

INTRODUCTION

The pressure of reality was closing in from all sides. It was as if the air was being sucked out of the room. As I tilted my head back in anguish, I felt like I was drowning in a sea of confusion and despair, and the only part of my body left above the surface was the tip of my nose. Without supernatural intervention, I was going under fast.

With shaking hands, I scribbled the current reality of my situation onto a sheet of hotel letterhead. It took me a few drafts before I got it right. When I finished, I called to confirm the intended recipients were in their room before I opened my door and headed out.

The hotel hallway felt like a dark tunnel closing in around me, and my footsteps whispered on the carpet as I walked in an almost trancelike state. Fear coursed through me. I had no idea what would happen next, only that I could no longer stay where I was.

How could this be happening to me? How would my truth be received?

Increasing doubts about lifting the veil of secrecy raced through my mind with each step. For as long as I could remember, I had been afraid to let anyone see the real me. My secrets were like a dysfunctional security blanket I clung to for dear life. The night I mustered up the nerve to expose the truth, I finally said good-bye to that false sense of security—to the fearful isolation that had become my haven.

As strange as it seems, I didn't realize I lacked courage until I found it halfway around the world in a hotel room in Israel. On that night, I knew I had to take a major risk. Suddenly, I was like a hostage who finds herself with a window of opportunity to seek help—a sliver of time to reach out and let someone know she is in trouble.

As I walked and prayed, God gave me exactly what I needed in that moment: supernatural courage. I was terrified, but I was resolute. It was now or never. When my pastor's wife answered my knock, I all but shoved the note into her hands.

"I'm desperate and have to tell someone the truth. My marriage is on life support." The words quickly tumbled out as she stood there bewildered. Janet wasn't only my pastor's wife; she was a dear friend, the person who had planned a surprise birthday party for me just a few days before my adult son and I left for Israel. My husband and I had been friends with Johnny and Janet Hunt for over fifteen years, and they were about to learn that the marriage Mike and I portrayed was not what we lived.

"Come inside, Ann," she opened the door wider as I backed up.

"I can't . . . not now," I whispered, just as the elevator door opened a few feet from where we were standing and my pastor walked out. I wasn't ready to face him; I wasn't ready for a conversation with either of them. I was barely ready for what had just happened. But it had happened. And although I was shaking, I was still standing. I pushed through my fear long enough to invite someone else into my deepest struggle. I was no longer a hostage to the bitter truth. I awkwardly thanked Johnny and Janet, told them I had to go, and quickly rushed back down the hall to my room.

This was the moment I began my journey toward freedom—not freedom from any person, place, or thing, but from the bondage of my own fear-based choices, from the dark place of isolation where I felt so alone. This is where writing became the vehicle God used to give me courage and transport me to a place of amazing grace. And it all started on a sheet of hotel letterhead.

I didn't know what would happen once my husband (who had remained stateside) found out what I had done. But the truth that everything wasn't perfect in our life was at last coming out, and God was at work in miraculous ways. I took His Word to heart: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."¹

Confessing the truth to Johnny and Janet started a chain reaction that led me toward honesty, openness, help, and healing. That night, I took two important steps toward courage. First, I committed to change. Second, I overcame the obstacle of secrecy and isolation. The Bible says,

“Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”²

It was then I understood a powerful truth: when our actions and behaviors are based on unhealthy, fear-based choices, the relationships we have with others will never be healthy—whether it’s with a spouse, family member, friend, employer, or even the person sitting next to us at church. I desperately wanted a healthy relationship with my husband, but that was never going to happen if the part I played wasn’t truthful.

Exposed, Exhausted, and Exhilarated

For many of us, being in unhealthy relationships has become a way of life, whether it’s in relationships with others or the one we have with ourselves. Many of us have resigned ourselves to the distorted belief that we are destined to exist in a kind of half-life, in a world where tension is normal and joy eludes us. We’ve come to believe that it is what it is.

We’ve set the bar for happiness and joy extremely low. Some of us, like me, have gone so far as to deny problems even exist, living in a fantasyland of dysfunction and isolation. Some of us blame the people around us for making our lives miserable. But the truth is, it’s not about the choices those around us make—although their choices can (and often do) affect us. When all is said and done, it’s our own choices that really make all the difference, including how we choose to respond to the choices others are making.

What I’m saying isn’t rocket science. It isn’t advanced physics. But it is something that cripples countless men and women, no matter their level of intellect, success, or faith.

Finding the courage to foster healthy relationships is about the choices we make to change the story of our own lives. It’s about praying for godly wisdom and discernment to accept responsibility for those

choices, courage to face their consequences, and the strength to move on. And it's about the healthy boundaries we set—or don't set—for ourselves.

If you've spent any time pretending to be someone or something you aren't, you know how exhausting and isolating the dance can be. Contrary to what some may think, it takes a great deal of energy to hide behind masks to cover up our fear and self-condemnation. Many of us have constructed the walls of our personal prisons so high and so strong, we've lost sight of who or what we are protecting ourselves from. All we know is that to expose who we really are is an unthinkable act with inconceivable consequences.

When I found myself in a hotel room in Israel contemplating divorce, I had no idea I was about to discover seven courageous steps I would consistently follow, day after day, that would ultimately change my life. And now, these steps can also change your life—no matter what difficult, challenging, or fearful situation you may be experiencing.