

How Jesus
Reframes Your Past,
Rewrites Your Present, and
Redefines Your Future



Restory your life

MARY E.
DEMUTH

Part Bible study, part writing tutorial, and part therapy session. In *Restory Your Life*, Mary DeMuth takes each of us by the hand and introduces us to the person God created us to be. With honest hope, she nudges us toward the telling of us, the ultimate offering of our rediscovered being in our world.

ELISA MORGAN, author of *When We Pray like Jesus* and president emerita of The MomCo

Mary can speak to wounds in a way that few can but everyone needs. She is relatable and sincere and will bring truth in the spaces that feel most broken. She is gifted, and God is using her in beautiful ways.

JENNIE ALLEN, *New York Times* bestselling author and founder of IF:Gathering

Whatever hard story you were given, it need no longer define or limit you. Open these pages and walk with Mary DeMuth as she guides you in discovering the better story God is writing through your life. You'll emerge from this deep soul work renewed, with fresh biblical wisdom, clearer purpose, and redemptive joy. Take the journey! You'll never look back.

LESLIE LEYLAND FIELDS, author of *Nearing a Far God* and *Your Story Matters*

Restory Your Life will help you discover meaning in the worst moments in your past and find beautiful next steps for following Jesus with your whole heart. Mary DeMuth guides the reader with kindness, generosity, wisdom, and understanding. I felt seen, known, and loved as I read this book. Your story is still being told, and God has big plans for your future. Highly recommended.

MATT MIKALATOS, author of *God with Us* and *Praying with Saint Nicholas*

Neurobiologically, we are shaped by story. But just as the brain can change, so can our understanding of our stories. In *Restory Your Life*, DeMuth reminds us, “We may be broken by our stories, but God knows how to reframe them.” Through both narrative and structure, DeMuth shares a message that is practical, hopeful, and desperately needed.

JESSIE CRUICKSHANK, neuroecclesiologist, speaker, and author of *Ordinary Discipleship*

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*To my new family at Redeemer Rockwall,
who stitched me up and put me back together again.*

Contents

INTRODUCTION	Origin Story	1
ONE	Map Your Own Story	11
TWO	Unearth Your Setting	31
THREE	Discover the Characters in Your Story	53
FOUR	Identify Your Inciting Incidents	71
FIVE	Endure the Muddled Middle	87
SIX	Work Through Your Pain Points	101
SEVEN	Discover the <i>So What?</i> of Your Story	119
EIGHT	Walk Out Your Story	133
NINE	Discover the Power of Your Restored Life	155
CONCLUSION	The End, or the Beginning?	175
	Acknowledgments	179
	Notes	181

Origin Story

Time makes up the pages that will be your story. Every time your life changes, you start a new chapter. To me, there's nothing more depressing than someone getting to the end of their days and realizing they've only written one long, boring passage.

ELIZABETH ISAACS, *THE LIGHT OF ASTERIA*

Re-. Inhale. Story. Exhale. Restory. Breathe.

The word came to me like a respiratory sort of prophecy. Jesus had written an utterly new story in my life, but I was sensing a deeper calling into the healing journey. He invited me into a rewritten story. A repurposed story. A renewed story. A *restory*.

We all have stories: some tragic, some sane, some wild, some tame. But the underlying beauty of all our stories is Jesus' intersection with them—and what he fashions out of the torn pieces.

He cut through mine when I was fifteen years old. The previous three years had brought me to the brink of suicide and a spiral of loneliness, anxiety, and undiagnosed depression. An only child haunted by far too many secrets, I spent those early adolescent years nearly completely alone, isolated on ten acres under the wink of Mount Rainier. My mom tackled master's-level courses late into the evening; my stepdad worked a swing shift at the county jail—all while my unworthiness and shame shouted in the silence. Voices that sounded like mine, but louder, declared my worthlessness. I felt haunted by long-term sexual abuse, indifferent neglect, multiple divorces, drug

abuse in the home, and the death of my predatory biological father. Addicted to the quite-available porn in my home, tempted by the marijuana therein, and battling a ragged longing for a father—all these realities ate away at me. My soul felt dry-rotted. My story boasted one long narrative of tragedy, full of far too much trauma to process at fifteen years old.

I didn't know why I'd been born.

The only logical explanation I could deduce was this: I existed to either be stolen from or outright ignored.

One autumn weekend, I found myself nervously stepping into the evergreen air of Camp Timberlake. The Young Life camp situated itself neatly into the too-tall woods not far from my home—yet a lifetime away. Here, leaders listened to me. Peers befriended me. Echoes of Jesus made my heart pound, and I kept crying for no apparent reason. I couldn't get enough of this Jesus. While many reveled in capture the flag or crazy competitions involving shaving cream and mud, I could not wait for the part where we heard about Jesus.

The year prior I'd attended Young Life meetings at the behest of a friend. I knew literally nothing about Jesus before that time—other than his name used as a swear word—and I'd had no idea he had anything to do with Christmas or Easter. So when I heard one of the leaders share the story of Jesus calming the seas (Matthew 8:24-27), I—like the disciples—marveled.

Their question became mine: *Who is this man? Even the winds and waves obey him.*

I listened with rapt attention as the speaker at Camp Timberlake shared about Jesus—his life, the ragtag bunch he hung out with, his pursuit of the broken ones, Judas's betrayal, Jesus' death on a bloodied wooden cross . . . and his shocking resurrection. It all felt like too much, or certainly too good to be true. I was a broken girl, abandoned

and alone. Could it really be that Jesus did all that because he loved me and wanted a relationship with the likes of me?

To say that that message rocked me is a beautiful understatement.

I did not speak to anyone as I made my way to the trunk of a giant hemlock, whose heavy branches drooped toward me, as if intent on grabbing me. The stars pinpricked the night under its needled canopy as I sucked in breath, telling myself not to cry. I had been alone and fatherless so long—my biological father had died; my first stepfather had disappeared; my recent stepfather had moved on—and I felt used up, like a dishrag wrung dry.

So I prayed, *Will you be the Father who will never leave me?*

The branches seemed to answer back, no longer menacing. Now the crisp autumn breeze felt like an embrace. All that I had sought through the valley of shadows now became solid—as tangible as the needled earth beneath me. I would be parented. I would be loved. I would not be abandoned. I would (someday) be healed of all this mess. At least that's what I hoped.

That was the day my story pivoted, or at least began the pivot. I was naïve then, believing that the moment I met Jesus meant complete and utter change. In retrospect, the journey toward health and healing was a long slog. A story doesn't change instantly when Jesus enters. He has a lot of long, slow, careful healing work to do in the pages of our lives.

But we do change.

In that wide-eyed bliss of newly knowing Jesus, I would tell myself all was well, that I had already been healed and set free. Mature and hypervigilant, I went on to succeed in school, graduate college with a high GPA, and meet my husband, Patrick, in church—like a good Christian girl. But fissures soon formed in my carefully constructed façade. It all crumbled when my firstborn girl turned five and the sexual trauma resurfaced like a maniacal dragon breathing fire on

my carefully curated life. Chronic, unrelenting insomnia; unwanted outbursts of tears; helplessness; and a trauma fog consumed me like thirsty flames.

We could not afford counseling, so I read every book I could find on past abuse, filled out every workbook answer, talked to friends, and sought Jesus for healing—again. It came as slow as molasses as we made our new home far from the Pacific Northwest, where all the pain had happened. I thought I could outrun my story, but it had legs and chased me to the piney woods of East Texas.

But even then, I realized that Jesus was taking me on a restorying adventure of prayer and giving me a longing for a renewed life, healing my broken story, tears upon tears. I went from identifying as a victim to realizing I have been made new. From violated to loved, neglected to wanted, harmed to healed. As I raised my kids in Texas, then France (where Patrick and I served as church planters), God reshaped my self-worth. I no longer felt mired by my past. Through the decades, Jesus used friends, prayer, books, counseling (eventually), and the Bible to bring me to a place of wholeness.

And yet, when God gave me the word *restory*, I had a sense there was more to life than simply being made whole. All that redemption meant something—not merely for me, but for you, too. All that personal wrestling had an endgame. It mattered.

I slowly began to realize this as I listened to a broken friend spilling her story, when I prayed with a new acquaintance at church, when I simply cried with someone. Jesus worked in and through me so that my empathy muscle strengthened. He showed me that the healing he does in our lives is for the sake of us—yes—but also for the flourishing of others. It's for imparting hope in helpless situations, for bringing light to the darkness, for being the hero we longed for when we were younger—for ourselves and for others. We are restoried to help others find their new stories.

Some of the most joyfully profound moments of my life have come on the heels of interceding in the lives of the broken. It's like all that mess finally meant something. Romans 8:28 really is true, friends: "We know that God causes everything [yes, even neglect, divorce, sexual abuse, parental death, and suicidal thoughts] to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them."

Jesus has a purpose for your pain. He has placed a calling on your life. I know that's hard to comprehend when you're in the middle of a mess. It's not a quick transformation, moving from inward pain toward outward benevolence. And you may think your struggle with the past will never end. That's normal. It's called grief. And lamenting is a necessary practice before breakthrough. Still, the truth remains—God is working through this pathway of pain, making you a blessing to this broken world. You are restored to bring restoration to your friends, family, and community.



I am a novelist as well as a nonfiction writer, which is to say—I am a storyteller. In the elements of storytelling, we start with the setting, the “normal world” of the story. Good authors explore the time, place, and characters briefly, then something called an inciting incident (yes, seems a bit repetitive, but that's what the English teachers say) bursts onto the scene, followed by the conflicts, rising action, and difficulties. In Western culture, all this mess is followed by a climax, the pinnacle of the story. Only then does the denouement—the working out of the story's climax—occur.

You are currently either approaching or embodying your denouement. And that gets me excited.

Why?

Because your story matters. God will use your story to change lives and alter the landscape of the Kingdom for generations to come. Megachurches, big crowds, and celebrity influence can't do this; Jesus calls us all to work out our stories in the context of close relationships. That's the way he earthquaked our world, upending the way things were—with a gathering of his closest friends. Jesus intersected their stories, restoried them in powerful ways, then encouraged them to be his emissaries of hope in a hopeless world.

Our growth is tied to our stories. Our healing is a narrative discipleship deeply connected to who we are, how God made us, the circumstances surrounding our upbringings, and how we live today in this present world. Our stories evolve over time—and they are profoundly influenced by the people in our lives. The truth is, we don't grow through antiseptic or step-by-step methods, detached from relationships. Human beings are more complicated than that. We need each other as we study the kind of biblical knowledge that transforms us.

This book is my answer to your hunger to let go of what's been holding you back. You no longer need to be enslaved to *back then*, harassed by voices that say you'll never change or get over the pain. If you feel stuck and dissatisfied with how life is unfolding for you and you long to make a difference in this world, it's my prayer that these chapters will help you reframe the difficult story, find healing through Jesus, and begin to grasp the amazing new story he has prepared for you. I'll remind my story to give you footholds in your own so you'll see how God's extraordinary kindness intersects your story. God has uniquely created you and the you-shaped healing journey he has called you to. Your story looks different from your friends' or that leader's. God wants to give you vitality, joy, and effervescent discipleship—the kind that can't help but spill over into this dying world.

So get ready for a journey through your story: the elements and structure and progression of where you have been and who you are

becoming. As we look at our lives through the lens of God's restoring process, we'll discover a form, intentionality, and vision for how he's taking what we've thought was only pain or inadequacy and creating something new. Each chapter represents an element of your story, and to put legs to the narrative, we'll also explore the given element through the eyes of a person from Scripture:

- map your own story (Mary of Bethany)
- unearth your setting (Joseph, son of Jacob)
- discover the characters in your story (Peter)
- identify your inciting incidents (Paul)
- endure the muddled middle (the woman with the issue of blood)
- work through your pain points (Job)
- discover the *So what?* of your story (the Ethiopian eunuch)
- walk out your story (Rahab)
- discover the power of your restored life (the woman at the well)

You'll notice throughout Scripture how God interacts with his people to heal them and bring them new life. Mary of Bethany moved from obscurity to the inner circle of Jesus. Joseph, though betrayed, ended up saving the very ones who had sold him into slavery. Peter shifted from denier of Jesus to a restored, venerated leader in the embryonic church. Paul morphed from a persecutor of Christ followers to considering it a privilege to be persecuted for Jesus. The woman who bled switched from alienation and pain to inclusion and health. Job's story changed from hearing about God to actually seeing him. The Ethiopian eunuch went from not understanding the gospel to being baptized into it. Rahab was an outsider, but she became part of the fabric of Israel—including the lineage of Christ. The woman at the well, a Samaritan, changed from brokenness to wholeness, so

much so that she couldn't help but share the love of Jesus with the town that had marginalized her.

The beautiful truth is this: Like the people in the Bible, your growth journey is unique, utterly unique to you. And the Lord will use your personality, gifts, and affections to play an integral part in your discipleship journey. I joke that I've written fifty or so books because I was a mess and God has used every book I've written to bring another facet of healing my way. It's the same for you. God loves you so much that he will use your own unique bent to bring healing your way.

So as you work through this storytelling journey, be expectant. And trust that the Lord does new things all the time—yes, even in and through you.

You may feel like your story is broken.

You may be worried that trauma has negated your ministry potential.

You may be looking at other people's stories with longing, hoping for a different outcome.

You may be discouraged.

You may wonder if you'll ever move beyond your current obstacle.

You may fret that spiritual growth is for others but not for you.

First let me say this: You are normal.

And you bear the image of the almighty God, who loves you, gave himself for you, and is utterly *for* you. No story is insignificant in the Kingdom of God. All are weighted with worth, endowed with purpose, and welcomed as beautiful.

So welcome to your own restoried adventure. May the Lord encircle you, protect your heart, and set you free. Because as you experience all that, you'll become an emancipator of other people's stories—a quiet but necessary revolution and revelation this broken world is crying out for.

Now to him who by the power that is working within us is able to do far beyond all that we ask or think, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

EPHESIANS 3:20-21, NET

ONE

Map Your Own Story

*Faith never knows where it is being led,
but it loves and knows the One Who is leading.*

OSWALD CHAMBERS, MY UTMOST FOR HIS HIGHEST

Mary of Bethany

I have always been a girl of many questions—so many that Father often jested that my name was the Questioner. Mother simply scolded my curiosity. But Mother and Father are gone now, dust to dust. I find myself missing their presence.

Now I live in the foothills of Bethany with my dear brother, Lazarus, and my industrious sister, Martha. And still I have questions.

I am aware of the protocols of my religion. As a woman in a world made for men, I cannot ask questions of the local rabbis, nor can I worship fully in the Temple as Lazarus could. But my heart! Oh, my heart longs to know the Almighty, the Rescuer, the One who led the remnant back from captivity. This same God made impossible pathways through a sea and then a river for my people. He vanquished enemies aplenty, reaching from heaven to protect us. He provided a leader in Moses; judges, like Deborah; and kings, like Solomon—all to give us needed guidance and direction. And to worship him? We had a Tabernacle, then a

Temple—a pathway from out to in, from away to welcomed, from alienated to held.

All I have ever wanted has been to know this pathway for myself, to discern the intricate twists and turns of knowing my Creator.

Here is what I know now: The questions and longings from my story have led me toward the hero of my story.

Our family welcomed Jesus, who is called the Christ, into our home. We provided a safe place to stay, offered hospitality, and welcomed him with respite from the dusty roads. Jesus came with twelve companions, who rustled up such appetites that we could scarcely keep them fed. But the “food” Jesus has brought us is what satiates me most.

They say a rabbi’s role is to teach, and a student of that rabbi sits at his feet. Oh, how I wanted that place of privilege at the feet of Jesus, whose words were life and breath and hope—pure manna. I would not dare sit in that sacred place—except . . .

There was that moment as Martha bustled around the kitchen and Lazarus laughed among friends . . . and a knowing passed between Jesus and me. I could not hear his beckoning with my ears, but I felt it in my heart—that he would welcome me at his feet, to learn as a student. In that hiccup of time, everything blurred around me. The cacophony of voices faded into warbled music. Preparation of the upcoming meal became an afterthought.

I sat.

I listened.

Jesus spoke.

My heart thrilled.

Before that moment I had been an orphaned sibling, trying to make sense of my longing. But under the steady

gaze of Jesus, I found family, community. He, my father and teacher and friend and Lord—and I, his beloved.

Martha's reprimand came, as I expected, and I steadied myself for a rebuke from Jesus' lips, but none came.

Instead?

He smiled. Drew his companions near. Told Martha not to be consumed with details. Then he held my eyes. "There is only one thing worth being concerned about," he said.

"Mary has discovered it, and it will not be taken away from her."

I will spend the rest of my life held by those beautiful words.

To be restoried, we must first be *storied*. We must look behind and uncover what once was so that we can discern turning points and the kind of work the Lord wants to do in our lives.

We have a past. We live in the dynamic now. And we have a future.

Unearthing our lifelong story is a daring act. Why? Because though that story can be painful, God is in the midst of every scene, and retelling it to ourselves means we treasure hunt for his ways. As Oswald Chambers notes, God is the leader of our stories.

In recounting our stories, we also help our mental health. Two researchers, Drs. Duke and Fivush, have found that those who know the details of their extended stories have better mental resilience. Did those they studied know what their grandparents did for a living? Did they know how their parents met? "After conducting research on many children and families, and comparing their results to a battery of psychological tests the children had taken, Dr. Duke and Dr. Fivush came to an overwhelming conclusion. The children who knew more about their family's history exhibited far greater control over their

lives. They had far greater self-esteem and told a much healthier story to themselves about their family and history.”¹

Friend, uncovering your story—even if the act of doing so scares you—is a gift you give your mental, emotional, and spiritual health. It’s brave, but it’s also a step toward healing.

The Shape of Your Story

When we keep our stories locked within, when we push them down deep and opt for a façade of normalcy, we don’t grow. We certainly don’t restory our lives. Instead, we tend to relive what’s been done to us. We repeat what we don’t process. An untold story, I often tell people, never heals. We see this in generational sins and struggles. If one parent was yelled at as a child, her tendency may be to yell at her kids. But, if she dares to let out her story and make meaning of it through the insight of others and the wisdom of God, she is far more apt to parent differently.

Self-editing your story doesn’t eliminate it—it turns it into a monster, screaming to come out in unwanted behavior.

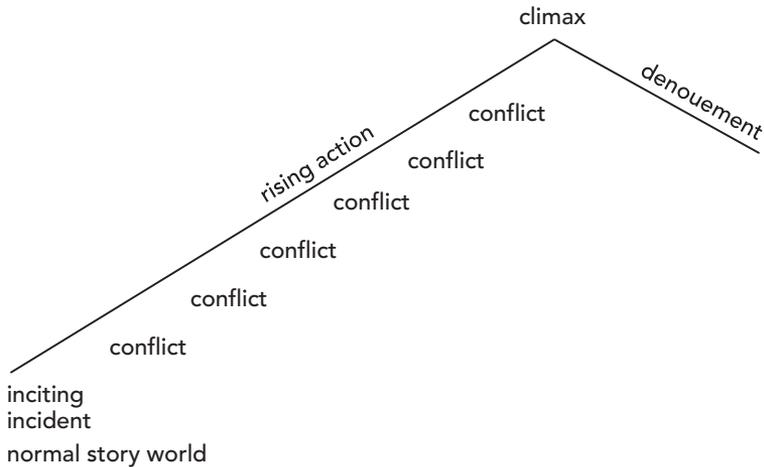
In short, you may try to outrun your past, but it has the tenacious legs of a marathon runner, and it will chase you, catch up with you, and surpass you, leaving you in a fixed place, unable to grow beyond it. Letting out your story knocks the legs out from underneath your past and gives you space to reflect and heal—and then move on.

So how do we best uncover our stories? First, we need to give our stories a shape. Understanding the fundamentals of storytelling across history and cultures can give us a skeleton to hang our stories on.

All storytelling has a shape, a structure—we instinctively know this, whether we’re listening to a friend recount a fender bender or reading an ancient myth. As we walk through timeless approaches to storytelling, I want you to be aware of how stories are told. Why? So you can uncover and share your own.

Western Story Structure

Remember the typical story structure I mentioned in the introduction, with the normal story world, an inciting incident, conflicts aplenty, a climax, and a denouement? You may remember this diagram from high school.



In this format, the story begins in a normal, everyday world when a protagonist is suddenly taken aback by an external (or internal) stressor. A good storyteller then plies the protagonist with conflict upon conflict. Each difficulty, hopefully, holds the reader at rapt attention (or if you're reading a novel, helps you turn the pages deep into the night). When all seems lost, a big hullabaloo happens—the climax—where everything comes to a cataclysmic apex, which is followed by a resolution, also known as the *denouement*, a word we get from French. The protagonist now must learn to live in the new world. In the case of a simple romance, the structure is plain: boy is alone; boy meets girl; all sorts of shenanigans and misunderstandings happen that threaten their burgeoning relationship; a big fight erupts, but they come to a new (happy) understanding; they live happily ever after.

If you want to map out your story in this structure, it can be as simple as drawing the first diagram (the inverted *V*) on a large piece of paper and highlighting pivot points in your life. Just to start you off, your birth is the inciting incident. You may want to “chunkify” your story by taking it in ten-year increments, highlighting what kinds of conflicts, traumas, achievements, and relationships shaped each of those decades. The climax can be anything you want—when you met Christ, got married, had children, or accomplished that accolade last week. There will be a pivot point to your story—a clear *before*, then *after*. For me? From ages one to fifteen, significant traumatic things populated my life. I met Jesus at fifteen, and I’ve been living in the denouement since then, “work[ing] hard to show the results of [my] salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear” (Philippians 2:12). When I met Christ, my restory began, and to be quite honest, I’m still walking out that healing journey.

The Hero’s Journey

You’re probably familiar with the more in-depth story structure Joseph Campbell maps out in his book *The Hero’s Journey*. In the intro to the book, editor Phil Cousineau analyzes the narrative patterns involving a story’s hero (protagonist) throughout history, writing, “The journey of the hero is about the courage to seek the depths; the image of creative rebirth; the eternal cycle of change within us; the uncanny discovery that the seeker is the mystery which the seeker seeks to know. The hero journey is a symbol that binds, in the original sense of the word, two distant ideas, the spiritual quest of the ancients with the modern search for identity, ‘always the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story that we find.’”²

The hero’s journey is cyclical, starting in an ordinary world and then quickly becoming an adventure of facing some obstacles, meeting mentors, and despairing of circumstances before finally finding restoration in their story. Here’s a rough idea:



This circle resembles the elements of the three-act structure we see in the first diagram except that the line has been stretched around a curve. The departure represents the very beginning of the journey (the inciting incident and normal story world). The initiation is the rising action with conflict, followed by a dramatic climax. The return is the denouement.

This framework helps us discern the story structure of most of the books we read and movies we consume. Take the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*, for example.

- **Ordinary world.** In the opening scene, Dorothy is in her normal Kansas world, populated by her aunt and uncle, friends, neighbors, and a mean lady on a bike who wants to kill her beloved dog, Toto.
- **Departure.** A tornado turns everything upside down—literally. Dorothy arrives in the magical land of Oz,

inadvertently causing the triumphant defeat of a hated witch (*call of adventure*). However, Dorothy doesn't understand the significance of this event and simply longs for home (*refusing the call*). She meets Glinda, who speaks of the great and powerful Wizard of Oz, who can solve all her problems (*meeting the mentor*). Finally, Dorothy takes that first fateful step onto the yellow brick road toward Oz (*crossing the threshold*).

- **Initiation.** Along the yellow brick road and into the Wizard's Emerald City, Dorothy encounters characters such as the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, the Cowardly Lion, and the Wicked Witch of the West (*tests, allies, enemies*). Eventually Dorothy faces a dilemma in the witch's dark castle—will she let go of her newly acquired magical ruby slippers for the sake of saving Toto's life (*the approach*)? When her friend the Scarecrow is set on fire, Dorothy douses him with water, which dissolves the Wicked Witch (*the ordeal*).
- **Return.** Upon returning to the Emerald City, Dorothy receives a reward—though not in the form we might expect. When Toto removes the curtain of the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy finds him small and certainly not powerful. It's a universal lesson all of us must learn—that those who appear heroic and in control are often simply ordinary people (*the reward*). When the Wizard's hot air balloon accidentally leaves for home without Dorothy, Glinda reappears and tells Dorothy that the ruby slippers can transport her home. Dorothy is the heroine in her own story (*the road back*). Though Dorothy had longed for a life over the rainbow, she is now content to be proactive in her hometown. She awakens in Kansas after a very strange dream, but she is not the same person she was (*the resurrection*). She now has confidence and a deep appreciation for the oft-hidden rewards of home (*the return with elixir*).

We relate to Dorothy, don't we? She is fragile, tenacious, nervous, longing, and at times, heroic. We long for her to win. And as we understand the progression of the hero's journey, we discover our own connections to the overarching story. We can ask ourselves questions like these:

- *When did I meet an important mentor? When didn't I have one but longed for one?*
- *What obstacles have threatened me? What has prevented me from moving forward?*
- *Who has prevented my growth?*
- *What is my calling on this earth, and why is it so hard to fulfill it?*
- *When have I made heroic choices?*
- *What rewards have I experienced along the way?*
- *Do I have enemies? Heroes? Have I gained new insight after trials?*

This story structure leads us to a foundational conclusion: A hero lives an adventure. A hero makes choices, often hard ones. A hero faces difficulties and overcomes them. And if we are the heroes of our own stories in a sense, this kind of purposeful action is necessary. We always have a choice, no matter how random the conflicts we face or how uprooted our lives currently feel.

If the hero's journey feels resonant as you look at your own story, create a circle on a big piece of paper with the words I've shared in the diagram. Again, your birth is the normal story world's beginning. Detail when you've felt the call to something different, whom you've met along the way, what kinds of difficulties and obstacles you've faced. Have you had a moment of profound change? And what does your life look like now that you've learned so much and you're helping others with their restorying?

The Chiasm

As I was writing this chapter, a reader shared this painful story with me:

My sweet dog had been anxious during the night in the wake of a storm that sat over our home for several hours. I was up with her, and then, when daylight came, we went outside to explore before anyone else woke up. In one corner of our backyard, there was a new light shining through where hours before the shade of a beautiful oak tree had graced and anchored the space. A massive tree had been *yanked* from the ground in the storm overnight.

What I saw there looked so much like what had happened to me ten years earlier—everything uprooted, my life yanked out of all that felt grounded and secure—even though deep down I had known there were problems. I was in an unhealthy church serving an abusive pastor, and I had prayed for God’s rescue, but wow, I didn’t see it going that way. I had loved that part of my life in so many ways. It was brutal to lose it. And I loved this tree in my backyard. It brought covering and shade and what felt like protection. And now it’s gone—or more accurately, it’s in pieces on the ground . . . all of the goodness lost, which is such grief. All of the pieces on the ground, so disorienting and strange. And now, new light seeping through where the leaves once caught shadows.³

The reader, Connie, viewed this fallen tree through the lens of story. She welcomed it as a metaphor for a time of crushing and new life—where light can stream through what had been torn down. God is so good to open our eyes to the story he is unfolding around us, isn’t he?

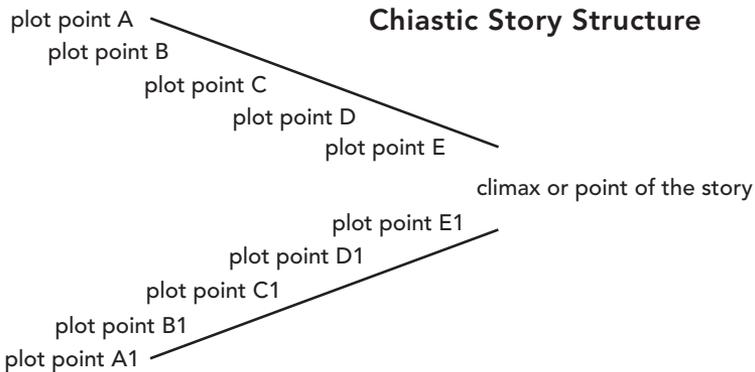
Connie probably didn’t realize it, but her story takes on an even more ancient story structure—that of chiasm, which emerges from ancient Near Eastern literature. The Bible is full of chiasm, where the climax of the story isn’t at the end but lies in its belly, between the opening story

element and a corresponding element at the end. Because the Bible wasn't written with italicized or bolded text, this literary device helped readers discover the most important piece of a story immediately.

The word *chiasm* (or *chiasmus*) has to do with the Greek letter *chi*, which resembles the letter *X*. There is a point in the story where everything changes, a hinge between what comes before and its echo afterward.

Old Testament professor Robert J. Chisholm Jr. explains, "A more sophisticated and elaborate form of delimitation involves the use of *chiasmus*, where the themes or key words of the first half of a literary unit are mirrored in the second half. Often a pivotal element is highlighted by its central position in such a structure. Once the cycle of elements has come full circle, the reader (in the original context, the listener) senses the unit is complete."⁴

Once you understand the nature of the structure, you won't be able to unsee it as you study your Bible. Here's what it looks like:



I'll make it simple for you, putting a bit of meat on the bones of this structure using John 4:23-24.

The time is coming—indeed it’s here now—when true worshipers *will worship the Father in spirit and in truth*.

The Father is looking for those who will *worship him* that way.

For God is Spirit,

so those who *worship him*

must worship *in spirit and in truth*.

The central part of the chiasm, “For God is Spirit,” is the fulcrum of the passage. Notice how the first part and last part directly correspond to each other, repeating *worship* and *spirit* and *truth*. The middle part’s repetition is “worship him.”

Looking at Connie’s story, we see the light pushing through her backyard as the central point of the story. Prior to that, a storm, then the felling of the tree. She then recounts her painful church story as a storm, then destruction, which led to new light in a new place.

storm

felling of tree

new light

felling of her church

church storm

As you map out your own story, the chiastic structure may take a little more thought. What was the main pivot in your life? It could be a decision to stop drinking or the moment of salvation or the time you walked away from that abusive relationship. Now look to see what earlier events correspond to your more current events. What patterns do you notice? What story are you trying to complete?

Here's something I've spotted in mine. Two predators found me at five—and later a Christian-publishing professional preyed on me in my late thirties. Obviously the instances differed widely, and I hope I had more tools to deal with the second occurrence, but they did happen. In the time between those two predations, I met Jesus, who began to heal me—the main pivot point in my life.

As I started to look at these events through the structure of a chiastic story, one thing became very clear to me. My first abusers were predators, and they were narcissistic. The man in the publishing industry was a predatory narcissist. Stepping back to look at other pieces of my story, I kept noticing that I even pursued female friends who fit that mold as well. And I had family members who were either predators or narcissists.

I realized that this was the story I was trying to complete: If I could prove a predatory narcissist liked me, I could prove my lovability to those in my family of origin who had treated me with contempt, dismissal, or predation. Since my earlier family hadn't completed my story with love, I spent many years as an adult pursuing unsafe people, hoping desperately that they could complete my story. The problem was that predators and/or narcissistic people make very poor saviors. They are so busy using others that the last thing on their minds is how to salve a broken person's wound.

Understanding the pattern in those stories, I finally realized I was going about things all wrong. I would keep living my past story if I didn't go to Jesus to finish my story. I'd keep circling the drain, hoping I wouldn't fall in the trap. Without healing, my chiasm would play on repeat.

I am now far more aware when I run into folks who exhibit predatory or narcissistic traits. I remind myself that I am loved and sufficient and don't need their approval, validation, or love to feel okay about myself. I am loved by the One who died for me, and that is enough. This realization has helped me stop a painful cycle.

If the way I'm writing about this realization sounds easy or anti-septic, know that the journey here was neither. It took many years of chasing after unsafe people (hoping against hope that they'd suddenly change into trustworthy folks) and getting burned and hurt too many times to count before I had the *aha* about what I was doing. By going to counseling, processing with my husband and friends, and learning what traits safe people possess, I slowly worked through the why of my mess. To be honest, predatory people and narcissists still hold sway over me. Perhaps they always will. The difference is that I am more aware.

That's the power of mapping your story.

You're Not Alone

God's best work is done when he intersects with our most difficult experiences. His kindness is beautifully available, particularly when you're weakened or fearful.

In Isaiah 63:9 we are reminded of God's great compassion toward us, even when it's hard to personally process our grief:

In all their suffering he also suffered,
and he personally rescued them.
In his love and mercy he redeemed them.
He lifted them up and carried them
through all the years.

God had powerfully delivered the nation of Israel from Egyptian slavery and led them through their wilderness wanderings and into the Promised Land. But the Israelites did not heed the warnings of the Lord, who loved and led them—instead of worshiping him, they abandoned him to serve idols. That idolatry led to their exile in Babylon. This verse was addressed to that group of exiled people—the remnant,

who may have been feeling that God had abandoned them. But here we see God's great mercy toward those he loves.

He has that same heart toward you, friend.

You have walked a similar path. Before you knew Jesus, you were enslaved to sin, brokenhearted and wayward. Jesus rescued you by sacrificing himself on a cross and resurrecting on day three. He literally fought the foe of death and sin on your behalf. As a Christ follower, perhaps you've been prone to wander—an aching difficult part of your story. Even so, your Lord has affection toward you. He does not despise your story, even if it's full of bumps and bruises and foibles and regrets. He will lift you up and carry you when you don't feel worthy of love or attention.

And the good news is this: He already knows your entire story. In fact, he knows it better than you do. He “formed you in your mother's womb” (Jeremiah 1:5). He created your “once upon a time,” and he knows your last breath. He delights in giving wisdom to those he loves—particularly about how to navigate next steps in a difficult story.

If you feel nervous or fearful about looking more closely at your story, know that your compassionate Father is with you every step of the way, just as he was with his people even in their rebellion and wanderings. And he wants you to be honest. He knows that untruth causes pain and hiding but that authenticity brings us into the light. We must mine our stories, not to wallow in them or stay tethered to them in unhealthy ways that leave us stuck, but to learn from them.

Once we're willing to truly face our stories alongside God, we begin the restory process—but we don't do that alone. Our relational God intends for our healing to happen in relationship with others. Telling our stories invites other people into community. Every time each one of us is bold enough to honestly share our story with others, the story lessens, its bite weakens, and we experience a surprising

bonus: We make friends. When my husband and I left our megachurch of twenty-three years, we joined a small local church. My husband began attending a weekly meeting of men in the church who simply told their stories. A few weeks into the series, they invited him to share his story. In that moment, he felt welcomed home. Now whenever we attend this new church, Patrick is greeted by new friends. Like you, his story is full of ups and downs—but the sheer act of sharing it vulnerably opened his life up to new friendships.

As I've been praying my way through the writing of this book, I've been asking the Lord for a passage of Scripture to serve as an anchor for the principles herein. Hebrews 12:1-4 has kept coming to mind. Why? Because it mentions community and Jesus' compassion—two important elements in telling our stories.

Since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up. After all, you have not yet given your lives in your struggle against sin.

HEBREWS 12:1-4

The Lord surrounds us with a cloud of witnesses, both in the heavens *and* in the earthly realm. We are called to live out our stories with verve and intention. Jesus is our goal, but he is also our means of walking with integrity and hope. Why? Because he endured all things

for our sake. He is a merciful friend who has experienced the hell of this life—and he knows best how to intersect and heal our stories.

My challenge to you before you move on to the next chapter, with Jesus as your companion, is to map your journey using one of the frameworks I shared earlier. There is no teacher grading your effort; it can look however you want—a story arc, a hero's circle, a chiasm, a song, a drawing, a poem, a recounting by voice into your phone. These tools I'm offering you are simply frameworks to get everything out onto the page (or into the microphone and transcribed). And since each one is a diagram, that can eliminate the fear of writing a very, very long essay about your life. You can write fragments in the margins—or one word to remind you of that time when you were eleven. You can draw a picture if that best fits the way you remember your past. The point is to get it out—at least for your sake. If you fear the reactions of others, I encourage you to show your diagram or written-out story with a safe friend. All you need to do is slide the paper across the table and let them see it. In that shared space, you are no longer bearing your story alone. That place of safe community, then, becomes the first step of the restorying process.

Restorying Mary of Bethany

As you pull this together, I want you to watch closely for ways the Lord has intersected your story, similarly to the way I imagined Mary of Bethany at the top of this chapter. How did he rescue you? When did he seem aloof? When were you discouraged? What people have helped you? What people have served as adversaries? What themes have emerged? Can you see a thread of redemption—or of struggle or patterns of relating that you'd like to change?

To be restoried is to let out your story first—it's to give it weight and dignity. And it means you must learn self-compassion. Be kind to

little you back then. Take off your hat of judgment and choose to offer mercy to the child who was just trying to make it in the world. If you remember something differently than your sibling does, that's normal and okay. Every person you meet sees the world through a different lens. That doesn't make one story correct and another wrong; it simply means we live in a world of nuance. Maybe your parents' harsh treatment of you really affected you while your sister felt it was what she needed to help her achieve things. We all experience our families of origin differently—and that makes sense. This happened at the beginning of time with Cain and Abel. They didn't experience their parents in the same way, nor did they interact with God in the same way.

You have permission to own your story. You are allowed to tell it however you would like to. Pray that the Lord will give you insight and direction as you work through your timeline. And be prepared for healing and change.

Telling your story is an audacious step toward a restoried life. I'm so proud of you for taking this journey.

Questions for Discussion

1. Which story structure was the most familiar to you? The least?
2. How does understanding different ways of telling a story help you share your own?
3. How does Mary of Bethany's story teach you about telling your own?
4. When have you finally let out a story to a trusted person, and how did you feel after you shared it?
5. How difficult was it for you to recount your story the first time?