

reclaiming your heart

A Journey Back to Laughing, Loving, and Living



DENISE HILDRETH JONES

Praise for Denise Hildreth Jones

“*[Reclaiming Your Heart]* is an unabashed look at real life, including dashed dreams, punctured hope, and unvarnished truths that get brushed under the rug of religious clichés. This book is the real deal for those seeking hope in spite of life’s disappointments.”

ALAN E. NELSON, EDD,

author of *Embracing Brokenness* and founder of KidLead, Inc.

“In *Flying Solo*, Denise . . . covers real heart issues such as learning to let go, getting through grief and disappointment, and allowing God to fill that secret place in our hearts that only he can fill. Although this book was written to bring hope and healing to those who have been through a divorce, I recommend it to anyone who wants to experience an intimate relationship with a loving God through every season of life.”

NANCY ALCORN,

founder and president of Mercy Ministries

“By sharing her personal reflections and her conversations with God in *Flying Solo*, Denise offers incredible comfort for those recovering from divorce and a hope for a joyous future. This book offers validation for the feelings we all encounter and a path of self-discovery that is uplifting, encouraging, and inspiring.”

JENNY SANFORD,

former First Lady of South Carolina and author of *Staying True*

“In this beautiful book, Denise Hildreth Jones has given us a gift by allowing us to walk with her through the most intimate, painful, and faith-building moments of her life. In doing so, she reminds each one of us that God is most powerfully present even when he seems to be most apparently absent.”

PETE WILSON,

pastor of Cross Point Church, Nashville, Tennessee, and author
of *Plan B: What Do You Do When God Doesn't Show Up the Way You
Thought He Would?*

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CHAPTER ONE

HEART CHECK

*Go to your bosom; Knock there, and ask
your heart what it doth know.*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

I STOOD IN THE DRESSING ROOM and stared at the fancy jeans I had just put on. Then I turned around to check my rear end. I hadn't done a booty check in a pair of jeans since I don't know when. Maybe never. But at almost forty years old, recently divorced, I was doing just that.

I left the dressing room and crossed over to where my mother sat in a chair waiting for me. Then I did the "girl walk."

Most men I know have no idea what this is. When a guy tries on clothes, he does the "robotic turn"—arms slightly stuck out from his sides, he turns around in a circle as he bounces slightly from one foot to the other, looking more like a waddling pregnant lady in her ninth month. To check his rear view, he pulls at the seat of his jeans, twists his head in a contortionist manner, then shrugs and decides it's not worth the headache. They stay up. He'll buy them.

But girls or women, in my experience, do something completely different when they're in front of a dressing room mirror. A woman keeps her body facing forward, takes a step away from the three-way mirror, and turns her head slightly to see how her booty looks. Then she slowly turns around and spends the next thirty minutes doing it over and over again—as if the view will be different the last time than it was the first.

Today, every backward glance made me smile. This was a marker kind of day for me, a defining moment—almost as momentous as the decision I had made five months earlier when I chose the clothes I would wear to court to begin the process of becoming divorced.

“What do you think?” I asked my mom. This is also something girls do. They take friends to tell them how they look. Men reluctantly take their wives, if anyone.

“They look good, baby.” My mom is very Southern, so these words came out slowly. The word *baby* had three syllables.

“They're not too tight?” I asked.

“No, they make your rear end look cute.”

I was almost forty. *Cute* was definitely a good word.

“I travel and teach people about Jesus, Mom. Seriously, do they look too tight?”

Mom laughed. She understood. When she married my father, a young new preacher, she couldn't even wear a wedding ring because of the restrictions in the denomination he served. She was well aware of what people in ministry were often expected to wear or not wear. Plus she has always been one of the classiest, most ladylike women I know. If she approved, I could run with that.

“They look fine, baby. You know your mother wouldn't lie to you.”

I flipped my head for the tenth time. If I jerked much

harder, I was going to leave with a new pair of jeans and whip-lash. “They’re cute, huh?”

“I like them.”

“They’re pricey.”

“Well, I’m paying for them, so don’t you worry about it.”

The jeans were going to be my Christmas present from my parents.

“I’m almost forty, Mom. Should I really be wearing these?”

“My forties were my best years. You enjoy wearing them.”

I turned my body halfway around and studied the side shot in the mirror. The smile crept wide across my face. My fancy jeans looked really good on me. “You sure you want to get these for me?”

“Are they what you want?”

“Yeah, Mom, I really like them.”

“Then let’s get them.”

I think I might have skipped a little as I returned to the dressing room that day. That was inappropriate, perhaps, for a woman my age but fully reflective of what was happening inside me.

You see, that moment wasn’t really about jeans. Not really.

It was about something I had lost, something I was fighting desperately to regain.

My heart.

I was fighting for my open, alive, God-created heart.

Let me give you a little background to show you what I’m talking about.

When I was fifteen, I usually went to school with a pair of boxer shorts sticking out from underneath a pair of cutoff sweat-pants. That was the style at the time for kids my age. My mother was tortured over my style decisions, but she never said anything. My dad did, though. “You’re seriously wearing that?” he asked me a couple times when he was dropping me off at school.

“Yep. Seriously” was all I offered. My wardrobe decisions might not have pleased everyone, but they pleased me.

The next year, when we moved from Myrtle Beach to Camden, South Carolina, I decided a new school required a more mature look. I graduated from boxers and sweatpants to skirts and sweaters. I even got my own account at a little store called Clothes Tree and paid the bills with money from my part-time job at a photography studio. I developed a pretty good sense of my own style. By the end of my senior year, I was even voted “best dressed.”

By this point, unfortunately, my younger brother was cutting off every T-shirt he had right smack-dab in the middle of his chest, revealing his belly button. My poor parents. Just when one of their children was getting it together, another one was losing his mind.

As a college student and later, as a young graduate, I continued to enjoy my own sense of style. I met a young man, fell in love, and eventually got married. And somewhere around that time, there was another clothing shift. I basically stopped choosing my own clothes. I let someone else—my husband—define my style. Even during our courtship, he purchased many of my clothes for me. Rarely did I buy something myself, and if I did, I sought his approval first.

Now, I’m not saying that a woman shouldn’t wear clothes her husband likes. Not at all. But in my case, letting my husband pick my clothes was an outward sign of a very destructive dynamic in our marriage. I couldn’t see it then, but I can see it clearly now. It had a lot to do with what was happening between us and, more importantly, what was happening inside me. Bit by bit, my heart was shutting down.

As the fractures in our marriage began to spread more quickly than the new lines forming at the edges of my eyes, I

finally took a stand—over a pair of jeans he wanted me to buy. They were beautiful jeans, expensive designer jeans. But they simply weren't me.

Clothes are personal. They should be a reflection of who you are. And as pair after pair of jeans made their way to my dressing room that day, I realized none of them came close. Standing there in front of the three-way mirror, I saw what those jeans represented. The man choosing them didn't really see me. I felt I had not truly been seen in years. And I wanted to be *seen*. Not as a label, not as an image . . . just as me. As Denise.

In other words, there was no way on earth I was buying those jeans. I left the store without a single purchase.

That was a big stand for me. I was so broken back then that to take any stand at all was monumental. Those jeans represented everything wrong in my marriage, and it was the hill I chose to die on.

You know what's funny? The jeans I tried on that day, picked out for me by my former husband, were the *exact same brand* my mother bought me for Christmas the December after my divorce.

As I said, the jeans weren't really the issue. The issue was what those two moments revealed about my heart. The first spotlighted a fractured, dead heart. The second showcased an open heart coming back to life. It was another step past the one I described in my memoir, *Flying Solo*, when I chose "disposable" clothes but new shoes to go to divorce court. Now, some months later, I was giving myself permission to wear those fancy jeans. Not because anyone else on the face of the earth thought I should have them, but because my heart responded to them on that defining day, at that reclaiming moment in my story.

There is a store my second husband and I often pass whenever I can actually get him into the mall. "Babe," he will say,

“whatever you do, don’t buy me anything from that store.” Again, he’s talking about so much more than shopping. He is saying, “Let me be me. Let me be the man God created me to be.” And I do—because I spent so many years *not* being the woman God created me to be.

If I say it once through our journey together, I will say it a thousand times. Once you know what it is to have your heart back, you will never let it go again. And you will do your best to never be a pawn in the enemy’s scheme of shutting down someone else’s heart.

How’s Your Heart?

Now that I’ve told you a little bit about my shut-down heart and one of the many ways it revealed itself, I’d like to ask you a few questions about your own heart. This is important because understanding where we are helps us understand how to get to where we’re going. (If you have the Google Maps app on your phone, it’s kind of like hitting the Route button when you’ve taken a wrong turn.)

You see, many of us have taken wrong turns in this life we’ve been given, and those turns have left us feeling lost. Or angry. Or fearful. Or controlling. Or weary. Or all of the above. Closed off from the person God created us to be and heartbreakingly shut down.

Could this be you? Think about it:

- ◆ If you are no longer doing things you used to love to do or have convinced yourself they no longer mean anything to you . . .
- ◆ If you spend your time perpetually focused on the needs of others and pay no attention to your own God-designed needs and desires . . .

- ◆ If you rarely have a real belly laugh or a good cry anymore . . .
- ◆ If you rarely listen to music anymore or sing from the bottom of your toes . . .
- ◆ If you don't feel things on a deep level anymore—good feelings or bad . . .
- ◆ If you find yourself thinking often that one more car (or one more house or one more affair or one more piece of cake) will fulfill you . . .
- ◆ If you haven't cut off the television or the noise in your ears for a while and just stopped and listened to the world . . .
- ◆ If the thought of doing something spontaneous, breaking your routine, or having your plans disrupted causes your stomach to tighten . . .
- ◆ If you haven't had an honest conversation about the stuff in your life in a long time—or if you can't even imagine whom you'd have such a conversation with . . .
- ◆ If you're pretty sure that your past has disqualified you for your future . . .
- ◆ If disappointment after disappointment has left you convinced that having another dream isn't worth the pain . . .
- ◆ If it feels like other people are always pulling the strings of your life . . .
- ◆ If you haven't really tasted your food in a long time or you've forgotten what kind of clothes you like to wear . . .

. . . then it might be time for a heart check. Because laughing and loving and experiencing and feeling and tasting are all pieces of living, and some of us haven't done any of that in so

long we're not sure we remember how. Some of us don't even want to try. We've been hurt, and we don't want to hurt anymore. We're tired of being let down. Or we're just plain tired. For one reason or another we've lost touch with who we really are, who God created us to be.

Friends, I understand. Believe me, I've been there. That's why I'm inviting you to take an amazing journey with me—a journey to a place of joy and freedom. What waits for you at the end of this road? Here is just a taste of the possibilities:

- ◆ You'll learn to enjoy that belly laugh, the deep-down, from-your-toes kind.
- ◆ You'll break the habit of running away from your pain and learn to run into it instead. Once you let yourself feel pain—truly feel it—you'll be able to learn from it, leave it behind, or live with it in grace instead of despair.
- ◆ You'll give yourself permission to have difficult conversations with those you love the most, and you'll be okay if there is friction or tension.
- ◆ You'll experience the freedom of releasing people to their Father instead of feeling responsible to rescue them from their pain or their anger or the consequences of their own choices.
- ◆ You'll enjoy the peace of accepting who you are and the enjoyment of just being you. That, my friend, is sweet peace.

Will all this come with a price?

Yes. A steep one.

Will it be worth everything you must do to find it?

Absolutely.

Can it really happen for you?

Without a doubt.

You see, we have all been offered an abundant life. It is our birthright as children of God, our promised gift as followers of Jesus Christ. It is what we were made for, the way we were intended to live. And yet somehow, too often, it eludes us. It's almost like it's been stolen right out from under our noses.

So often we stop at the first part of John 10:10—"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy." Many of us understand that part of it. We've experienced how he steals our innocence, our marriages, our loved ones, and our dreams. Yeah, we know there's a real thief out there.

But that isn't where the passage ends. There is more. Thank God there is more! The Scripture goes on to say, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (NIV). Or as the King James Version so memorably puts it, "more abundantly."

Now that is a journey so worth taking. And today, right now, as you hold this book in your hands and determine that you will turn the page, you are declaring it is a journey you need to take. An expedition to take back the abundant life that has been stolen from you. To open up what has been shut down in response to painful life experiences and less-than-stellar choices. To live as the person God created you to be, the real you Christ died to save.

My specific story may be different from yours. What I have learned about the dangers of a shut-down heart and what it takes to reclaim it came through a traumatic divorce and its aftermath. Your experience may involve a difficult childhood, a soul-destroying job, a long grind through economic hardship, or some other life circumstances. But pain is pain—and the Lord's offer of abundant life applies to any painful, shut-down circumstances in which you may find yourself.

How Do Hearts Shut Down?

I was sitting in McDonald's with my then five-year-old niece Lauren, enjoying Cokes. I was educating her on the joy of the McDonald's Coke burn and the follow-up of their salty fries when I began to study her little face. She was popping in those fries one after another. And in that moment I could see her twenty years down the road.

"Lauren, you know what?"

Her "what?" was slurred because of the four French fries she was currently chomping.

"When you grow up, you are going to be a mighty woman of God."

She never missed a beat. She just popped another French fry into her mouth and said, "I know, Aunt Niecy."

Doesn't that just take your breath away? It does mine because it is such a beautiful picture of an undamaged heart. There was no cynicism, no rolled eyes at the absurdity of my statement. There was just complete acceptance. Whether Lauren understood what I was saying or not, she was convinced of one thing: she could be anything.

You see, we don't come into this world jaded. We enter life with breathtaking dreams and open, trusting hearts, convinced that anything is possible. When we see Disney movies as little kids, we find it easy to believe that we can be Cinderella or Prince Charming, that our stories really will end with a happily ever after. We assume we can put on gold bracelets like Wonder Woman and deflect any bullets sent our way, or don a red cape and leap tall buildings in a single bound. We expect all those cakes we prepare in our Easy-Bake ovens to really be easy to bake. And we're sure that if we have just the right bat—and turn the bill of our cap just the right way—all the balls we hit will end up in the stands.

Eventually, of course, we grow up and get more realistic. And don't get me wrong—we *should* grow up. The problem comes when we grow up and forget how to *live*. When we take the hearts God designed to be alive, confident, trusting, and—most important of all—always connected to his heart, and we allow them to wither and fade.

That's not maturity. That's tragedy. And it can happen all too easily—if we don't carefully guard our hearts.

I think it's safe to say that we don't wake up one morning and say, "*This is the day I'm going to stop living. This is the day I'm going to shut down my heart.*" So how does it happen? If we enter life with alive, carefree, completely abandoned hearts like my niece Lauren's, then how and why do they change?

The answer is pretty obvious: life.

Yep, life.

Life creeps in and shuts us down.

Or more accurately, we encounter difficulties in life and we shut down in response.

For some of us, this happened in our childhood. Maybe it came in the form of stolen innocence—sexual abuse—or the trauma of physical or verbal abuse.

I remember a time when Tyler Perry, the creator of my favorite movie character, Madea, and the writer of my favorite movie, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, appeared on *Oprah* and talked about the sexual abuse he endured as a child. Oprah showed two pictures of him—one taken before the abuse and one taken afterward. He said, in essence, that the second picture, the one with "sad eyes," marked the place where his young heart shut down.

But it's not just abuse that can shut down a child's heart. For some of us, death, divorce, family illness, or other circumstances caused adult responsibilities to fall on small shoulders that were

never meant to carry them. Those years that were supposed to be lived out in wonder and delight succumbed prematurely to the demands of an adult world. Instead of maturing in a healthy way and becoming healthy adults, we shut down in our childhood.

For some of us, a rigid family code motivated us to shut down. Whether overt or implied, the message we internalized was “In our family, we are to look like _____, act like _____, be like _____.” (I’ll let you fill in your own blanks.) Instead of being allowed to live out of our individual, God-designed hearts, we were given a box to squeeze ourselves into. Over time, we were molded into the person our family code required us to be, and the person God created us to be got lost in the shuffle.

For others of us, school was the place where our hearts began to shut down. Maybe the other kids picked on us or bullied us or branded us with an identity that haunted us year after year. (Bullying for even minor things like hair color or a lisp can leave lingering scars.) Maybe we moved a lot and grew weary of starting over. Or maybe a learning disability made school such a struggle that we finally gave up, convinced we were just dumb.

Even if we made it through high school unscathed, college might have brought us up short. Gone were the days when everybody knew our name. We were lucky if anyone recognized us at all. Some of us felt rejection for the first time. We didn’t get into the sorority. We weren’t the best player on the football team anymore. We didn’t make the grades we thought we’d make. Insecurity and that seed of rejection settled in our souls, and we shut down our hearts to protect them.

Or maybe college birthed another dynamic: it caused us to push harder. We had to be the best student, the best athlete, or the best sorority member. Our real hearts got lost in the land

of expectations—the ones we placed on ourselves as well as the ones others placed on us.

For still others of us, it happened after we graduated college. Other kids had graduated college too, and that dream job we thought would be ours just never showed up. Instead, we found ourselves working in jobs we hated alongside people who didn't value us, doing work that was less than inspiring.

Or maybe it happened after we got married. Prince Charming didn't turn out to be quite so charming. In fact, he was pretty messed up. And Cinderella came with issues—lots of them.

Truth be told, a lot of our “stuff” doesn't make its appearance until we get married. Intimacy does that. It brings out what is on the inside. And inside that covenantal place, the wounds from our past can roar to life. The residue from childhood abuse can cause us to despise our spouse's touch. The emotional fallout from having parents divorce can make us distrustful, manipulative, or detached from relationships. And in the midst of that crucible, both partners can end up thinking it would be easier simply to exist than to dig in and heal.

For still others, it happened when Prince Charming or Cinderella never showed up. We waited and waited, with no sign of a fairy-tale romance—or any romance at all. The years ticked by until the ticking clock became a banging gong. And with each dateless Valentine's Day, each ridiculous bridesmaid's dress, each bachelor party that we're expected to be the life of, our hearts shut down a little more.

And the process didn't stop there. In fact, life still comes at us as certainly as waves to the seashore. It comes with health issues and financial issues and children issues and parent issues and career and church issues. With each crashing wave, instead of falling at the feet of our Creator, many of us just fall deeper

and deeper into the lie that life will never be any more than what it is. The cumulative effect leaves us asking, “If this is life, why should I even show up at all?”

And that’s when it happens. That’s when we hide out, go numb, give up. We close off our hearts layer by layer, piece by piece. John Eldredge describes it like this: “After a while, the accumulation of event after event that we do not like and do not understand erodes our confidence that we are part of something grand and good, and reduces us to a survivalist mind-set.”¹ But even as we cling to survival, something may be dying.

Yes, I said *dying* because what happens to our hearts really is a matter of life and death. We’re not just talking about jeans here—or whatever the symptoms of your shut-down heart may be. We’re talking about what is taking place in the deepest part of us. If we don’t wake up to the condition of our hearts and make a commitment to reclaim what has been lost and strengthen what remains, then death really will be the result.

I don’t think I could put it more plainly. A completely shut-down heart is a dead heart. And because our hearts are where we link to God, the consequences can be eternal.

Journey of a Shut-Down Heart

If I could turn back time in my life, I would want someone to sit me down and share with me the stories and ideas I’m going to share with you. I wish someone had looked at me fifteen years ago and said, “More than anything you do, Denise, grab your heart and don’t let go. Fight for it more than you fight for anything else.”

But nobody told me that—or if they did, I couldn’t hear them. I had to walk through the most difficult places, get to the end of myself, and experience what it’s like to live with a

shut-down heart. Then I had to fight with everything I had to get my heart opened again. Here's how it happened with me.

I grew up with parents who assured me I could be anything. They gave me and my brothers every opportunity to pursue our gifts and desires, including lessons in piano, voice, acting, and tennis. There was nothing we desired that they didn't do their best to make available to us, even with their limited resources. And what I desired most of all was to be a singer.

My father was a pastor, so I always had unfettered access to our church's sound system, and I made full use of it. I would often be late to school because I was at the church singing. As soon as I got home from school, I'd head straight to the church and sing. On weekends, singing was the first thing I wanted to do. As soon as church was over on Sunday and we had cleaned up after dinner, I would go sing.

All through my middle school and high school years, singing was my passion. But I had no idea whether I could ever make a living with my music, so I developed a backup plan. I majored in broadcast journalism at the University of South Carolina, though I took private voice lessons all through college and continued to look for opportunities to break into the music industry.

At one point I thought beauty pageants might afford me the opportunity I was seeking. So I entered the Miss South Carolina pageant—twice!—with hopes that the Miss America stage would open a door for me to become a professional musician. I won the talent competition once and became a finalist both times but still came up short of the crown. Some painful circumstances that unfolded during the competition convinced me that Miss America wasn't the vehicle to get me to my dreams.

When college was over, I had some decisions to make. I began to ask the Lord what he had for me, and it soon became

clear that I was not to stay in my hometown in South Carolina. Nashville—or Music City, as some have named it—seemed the ideal place for a girl who dreamed of being a singer. So I took all my college graduation money and moved to Tennessee. (I'm sure there is a sad country song in here somewhere.) A cousin who was a Christian recording artist offered me a place to stay. I took care of his children while he and his wife were on the road. Meanwhile, I was looking for a real job and working on a demo CD to send to record labels.

After three months of living with family, I was finally able to move out on my own. I got a job as a receptionist in the parts department of a heating and air-conditioning company, working with a woman who cussed like a sailor, chain-smoked, and wore mink coats on the job. I adored her, but being a receptionist in the parts department wasn't what I had envisioned for my life. I still dreamed of singing professionally, but as the rejections started coming in from my demo, I began to suspect that God might have different plans for me, at least in the short term.

Fortunately I still had an outlet for my passion. I had found an amazing church in Nashville whose choir had received numerous music awards. It was one of the elite choirs in the Christian music industry, and I became part of it. While at this church, I met the man I would marry. And it was somewhere around then that things started to go wrong with my heart.

You see, the level of talent in the choir was unbelievable. It included backup singers for some of the most famous artists in country and Christian music. As I encountered more and more gifted singers, insecurities I never even knew I had began to surface. To make matters worse, my future husband was part of a legendary recording group. He had a voice few could rival—especially mine. I had been pretty good in the small pond where

I grew up. But this was the ocean I had been thrown into, and he was a really big fish.

Though I loved being around him, I felt the distinction acutely. The more time we spent together, the more my own dream of being a singer dwindled. Amid all the wonderful music, my own voice grew faint.

I didn't know it at the time, but a piece of my heart was shutting down.

We married a month shy of my twenty-fifth birthday, and the shutting-down process accelerated from there. Very early in our marriage, I knew something was seriously wrong in our relationship. I reached out to some people I trusted and shared with them my concerns, but they didn't seem able to help. I was young, and I had been raised to believe marriage was forever. So I did the best I knew to do. Unfortunately that involved handing over piece after piece of my true self.

I gave up my opinions to keep the peace. I fudged my convictions to avoid arguments. I second-guessed my instincts and pushed down certain aspects of my personality and, yes, even my taste in clothes. And I surrendered most of my dreams, including my lifelong dream of being a mother, because it seemed the life I was living left me no choice. Piece by piece the vibrant, alive woman God had created me to be all but disappeared.

If you had asked me at the time what was going on with me, I might have said I was making sacrifices out of love. I might have said something about the importance of compromise. I might have told you I was fighting for my marriage. In many ways I was. And I still believe those things are both necessary and important. I often tell people that the Bible clearly says God hates divorce and anyone who has been divorced knows why.

But what I was doing in those days was less about sacrifice

and compromise and more about hiding from the truth of our relationship. I was avoiding pain, running from confrontation. In a sense, I was treating my marriage as an idol—sacrificing my dearest possession, my truest self, to a false god.

I had always assumed that people who got divorced just hadn't worked on their marriages hard enough, and I was pretty sure I'd be judged that way if I got divorced. So I was absolutely determined to give my marriage everything I had, no matter what it took. But in my arrogance, in my deepest places of disillusionment and pride, and in my twisted ways of thinking, I was really handing over my heart to the thief who came to destroy.

And I was definitely paying the price. I looked ten years older than I look today—as my friends will tell you and pictures will reveal. I was tired and worn and all but dead inside. Large groups intimidated me. I'd sit like a wallflower. I lived those years inside of my marriage telling people, "My college years were the best years of my life." Every time those words flew out of my mouth, I would wonder what people thought of me. But I couldn't help it. It was true.

A Gentle Wooing

And yet, do you know what God was doing during those years? He was gently inviting me to encounter him, to discover what he had for me. And he did it in that sweet way of his—by graciously offering me opportunities to connect to my heart and remind me of who I really was. But it wasn't until after my divorce, after I had begun to reclaim my heart, that I actually realized what he had been doing.

Six years into my marriage, for instance, when I was in an extremely broken place, God gave me the idea of a crazy character named Savannah. She was so compelling to me that I wrote

a series of novels about her. Savannah said anything she wanted to say, did anything she wanted to do. She was a bit of a mess at times, but she was also completely alive.

When I handed the first Savannah book to an agent friend of mine and asked her to read it, she came back to me with these words. “Denise, I bet this is what you’re really like somewhere deep down in there.”

I believe her words were God’s words to me—as direct a message as any he has ever spoken to my heart. Because Savannah was me—or at least the me I had been. Looking back now, I can see that God was giving me a chance to try to grab my heart back. Sadly, I didn’t understand that at the time. All I knew was that for a couple hours a day, when I sat down in front of my computer and wrote about this vibrant, alive young woman, my heart was alive too. It would be a while before I realized that same heart was available to me every day.

My counselor, Ken Edwards, told me years later, “God will woo us to him or push us to him.” That is so true. Looking back, I can see that God was wooing me through Savannah. Not forcing, not pushing yet, but gently calling me back to himself. He also wooed me through opportunities to teach his Word in Bible studies and seminars. I have been privileged for the past fifteen years to minister across this nation and overseas. Each time I teach, my heart is connected to that deep, authentic place of my Father. And even through that “dead” season of my life, God gave me those breathless moments of delivering his Word. For a brief time I would know what it was to be my true, best, most alive self. Then I would return home to my shut-down cocoon.

I’m not one of those people who lives with no regrets. Yes, I know all the decisions I have made brought me to the place I am today, and I am very grateful for this place. But I do have

regrets. Countless regrets. Things I wish I could do over, do differently. Words I wish had never come out of my mouth. Choices I wish I had never made. One of the many regrets of my first marriage is that I missed God's wooing in those days. Because even with the respite of my writing and my teaching, it wasn't until I reached the pushing place and the pain of my divorce that I started getting serious about reclaiming my heart.

I have often wondered what would have happened had I dared to begin to reclaim my heart inside of my marriage. I will never know. It might have made a difference, or the marriage might simply have ended sooner. What I do know is the first day I sat on my counselor's sofa to begin to unravel the mess that was my life, I said, "Whatever got me here, I want it out of me." I see now that I was really saying, "I want to live. Really live. I want my heart back." But it took me a while to get there.

You have to understand how shut down I was by that time. I didn't even know what I liked. As I've mentioned, my husband bought virtually all my clothes—jeans included. I had worn my hair pretty much the same way for years, in a short bob, because that's the way it was when he met me and that was how he liked it. He was a gifted interior designer, so he chose our furniture and decorated our home. He always asked me what I liked, but I almost always said, "Whatever you pick is fine with me."

And let me make this clear: my husband wasn't *doing* all this to me.

I was doing it to me.

Because the truth is, no one can shut down another person's heart.

Did you get that? I'm going to repeat it, and I want you to read it slowly and then underline or highlight it: *No one has the power to shut down another person's heart.* Handing over our

hearts is always a choice, just as handing over our peace or our joy is a choice.

That's not to say it's always a conscious or deliberate choice. In extreme cases, such as severe abuse, it may be an automatic response, a God-given self-protective mechanism. And even in my case, I didn't plan to shut down my heart. I simply responded to circumstances the best way I knew, day after day, using tools that felt natural to me but turned out to be counterproductive. But those were still choices on my part, even if their end result was to cut me off from the life I was meant to have.

My husband did not shut down my heart, in other words. I chose to hand it over. That was my sin—because, as we will discover in our journey together, shutting down our hearts is always sin. And to resurrect my heart, I had to *choose* to recognize my sin, own it, and repent of it.

I say all that to make it clear that I am in no way blaming my former husband for the state of my heart. I'm just thankful that somewhere in the course of running headlong into the intense pain of my divorce—and running headlong into the heart of my Father—I finally made the choice to change direction.

Opening Up

So what has this change of direction been like? For me, it's been a gradual but deliberate process of rediscovering my authentic feelings and my personal tastes, daring to confront the misconceptions and misguided decisions that kept me shut down. Some of these might seem trivial, but for me they were pivotal in my journey to open my shut-down heart.

The jeans are definitely a case in point. But let me give you a few more examples.

One day several months after my divorce, Ken encouraged me to go to the bookstore and buy five magazines that were not

what I usually purchased. “Just let your eyes scan the magazines and see what your *heart* gravitates toward.”

I was shocked—completely shocked—to discover that my heart gravitated to home magazines. Four of the five I bought were about decorating. I had never hung a picture! My mother had always decorated our homes, and she and my godmother had even decorated my first apartment. Then I married, and my husband did the decorating. Learning I had the slightest hint of interest in a fabric swatch or paint color was a revelation to me.

When I remarried and moved into my new husband’s house, he said, “Make this your home, babe.” And I did. For one solid week I did nothing but design our home. I hung every picture. Placed every piece of furniture and every accessory. Covered my piano with family photographs the way I had always wanted to do. I don’t know that I have ever enjoyed a week the way I enjoyed that one.

I also didn’t cut my hair for anything other than a trim for a year following my divorce. I discovered I love it long. I’ve highlighted it and wear it wavy and curly and wild. I’ve had fun exploring my personal fashion sense too. It is sometimes classic, sometimes trendy, and totally me. I’ve found that I am good at all of it—at styling my clothes and styling my hair and styling my home. More than that, I feel alive when I’m doing those things.

One of the greatest joys of my reclaimed heart is bringing music back into my life. By the time of my divorce, I hadn’t bought a CD for years. Oh, I sang along during worship at church but never spontaneously. The girl who used to be late to class because she was so caught up in singing had closed music so far off from her soul that she didn’t even tune in to music stations in the car. It was talk radio all the time.

But when I began to reclaim my heart, I reclaimed my love

for music as well. I spent hundreds of dollars on music downloads, and I started singing again—loud and often! As the music took its rightful place in my life, my heart opened wider and wider.

And then, somewhere along my journey to reclaim my heart, something really wonderful happened. I met and fell in love with a man who was on the same journey from shut down to open and alive. Eventually we married. Our life together has been a revelation to me—not perfect, but real and satisfying.

If a fear haunts me, it is this: that I would ever allow my heart to return to its lost, barren, shut-down state. And that's always a possibility, especially when I face challenging situations.

For instance, when I married Philly, he came with his own broken places—places he has fought hard to reclaim and continues to fight for—and there have been times when my brokenness rubs up against his.

Marrying Philly also meant I took on the role of “bonus mom” to his five amazing children—four girls and a boy, who at the time of our marriage were thirteen, twelve, eleven, nine, and seven. This new family was truly an answer to prayer, something I wasn't sure would ever happen. But the truth is, it's not easy to build a relationship with five kids who still struggle with their parents' divorce, who can't help but see my presence as a perpetual reminder that their mom and dad will never get back together. The challenges we face as a blended family sometimes make me want to run and hide—and I mean that literally as well as figuratively. We had a running joke for our first couple years of marriage: “If you want to find Denise, she's probably in her closet.” And I was. It was the only place in my house that felt safe to me.

So there are still times in our life together when I let my fears control me, causing me not to be genuinely Denise. There

are still days when my insecurities remove me from being fully present in our lives.

But now I fight it! I fight hard to keep my heart alive because I know what it's like to be shut down. And I have decided I will never live there again. Never.

My Challenge to You

I don't want you to live there either—no matter what circumstances have influenced you to shut down your heart.

You might be like I was—so shut down you don't know who you are anymore. Maybe you haven't bought your own clothes in years, or maybe the only time you actually voice your opinion is at drive-through windows when no one else is in the car telling you what you should order. Or maybe you're not quite that shut down, but something in my description still feels a little too close to home. Or you might even have a huge desire to toss this book back up on a shelf or return it to the friend who gave it to you. Maybe you are still in a place of thinking everything that has happened to you is someone else's fault. Maybe you're simply not ready to reclaim your heart, and that's okay.

But if any of what I've said sounds the least bit familiar, I hope you'll consider that God might be wooing you. Maybe he's inviting you, in the safety of your own home or during your lunch break at the office or on a beach chair listening to the music that only God can make, to take a journey that might actually change the very course of your life.

Let me assure you of one thing: when the Creator of the universe took the extreme care that he did in fashioning you, he made you unique and precious, and he gave you the power of choice. Nothing that has happened to you since then—not even the pain of abuse, betrayal, or failure—can take away that power from you. If events beyond your control have caused you

to shut down without giving it a thought, you *still* have a choice of what you will do with your future.

No one can take your God-designed, alive heart away from you. Only you can hand it over. And only you—with God’s gracious help—can take it back.

There may be moments on this journey when you need to take a breather. I understand that. There may be moments when you need to put down the book and have a meltdown. Lord knows I’ve had those too. There may even be moments when you need to stop reading entirely and encounter all the pain you have run from for years.

But I can assure you of this. The first time you hear yourself belly laugh again . . . the first time your spouse touches you and something inside you tingles . . . the first time the laughter of a child awakens you to something deep in the soul of you . . . the first time you sing in the car again like you’re Celine Dion or Harry Connick Jr. . . . the first time you buy your own clothes or pick out your own dinner or decide how you want to wear your hair or state your opinion out loud . . . you will be grateful that you were brave enough to keep reading.

Yes, I said it, *brave enough*—because reclaiming your heart takes courage. It takes work too—the work of honestly examining your life and then being intentional with different choices. But it’s so worth it. With God’s help, you can reclaim your shut-down heart and run headlong into your amazing future.

Let me assure you. From the other side . . . the view is breathtaking.

