so you can take a brief glimpse into the years that led up to that horrific day—the day I experienced one of the most frightening physical assaults by my former husband and the day I finally realized that I could no longer save my marriage.

While my story involves many broken promises, broken dreams, and a broken heart, it did not begin that way.

Once upon a Time

My growing-up years were wonderful in many ways. I am the oldest of three children, with two younger brothers. My parents came from very different backgrounds. My father escaped from a communist country when he was still a teenager, and my mother was raised in the Midwest by a saint of a mother but a tyrant of a father. My parents were and are overcomers, strong and resilient with hearts of gold.

While my family was loving and traditional, much of my childhood was riddled with seasons of financial instability. By the time I was seventeen years old, we had moved numerous times. My dad was a land developer with a keen eye for real estate. He built beautiful custom homes and magnificent subdivisions. I am proud of my dad in many ways. Even so, his tenacity to never give up was both a blessing and a curse. Knowing when to surrender was not his strong point. His willingness to take risks was an asset when

he ran for his life across the communist border, but this same trait at times cost him and his family dearly. I can see in my own life how this has been something I, too, have struggled with and have had to learn how to manage in a healthier way.

The industry my dad chose provided the opportunity for big rewards but also the potential for big risks. In this environment, his relentless work ethic and never-say-die attitude paid off tremendously, and we enjoyed luxuries that others could not. But at the same time, the risks caused my family and my mom a great deal of pain. As an adult, I understand the risks, but as a child, they were troubling. One year my dad would be named “Builder of the Year,” and the next, due to a downturn in the economy, he would lose everything. We never knew when the other shoe was going to drop. I remember coming home from school one day to find a man repossessing my mother’s Cadillac from the garage. Throughout it all, my mom showed a quiet strength that was the backbone of our family. I now realize that she passed this characteristic on to me. For that, I am so thankful.

During the summer between my sophomore and junior years of high school, we spent a couple months in California while my father explored the area for potential business endeavors. On that summer vacation to the Pacific Coast, my life took a significant turn. At age sixteen, I met my future husband, Ben, in a perfect, teenage romantic, storybook moment. Ironically, it was my father who introduced us. I say “ironically” because my parents kept me pretty sheltered. Since I was the only girl, my parents were very protective, sending me to an all-girls private school. I had never really dated or even had opportunities to meet boys before I met Ben.

My Prince

One afternoon I went for a walk on the beach with a friend. When I came back, Ben was there, kicking a soccer ball around with my

brothers. By the time I arrived, Ben had met my parents. My dad introduced me to this tall, handsome boy, a sophomore in college with six-pack abs. He said, “I’d like for you to meet my daughter, Ramona.” I was immediately drawn to him. Ben had a sharp wit and goofy, boyish appeal.

We went on our first date before my family left California to return home. Ben was the perfect gentleman and even brought me a dozen roses. My parents let us take their car, and he took me out to dinner on a ferryboat on the water. He had a great sense of humor, and I remember a lot of laughing.

After that summer vacation, my dad announced that we would be moving to the West Coast. While I was upset to leave my friends, I was excited to reunite with Ben. He’d been calling me almost every day since our date, and our romance had gained momentum.

The next few years were rocky ones for both me and my family. But whenever I found myself overwhelmed by my circumstances, Ben was my knight in shining armor. He would give me a ride, bring groceries, or simply offer a shoulder to cry on. He became my own personal hero.

It seemed to me that Ben always put me first. I remember how I used to watch his college soccer games on television. One night during a particularly difficult time for my family, I was planning to watch his game on TV. The sportscasters were announcing the players as they ran onto the field, but when they announced Ben’s name, he wasn’t there. This puzzled me. Shortly afterward, there was a knock on my door, and there he was. He had left the game to be by my side instead. Ben grew to mean more and more to me in many ways.

During that time, I came to understand Jesus in a new and personal way. In fact, Ben was the first one to talk to me about Him. Early in our relationship, he asked me what I thought about Jesus. I remember thinking, *Wow, is he a Jesus freak?* But it was

through Ben and a few dear friends that my relationship with God deepened and became a stabilizing force in my life.

Ben and I continued to date, most of the time from a distance. When Ben was a sophomore in college, he left school to join the military. He spent the next four years in a special operations division. He became obsessed with training, toughness, and being at the top of his class. He broke battalion records and would repeat the mantra he had been taught: “Kill, kill, kill.” I saw him slowly transform before my eyes, but I continued to trust him.

Throughout those tumultuous end-of-high-school years, Ben romanced me from afar, solidifying what I thought was genuine attachment. Ours was a storybook romance. My girlfriends would gather to hear his love letters. He would send me FTD bouquets, and my friends would swoon.

During my freshman year of college, Ben proposed. I was taken aback. After all, he was the only man I’d ever dated, and I knew I was still young. While I was very hesitant, I said, “If you promise to support me through my highest degree, then I’ll go for it with you.” He agreed.

By this time, I was starting to see signs of trouble in our relationship, but even early on, I ignored my gut. One minute Ben could be charming, and the next moment I would see another side of him. Often I would mail him care packages. In one of them, I included a photo album. A particular photo set Ben off. It was of me and a bunch of college friends, including some guy friends. Upset by this, he drove all through the night from Georgia to my college in Tulsa, Oklahoma. When my phone rang, he said he was waiting downstairs in my dorm. “I came to see you,” he said.

Ben was furious about one of the guys in the photo, assuming I had been romantically involved with him in some way. He said he had driven all night, across country, to beat up my friend. I managed to calm him down and told him that everything he was thinking was simply not true. Later that night, he agreed to meet

my friend. When he did, he saw for himself that my friend was a nice person. Ben even asked for his forgiveness.

Now I know that his quick turnaround was odd, but at the time, I decided, “Okay, he must really care about me.” While Ben’s reaction scared me, I minimized it in my mind. I convinced myself that he loved me, and I chose to focus on his good side.

Looking back, most of the times with Ben were wonderful. When we were able to be together, I was swept off my feet. We attended romantic military balls in formal attire. We rode roller coasters until our heads spun. He treated me to four-course fancy dinners. We had a special rock, “our rock,” where we watched the sun set over the ocean. Ben even drew a sketch of us sitting there together that I framed.

To me, Ben was romantic, attentive, caring, and supportive. I felt loved, and I was falling for him, hard. We dated for three and a half years before marrying. What I didn’t realize at the time was that our brief rendezvous were definitely not the ideal way to really get to know someone. We were separated by miles, and our limited exposure allowed him to maintain a perfect façade that would eventually begin to crumble after we wed.

Just prior to our wedding, I began to see more problems. He would call me names or put me down, saying things to cause me to doubt myself. If I expressed any discontent or concern about our pending marriage, he would explode. I remember him saying multiple times, “Just give me the ring then. It’s over!” But those negative moments were followed by wonderful ones. One minute he could be harsh, but the next minute he could be playful and attentive.

Why didn’t I run for the hills? I just didn’t. The way I saw it, Ben had always been there for me when I needed someone. It seemed to me that the distance and time spent apart were emotionally hard on both of us. Marriage appeared to be the perfect solution. So Ben and I stood at the altar, marrying at the ripe old ages of nineteen and twenty-two years old.

Thus begins my story of falling in love, marrying, and having three incredible children, all while growing up and then growing apart. Unfortunately, what began like a fairy tale romance would turn out to be anything but blissful. Tragedy would soon unfold in my life, and the starry-eyed teenager would become the black-eyed wife.

In the following chapters, I will continue my story of love, marriage, children, and abuse. I will attempt to tell you the whole story—the moments I am proud of and the moments I would just as soon forget.

Through It All

I believe that God protected me and my children through all those years. When I was walking through the darkest days, I felt the Lord saying to me, “I am with you, even when you don’t feel Me.” He is the One who ultimately helped me turn my focus away from saving my marriage and believing that I could love Ben into wellness. God never stopped showing me how much He loved me and how He desired that I live in freedom. He gave me the tenacity to survive and move forward with resilience.

Today I can say with assurance that God is good. God loves me. He continues to walk with me through my story. He is healing my children and me day by day, and He desires to do the same for you.

No matter how despicable or desperate your situation might be, I am convinced there is hope for you too. And I believe that God can use these experiences to bring about a greater good for you and for others.

Your Story

I firmly believe that my entire story is important, and so is yours.

Your story is incredibly significant. And so are you.

That may be a tough statement for you to believe right now. Abuse has a way of blinding us to our own value. You are probably exhausted. You may feel defeated and isolated. When we experience abuse, our tendency is to withdraw into a dark, private corner, fearful that anyone may further hurt or destroy us. And for those who do not withdraw physically, certainly many withdraw emotionally.

At this point, you may feel as if you have little belief left in you. How can you believe in anything when you are broken and empty, with no energy left to imagine life can ever get better? Or maybe you're wondering if you will ever feel joy, peace, or happiness again. How can you believe there is hope? How can you believe in a life after abuse?

I want to take your hand and help you out of that place. I want you to know you are in a safe space, that I care about who you are and where you have been. If I could sit down with you today, over a cup of coffee, I would encourage you with this: it's time to tell your story, at least to yourself. You're ready. And God is on your side. Understandably, some of you may be struggling to believe that God is on your side. Experiencing abuse can leave us feeling distant from Him or questioning if He cares at all. (This is a very important subject that I cover later in the book.)

One of my clients put it this way: "Now that I've begun to talk with you about my story and write about it, I no longer feel like a character in somebody else's story. I used to see my husband as so much larger than life. I thought someday books would be written about him, and I'd be 'his wife.' I'm only beginning to understand that my story is *mine*. I'm learning that many women feel that way—that we are supporting characters in somebody else's story. But that's not the truth."

Your First Step toward Freedom: Telling Your Story

In my own life, God used what felt and looked like a personal failure to bring about something beautiful. I am living proof. Miracles

are not just for Jesus's time. They still happen today. My children and I are a living testimony to the fact that not only do miracles happen, but they are also not intended to be kept in a box for ourselves. Instead, we can choose to share our stories with others. By telling our stories, we can discover that our pain has purpose.

That is why I am telling my story. And that is why I encourage you to tell yours when you're ready.

"It was tough at first for me to tell my story," Kate said as she fiddled with a Kleenex on her lap. "I felt like people would judge me and that it would bring shame. But I've experienced just the opposite. Sharing what I went through with people I trust has been not just healing for me but also beneficial for others. I had no idea other people were hiding pain like this too. It's been so freeing!"

The good news is that Jesus wants to set us free (John 8:36; Galatians 5:1). He provides freedom for everyone who chooses it. It is my hope that you will choose it for yourself. What Christ has done for me, He wants to and will do for you. You were created to be loved, respected, valued, and treasured. Life can be tough for all of us at times, but intimate relationships by design are meant to be safe havens, places of refuge. Anything short of that is not God's desire for you. He sees you as the "apple of his eye" (Psalm 17:8). If your experience runs contrary to this, it's time to consider new possibilities, a new way of living and loving. Love is never supposed to involve abuse. This includes you.

Your first step, telling your story, is not easy or simple. I have walked down that road of isolation and fear. You may feel discouraged or even reluctant to believe that this horrible time in your life will ever end and that you can experience peace and happiness again. I understand. I have been there too.

But now I am standing on the other side with the assurance that healing is possible. There is life after abuse. A good life awaits you. One of my favorite verses from the Bible says, "Weeping may

last through the night, but joy comes with the morning” (Psalm 30:5 NLT). I am so thankful for this promise, and it can be your promise too. While our stories may be filled with weeping, we can be assured that “joy comes with the morning.”

Cling with me to this promise as we walk this journey together. Take my hand. Now let’s begin.

Questions to Ponder

At this point in every chapter, I’d like you to write out your thoughts. If you do not have a journal, now is the perfect time to start one. This is your space to be honest, to say what is actually on your heart and mind. Record what has happened, put your stake in the ground, mark where you are, and watch how you will grow.

Please be aware that what you share in this journal needs to be private. You will want to keep it in a safe place. If you know that it will never be read by anyone else, you will find the freedom to speak truth without fear.

Take the time right now to begin writing your story. Even if what you actually put to paper is brief, even if it is just the start of your story, that’s okay. It’s important that you see something written out. Your story matters. You matter.

Here are some questions to help you get started:

1. Begin writing your story today. You may want to include the following points:
 - a. How did the two of you meet?
 - b. What attracted you to him?
 - c. Can you identify some things in your life that may have caused a void that you thought perhaps he could fill (such as family-of-origin experiences and belief systems)?

d. Early on, what were some of the things he said and did that were warning signs that you may not be able to trust him with your heart?

As difficult as it may be, I encourage you to utilize the abuse evaluation form (refer to appendix A). Circle every word or phrase listed on that form that describes what you have experienced in your relationship (even if it happened “only once”).

e. Add anything else you think is important to your story to include at this time.

2. Do you believe it’s possible for you to heal well from the pain you have experienced in your relationship?
3. When you reflect on the concept of freedom as it applies to an intimate partner relationship, what would it look like for you? How does your current experience compare?
4. Are you willing to invest the time in yourself to heal well and live free? If this decision is a struggle, I encourage you to believe that you are worth it.

Prayer of Reflection

At the end of each chapter, I’d like to offer a prayer for you to read and meditate on. I hope it will be just a start, the nudge you need to pray on your own. Perhaps you are a person of prayer and turn to God regularly with your deepest hurts and concerns. Or you may be someone who struggles with belief in God, especially in light of the pain you are experiencing. But for now, will you give me permission to pray with you here, to give you a start, to open the door to encourage you to be honest before God? Prayer is simply talking with God. It’s a way for you to share your deepest hurts and emotions with Him. You can tell God, honestly, what is

on your heart. Pray with me. Unburden yourself before God and know that He hears and that He cares for you.

God, I'm scared. There's a brokenness inside me that feels beyond repair. My life has not turned out as I had hoped. I trusted and loved someone who betrayed me and bruised me in ways that only You can see. It is so painful to think about my own story. It feels almost unbearable. Help me to believe that I can heal—not just heal but heal well. Your Word says that You, Jesus, died so I can be free. Show me how this translates in my life. I am not sure how to be free or where to begin. But You do. You know me. You know my story. You alone can heal my broken heart. Today I place my heart, my hopes, and my life into Your safe hands. The safest place I can be is with You. Your Word promises that You will never leave me. Thank You for loving me even when I doubt You, when I feel abandoned and so alone. You're with me now. Please take my hand and walk me through this journey to healing well. Together, we can do this. Amen.

God's Enduring Promises

You may be very familiar with the Bible, or this might be the first time you've ever read it. No matter what your personal faith journey looks like, I'd like to share some of the Bible passages that were helpful to me. There were times when I read these verses over and over again, through tears, clinging to the hope that they promise.

I am sick at heart.

How long, O LORD, until you restore me?

Return, O LORD, and rescue me.

Save me because of your unfailing love.

For the dead do not remember you.

Who can praise you from the grave?

I am worn out from sobbing.

All night I flood my bed with weeping,

drenching it with my tears.

My vision is blurred by grief;

my eyes are worn out because of all my enemies.

Go away, all you who do evil,

for the LORD has heard my weeping.

The LORD has heard my plea;

the LORD will answer my prayer. (Psalm 6:3–9 NLT)

But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted;

you consider their grief and take it in hand.

The victims commit themselves to you;

you are the helper of the fatherless. (Psalm 10:14)

I call on you, my God, for you will answer me;

turn your ear to me and hear my prayer.

Show me the wonders of your great love,

you who save by your right hand

those who take refuge in you from their foes.

Keep me as the apple of your eye;

hide me in the shadow of your wings

from the wicked who are out to destroy me,

from my mortal enemies who surround me. (Psalm

17:6–9)

He reached down from heaven and rescued me;

he drew me out of deep waters.

He rescued me from my powerful enemies,

from those who hated me and were too strong for me.

They attacked me at a moment when I was in distress,

but the LORD supported me.

He led me to a place of safety;

he rescued me because he delights in me. (Psalm 18:16–

19 NLT)

So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:36)

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)