



Find the Power
to Escape
Your Past

FREE
YOURSELF
BE
YOURSELF

ALAN D. WRIGHT

WITH FOREWORD BY GARY CHAPMAN

Previously Released as *Shame Off You*

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MULTNOMAH
BOOKS

FREE YOURSELF, BE YOURSELF
PUBLISHED BY MULTNOMAH BOOKS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

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ISBN 978-1-60142-276-7
ISBN 978-0-307-56326-2 (electronic)

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

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Cataloging-in-Publication data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America
2010

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To my children:
May you soar to great heights
in the certainty of my love,
never in search of it.

*For Abigail,
her father's joy:*
I love you more than a million
Ghirardelli hot fudge sundaes.

and

*For Bennett,
his father's blessing:*
I love your sixty-yard sand wedge hole outs,
art masterpieces, and excellent schoolwork.
But I love you—just you—a million times more.

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acknowledgments

my thanks to:

Anne, my love. Aren't we blessed that, instead of my shame snuffing you out, your grace lit me up? Thanks for the depth of love that comes with two decades of marriage and for blessing me to write another book.

Jim Glasgow, Pastor "Gem." When, upon completion of your doctorate in ministry so many years ago, your child retorted to a friend, "My dad is a doctor, but not the kind that can help anybody," she was wrong. You've doctored my soul a thousand times. You're one of the best doctors in the world and I love you.

Mickey Thigpen. I'm pretty sure I'd lay my life down for you. I'm positive you've already laid yours down for me. It's not your intelligence, your work ethic, your theological insight, your humor, or your skill at running the church that I love about you most—it's your heart.

Katherine Currie. You are extraordinary. Ordinary people would become self-absorbed in your circumstances, but you have not turned inward with anxiety—you have turned outward with love. Thanks for giving Alan Wright Ministries the time that you did not have so that more people could discover God's love.

Bob Roach. Elder, pilot, mentor, friend, brother, promoter, planner, giver, and, when needed, rump kicker. Thanks for having the skill to fly this message around the nation, but thanks more for having the heart.

Reynolda elders. Your partnership in the gospel is a delight.

Pastor's Prayer Partners. As God breathes out blessing upon those who read these pages, it's because He first breathed in the incense of your intercession.

Reynolda Presbyterian Church. Oh, your hunger for the Word! Every weekend I feel like a grandmother smiling to see her Thanksgiving feast gobbled up by her hungry family.

Dudley Hall. The reason I had to write this book is because I couldn't package up you and send you to bookstores around the world. Whatever good can be read in these pages can already be seen more clearly in your life. Thanks so much for spiritually fathering me.

Don Jacobson. Phone calls with you are not chats, they are God moments. Thanks for letting me partner with Multnomah again.

Larry Libby. Man, you've got style! Thanks for capturing my heart and helping it beat more vividly on these pages.

foreword

BY GARY CHAPMAN

all of us have a history, and all of us have a future. We cannot change the past, but we can create our future. For most of us, our past is a mixed bag—some good memories and some painful memories. We have made some wise choices and some poor choices. We have been treated kindly by some people and have been abused by others. The experiences of the past speak to us every day. Some days, we hear, “You’re appreciated; you made the right decision; you have many friends and great potential.” Other days, we hear, “No one loves you; you are a loser; you will never amount to anything; you have no future.”

How we respond to these voices from the past will determine our future. As a counselor, I have listened as people have told me of their distressing past. They speak of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. They feel hurt, anger, and shame. On the one hand, they blame the people who hurt them, and on the other hand, they wallow in self-condemnation. Some have lived in the bondage of resentment and have sought to take revenge on those who have hurt them. The road of revenge has led some to atrocious acts of violence in an effort to “make them pay” for their wrongs. Others have turned their anger toward themselves. They blame themselves for all that has happened to them. They dress themselves in cloaks of shame and live behind emotional sunglasses, afraid to let anyone know who they really are. They reason that “No one would love me if they really knew me.”

We were not created to live under cloaks of shame. The wonderful message from God is that He loves us and wants to heal our past, put His Spirit within us, and lead us into a fruitful future. With those who have sinned against us, God will be the judge. He is committed to justice and mercy. If they repent, God will forgive them. If they do not repent, God will judge them. We can release them and our hurt and anger into the hands of a loving and just God. We can breathe deeply and walk into the future freed from the pain of the past.

If you have pronounced judgment upon yourself for past failures or abuses, and imposed the sentence of misery upon your soul, God reminds you that Christ has already paid your penalty. You are free to walk out of jail and experience the freedom of release. The sun is shining. The flowers are blooming. You are free to enjoy the beauty of walking with God.

In this book, Alan Wright will share with you the details of how to experience freedom from shame and how to release your enemies to God. What you are about to read will show you how to *free* yourself to *be* yourself. God made you in His image. That image will be revealed as you lay aside the clothes of self-condemnation and blame and put on the clothes of forgiveness, kindness, and love. I predict that as you read and apply the principles in this book, you will discover your true self—the person God made you to be.

And I think you're going to love the person you discover.

—GARY CHAPMAN, author of *The Five Love Languages*
and *Love as a Way of Life*

CHAPTER ONE

COUP D'état

Today is the anniversary of Saddam Hussein's execution. Not so very long ago, his birthday was the most celebrated day on the Iraqi calendar. Now, however, the ousted, humbled, and imprisoned dictator has been tried, sentenced, and hung by the judicial system of a liberated and democratic Iraq. For several years, there has been no summoning of the citizenry to the mandatory birthday festivities.

With the former Baathist strongman's execution for crimes against humanity, more and more Iraqi citizens have come forward with tales of cruelty and torture at the hands of the former regime.

For some reason, the stories from the Iraqi national soccer team grieved me more than the rest. Once the athletes were speaking freely, we learned that they were severely punished if they didn't win. Before each game, Uday, Saddam's elder son, would call the team captain with threats of imprisonment—or worse—if they lost.

"The players would start crying," said Emmanuel Baba, a team member. "They would tremble with fear."¹

Players told of being flogged, imprisoned, and put to forced labor in the wake of losing important games. They dared not quit

the team for fear of being executed. One of the star players, Laith Hussein, confessed: "I thought many times of leaving soccer, but how could I? I was afraid of what Uday would do to me and my family. I would sit and cry when I was by myself. I want to play soccer for myself and the Iraqi people, not for Uday."

The soccer players' testimonies grip me so painfully because, in the first place, their suffering was linked to a game. A *game!* A game that kids play in their backyards. A game invented for only one end...fun. Life under an oppressive regime is hard enough. But when even the games become venues for punishment, it seems that humanity has sunk to its lowest ebb.

Upon further reflection, I must admit that the grief I feel while reading about the weeping soccer players runs deeper than my compassion for the abused athletes. I realize that I grieve for myself. On the one hand, the Iraqi oppression is a million miles away. An alien culture. A distant drama.

On the other hand, it is the story of my own soul.

THE DICTATOR WITHIN

I've had many successes in my life. But what has motivated my efforts for victory? The fun of the game, or the fear of punishment if I don't win? Have my accomplishments been fueled by the fulfillment I feel when I use my gifts well, or by the tyrannical threat to my self-worth if I don't always come out on top? Have I repeatedly entered life's field of endeavor to play for myself and the kingdom I represent, or has it been for a hidden, inward Uday calling before each game with his threats?

My answers to those self-inventory questions were laid bare one evening when I was enjoying bedtime prayers with my eight-

year-old boy. I couldn't believe my ears when Bennett told God what he was thankful for that night. The next day was to be a big day for the boy—he was going to take his first academic tests. Because we'd been homeschooling Bennett for his second grade year, he hadn't been taking exams in traditional school fashion. So in keeping with our state law, we had contracted with an independent expert to test our son's scholastic aptitude.

I'm an unlikely homeschool parent because I spent my whole educational life maneuvering successfully in the traditional school system. I discovered early on that I could do well on tests. And it felt wonderful to excel. I not only wanted to make A's; I wanted to make "100s." I didn't want to make a great score; I wanted to make the *best* score. What started as a feeling of satisfaction over a job well done became a growing internal pressure to always be the best in the class. Anything less than an A would silently sting my soul. So I studied as much as necessary to ensure those top marks.

I loved those A's. My first semester at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I made straight A's. My dad wrote me at the end of that semester, expressing his pride in my accomplishment. I've kept that note for twenty-four years.

Though I loved making good grades, I didn't like tests. Tests were the cause of my late-night cramming sessions, churning stomach, and general dread. Life was always a matter of getting done with the tests. I always thought that life would begin for me when I had finished all my exams.

So there I knelt, the lifelong grade-fanatic of a dad, next to an eight-year-old boy who had never taken an academic test in his life. If you've ever felt an undue inward pressure to perform or the fear of possible failure at an upcoming exam, you'll understand why my boy's innocent prayer moved me so deeply.

“Lord, I’m thankful for all the fun things we did today, and God,” Bennett prayed sincerely, “thank You that tomorrow the man is coming to our house and I get to take those tests.”

I hid my tears so as not to confuse the lad who had prayed the golden prayer. I wept for joy because my boy was not afraid. No, more than that. I wept because I realized that my boy was learning for the sheer fun of learning, not for the tyranny of a test. It reminded me that there is a way to live apart from the pressure to perform. It filled me with joy to realize that my life-long oppressor had found no hold on my child.

Oh what sweet freedom is this! I wondered as I wiped my eyes. What delicious liberty fills this boy’s heart.

Will you allow me one unadulterated parental boast? Second-grader Bennett, the examiner told us, tested as high as seventh grade level and no lower than fourth grade. How could it be? With no fear, no cramming, no late-night caffeine, my boy was outperforming the best I had ever brought to the classroom tests of my childhood!

There are two motives that can make a soccer player try hard—the fear of Uday or the fun of the game. There are two motives that can make a boy learn—the fear of the test or the thrill of discovery. There are two motives for succeeding in life—the fear of falling short or the faith that flies high.

It’s just about that simple.

LIFE MOTIVATORS

All people who try hard at life do so for one of two reasons—they’re fearful and looking for acceptance, or they’re fulfilled and looking to make a difference.

These opposing life motivators are matters of the heart and can be well hidden from public view. This silent tyranny in my life wasn't revealed to me until I really wanted to improve my life. An honest inventory of my strengths and weaknesses revealed some recurring problems in my character that led me to some hard questions.

Here's the unvarnished truth. I, Alan Wright, couldn't bear even the mildest criticisms. As a result, I usually overreacted, justifying myself in the process or feeling a disproportionate weight of guilt. I tended to hear innocent questions or comments as criticisms. My wife's "the garbage needs to go out" sounded to me like "you're slacking." If she said, "the kids really have missed you this week while you were away" it sounded to me like "you're a bad father." *Why was I so sensitive to anything resembling criticism?*

I discovered mixed motives behind even my best efforts. Even when I was at my best, preaching well, helping someone in a crisis, or reaching out to a lonely person, I had to wonder, *Am I just doing this to help my church be successful so I will be a successful pastor and feel good about myself?*

I had difficulty speaking direct truth to people. Instead, I spent enormous energy behind the scenes trying to smooth things over or remove a person from a church leadership position without actually confronting the individual. That left me not only feeling phony, but also tired and often ineffective as a leader. *Why did I need everyone to like me?*

When I wanted my wife to change, I pointed out her deficiencies instead of encouraging her in all her strengths. We're in our twentieth year of marriage now and I'm happier than ever, but it took me a long time to see what I was doing. In the first

years of marriage, I wasn't satisfied with her housekeeping. Then, for years after that, I wanted her to be more fit. In the early years of pastoring, I put pressure on her to be at church events because "what would people think" if the pastor's wife wasn't there? Anybody would tell you, Anne is a marvel—a joyous, beautiful, gifted woman. *With such a log in my own eye, why was I pointing out the specks in hers?*

I felt unduly doomed by my failures. I remember once getting a speeding ticket and, after the officer left I just sat in my car, shell-shocked and stunned, as if I had just committed a heinous crime. If I preached a bad sermon or we had poor attendance at church, I secretly worried about it. I was driven to succeed. Any other possibility elicited unadulterated dread. *Why couldn't I fail without feeling like a failure?*

I had a hard time keeping a sense of balance in my life. I caused a lot of stress in our marriage because I became so consumed with ministry. I felt like I had to say yes to every request for my help. Sometimes it seemed like everyone had access to my time except my own family. *Why did I have such vague boundaries in my life?*

I felt overly responsible for others' burdens. When I took clinical pastoral education in seminary and served each week as a hospital chaplain, I came home with awful headaches. When the doctor tested me and determined that I had no physiological problem, I had to admit that I was coming home from the hospital with all the patients' problems attached to me. I remember trying to watch a TV show with my wife at home one evening and thinking, "How can I sit here and enjoy this show while all those people are down at the hospital suffering so?" *Why couldn't I care for others without having to take on the weight of the world?*

I turned down honors and gifts. I know this may sound inconceivably stupid, but I was offered a full scholarship to seminary, a prize offered to only one incoming student. It would have paid everything. But I turned it down because I thought someone else “might need it more.” On another occasion while in seminary, I preached at a nearby church one Sunday and was approached by a wealthy man in that congregation. He told me that he felt led to pay for my seminary. Further, he would like to help launch me into ministry the way he had helped another nationally known preacher.

I turned down both his offers.

How dumb can you get? What was wrong with me? *Was I really being nobly humble, or did I unconsciously think I didn't deserve such gifts and honors?*

Though I never fell into outright addiction, I felt its continual pull. I don't know how I managed to keep myself out of the snare. Partly fear, I suppose. I wouldn't let myself get swept away with pornography or sexual addiction because I feared it would cost me my ministry. I feared alcohol addiction because it was a family wrecker in my childhood home. I might have become fully addicted to my work if I didn't fear my wife abandoning me. *Why did I have to rely on fear to keep me from addictive behavior?*

Though I was successful, I often felt like an imposter. When I was a freshman in college, I took an honors section of a religion course. I never spoke out loud in the discussion class. After the first exam, the professor wrote on my paper, “Alan, anyone who can write an exam like this—nearly flawless work—really ought to speak out in class.” Even then, I thought, *I'm not as smart as you think.*

Even as senior pastor of a vital church, I tended to think, “What am I doing in this position? Someone else could do a better job.” When others lauded me, I often thought, “Yeah, but I’m not really as good as you think.” *Why didn’t it ever occur to me that maybe God HAD given me some important gifts and I DID have something special to offer?*

I felt held back from true greatness. I knew I could succeed, but only to a point. I had a gnawing sense that I would never fulfill my destiny until I felt differently about myself. As a kid, I played tennis and was ranked as high as twelfth in North Carolina, but I could never imagine myself being the best. I could see myself being really good at a lot of things, but I couldn’t imagine myself becoming great.

I remember watching former Chicago Bulls great Michael Jordan when the game was on the line. He *wanted* the ball in his hands at the last second because he believed in his own greatness. Not me. I never wanted the ball in my hands for the last shot. At that last second, I would be too prone to think about the misery of shooting an air ball instead of the euphoria of swishing the net. It all left me wondering, *Is there something in me that shies away from ultimate success?*

sweet freedom

I now know the answer to those questions. I now know the root of my problems.

It’s called shame.

Simply put, shame is a feeling of being inwardly flawed—of not measuring up. It probably sneaked into my soul back in fourth grade, when my family broke up. I became introverted and

didn't talk about how embarrassed I was to be in a family besieged by alcoholism and divorce. I felt best about myself when I performed well, but never felt I performed *well enough*. Knowing you have to measure up in order to feel acceptable while knowing that you can't quite measure up leaves you with a gnawing anxiety that wreaks havoc in your soul.

These pages are, in large part, the memoirs of my coup d'état. Unlike Saddam, Shame is a tyrant that has no mustache, no giant statues of himself on display, and no portraits on every street corner. In fact, this tyrant prefers to remain in hiding and to rule undercover. For most of my life, I didn't even know it was there, hiding in my soul, silently dictating the direction of so many of my thoughts and emotions.

I'm pleased to report that Shame has been overthrown and Grace has become the main motivator in my life. But like anyone in a newly emancipated land, I still face skirmishes with the enemy. And I'm still discovering how to live as a newly liberated citizen.

I can't promise you that this freedom from shame comes easily or automatically, but I can promise you that real freedom is available.

And that it's sweet.

Sweeter than anything I've ever tasted.

You know how you feel after you've been successful? Everyone smiles and applauds your performance. No one berates you, no one shames or pressures you. Isn't the bliss of pure acceptance sweet? Can you imagine feeling like that all the time? Would you be shocked if I told you that's what life is supposed to feel like?

Imagine being able to laugh when you fall instead of looking

around to see who else is laughing. Imagine failure becoming a teacher to instruct you rather than a ghost to haunt you. Imagine the deep, vague anxiety in your gut becoming a cool, quiet satisfaction instead. Imagine having no need to put others down because you feel so good about yourself. Imagine being able to enjoy your friends, your family, and your spouse instead of relegating them to the back burner in order to pursue your next accomplishment. Imagine feeling no terror at the thought of baring your soul to a confidant. Imagine the return of a real belly laugh. Imagine your thirst for booze, the adult channel, the shopping binge, or whatever numbs your hidden anxiety gone, quenched by a stream of living mercy.

I write because I have spent years studying the oppressive regime of shame in the souls of men and women. I want to expose this no good dictator for what it is—a vaporous liar that rules by fear. We will expose the anatomy of shame, dissecting it piece by piece. When you see it and understand it, you'll say not only, "I can't believe I've been motivated by that monster," but, "I want to be free!"

And free you can be. I promise—because God promises that "the truth will set you free." We need fresh explanations of the truth to correct our thinking, and we also need stories to touch our hearts and heal our wounds. The pages that follow offer more than an explanation of psychological principles; they offer the real stories of those set free by a transcendent Love. Stories of ordinary people like you and me.

Some of these ordinary lives are set in the landscape of the Bible. Some in my parish or home. Though I must reveal the emotional and mental dynamics of shame, I pledge to avoid getting lost in psychological technicalities. In fact, I pledge to do

what I love most—tell my favorite love story.

I ask this of you. Be open-minded. Most people don't think they have shame issues, but all people do to some extent. Your shame may have some of the classic roots—broken home, alcoholic parent, abuse, molestation, performance pressure, conditional love. Or you may have simply breathed in shame like secondhand smoke from the polluted atmosphere of a fallen world. After all, shame is not only the tool of parents. Shame is everywhere and has been used in every setting—teachers, coaches, friends, employers, neighbors, And sadly, perhaps most profusely, preachers.

Please don't think your shame is too deep for anyone to understand. No matter how deep your wound, there's hope for healing in the pages to come. And please don't think your shame is so light that it should be ignored. Discovering these truths may mean the difference in living life halfheartedly and living life abundantly.

Though I write from the perspective of a follower of Jesus Christ, you don't have to be a Christian to benefit from what I have to say. Just understanding what motivates you will help you to change. Knowing your enemy's tactics will help you to defeat him. So regardless of your faith perspective, be assured that I do not write about shame in order to shame you into believing as I do. That said, if I am to be of any benefit to you, I must be transparent enough to show you how my soul is being healed. Ultimately, I have no healing mysteries to share but those that are plainly revealed in the Lover of my soul, Jesus Christ. Ultimately, I have no empowering gift to offer but the living presence of God's Spirit, who daily bathes me in grace.

What is your master motive? For whom do you perform? Joy

or Uday? It's time for your coup d'état. Time to change your motive for success. Time to play the soccer match because it's fun, not because you're scared. Time to *enjoy* excellence instead of striving for it. Join me for a magnificent journey from fear to fulfillment. From hidden pressure to hidden peace. Though others have tried to motivate you with the refrain "Shame on you," I'm here with a new command: "Shame off you!"

ASK A Question to Inquire:

What motivates my efforts for victory—the fear of failure or the fullness of self-worth?

BELIEVE A Principle to Ponder:

“Every person who tries hard at life does so for one of two reasons—he’s fearful and looking for acceptance or he’s fulfilled and looking to make a difference.”

I do not need fear to motivate me for God has not given me a spirit that makes me “a slave again to fear, [for I have] received the Spirit of sonship” (Romans 8:15).

CHOOSE A Commitment to Keep:

I choose today to uncover shame’s influence in my life and commit myself to overthrow its silent tyranny in my soul.

PRAY

O God, You have promised that hidden things will be exposed. Be the Light of Life to me now. Fill my heart with Your shining grace, and reveal the shame that hides in the shadows of my soul. I long for the freedom of a shame-free life, so I offer You full access to my heart and mind. Guide me on this healing journey, and lead me into more abundant life. In Jesus’ name, AMEN.