

A Treatment Plan for Recovering from
Trauma, Tragedy, and Other Massive Things

HOPE IS THE FIRST DOSE

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W. LEE WARREN, MD

Award-winning author of I'VE SEEN THE END OF YOU

HOPE IS THE FIRST DOSE



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Tragedy, and Other Massive Things*

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To Josh, my son and my friend: you're stronger than you know
Lisa, for loving Mitch as your own, and for catching all my tears

Dale and Joyce Margritz, friends who became
family in the furnace of suffering

And to all those looking for the light again

Dum spiro spero (While I breathe, I hope)

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Author's Note

The stories in this book are true. I've changed the names and some details of all the patients and some other people in the book to protect their privacy. Conversations are reproduced from my memory, and the dialogue is true to the spirit of the conversations, even if the actual words I use have been changed. Drs. Win Lyle, Michael Roberts, Jonna Cubin, and Eric Cubin graciously allowed me to use their names and the shared parts of our stories.

MEDICAL DISCLAIMER

This is a book about how to deal with the hardest things in life and still find your way back to hopefulness, faith, peace, and a happiness that will be different from the one you knew before. We talk a lot in the following pages about something I call “self-brain surgery,” and I lay out my treatment plan for *the parts of healing that we can do ourselves with God's help*. However, there are times and situations when we need professional help to process and recover from trauma, abuse, loss, and other serious life events, and even anxiety, depression, and other mood and thought disorders. *Do not substitute my advice for the advice of your physician or therapist!* Please, if you're struggling, seek professional help.

Prologue

It's Coming for You, but There's a Plan

Shatter them with double destruction.

—Jeremiah 17:18, *BSB*

Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.

—Ephesians 5:14, *ESV*

Once, when I was a student at the United States Air Force School of Aerospace Medicine, I received a ride in a T-37 jet trainer aircraft so I could learn about the gravitational forces that pilots' bodies are exposed to. This experience would help me be a better flight surgeon, a better air force physician.

Prior to the flight, the crew chief responsible for the airplane gave me a briefing on the things I needed to know for a safe flight. He walked me to the plane, helped me get settled into the cockpit, fastened my safety harnesses around me, and then directed my attention to the floor under my feet.

"Sir," he said in a deep Texas drawl, "keep your feet off them pedals 'less you want to turn this into a real short trip, understand?"

I nodded. "Yes, Sergeant."

"Good," he said. "And, Lieutenant, you see that yellow handle there?"

I noticed the U-shaped metal handle just in front of my seat. It was labeled Ejection Seat! Caution!

"Yes, Sergeant, I see it," I said.

He leaned closer and said in a louder voice, “There ain’t no rocket in this seat; only one like it in the whole air force. Just a big ol’ spring. If you should pull that handle before you’ve reached one thousand feet of altitude, sir, you will be killed. Do you understand, Lieutenant?”

“I do. I won’t touch it,” I said.

He smiled, straightened, and gave a crisp salute. I returned the salute and he said, “You have yourself a nice flight, then, Lieutenant. Keep your feet still, though.”

He walked away, the pilot climbed into the cockpit, and we had an amazing and uneventful flight, outside of a little vomiting and a lot of prayer while he introduced me to aerobatics.



This book is about what happens when *life* pulls the yellow handle before you’ve reached a safe altitude: You get ejected from everything you know and launched onto a dangerous and seemingly impossible trajectory that feels completely out of your control and unsurvivable. There’s no rocket in the seat; you’re going to fall.

When the handle gets pulled and we get launched, the inciting event is what I call the Massive Thing, or TMT. These life traumas cause tremendous pain and invoke in us a sense of being lost or out of control. They trigger emotional and even physical problems that reach into every area of our lives and are, in every way, massive things.

Although I’ll be sharing a lot about my own TMT in the pages to come, the reason I wrote this book is because you have some massive thing in your life, too, friend. Whatever it is, it’s *your* massive thing: someone left, someone cheated, the biopsy was bad, the baby didn’t have a heartbeat, somebody died, you’ve suffered abuse, a global pandemic destroyed your business . . . there’s something.

And I hate to break it to you, but if you don’t have that massive thing yet, you will. Some of us feel like our whole lives are a series of less-massive-but-still-troubling traumas, which you could call “mini-massive things,” but the truth is, your trauma is your trauma.

The bad news? TMT is impossible to survive without a treatment plan—just as it’s impossible for the T-37’s ejection seat to deploy its

parachute in time to save your life if there's not enough altitude.

The good news? I've spent more than twenty years studying the best way to doctor people when I can't save them with surgery or medicine. And my family has been in graduate school for human suffering since 2013, after our TMT, and I've been taking notes. What I've learned is that it's not impossible to live again. Somehow, God can deploy the chute and you can survive—find your feet, find your faith, and even find your happiness again. It won't look the same, but you *can* find it.

When TMT comes for you, you'll feel overwhelmed, desperate, and crushed. To make it worse, TMT will eject you from your life, just as pulling that handle will shoot you off into space, and you can never go back to your old life. It's a double destruction: Your body will ache, your faith will plummet, and you won't know what to do.

TMT is the gift that never stops giving. You'll have post-traumatic stress (and its involuntary intrusions in your least expected moments) and an insatiable desire to purposefully revisit in your mind the thing that hurts you so much. These undesired flashbacks and compulsive ruminations threaten your sanity, and there's a real danger of getting lost in them.

But you're not crazy, and your feelings are normal and natural.

I know because I'm living what I've described. It's been almost ten years, and I've learned a lot about the natural course of TMT and the treatment plan to manage it.

And that, my friend, is why I'm writing this book. Because once you have a treatment plan, you'll start to see the light again.

If you're in the depths of your own TMT, rediscovering hope might seem impossible. But I promise that it *is* possible, and in the pages ahead I'll show you how.

I'll share the story of our family's experience with TMT in part 1. You'll see that TMT happens to everyone, and it's largely out of your control. But in part 2, you will learn that you aren't doomed to be a victim of TMT forever. The Massive Thing will change you, but you have the power to choose how some of those changes affect your life going forward. After my TMT, I started noticing how other people responded to their traumas and tragedies, and I realized that it's not

our experience of trauma that defines our quality of life but rather the choices we make afterward. In part 3, I share stories of patients as they encountered their TMTs and how I made the breakthrough discovery that changed everything for me: *There is a reliable, repeatable method* we can use to find hope when all seems lost. In parts 4 and 5, I present the treatment plan that I discovered and applied to my own broken heart after TMT came uninvited into my life on a Tuesday night in 2013. The treatment plan helped me find happiness again, helped my wife, Lisa, and our family learn to live again, and it will help you too.

If you're one of those people who skip epilogues when you read, please don't skip this one. Why? Because in the epilogue, you will see how all these stories come together to make sense of two things Jesus said that seem impossible to align:

- In John 16:33, he promised that in this world we would have trouble.
- In John 10:10, he promised that he came to the world to enable us to have abundant lives.

The treatment plan helps you square up these two verses. It helps you know that when the yellow handle gets pulled, the ejection seat's parachute is going to open, even though there's not nearly enough sky below you.

When TMT comes for you, you'll feel overwhelmed, desperate, and crushed. But there *is* a treatment plan.

As a warning, like in all those drug commercials in which a smiling actor tells you all the side effects of the new drug they're promoting, I must disclose this: The treatment plan is not a vaccine to prevent TMT, and it is not a cure that eradicates TMT and all its harmful effects. It is maintenance chemotherapy to keep us alive and as well as possible in the post-TMT life we must live.

TMT is coming for everyone. It may have already come for you. But

as I always tell my patients: It's going to be okay. It's going to take some self-brain surgery. It's going to take some soul surgery. It's going to hurt. It's going to leave a scar.

But there *is* a treatment plan, and the first dose is hope.

PART ONE



When the Thing Happens That You Never Get Over

Look long and hard. Brace yourself for a shock.
Something's about to take place
and you're going to find it hard to believe.

—Habakkuk 1:5, MSG

1

Where on Earth Is Hope?

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

—Jesus, John 10:10, ESV

On Tuesday, August 20, 2013, my nineteen-year-old son Mitchell died of multiple stab wounds to his neck.

His best friend also died in the same way that night but with only one wound.

Whether the knife that was used to kill Mitch was in his hand or someone else's, whether he was at fault or a victim, we will never know. It's impossible for us to know. The official story is so far removed from what we know our gentle son to have been capable of, we cannot believe it.

APRIL 2021

NORTH PLATTE, NEBRASKA

“How many kids do you have?” you ask.

I grit my teeth—a little carefully, because I’ve cracked two molars in the eight years since my son Mitchell died.

It’s the worst question you can ask bereaved parents because we im-

mediately go into a private conversation with ourselves. I ask myself, *Five? Or four?*

If I say four, it's with an asterisk, but at least I don't have to go down the waterslide this question is going to take me on if I answer truthfully.

You didn't mean for the question to hurt me, obviously, but there we are.

Here's how this plays out: If I say four, then the whole time we're talking I'm emotionally flogging myself for ignoring the entire life of my beautiful son, just for the sake of sparing myself your inevitable apologies and your prying questions into what happened. I'm Peter at the foot of the cross, in shame about not owning up to who I really am.

If I say five, I'm doing so in hopes that you'll be like most people; you'll nod and say, "That's great! We have three." But it never works out that way for me. There is a 367 percent chance that you're going to respond by saying, "Wow! Tell me about them!"

This is where I deploy tactics. I'll go into great detail about Josh and his wife, Amber, and our amazing new grandson, Ryker. I'll gush over Caity and Nate and their perfect angels, Scarlett and George. Then I'll overshare about Kimber and her special-forces husband, Bryce, and their brilliant son, Jase, and about Kalyn in graduate school and-did-I-tell-you-about-her-research? Oh boy, those grandkids are destined to be a bunch of world-class athletes and future CEOs, I tell ya!

I'll then try to change the subject, but of course, you're an actuary or a CPA or some sort of math genius, and you stop me.

"Wait, that's only four."

So then it's go time. Let's do this. "We lost Mitch in 2013."

And you never ever just say "I'm so sorry" and move on with the conversation.

Nope. You have to say it.

"What happened?"

I want to lie. "He died saving seventeen nuns, two kittens, and six puppies from a house fire. But he got them all out!"

Unfortunately, my brain stops me. The internet is forever. It's too easy for you to look it up, and for some reason people always do.

So I tell the truth, at least as far as I understand it. “He was stabbed in the neck.”

And that’s when, every single time, I realize that everyone else in the room has stopped talking, so my words hit every ear like I am speaking directly into them.

Great way to bring a party to a screeching halt.

And then I can’t stop myself. I tell you that he and his best friend both died. There were three knives. Multiple stab wounds and blood everywhere. The police in this small Deep South town spent a nanosecond in the house and said Mitch killed his friend and then himself. However, the other boy had only one wound and Mitch had eight. Mitch had a cast on his arm, and all the knives had blood on them, yet the police didn’t even check for fingerprints or call for detectives to investigate. It was an open-and-shut case for them—nothing to see here; clean up the scene, put it in the papers as fact, and move on.

But it was not so for us. Mitch was not a fighter. His drug-and-alcohol screen was negative. He loved this other boy. And he hated violence, so the idea of him killing someone and then himself is impossible for me to even contemplate.

Knowing another family was also devastated that night, and being unable to ever know what actually happened, is unbearable. It’s impossible. Choose which is more palatable: Your son killed his best friend and then himself, or the two lifelong buddies fought and both died, or some unknown third person got away with murder. None of those provide answers, clarity, or any hope of healing.

By now your mouth is open, you’re kicking yourself for asking, and you’re trying to find an excuse to go talk to someone else.

Make a mental note to not invite me next time.

—//—

So I’m sitting in the dark by the fire, with my two seven-month-old German shorthaired pointers, Harvey and Louis, at my side, trying to find the words to tell you what happened between the Phone Call—the moment life pulled the yellow handle on us—and now, and how we managed to not die but to actually live again. My wife, Lisa, is sleeping

down the hall, and I'm battling with myself, deciding whether I love you enough to tell you this story or whether I should just have another cup of coffee and look at funny memes on Instagram until she wakes up. Because giving you the story isn't going to be easy, but I keep hearing a voice—God's, I believe—saying you need my story and that the telling will help more than it hurts.

If you've read my last book, *I've Seen the End of You*, then you already knew about Mitch and about how, as a neurosurgeon, I work with a lot of people who are dealing with hard things: brain tumors, head injuries, cancer. I told you in that book that the three things that saved me were: (1) realizing that hopelessness is deadlier than cancer or anything else that can happen to us, (2) that God's promises are all true, and (3) that you can't change your life until you change your mind.

What I didn't tell you was that losing a son made me infinitely sad, hopeless, tormented, lost, and faithless for a while. Your massive thing will likely do the same to you.

Lisa and I had sat on a bench of misery and talked about what needed to happen next: Would we live in the darkness, or would we find a way to walk toward the light again? Then some well-meaning friend asked me to read a book by Dan Harris with the minimally optimistic title *10% Happier*. I did, but it just made me realize that 10 percent happier than infinitely miserable would not move my misery needle enough to help me at all.

So this is the story of the most painful surgery I've ever had: the self-brain surgery I learned how to perform when I needed to transplant into my own head Jesus's promise in John 10:10—that he came here so we could have abundant life—because I felt dead inside.

I don't need to tell you the whole story of losing my son since this is not a book about grief and I've told you a lot already, both here and in *I've Seen the End of You*. But I'm blessed/cursed with writing books that are about multiple things at once: a war memoir (*No Place to Hide*), which was really about control, PTSD, and God's faithfulness, and a book about brain tumors and loss (*I've Seen the End of You*), which was really about doubt, faith, and hope. So here we go again: a book about pain that's really about happiness.

If the human nervous system obeyed classical physics, then an infinitely crushed, sad, or hopeless person could reach emotional equipoise only by obtaining an infinite amount of happiness. But it doesn't work like that. Grief and pain put us into a paradoxical world in which Jesus told us that we will have trouble but also that he came to give us abundant life¹—and you *can* have both.

But, just like the line from the old Sinatra song “Love and Marriage”: “You can't have one without the other.”

Losing a son made me infinitely sad, hopeless, tormented,
lost, and faithless for a while. Your massive thing
will likely do the same to you.

My research into how people handle the hardest things life can throw at them had shown me that some of those people *were* able to find a path to happiness and abundance eventually. And somehow in our darkest days our family found it, too, by “the awful grace of God.”²

I wrote this book because Lisa and I realized it wouldn't be fair to tell you only *that* we found a path; I have to tell you *how*. I need to give you the treatment plan because I do love you enough.

But to get to the treatment plan, I first need to tell you the story. And we have to start where the trauma of losing my son took me: down a dark mental staircase to the furnace of suffering, the depths of life's worst moments. We won't stay there long. But if you trust me enough to go there, then I'll show you how God pulled us out of the miry clay, out of the horrible pit, how he set our feet on the rock again,³ and how he can do the same for you when you face your version of the Massive Thing (TMT).

If you'll go down this mental staircase with me, I'll show you how I came to discover the treatment plan, and then you'll be ready for me to share it with you.

In the following pages, I'm going to be talking a lot about things you can do to try to live again after TMT turns the lights out in your world. But in all the talk about changing our minds, self-brain surgery, and

fighting for faith, do not think it's all up to you. Because TMT will take your strength and your resolve, and you'll soon despair if you miss this one important point: Just as you have to actually walk into the cancer center to receive the radiation beams you did not invent and cannot administer to yourself, there is some work to be done in learning to live again. But you don't do it alone. I already told you that the first dose is hope—but it comes in a syringe of grace from the skilled hands of the Great Physician.

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