

PEOPLE OF THE SECOND CHANCE

A Guide to Bringing
Life-Saving Love to the World

MIKE FOSTER

Foreword by BOB GOFF

Praise for
People of the Second Chance

“In my life, both personally and professionally, Mike Foster is a tremendous source of inspiration and encouragement. You’ll find both of those things in this book. You’ll also find humility, wisdom, and compassion. And as always when it comes to Mike and his work, you will be met with grace.”

—JAMIE TWORKOWSKI, founder of To Write Love on Her Arms and *New York Times* best-selling author of *If You Feel Too Much*

“Mike’s words are soaked in a special blend of grace, compassion, and clarity for living in God’s love. Absolutely beautiful.”

—MARK BATTERSON, *New York Times* best-selling author and pastor of National Community Church in Washington, DC

“Mike Foster has created a movement, and this is the official playbook. *People of the Second Chance* provides all of us an extra dose of hope and inspiration. Join the team, put on your jersey, get on the field, and be part of the second-chance community!”

—BRAD LOMENICK, former president of Catalyst and author of *The Catalyst Leader* and *H3 Leadership*

“Mike is your friend, whether you’ve ever met him or not. You can feel it on every page of this book, and Mike wrote it for you because he wants good for his friends. This book is a beautiful, healing thing, and I am so glad it exists.”

—ANNIE F. DOWNS, best-selling author of *Looking for Lovely* and *Let’s All Be Brave*

“What if we partied as much as we preached? This question from *People of the Second Chance* hit me like a ton of bricks, but it wasn’t the only knee-buckling moment in the book. A lot of people write about grace, but Mike Foster celebrates it, creating a raucous call to a party everyone is invited to. If you’ve ever wondered if second chances are real and available, read this book.”

—JON ACUFF, author of *Do Over* and *Stuff Christians Like*

“Mike Foster is a rare and necessary antenna for goodness and grace. Through this wonderful book that brims with vulnerability and wisdom, we can begin to wholly realize the concept of unconditional love. In *People of the Second Chance*, Foster so beautifully shares the greatest news anyone can hear: you are beloved.”

—RYAN O’NEAL, *Sleeping At Last*

“Five stars! This is fierce and compassionate truth telling at its finest. *People of the Second Chance* is an incredible road map for fully experiencing the grace of God in a whole new way.”

—JUD WILHITE, senior pastor of Central Christian Church in Las Vegas

“Each page of this book was designed to remind us of our incredible stories. It’s the voice of a man I trust whispering over our shoulders that our weirdness is wonderful and our quirks are among our most endearing qualities.”

—BOB GOFF, Chief Balloon Inflator and *New York Times* best-selling author of *Love Does*

“Mike is this generation’s Brennan Manning. His passion for helping us live as God’s beloved is awe inspiring, and this manifesto for second-chance living is exactly what our world needs right now.”

—GABE LYONS, author of *Good Faith* and founder of Q

“I loved this profound work of grace and the simple reminder that life can be cherished in the midst of our brokenness. *People of the Second Chance* will cause hearts to leap for joy as we imagine a world where our imperfect stories truly matter.”

—REBEKAH LYONS, author of *Freefall to Fly*

“I don’t read many books, but I always read Mike’s. This one leads us back to the core of who we are and how we should live. Filled with vulnerability, hope, and practical help, *People of the Second Chance* is a must-read!”

—JEREMY COWART, founder of The Purpose Hotel, See University, and Help-Portrait

“The day I hit the lowest point in my life I made one phone call. It was to Mike. That phone call convinced me that I would rise again. And reading this book was like having that phone call all over again. This book is a manual for anybody who wants to rise again. I’m so grateful for Mike and this message.”

—CARLOS WHITTAKER, a speaker and the author of *Moment Maker*

“*People of the Second Chance* is a profound and inspiring book that will stir your heart toward belief, bravery, and the life God dreams for you.”

—SCOTT HARRISON, founder of charity: water

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PEOPLE OF THE SECOND CHANCE

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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For every broken life becoming beautiful again



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FOREWORD

Mike and I have been teaching a class at a local university together. It's a class about success and failure and what we do with each. Truthfully, we spend a lot more time in class talking about failure than success. The reason is simple. Our successes often distract us, while our failures usually shape us.

Everyone wants to be successful. Whether you're a racecar driver or business leader or Olympian, you long to repeat your successes. Who doesn't? But not many people want to repeat a failure.

Still, there are a handful of people who live their lives unafraid because they have come to realize the beauty in both success and failure. These people would rather fail trying than fail watching. Mike is one of those guys.

Each week in class we bring friends to talk about a time when they failed. In fact, experiencing failure has become almost a prerequisite to being our friend. Honestly, we wouldn't have much in common otherwise. We've noticed that people who have failed are more generous with their compassion, more extravagant with their love, and less inhibited in their expressions of both. I think it's because these people spend less time caring about what their lives look like and more time figuring out what their lives are about.

I love Disneyland. On my first trip there as a kid, my family stayed at the Disneyland Hotel. I'd saved up my allowance for a year, and on the first day I bought a stuffed animal with a really long, furry tail. That night we went out on the balcony to watch

the fireworks. I gave my stuffed animal the best seat in the house—up on the railing. When the fireworks ended, I tried to pick up my nylon friend, but it wouldn't move. Someone below had grabbed ahold of my stuffed animal's tail. I pulled up as hard as I could, and he pulled down as hard as he could. I didn't know what to do. It was the first time I ever felt as if something precious was about to be taken from me.

This is a book about love and hope and tugging back against those things that are trying to steal our joy, our attention, and our identities. All of us will have something that has been relentless in its tug on our lives. It may be a bad religious experience, our political stance, or the failures or successes we've experienced. This book is about tugging back. It's an invitation, with a little muscle behind it, to see who God is turning us into, rather than overriding with who we were.

This isn't a self-help book about just being happy; it's about being aware of the beauty of becoming whole. It's not about finding meaning in our lives by looking perfect; instead, it's about realizing that we are perfectly loved and allowing this to give our lives meaning. This is a book for messed-up overcomers, for religious rebels, for the broken but resilient. It's not about taking a knee in the end zone when you win; it's about taking both when you don't.

Mike has created this grace-filled, shame-breaking book by riffing on the lessons he's been learning from Jesus and has been incorporating in a nonprofit organization he founded for people who have messed up. It's aptly named People of the Second Chance. It's made of people like you and like me who are pulling back against what's got us by the tail.

If you feel as if you've lost your way and have asked the questions I've asked myself so many times, such as "Who am I?" or "Why am I here?" or "What in my life will outlast me?" then this

book will be a heart-gripping, life-changing page-turner for you. This book welcomes you into a community of second chancers who are discovering their true identity, their hopeful purpose, and the unfair advantage their failures have given them to impact others with big love rather than big opinions.

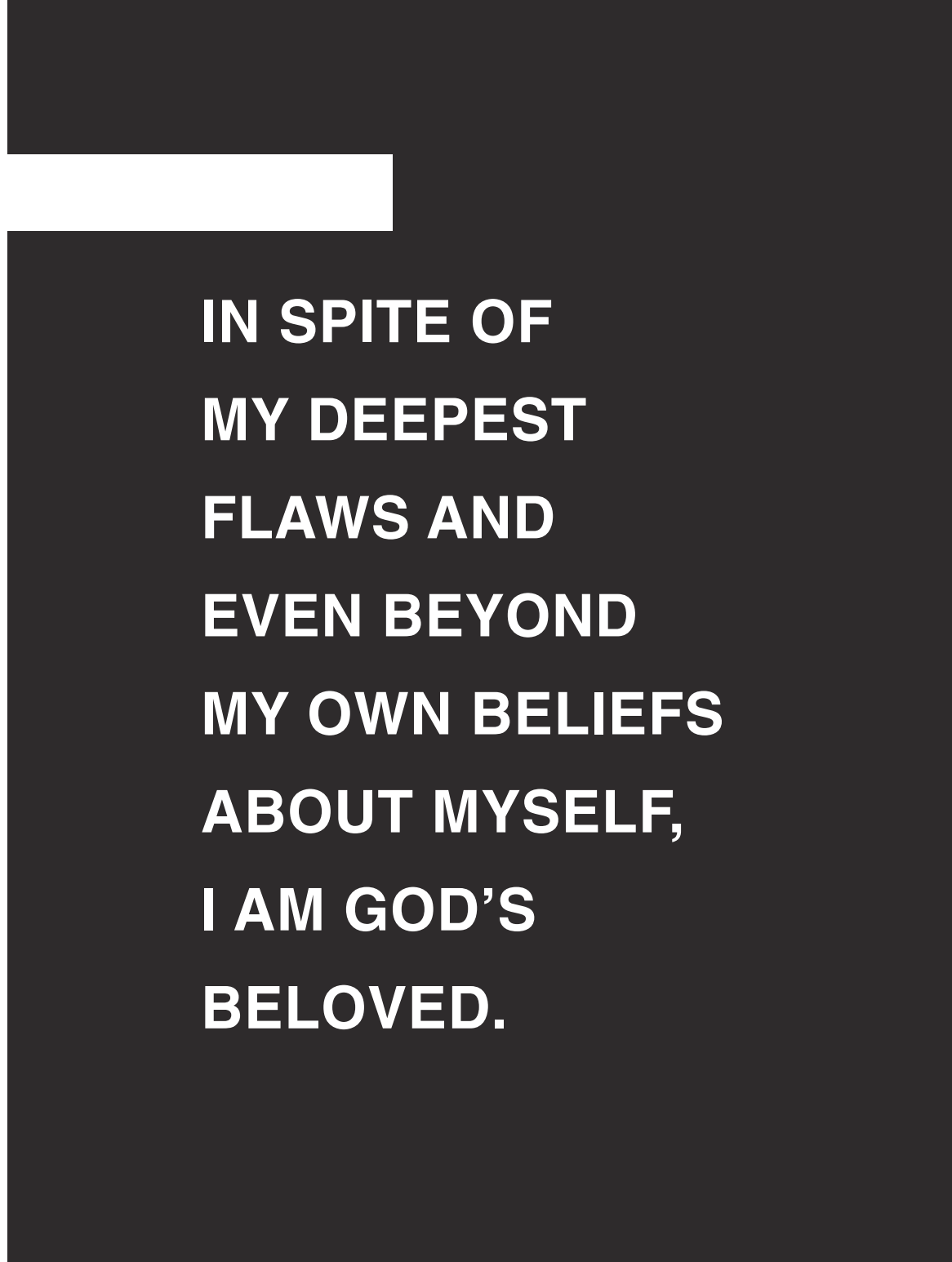
Here's the simple truth: life is messy. We don't need to act surprised anymore. Instead, we have reason to be tremendously hopeful. In the reverse economy of Jesus, the things that break us, God inverts to shape us. Either we can let those things pull us over the rail, or we can start pulling back. Fear, shame, and worthlessness have only the power we give them. This book is about hope, love, and grace and how they work toward the same ends.

Each page of this book was designed to remind us of our incredible stories. It's the voice of a man I trust whispering over our shoulders that our weirdness is wonderful and our quirks are among our most endearing qualities. Most important, this book reminds us that God is just moments away from transforming the shame and fear we've allowed to pull us over the rails into a right perspective about self-acceptance, love, and faith.

I'm proud to introduce you to my friend Mike Foster and the safe place he's made in this book for all of us to learn, grow, and explore our successes and our failures. This is what Mike calls "People of the Second Chance." You're already accepted and loved, and you've only just arrived. That's because there's nothing to prove, nothing to be except you, and everything to imagine. This is a place where the dream God has placed in your heart isn't limited by the failures you've encountered in getting here.

Welcome home.

—Bob Goff, Chief Balloon Inflator and *New York Times* best-selling author of *Love Does*



**IN SPITE OF
MY DEEPEST
FLAWS AND
EVEN BEYOND
MY OWN BELIEFS
ABOUT MYSELF,
I AM GOD'S
BELOVED.**

Three

Seconds

People of the Second Chance live in the humble arrogance of being God's beloved.

I am a second chancer. And it only took three seconds of my life to make me long for that role.

It was a Memorial Day weekend on the Colorado River, and I was nineteen years old. I joined some families from church who were doing their annual water-ski trip. The Rogers and MacGregor families put on a water-skiing extravaganza each year and invited a few friends. I got to be a chosen friend that year.

We woke early the first morning and water-skied for a few hours. Everyone fared well except for me, a newbie. When I skied, I looked more like a drunk giraffe than a musclebound water aficionado. I gave it my best shot, but I'm certain I swallowed more water than I skied on.

Everyone on the boat played cool about my tragic shortcomings in the ski department. No flat-out mocking. Just some heavy sighing and huffing with a dash of disdain.

My pride was bruised, but I kept up a good image. I've always been good at image managing and pretending to be okay. I learned early on that it's best to be strong and smile your way

through subpar performances. Nothing to see here, folks. I'm fine. No weakness at all. None. Let's just move along.

Furthermore, I couldn't let any of those girls in Christian bikinis know I wasn't potential boyfriend material. Know what I mean?

Ryan MacGregor, my friend who invited me on the trip, sensed my ego had been bumped around a little. He figured it would be good for me to give boat driving a shot. I could redeem my honor and build up what was left of my bruised ego. I needed a second chance. So Ryan asked, "Hey, Mike, you want to drive the boat?"

I honestly thought, *How hard could this boat-driving thing be? It's got a steering wheel. I know how to do steering wheels.*

I said, "Sure, Ryan. Count me in."

He explained that he would get the boat going. There is an art to pulling a skier out of the water, and as the rookie driver, I wasn't quite ready for that.

We started cruising up the river. John, our skier, zipped back and forth behind the boat. He skied like a graceful water gazelle, lightly jumping from one wave to another, so unlike the intoxicated-giraffe style I had demonstrated earlier that morning.

The warm wind blew in our faces. I felt alive.

Ryan gave me the look and said, "Okey-dokey, Mike. Your turn!" He scooted away from the wheel and pointed for me to take over. I did. Now I was driving, studly as can be. I was good with steering wheels. I hoped those Christian girls were noticing.

After a few moments our skier motioned that he wanted to turn around and go the other way. Ryan said, "Okay, Mike, we need to turn the boat and go back down the river. Just turn the wheel slowly and evenly, and you should be good to go."

So I began to turn the wheel and drive the boat into what I thought was clear water.

But it wasn't clear water.

There was a skier from another boat in my path. He had dropped into the water, waiting for his boat to pick him up. I didn't see him until it was too late. I couldn't turn our boat in time.

And I hit him.

It happened in just three seconds, yet it felt like an eternity. Ryan quickly cut the engines and dove into the water and swam toward the skier I had just hit. The skier's head flopped forward. His body bobbed on the water like a rag doll. A pool of red blood surrounded him. His life was draining into the water.

Panic. Fear. The Christian girls were now screaming.

And I just wanted to run.

Run as far and fast as I could from what I had done. Run from myself. Run from life. Run from what everyone was now thinking. Run from the fact that there was no going back. No undoing this. No repairing the damage. Just me facing a motionless, bloody body in the river. I wanted to escape.

Maybe you've been there too.

The skier survived. The doctors weren't sure how he survived, but he did. He lost a ton of blood. The propeller had snapped off and hit him in the head. The blade carved up his right arm. It was a miracle he was alive. The doctors said that if the propeller had struck just a quarter of an inch deeper, the force would have decapitated him.

That thought still gives me shivers.

My victim spent weeks in the hospital.

After the accident I was lost. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to act. How sad or strong are you supposed to be? There is no playbook for such tragedies.

Should I be grateful that he lived or regret the incredible damage I did? Do I talk about it or just keep quiet? Is there a Bible verse to hang on to? What should I feel? These are questions I later learned that only grace could answer.

Meanwhile, my heart was dead. I felt alone, and my thoughts were dark. My words stuck inside me, trapped in a story I desperately wanted to escape.

The damage I did that day on the river was real. It rippled through families, friends, and innocent bystanders. I would never forget, but they couldn't either.

Even though it was an unintentional accident, I still blamed myself. I took all the responsibility for that day. I shamed myself *hard* in the weeks and months that followed. The district attorney pressed criminal charges. A lawsuit followed. But none of that compared to my self-imposed punishment.

And out of this tragedy, I created a new rule for my life. Even though I loved being in, on, and around the water, it was now off-limits to me. I carved this final verdict on my heart so I would never, ever forget. The water was now closed to me. I told myself this would honor my victim. I also convinced myself this was the best way to protect my heart from having those feelings again. The new rule would work so well. It all made perfect sense.

Until it didn't.

Because that rule, meant to crush my shame and protect my heart, instead crushed me. I wrote it to protect myself, but I ended up punishing myself, pinning myself down to a small, groveling life. I couldn't take the chance of stirring any more troubles on the waters of my story. I became small and I played it safe.

Such rules and laws. It was like making a deal with the devil. No more sorrow at the cost of no joy.

And that's the problem, isn't it? Grace gets censored when we write these devilish decrees for our lives. Secret commandments get scrawled on personal tablets of shame, and we live life as if our stories belong on a discount rack rather than as valued, cherished children of God. We let a moment of pain cut us off from a lifetime of grace.

The rules we write for ourselves are sneaky. They run quietly in the background like a virus infecting an operating system. We forget they are even there. They intertwine their devious codes throughout our spiritual, emotional, and psychological systems. I call them the Five Condemnments:

1. I don't deserve a second chance.
2. I am my shame. I am my secrets.
3. I will always feel and be this way.
4. I am defined by my worst moments.
5. My life, my dreams, my hopes no longer matter.

And this is what we need to talk about, isn't it? We need to look at what's running in the background of our beliefs and expose the shame virus corrupting our hope for a better life. We must come out of the shadows and talk about hard things.

REACHING BACK

When I am working with hurting people, probably the most tragic thing I witness is when they have accepted the lie that whatever ugly, can't-talk-about-it, embarrassing thing has happened in their stories is somehow beyond the grace of God. That his mercy doesn't reach far enough. That his hand of grace is just beyond . . .

- the quiet addiction to painkillers;
- the shame of an unexpected divorce from the person you loved so much;
- someone's sexuality and what it all means;
- the betrayal of a family member;
- the fear of growing old and being alone.

God's reach is just beyond . . .

- a secret abortion and the sorrows of miscarriages;
- the depression, the sadness, and the eating disorder;

- the drinking and the bad choices;
- hidden regrets that you chose your career instead of your kids.

Yet God is reaching out in all these painful moments and whispers, *Just reach back to me, my beloved! I am here. Please, I beg you. Just reach back.*

In preparing to write this book, I thought about you a lot. About what your life might look like right now. Where do you live? What hurts do you carry? Do you like yourself? What beliefs do you have? Whom do you love? Who loves you? What lies do you believe? What friends do you have? Do you know the lavish grace of God?

I wondered why you might pick up a book about second chances. Were you looking for . . .

- a chance to change?
- a chance to thrive?
- a chance to be challenged?
- a chance to start over?
- a chance to forgive?
- a chance to dream wild dreams?

Or maybe you're looking for a chance to be loved as you've never been loved before. And wouldn't that be wonderful? Because to be loved like that is what you were made for. It's the reason you and I are here. It's what we are all looking for. And that, my friend, is the place we must start.

There are two big ideas I will talk about in the pages ahead. They are the foundation for what I believe it means to live as people of the second chance. They are the values on which I try to base my own life. And I have found that if we embrace them, they will take us into the house of grace and belonging.

Fundamentally, this book rests on answering these questions that every human being has asked thousands of times:

Who am I?
What am I here for?

There are many answers to these two questions. Countless gurus, parents, religious leaders, motivational speakers, infomercial pitchmen, and those who are trying to sell something for three easy payments of \$19.99 seem to have an answer for you. But let me be bold for a moment. Let me take a stab at answering these most basic human questions the best way I know how. Let me answer through the lens of God's love and what I know of my own brokenness.

THE HUMBLE ARROGANCE OF BEING HIS BELOVED

My simplistic answer to the question "Who am I?" is this: my truest, purest, nonnegotiable identity is the beloved. And in spite of my checkered past, my fabulous flops, my painful history, my deepest flaws, my bonehead screwups, and, yes, even beyond my own beliefs about myself, I am God's beloved. This is my foundational identity and the foundational identity of every human being.

I am not those three seconds on the Colorado River. You are not your failures. And just because we have *made* mistakes doesn't mean we *are* mistakes. Every other self-concept is a jumbled concoction of our fears, insecurities, and hurtful words spoken over our lives.

"Define yourself radically as one beloved by God," said Brennan Manning. "This is the true self. Every other identity is illusion."¹

Identity is the engine that drives the relationship not only with ourselves but also with God and others. If your identity is broken,

your life is broken. If you define it incorrectly, you will carry that wrong definition into your story. If all you see are your limitations, you will miss out on the stunning possibilities God is creating in front of you.

I have heard it said that the only thing needed for a powerful lion to be intimidated by a person with a whip is for the lion to forget who he is. If the lion forgets he is a lion, he is doomed to a life of controlled captivity.

Your beliefs about who you are have more power than you likely realize. Think about this: you can never—and I mean *never*—live above your self-imposed limitations. If you think you can't do something, you can't and never will. Period. You won't rise above your own negative self-image.

Let me share an example.

On the first day of school, in an after-school program, the predominantly African American children in Oakland, California, hear something none of them has ever heard before. They learn that the word *Africa* wasn't always spelled A-f-r-i-c-a but earlier was spelled A-f-r-a-c-a. The children are asked to speculate why it might have been changed and whether it matters. They shrug their shoulders as if to say, "Who knows?" After all, what difference can one letter make?

The teacher then explains that the syllable *fric* can be traced back to an Arab word meaning "land of the conquered or vanquished" but the syllable *frac* goes back to a term that means "land of the hidden soul."

The teacher asks again: "Do you think it matters?" For someone with Afracan heritage, one letter is the difference between seeing oneself as a vanquished victim or a descendant of humanity's "hidden soul."

That's how these kids in Oakland begin a year of life-changing lessons, not just in history and colonialism, but also in empower-

ment and identity. It's too soon to draw conclusions, but so far all the children who have gone through this yearlong after-school program are showing high levels of engagement in their learning and significant academic improvement.²

What if you changed a letter in your identity? Could a few tweaks in who you think you are be the beginning of a whole new story? Could identity hold the key to letting hope and healing rush in? Could stepping away from stinking thinking radically change the way you see yourself and your role in the world? I think it will.

It's time to stop seeing yourself as an inhabitant in the land of the conquered and vanquished. That's not you. You are from the land of the hidden soul.

You are not made to live under the weight of religion or guilt or chronic not-enough-ness. You are made to enjoy the love of God.

His heart is far larger, his love far stronger than anything we can imagine. A relationship with him is not a relationship between equals. He runs the show. He initiates; he works; he finishes. That's scary. God is one lover you cannot manipulate or woo. He's all one sided. It's all grace. And he is all love.

PARTY PLANNERS

So if the starting point of second-chance living is knowing *who we are*, then the next step is knowing *what we are to be about*. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr says, "When you get your 'Who am I?' question right, all the 'What should I do?' questions tend to take care of themselves."³

It is so easy to complain about the state of the world. Violence. Selfishness. Economic injustice. Racism. Sexism. Systemic oppression.

The reality is, bombs, bureaucracies, and political parties will

not solve society's greatest problems. Only you and I can solve them, and we can do it with subversive acts of love. That means you and I must believe again in the world, in ourselves, and in each other.

I love what author Howard Zinn wrote in his essay "The Optimism of Uncertainty."

If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.⁴

So how do we respond to being the beloved? What will our hours, days, and lifetimes be filled with as we sink deeper and deeper into the knowledge of his love? Or as the poet Mary Oliver asked,

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?⁵

The response to God's love is before us. I think it is clear, but we often miss it.

I see God as someone who loves to play, dream, and create. He is the one who hung sparkling stars in the night sky and paints

masterpiece sunsets each evening. I see God as a friend who smiles and laughs and likes cupcakes with chocolate icing. He is the life *and* the God of the party.

I love how the Scriptures point out that Jesus himself was so prone to have a good time that he was accused of being “a glutton and a drunkard” (Matthew 11:19). Or consider the clearest picture of God’s grace, in the parable of the prodigal son. The whole point of the gospel comes through a story about a wayward child who returns home to a raging party thrown in his honor. Given by whom? The father, who clearly represents God. The Creator celebrates broken things as a way to love us. And this, my friend, is also what he invites us to do.

Yet too often we’ve missed this part, haven’t we? Sometimes we see the sin but forget about the celebration. We lick our wounds but never a tasty sprinkled cupcake. Instead of prodigal parties with reggae music and fruit punch, we throw pity parties that no one wants to attend. We’ve grown so victimized by our own hurting that we’ve missed celebrating the miracle of our healing. And not only our own healing but also the healing of those around us.

Second chancers must find the party. We must be the party. We must create opportunities to celebrate and become the proverbial hostess with the mostest.

What I am proposing is that you and I do the work of prodigal party planning. That we figure out creative ways to celebrate the uncelebrated people in our cities. That we look at our fellow prodigals and say, “Yeah, we’ve been there too. It hurts. It stinks. But you’re loved, and here’s a cupcake.”

The formula could look like this: *people* of the second chance become *planners* of the second chance. The beloved who adopt the sole purpose and mission to love. Get your address book out.

Open up your Google contacts. Look around you. Send out invitations to . . .

- misfits and outsiders;
- single moms and welfare dads;
- enemies and friends, haters and lovers;
- ex-cons and crack dealers;
- Wal-Mart greeters and Rolex-wearing CEOs;
- dreamers, doubters, and everyone in between.

Let's just say that everyone gets an invite and no one gets left out.

Mother Teresa said, "The problem with the world is that we draw the circle of our family too small."⁶ When we plan parties, we should draw big circles, because we are all family, and everyone needs a party.

Imagine what our faith might look like if we partied as much as we preached. If we spent as much time blowing up balloons as we do attending Bible studies. What might happen if our mission were to serve as much cheese dip to crazies as we do communion to churchgoers?

It is time to enjoy God again. Yes, there is suffering, but there is also celebration. Yes, there is pain, but there is also a party. Your life will be heavy, and it will be light. The question is, How will you carry it, and what will you do with it? A friend told me that the exact same place can be either a prison or a promised land. The difference is perspective and the fact that you must work to make where you are where you want to be.

Looking back on my boating accident, I know I could have used a prodigal party. I needed something to free me from the prison where my heart was being held. Someone sharing some chips and salsa with me would have been my miracle. I needed God's beloved to let me know the Father still delighted in me. I

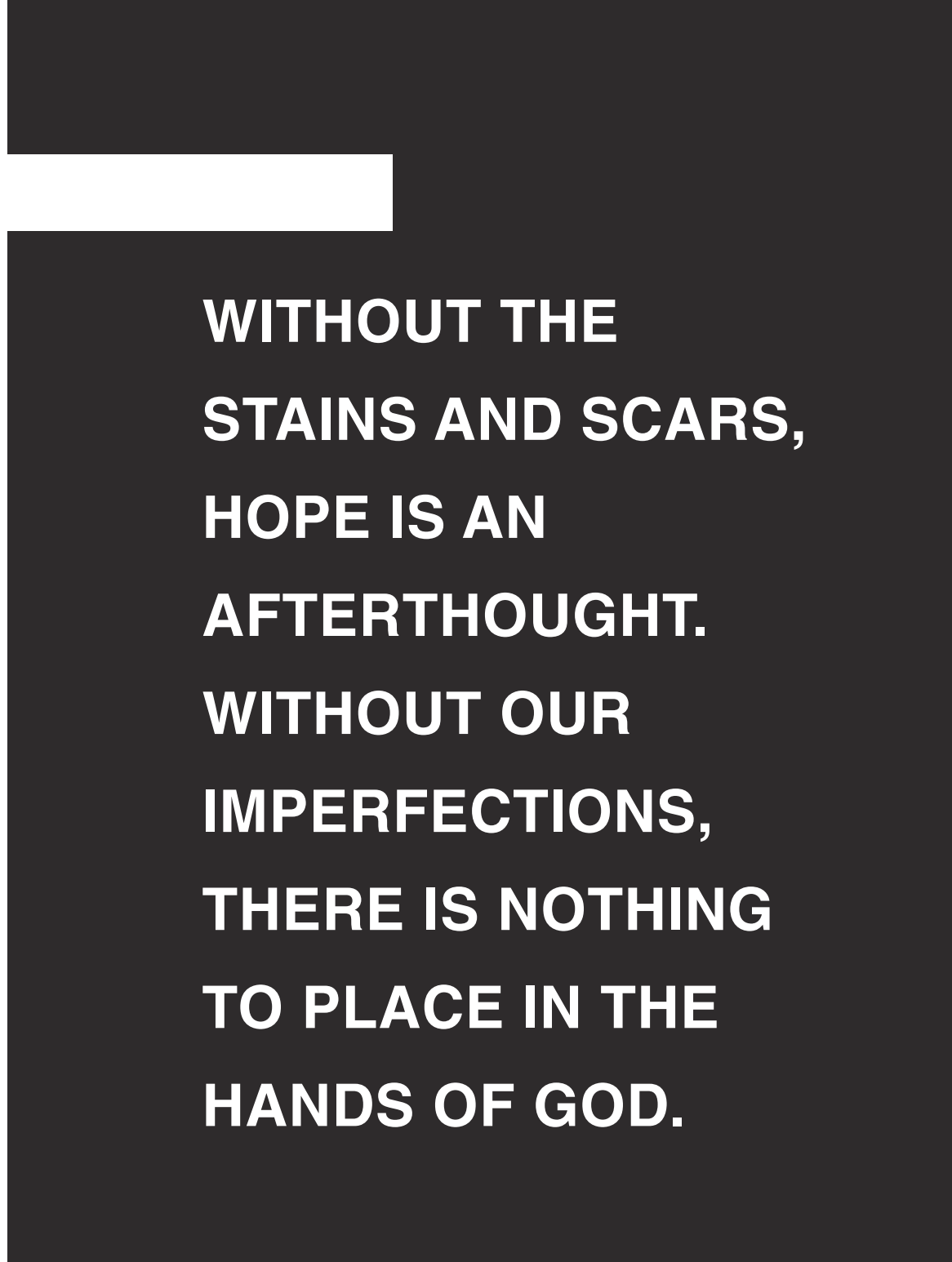
eventually forgave myself and, in recognition of this, let myself enjoy the water again, but it took many years.

People need to know that after the tragic pain, the irreplaceable loss, the death of our dreams, reputations, innocence, and health; after battling the storms of addiction, betrayal, and boat accidents; after we've messed up, fallen flat on our faces, and tasted the bitter pill of our own powerlessness—after all of this, we can smile again.

The American diplomat John Kenneth Galbraith said, “All successful revolutions are the kicking in of a rotten door.”⁷ I want this book to be a big boot and the systems of shame, cynicism, hopelessness, judgment, captivity, and oppression to be the rotten door.

The tragedy of my boating accident and my other rock-bottom experiences have taught me many lessons about what it means to live as a second chancer. This is the journey I want to take you on.

I've seen the power of believing in broken people. I've discovered that the only thing I have to be is God's beloved. I am not those three seconds, and with the God of grace by my side, I'm ready to kick down the rotten door.



**WITHOUT THE
STAINS AND SCARS,
HOPE IS AN
AFTERTHOUGHT.
WITHOUT OUR
IMPERFECTIONS,
THERE IS NOTHING
TO PLACE IN THE
HANDS OF GOD.**

Green

Coats

People of the Second Chance hold
to the promise that broken things
can be made beautiful again.

Whether we like it or not, our experience is one part mischief, one part miracle, and one part mayhem all slammed together to make this cocktail called life. Our second-chance stories can look very different from one another and yet are often similar. Life demands that you and I sit in the tension of pain and suffering.

One of the first steps of living as a second chancer is to get comfortable with our messes. To find a peace with who we are and what life turned into for us. I've sat with so many people who have struggled with the sorrow of their stories, whose expectations did not line up with how life had turned out. They wanted an outcome that was never promised.

My simple advice to them? Embrace it all. Every tear and every heartbreak. Every stain and every scab. Every flaw and every imperfection. They belong to you, I say, so wear them with your head held high.

Second chancers understand our brokenness isn't something to hide but to integrate into our lives. We do not need to be

ashamed. No matter what the world says, we are not “less than” for being broken.

And yet it is so tempting to have it all together, isn't it? To look so good and be so fine. The right clothes. The right brands. Sexy Instagram photos where we look thin and young. Our perfect kids winning student-of-the-month awards. Pictures of our summer vacations that are better than everyone else's summer vacations. Fat girls want to be skinny girls, and skinny guys want to be beefier guys. We nip and tuck and Photoshop almost every aspect of our lives. It is the perfection playbook.

God's desire is to unleash you and me from the pathological desire to look nice. He says, “Whoever you are, whatever you look like, whatever mess you've been in, don't worry about that anymore. You're mine, and you're in good hands now.”

He meets us when our faces are smudged with last night's sin. In the stink of old cigarettes, cheap booze, and the Pine-Sol we used to clean our vomit off the floor. He is there in our shame and self-hatred. He meets us in the middle of our secrets—those things we lie about when we say they are no big deal.

My fellow second chancers, I know we all want to look good, but we're not meant to look that good. The grace movement is built on imperfection and scraggly edges.

Without stains and scars, hope is an afterthought. A luxury instead of a necessity. Without our imperfections, there is nothing to place in the hands of God.

WE ARE ALL GREEN COATS

In 1955 a woman named Elizabeth Henson was cleaning out her wardrobe closet. She felt it was time to discard some items that were old or that she didn't wear anymore. Pieces in which the

colors had faded, the edges had come undone, and over the years they had grown to smell of mothballs and mildew.

As Elizabeth was working through her closet, she came across a green coat she no longer wanted. Its time had come and gone. The fuzzy and frayed lightweight jacket was now a throwaway.

To her surprise, someone wanted the old coat. Her college-age son asked if he could have it.

I'm sure she must have thought, *Why in the world would you want this old, worthless thing?* But even though his request didn't make sense, she was more than willing to hand over the fuzzy green garment.

And as the story goes, with great delight her son brought the throwaway coat into his workshop. He grabbed a needle and thread and a pair of scissors. He carefully shaped the jacket into his vision. He sewed and stitched. He also grabbed a Ping-Pong ball and cut it into halves for eyes.

I'm sure back in 1955 no one could have imagined that Elizabeth's discarded green coat would go on to become an international pop icon, date a prima-donna pig, and play an Oscar-nominated song on a banjo in a swamp. But you see, Elizabeth Henson's son was named Jim. And that old green coat she was ready to throw away became the very first Kermit the Frog.

This is what happens when we put our throwaways into the hands of God. He has a vision for our brokenness. He crafts something surprising out of it.

We may not see how our frayed, smelly imperfections can be redesigned, but God certainly can. He believes that our imperfections are the raw materials for crafting something extraordinary. Second chances create banjo-playing frogs out of old green coats. They take imperfect people and give them a purpose.

Jim believed the coat could become Kermit. God believes your flaws can become a beautiful new you.

THE BEAUTIFUL LIE

And yet we believe what I call the *beautiful lie*.

The lie says this is what really counts: to be wealthy, powerful, influential, attractive, admired, talented, popular, and, above all, valuable. We must make a life that is worth something to others. Worth more than others. The world screams at us to hurry up and matter. Our lives become a reaction to this lie.

We must not be nothings. To be good for nothing is to be as good as dead. And death is what we fear most. The death that says our lives have no value.

So we thrash about in a pool of comparison and one-upmanship. Our lives become burdened by the heaviness of getting it right. Our joy becomes brittle, and our hearts slowly break. The only possible outcome of this hurry-up-and-matter hustle is the slow crushing of our souls.

But God offers real life, where our brokenness is redeemed. He says we can abandon society's beautiful lie and allow him to breathe new life into us, his beloved.

I think of the passage in Ezekiel where the Lord leads the prophet through a valley. Ezekiel wrote: "GOD'S Spirit took me up and set me down in the middle of an open plain strewn with bones. He led me around and among them—a lot of bones! There were bones all over the plain—dry bones, bleached by the sun" (37:1-2, MSG).

And God tells Ezekiel to prophesy, to reveal something by divine inspiration, over these bleached and broken things. He does a Jim Henson power move, and the bones come alive.

Bones come alive. Green coats come alive. Broken things

made beautiful. God breathes life into our dead and imperfect things.

LIFE IS MORE THAN LIVING AND THEN DYING

If you're dissatisfied with your life, perhaps it's because you haven't discovered the delight of flaunting your flaws. If you feel exhausted, perhaps it's because you've been fighting so hard to get it right and measure up. If you're bored with your story, maybe it's because perfection is perfectly boring. Or as writer Anne Lamott quipped, "Perfect means shallow and unreal and fatally uninteresting." She also wrote that "perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor."¹ Looking good is no fun at all.

I recently read about a community in communist-controlled North Korea.² The town of Kijong-dong is just across the demilitarized zone from the neighboring South Korea. The community is filled with beautiful white buildings with light-blue roofs.

From a distance Kijong-dong looks like a prosperous community. And that's what the communist regime of North Korea wants you to believe. The town has been specifically designed to resemble a thriving village, supposedly to lure possible defectors from the south.

But on closer inspection you would notice that the buildings have no glass in the windows. Automatic timers turn the lights on and off. No one actually lives in Kijong-dong. It is only a facade of a flourishing town. It is a lie.

Too often our stories are facades made to look as if we are flourishing. Let's consider the Sunday morning church ritual.

Wake up.

Shower and brush your teeth.

Comb your hair better than you did Saturday.

Put on a matching outfit instead of just clothes.

Show up on time. Don't leave before the sermon is over.

Smile and be nice.

Prepare to repeat the process on Wednesday evening.

The world would be a different place if people were always as nice as they are at church on Sundays.

I used to work at a church where excellence was one of the organization's top values. I never really liked that value. It doesn't seem to fit in the kingdom of God. When our churches look, feel, and operate more like an Apple Store than a soup kitchen, we might be missing the point. God's kingdom is more trailer park than country club.

Second chancers must categorically reject this got-it-together spirituality. We must avoid buying into the American Dream and living this type of story.

For example, you start off as a kid, and life is fun. Bugs, butterflies, and Saturday-morning cartoons are all that matter. No cares in the world. Nothing to prove. Then you grow into a moody teenager, and school is either loads of fun or sheer torture—seemingly the only two choices of adolescence. You figure out that high school is just a painful social experiment with you as a guinea pig. Educationally, it's sort of a waste of time. Anybody still know how to do algebra? I don't.

Next, you go to college or join the work force and get serious about a guy or girl. You might marry, or you might wait, depending on your student loan debt and what your career prospects look like. Eventually you get a decent job. Buy a house. Fill it with a couch and the biggest flat-screen television you can afford. Have some kids. Then the kids leave. Then you're alone, and you wonder what happened to the past twenty-five years of your life. Your spouse feels like a stranger or a distant friend, not a lover or someone you're even that interested in now.

When you're successful in life, you buy shiny grown-up toys

and go on exotic vacations and maybe upgrade from your first spouse to a more advanced model. If you don't upgrade your spouse, you definitely upgrade your car. Then your body starts to break down, your hair thins and grays, and your bones creak. You Botox the wrinkles or suck fat out of fatty places. You go to Cross-Fit three times a week. Or maybe you just give up and enjoy yourself by saddling up to the local buffet on Tuesdays and Thursdays and numb your sorrows by eating more ice cream than you should. And then it's just a waiting game for death. And then it's over.

They call it the American Dream. I call it a generic waste of a life. It is our own version of Kijong-dong buildings. It is an empty story that, quite frankly, is not compelling. It is safe, heart numbing, and the product of perfectionism, performance, and striving for success.

The only way to prevent our lives from falling into this drudgery is to surrender our green coats to God. We must allow him to craft something wild, mysterious, and mind blowing with both our successes and failures.

THE FUTILITY OF TOOTHPASTE

You may be reading this and thinking, *Sure, Mike. That sounds nice. But I've got stuff in my life that isn't just some small flaw but a complete disaster.*

Perhaps the beginning of your second chance is not a flaunting of your flaws but a basic form of acceptance. For you, it means coming to peace with what is and with what may never change. I call them *life's irreversible moments*, the moments that you can't fix and that God wants to heal over a lifetime. There is no undoing or getting over them, only a journey to acceptance. They are life's toothpaste moments because, no matter how hard we try, the toothpaste ain't going back into the tube.

I know. I've tried. Not gonna happen. Ever. Once it's out, it's out.

So what's the toothpaste you've been trying to clean up? What have you been trying to get back into a tube only to be frustrated by the futility of even thinking you could? It looks different for all of us.

You chose an abuser instead of a lover.

Friends betrayed you and humiliated you for laughs.

Your childhood disintegrated into chaos as Mom and Dad despised each other.

Cancer attacked your body, and chemo joined in for fun.

Addiction stripped you of your dignity and your smile.

Your child took his life.

Whatever the event was, the toothpaste squirted out, and now there's a mess.

As I shared in the introduction, one of my greatest empty-tube experiences was the boating accident. There is no undoing the tragedy. No unfeeling the heartbreak. No recovering what was lost or taken. No place to hide from that mess. There is no taking back the damage I caused.

When we have these kinds of stories, it's scary. It's often humiliating. But we don't have to fear anything when we realize that all things, even the painful moments, are teaching us something. It is in the mess that God meets us.

The most healing thing we can do right now is admit we need help. We can't fix it. Our mirage of perfection and self-sufficiency has collapsed.

I learned this the hard way. The long way.

That three-second accident stole years of my life.

Had I made amends? Yes.

Had I owned the responsibility for that day? Yes.

Had I faced my mistake head-on? Yes.

But it was still a mess. It was because of this moment I learned the magic of a second chance.

When the toothpaste won't go back in the tube, brush your teeth.

WHY BRUSHING YOUR TEETH CHANGES EVERYTHING

When I share my boating story, sometimes people want to know if I was ever able to talk to the person I hit. Did we have some moment when I said "I'm sorry" and he said "I forgive you" and then we hugged and cried? It's how we imagine the story should go. But it didn't go that way at all. I never saw him again. Lawyers got involved, and due to litigation we never met. The victim has always been a shadow in my story. I can only see his wet face and the look in his eyes after the accident. I can only see his limp body being pulled into the boat. That moment is our only connection.

And though I wish the beginning and middle and end were more Hollywoodish or Christianish, the story lands like a thud for some people. It is what it is. A tragedy. A dark moment.

Do you have things in your story right now that feel unresolved? Are the details and the reasons and those elusive answers still fuzzy? Maybe you've battled all your life to find meaning for what happened in your past. And what happens if it never comes? Seriously, my beloved, it may never, ever come. Ultimately, we have to learn to be okay with that possibility.

THE LAND OF CARDBOARD AND SPOILS

Years ago I had a speaking engagement with Dieter Zander, a dynamic speaker and musician. He served at one of the most influential churches in America. Thousands of young adults came

weekly to hear him teach. I was in awe of the God he spoke of and his ideas for the kingdom. He was truly gifted and on fire with God's blessing.

One night Dieter went to bed and woke up unable to speak or to move one of his arms. He had suffered a stroke from a condition called aphasia. The stroke wiped out his language hard drive and caused severe paralysis in his left arm. Unable to communicate and now living with a physical disability, Dieter was left with no choice but to resign from his preaching ministry.

He was forced to find new work. He took a job at Trader Joe's. His new duties were to mop the floors and take the expired food to the Salvation Army.

The world looked at Dieter and wrote him off. He was an old green coat. What good was a musician who couldn't play? A preacher who couldn't preach? But what did God say to Dieter? What does Dieter say about God?

After years of intense therapy, he began to regain some words. He says, "God was my boss. God is my friend now. God says, 'Dieter, you are not going to work. Now we play.'"

Recently LaDonna Witmer wrote a poem about Dieter and his story called "A Kingdom of Cardboard and Spoils."

If I am the king of all I survey, then I am king
of cardboard and spoils.
My kingdom is a noisy, windowless room in the
back of a Trader Joe's grocery store. . . .
.
My kingdom used to be a stage. A microphone.
A piano and an audience of thousands. . . .
Then came the stroke.
Now, five days a week, I arrive at Trader Joe's in the
early dark, hours before the sun cracks the horizon.

I push my mop up and down aisles. . . . There is
no audience in this kingdom.

But that's ok, because I'm not performing. . . .

I'm just me. Just Dieter. . . .

There's something beautiful about this simple,
menial work, though.

Take the food marked as "spoils," for example. It's
all still good. The fruit is good, the meat is good,
the flowers are good. But they're not perfect. . . .

So the Trader Joe's employees fill shiny carts
with all this perfectly edible imperfection and
wheel the load back to my kingdom. From
there, it will go to feed the hungry, who won't
care at all that their apple is lopsided. . . . They
just want to eat.

.

I understand the spoils. I can relate. Because I,
too, am spoiled. Over, and over and over again.

I used to be packaged as perfect. . . .

But now . . . I relish the imperfection. . . .

.

But the cardboard is recycled. The spoils are
feeding the hungry.

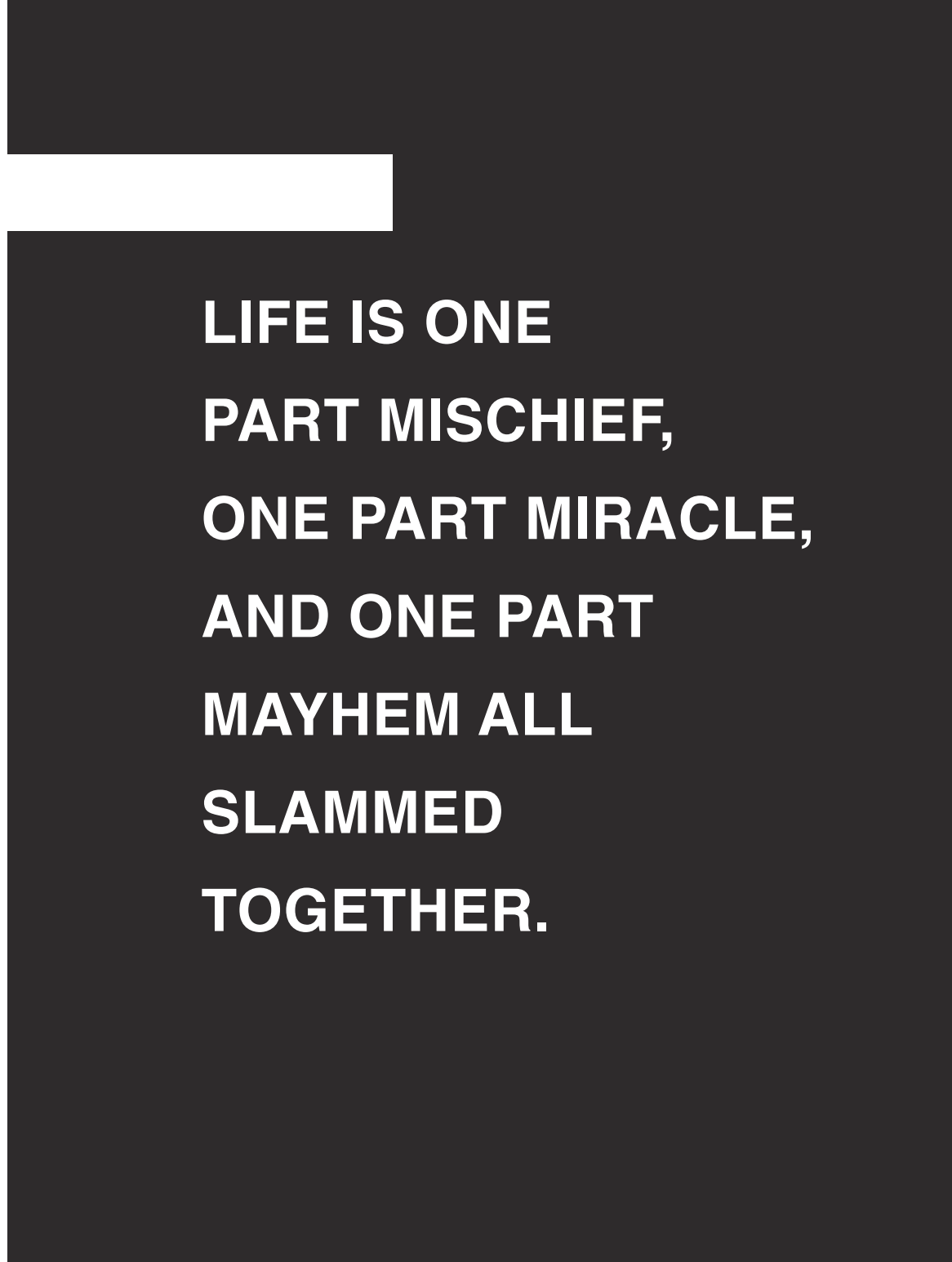
And today I am thinking life is good.

It's very good.³

Dieter's story teaches us so much. It invites us to live for an
audience of one. It teaches us that life is never packaged up nicely.
And if we can be honest, most of us look like lopsided apples.

I could take a thousand showers, but the stain of my boating
accident is not coming off. The stain can only be reimagined
through the handiwork of God.

Friend, fellow imperfectionist, and second chancer, there is no need to clean up or get your act together. Just let God bring you into his workshop and rework your old green coat. Bring what you have, no matter what it looks like. His standards are embarrassingly low, and he will work with everything you're willing to put into his hands. You are imperfect, but you can be perfectly loved and perfectly used by him.



**LIFE IS ONE
PART MISCHIEF,
ONE PART MIRACLE,
AND ONE PART
MAYHEM ALL
SLAMMED
TOGETHER.**

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WATERBROOK