



TO *Fly*  
AGAIN

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WITH DEAN MERRILL



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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*To Fly Again*

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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Burnham, Gracia.

To fly again : surviving the tailspins of life / Gracia Burnham, with Dean Merrill.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-4143-0123-5 (hc) — ISBN 1-4143-0125-1 (sc)

1. Consolation. 2. Burnham, Gracia. I. Merrill, Dean. II. Title.

BV4905.3.B87 2005

248.8'6—dc22

2004020161

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Printed in the United States of America

09 08 07 06 05

5 4 3 2 1

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# *Unfinished Lists*

I found an old list of mine the other day—the unfinished one I left on the little desk beside the kitchen counter of our home in the Philippines when I left that fateful day to meet my husband in Manila. I expected to whisk Martin away for an anniversary weekend by the sea and return home a few days later. As the world now knows, we never got back to that home. We spent the next year in the ruthless hands of the Abu Sayyaf, a Muslim terrorist group that demanded one million dollars for our release. Martin, my husband, came back to America in a casket. I returned in a wheelchair with a bullet hole through my right leg.

Months later, a dear couple who had come to Martin’s funeral kindly volunteered to pack up our belongings in that home in Aritao and ship them to me. When the truck rolled up to our house in Rose Hill, Kansas, where I had begun rebuilding my life with our three growing children, I watched the crates come off the back. Eventually, amid clothes and files and Martin’s tools and beloved photos of happy days, I came across my steno pad. The list from May 2001 said:

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- *Do end-of-month bookkeeping.*
- *Move furniture in the guesthouse.*
- *Move our mattresses back here. (We had loaned some of our bedding to the mission guesthouse, which was having a large crowd just then.)*
- *Service the radio battery.*
- *Order name tags for Jeff's clothing. (Our son needed them for boarding school.)*
- *Fix up the computer table in the library.*
- *Mike Fulford says SIL/Wycliffe owes us 191 gallons of avgas. Resolve this. (Avgas is fuel for airplanes.)*
- *Do next week's menu.*
- *Put Martin's toolbox away.*
- *Pay the helpers.*

How busy I was! How productive! I was a take-charge, get-it-done missionary wife and mom. Of the many small joys in life, few compared with the quiet pleasure of marking something off my to-do list. The fact that eight or ten or a dozen other items still awaited my attention did not diminish the reward of telling myself, *Well, at least I got that one done.*

I heard about one man who, in making his lists, would add a few tasks he had already taken care of—just so when he got to the end of the paper, he could go back and strike them out again. Psychologically, it felt good to tell himself he had already accomplished a few things. Now the rest of the list did not seem so daunting.

Lists supervise our lives, it seems, whether jotted in Day-Timers, on yellow stickees, on pastel notepads made

especially for the purpose, on the back of grocery store checkout tapes—or only on the front wall of our minds. A mother's work is never done, says the old proverb. And instinctively we know, whether we are parents or not, that if we don't itemize the specific tasks somewhere, the work will get totally out of hand. That was why I tried to keep my steno pad close at hand: I wanted to stay on top of everything.

And then—in a moment of time—everything changed. I became a hostage who had lost all control of my life, my schedule, and my future. I could only sit on the ground and stare at the jungle, wondering what would come next. Did the unfinished items on that list back in the kitchen ever get done? I had no way to find out. In fact, to this day I still don't know. My world had forever shifted.



Since my return to the States, I've met many other people whose world has been rocked unexpectedly. I spoke not long ago to a support group of cancer victims, survivors, and caregivers. The invitation had come for a date just a few weeks before Christmas, and I wasn't sure I should accept in light of preholiday busyness. But in the end, I said yes and afterward was glad I did.

I arrived that morning to find some two hundred people gathered in an upstairs hall. As I waited in the front row, an attractive young woman came up to me. She introduced herself and pointed out her husband, whose hair was now gone because of chemotherapy.

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“You know, this has been a really tough time for us,” she said. “We have three little kids. But the Lord has been faithful to help us so far. We’re looking forward to your message of hope.”

I took her hand and told her I appreciated her making the effort to come. Soon it was time for me to stand up and begin my talk.

“As you know, I stand before you today as a survivor of sorts,” I began. “My battle was not against cancer, of course, but against the schemes of a group of killers in the Philippine jungle.” I went on to recount how it all broke loose for Martin and me: the trip to the Dos Palmas Resort, the romantic evening, the sudden banging on the door early the next morning, the scramble for my clothes, the gun barrel in my back as I was prodded down the catwalk to the waiting speedboat, the boat’s escape onto open water, and my whisper to Martin just then: “We are in big trouble.”

I paused and looked across the room of somber faces. “In that one moment, I lost all control of my life. I would be told from that point onward where to sleep, how to dress, what to eat (if at all), even where to go to the bathroom. If I didn’t like the options, which I often didn’t, that was just too bad. My existence was out of my hands.”

The audience quickly began to identify with my predicament, it seemed. They, too, had been going along living a normal life, or so they thought, until the fateful day in a doctor’s office somewhere when the person in a

white coat said, “Your lab results came back, and I’m sorry to tell you that you have a malignancy.” In that moment, everything changed. The patients took in a breath of air and couldn’t push it out again. They sat transfixed, staring at the physician, fumbling for words. Surely it wasn’t true. Yes, it was—this was not a joke. The foundation of their life quivered as in an earthquake, threatening to crack.

As I continued to speak, I noticed people nodding their heads. The Kleenexes came out in greater numbers than usual. I began realizing that I had more in common with this audience than I had expected.

“How do we manage when life spins out of control in a single day?” I said. “What do we do when all our plans and goals are put on hold, when everything we had intended to do and see and accomplish gets swept aside, and we don’t know if we’ll ever get back to familiar ground? How do we keep our sanity? How do we avoid slipping into a personal canyon of despair?”

“I remember a particularly frightening Thursday morning in the jungle, the day of Gun Battle Number 13. We endured seventeen of these altogether, where our little group would be spotted by the Philippine military, who were trying to rescue us hostages but were ill-trained to do so. While their intentions were good, their technique was altogether dangerous, not only for the terrorists but for us as well.

“On this day Martin and I had just built a small fire to heat water for a cup of tea. Our recently washed clothes were strewn out on bushes to dry in the sun.



Suddenly, gunfire erupted. We had to get out of that place immediately.

“Normally, we tried to keep our belongings fairly well consolidated for such emergencies. But in this moment, our stuff was everywhere. We were totally unprepared.

“We instantly hit the ground, of course. As bullets continued to whiz past our heads, Martin gingerly reached up to pull the cord that tied one end of our hammock to a tree. He then scooted along the ground to do the same to the opposite cord. We squashed the hammock into our backpack and then dashed for cover, abandoning nearly everything else—extra clothes, cooking utensils, my hairbrush, and other necessities.

“Soon we found ourselves wading through a swamp that came up to our waists. We emerged on the other side and flopped down to rest. I looked at my husband with total exhaustion.

“In that desperate hour, my wonderful husband said, ‘Gracia, let’s remind ourselves of what we know is true.’ We had no Bible to consult; we could lean only on what we had stored in our memories. From that reserve, we began to recite: ‘If God be for us, who can be against us?’ (Romans 8:31, KJV).

“One of us said, ‘Where does it say in Scripture, “I have loved thee with an everlasting love”?’ (It’s in the Old Testament, Jeremiah 31:3, KJV.)

“ ‘And then what about that part at the beginning of Ephesians: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ”?’ (Ephesians 1:3, KJV).

“We went on sharing Scriptures such as these, trying to anchor ourselves in the truth we could trust, the truth that God is with us through the tunnel, through the valley, through the gun battle. He stands with us through the medical prognosis that terrorizes us, through every horrible thing that life throws our way. We don’t go through these things alone. We walk with our hands in the hand of the One who turns night into day.

“Ladies and gentlemen, a bad thing happened to me—and to you, too. We didn’t ask for any of this; we didn’t deserve it. But it came upon us regardless. The way of wisdom in going forward, I believe, is to keep walking with Jesus. He knows the road when we don’t.”

At the end of my forty-minute talk, the meeting ended, and I moved over to a table to greet people and sign copies of my book, *In the Presence of My Enemies*. The line moved slowly that day, as each person seemed to have a story to tell.

“I’m a caregiver for my mother, who was too sick to come today. . . .”

“I’m a cancer survivor; I’ve been cancer-free for five years. . . .” I began to notice that each person who had beaten the disease wanted to tell me the time length of their victory.

“Thanks for the neat message of hope. . . .”

One lady gave me a gift of some lovely china that she had painted by hand.

But the words that stuck most vividly in my mind came from several people who said, “I wouldn’t trade my cancer experience for anything, because it has brought

me closer to God” or “. . . because it has thrown me onto the Lord.”

I was shocked. Were they serious? Could anyone actually view cancer as a good thing?

Apparently so. The day that had devastated their life turned out to be the beginning of their spiritual rebirth. They had found new hope and new life in Jesus Christ.



It is not easy to come to this perspective, I admit. Sometimes the discomfort overwhelms us temporarily. We can't see straight or think straight because we are so miserable.

Once as we were wandering in the jungle, the Abu Sayyaf picked out a campsite on a cliff that overlooked a beautiful river. It was close to a village, but we had to stay away from civilization as much as possible to avoid discovery. So we settled there instead for about ten days. The cliff had trees from which the group's hammocks could be hung.

Martin and I didn't yet have a hammock, however; we were still sleeping on the ground. And the slope of the cliff was too steep for sleeping.

Hurayra, our assigned guard, took it upon himself to dig a little flat spot, like a shelf, into the side of the cliff. It was about six feet long and wide enough for the two of us to lie down inside it.

The worst part, however, were the swarms of flies that inhabited this cliff. They buzzed around everyone's head incessantly. With nothing to do, Martin and I would sit

and talk, swatting flies away almost constantly. It got so bad that after a while, we would seek protection by crawling under our *malongs*, the long Filipino piece of fabric that serves as everything from a towel to a skirt to a knapsack.

This kept the flies away—but it was also very hot. The sun would beat down until we were about to suffocate. We would eventually have to sit up to get some fresh air, fanning ourselves and flailing at the flies again until we were exhausted. The *malong* had to be better than this, we would think. And so the cycle would begin all over.

I began to grow very depressed. “I really miss my mom,” I said to Martin one day. “I just need her to be here and hold my hand.” I began to cry. My mother, with her warm and soothing accent from southern “Missourah” where she grew up, could calm her little girl’s nerves and somehow make it all better, I just knew.

I lay down under the *malong* again and started sobbing. Martin reached over to pat my shoulder, but there was nothing further he could do for me. The Abu Sayyaf members heard me carrying on, I’m sure, and even though they were tough warriors, they seemed to feel sorry for me. Just not sorry enough to release us.

We eventually left that cliffside to move on to another place, and another, and then another. I had to come, in time, to the understanding that while my wonderful mother was ten time zones away, someone even greater and more capable to sustain and comfort me was nearby: the Lord himself. He saw my weariness,

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my frustration, my lack of hope, and in his own ways he was there to lift me and encourage me.

The times when life seems unmanageable to us are the times when we find out that God is truly good. His goodness is shown not just in blessing us with material comforts: houses, cars, television sets, vacations. His goodness shines through in the times when we are *uncomfortable*, when all of life seems to have gone crazy.

One of the psalms we were able to recall, and even write down, in the jungle was the uplifting Psalm 100, including the line “Serve the LORD with gladness” (verse 2, KJV), which was Martin’s motto and watchword. There is another gem in the last verse of the same psalm that says:

*For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;  
his faithfulness continues through all generations.*  
(verse 5, NIV)

“The Lord is good.” That simple truth can sustain us through dreadful circumstances.

I would have to tell you that the various gods of the tribal people whom we served in the Philippines were not what you could call “good.” Their supposed rules and proclamations often worked to the detriment of the villagers. We would see children withering away without proper nourishment, even though the jungle held an abundant supply of nutritious tropical fruits. “No, you are not allowed to eat that fruit,” said the witch doctor. “It is forbidden.” And so, the obedient parents would conform to what their gods announced, even if it led to

burying a beloved child who eventually had starved to death.

In contrast, the Lord God is fundamentally good-hearted, loving, and concerned for his children of all ages. We must never forget that. He has a thousand ways to sustain us through our darkest hours. Life sometimes throws us vicious surprises—but he is not surprised. He stands ready to shower us with his love that “endures forever . . . through all generations.”

The poet J. J. Lynch wrote:

*Say not, my soul, “From whence  
Can God relieve my care?”  
Remember that Omnipotence  
Hath servants everywhere.<sup>1</sup>*

I think of that whenever God sends someone to help me, a widow and single mother, these days. Whenever someone shows me how to reprogram my home’s security code or sends me an encouraging card or gives me a song to lift my spirit, I say to myself, *Ah, yes—Omnipotence hath servants everywhere.* I never know when one of these is going to show up, and neither do you.



There are things we can do in the midst of our trial to make it less burdensome, more manageable. As we learn to work with the God who loves us rather than work against him, we can lessen our pain.

To these things we turn our attention in the coming chapters.