

THE SOUL OF A HERO



BECOMING THE MAN OF
STRENGTH AND PURPOSE
YOU WERE CREATED TO BE

STEPHEN ARTERBURN
& DAVID STOOP

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STEPHEN ARTERBURN
& DAVID STOOP
WITH B. A. JOHNSON



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The Soul of a Hero: Becoming the Man of Strength and Purpose You Were Created to Be

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INTRODUCTION

Heroes at Heart

After a combined seventy years of helping men overcome everything from feeling aimless and without purpose to private addictions and a myriad of complex male issues, we have come to believe that a high percentage of guys are lost, off track, and disconnected from their true calling: *to be a hero*.

Be honest now: Does the word *hero* resonate with you, or does it miss the mark, leaving you feeling cold and disconnected?

Maybe you're thinking, *What's heroic about my life?*

Well, here are four things you need to know:

1. God created every man to have a heroic heart, soul, and mind. It's part of the image of God in us.
2. There's a heroic path and purpose for *every* man, regardless of temperament, personality, or calling.
3. You have an enemy who will do everything he can to undermine your heroic journey.

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4. If you're willing to fight (which is part of the heroic journey), you can uncover your heroic heart and pursue your heroic purpose.

So, who is this heroic man you're designed to be? We'll answer that question more fully over the next seven chapters, but here's a working definition to get you started:

A hero is a man who knows his place in God's eyes.

A hero is a man who knows his purpose on earth.

A hero is a man who enjoys healthy relationships.

A hero is a man who lives with a sense of meaning.

A hero is a man who lives with a spirit of adventure.

In other words, a hero is a man who is spiritually secure, strongly connected, and certain of his purpose. In the Bible, we see that heroism is built on strong character, courageous action, unselfishness, and faithfulness, even in the worst of circumstances.

Seriously, what guy wouldn't want to live that way?

As we go along, we'll take a deeper look at what it means to be a hero, and we'll explore how the hero within us evolves as we journey from boyhood to manhood.

In the meantime, let's approach it from a different angle.

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If you're at all like us, you're able to grasp deeper meanings more quickly and easily through stories you can relate to. So let's begin with three stories that illustrate the soul of a hero.

Eli began life with a bang. A natural athlete and full of energy, he spent his high school years working out and playing football, enjoying the accolades and adrenaline rush of being the team hero. College, on the other hand, was a bit of a blur. Eli would say he minored in business and history and majored in sports and fun.

After graduation, he started working at an accounting firm. The money was good, but for Eli the job was mind-numbing. His boredom grew, and any sense of adventure or accomplishment shriveled to insignificance in the daily drudgery of crunching numbers.

It was also a desk job, and Eli soon found himself out of shape, tired, and without much motivation to get off the couch after work. Within two years, this general malaise grew into full-blown depression. By the time he called in to the New Life radio show asking for help, his despair was so deep it made him want to give up on life. He knew something had to change, but what?

Then there's Jesse, a classic Renaissance man who found his meaning and purpose in whatever creative or intellectual endeavor he pursued. Even as a kid, he loved music, art, writing poetry, and reading literary fiction. His dad, a sports enthusiast and sometimes angry alcoholic, was open about his disappointment with Jesse's bookishness and lack of interest in athletics.

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When Jesse was eighteen, he left his small Southern town for New York City, where he found work as an assistant copy-editor at a trendy magazine. In time, he met and married Jen, a practical thinker and upbeat young woman who balanced out the cerebral, angsty, artsy, sometimes melancholy parts of his personality. Despite their differences, they shared a love of nature. Walks in Central Park became part of their daily routine. They both had a quirky sense of humor and loved going to local theater productions.

But even though Jen was cheerful and fun to be with, she didn't enjoy philosophy, wasn't a reader, and didn't ponder the meaning of life the way Jesse did. Sometimes he wished Jen could be the kind of companion who enjoyed discussions of ideas, theories, and beliefs. For the most part, though, he was left to find these kinds of fulfilling interactions at work.

Over time, Jesse formed a close friendship with Stella, one of the bookish, thoughtful women in the office. When he conversed with Stella about what he had been reading or contemplating, he felt alive. He came to see me (Dave) when he realized he was falling for Stella in ways that worried him. He loved Jen, but his inability to connect with her in deeper, intellectual conversations negatively affected his feelings of closeness to her. Stella seemed to fill an empty spot in his life. Was he in love with her?

Finally there's Ryan, a successful corporate salesman who accepted an early retirement package when his company downsized to stay afloat. His kids were grown and gone, and all four of his grandkids were in high school. During his first

year of retirement, Ryan and his wife traveled the country, and he also played lots of golf.

But without his career, Ryan felt emotionally adrift. Something was missing. His job had kept him busy enough that he'd never taken the time to ask many questions about God, his own place in the universe, or his purpose. He'd never made time for friendships with other men during the years of raising kids and focusing on paying the bills and climbing the corporate ladder. At age fifty-eight, he realized he might have only fifteen or twenty years left to live. He wanted those years to be meaningful. He wanted the rest of his life to count.

Though these men were at different crossroads, and though they were at different ages and stages of life, they shared one thing in common: They had not yet fully tapped into the soul of the hero inside themselves. "Locate and nourish your inner hero in healthy ways, and you'll begin to feel alive again," we promised them.

Through a series of questions and lessons, healthy risks, and new discoveries and adventures (the very things we'll look at in this book), these men became reenergized. With fresh insights into their place in God's heart and their purpose in the world, their lives began to change in profound and beneficial ways. They became more secure, more at ease with God and others, and more confident in their identity and mission.

Eli realized that his true calling involved helping others, belonging to some sort of team, and challenging himself

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physically. With these new insights, he made a radical change in his career path and became a firefighter. As he discovered a vocation that brought him meaning and adventure, along with the joy of constantly learning new skills, he noticed an interesting change in his perspective.

After an exhausting but satisfying day on the scene of a huge apartment fire, Eli realized he *liked* the man he was becoming. He felt God's pleasure as he helped others out of danger. The first time he saved a child from a burning building and delivered her unharmed to her frantic and grateful mother was the closest Eli had ever felt to being Superman, his childhood hero. He felt as if he'd gone from being a boy adrift in the world to a real man on a mission. He woke up every morning grateful to God for a chance to change people's lives and bring a little of heaven's caring love to earth.

In short, Eli found the soul of a hero—and realized it had already been inside him.

Jesse discovered, over time and in counseling, that he was dealing with some unresolved father wounds. He found that his hunger for deeper conversations about life and his longing for philosophical and spiritual interaction could be met through healthy male mentors and a close fellowship of friends. He joined a group of aspiring writers, well-read thinkers, and spiritually curious men who met on Saturday mornings for coffee and conversation. They shared from whatever they were reading and writing, and they pondered the deeper questions of life together.

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This new group met several needs in Jesse's life. The leader was an older man who gave Jesse the kind of fatherly affirmation he'd longed for as a boy. The other men became brothers in their mutual search for meaning and creative ways to use their writing gifts. He no longer felt like such an odd duck in the world of men.

As Jesse began to get in touch with the creative inner hero in his soul, he found the courage to start writing a novel, an epic fantasy full of heroes and villains and overcoming danger. Every time he sat down to write, he felt like he was diving into an adventure, and he could sense God's pleasure in the creative process. He also found a greater appreciation for Jen's qualities of lightness, fun, and enjoyment of nature, realizing that these things provided a healthy balance to his introspective writing process. He needed her to pull him out of his own head and encourage him to get some fresh air, laughter, and fun. Their communication improved as they began to value the differences each one brought to their marriage and find healthy ways to nurture their varied interests. As Jesse tapped into the soul of a hero within himself, he discovered the pathway to a much happier, healthier, and more meaningful life.

And Ryan? Well, Ryan took stock of his life and began spending time with a spiritual director and life coach, who helped him in his search for meaning. Through conversation, thought, and prayer, Ryan was able to define what he wanted to do with the remaining years of his life: prioritize

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his time so he could put energy and focus into those things that would help him finish well and leave a lasting legacy.

One day Ryan had an idea. The country was in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, and he wanted to do something to make a difference. He shared his idea with his wife, and she was immediately on board. They wanted to inspire and encourage the men and women who were stepping up to take care of those who were extremely ill from the virus. The idea was to mobilize restaurateurs, who had been forced to shut down their in-house dining, to prepare meals for health care workers and first responders, thus keeping their kitchens open and their workforce employed.

Immediately Ryan set out to raise \$2 million, calling business associates from his former career and the heads of several foundations. While he raised the money, his wife contacted the eating establishments and organized them to provide breakfasts, lunches, or dinners. She also gathered a volunteer team to pick up the food in donated rental trucks and deliver it to local hospitals, firehouses, and police stations.

Four phone calls were all it took for Ryan to raise the necessary funds. Then he helped his wife roll out the entire operation in five days. It was a total win for everyone. One heroic act begets another, and it wasn't long before Ryan's idea began to spread and inspire more people to start heroic movements of care and compassion during a time of great anxiety for so many.

As Ryan tapped into the soul of a hero within himself, he

was well on his way to leaving a legacy of caring and love that would outlast his life in many positive ways.

A Rat's Tale: Enrich Your Life, and Your Problems Will Shrink

Though we have much in common as men, we each have a unique calling as well. After we understand our place in God's eyes, our individual mission, and a few core truths about the masculine soul (which we will discuss in later chapters), and then begin to implement these insights, a whole host of troubling issues will diminish or simply disappear. Discouragement will give way to a sense of adventure; fatigue will yield to an excitement to get the day started; and temptations and addictions may seem to lose their appeal. We've seen it time and again: When men discover their true heroic soul, they begin to grow and give in healthy ways. Men who have been searching for purpose and direction find themselves energized and focused. Others, who feared their best years were behind them, find a second wind that helps them live every remaining day filled with joy and enthusiasm.

Dave and I have both found our career calling—and feel God's pleasure in our lives—as we work in the areas of counseling, recovery, and speaking God's truth. I do this mostly through hosting a daily radio call-in show (*New Life Live!*); serving as the teaching pastor of Northview Church in Carmel, Indiana; speaking in various venues; producing

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specialty Bibles; and writing books. I find all these avenues for outreach endlessly and enormously meaningful and exciting.

Dave has also authored many helpful books and has decades of experience in one-on-one counseling. We have written several books together, shared speaking platforms, and often work in the radio booth together. Though we have several passions in common, perhaps the most obvious one is our heart for men who are trapped in destructive habits, dependencies, and addictions. We love seeing “the captives set free.”¹

In our years of ministering to men who are facing the typical male problems of addiction, temptation, aimlessness, and wounding, we have observed a remarkable truth: When we are able to help a man find his inner heroic soul, many of his troubling issues naturally start to fall away. Frankly, it makes our counseling job much easier and more enjoyable. Rather than focusing on the symptomatic problems, we focus on helping each man get in touch with his heroic heart and purpose and then nourish those things. Our job is to point the way, to call men to a higher path and a greater adventure—one that won’t give them a headache in the morning, land them in jail, ruin their marriages, or worse.

This idea—of increasing the conditions needed for mental and spiritual health so that unhelpful habits or sabotaging tendencies fade—is not original with us; but in our opinion, it is often underutilized.

Our interest in the concept of emotional healing was piqued by an experiment conducted with rats. A team of

research scientists discovered that amazing things happened when lab rats that were hopelessly addicted to a mood-altering drug were taken out of their small, boring cages and put into large, super-enriched environments.² The new surroundings were spacious and filled with a variety of great rat-sized exercise equipment, rodent-pleasing food, and spaces to run and explore with plenty of fun-loving rat friends. It was a rat's dream house. To the surprise of the researchers, once placed in "Rat Park," the previously addicted rats chose to drink pure water over the drug-laced liquid. In other words, their real life had become more exciting, fun, and rewarding than a drug. And they didn't want to miss out by being numbed up or zoned out on chemicals. There was no need for an altered state when real life was this enjoyable; and at least in this experiment, the addiction that had once ruled their lives simply dropped away.

We should add here that breaking an addiction is more complicated than simply creating a happy, active, interesting environment. But environment—especially one that is rich in meaningful connections with others—is a huge and often overlooked factor in cultivating mental health and avoiding dangerous temptations. Any good treatment program involves helping an addict create a hope-filled, purposeful, and fun vision of the future, one that will help override the pull back into the addiction cycle.

More often than not, Dave and I have seen that when we motivate men to create the conditions that call out their best selves, their souls begin to flourish, and addictions, sins,

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bad habits, negativity, and depression tend to lessen. This usually means connecting to their heroic soul and creating conditions to nourish their heart, mind, body, and spirit. When a man connects with the hero in his own heart, he becomes more giving, caring, fun, and optimistic—qualities that are attractive to others. His social connections grow. His spirit thrives. His mood brightens. A man who is fully alive is a joy to behold. As Howard Thurman, the renowned African American scholar and theologian, said, “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what this world needs is people who have come alive.”³ The world needs men who have come alive to their worth, their purpose, and their passion.

I wonder where you are on your life’s journey as you read this page. Perhaps you are experiencing a major crisis in midlife and feel that you need an overhaul. Maybe you’re basically happy and balanced but you’d like to have more purpose, more meaning, and experience more joy and more peace. Maybe you’d like a little more *superpower* in your daily life, and you’re looking for the skills to keep harmful temptations and bad habits at bay while increasing your connection with family and friends.

You know the old saying, “Bloom where you’re planted”? In this book, we’ll explore a slight alternative to this classic advice: “Plant yourself where you can bloom best.” We often counsel men in crisis or recovery to proactively and purposefully create an environment where their heroic masculine

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soul—their best God-created self—can most easily and naturally stretch, grow, and blossom.

The details of your enriched environment will vary from that of other men. But as you incorporate the seven “heroic secrets,” which we’ll explain in the following chapters, you will learn how to empty yourself and begin as a child; embrace your true identity in the eyes of God; find mentors and brothers to journey with you; discover your earthly purpose; learn how to love and respect a woman’s heart; and win the war within by mastering your mind. Over time, and with practice, the unique environment you develop (both internal and external) will take you from where you are to where you want to be in life. Desire and determination are all you need to practice these skills until they become a natural part of your daily life. It’s simply a matter of priority and commitment.

You may have heard the following short metaphorical tale before. It’s an old story, but it contains a profound truth and is worth repeating here.

A beloved and respected old man was asked by a young buck one day, “How do you always manage to respond so wisely and kindly? Why is your life so brave and good?”

The old man said, “Ah, my son, it didn’t happen naturally. There is always a black dog and a white dog fighting within me. One urges me to act badly;

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the other to rise above and do the good thing, the right thing.”

“Which dog wins?” the young man asked.

“The one that I feed the most,” the old man answered with a wink.

The Soul of a Hero is about feeding the good dog with regular nourishment. As you do so, the bad dog gets weaker and the good dog grows stronger.

To put it another way, rather than spending a lot of time shouting at the darkness (warning men not to behave badly), we’ve found it far more effective to light a candle (to point men toward their unique hero’s journey). If you turn a man’s face toward the sun, show him what he is capable of becoming, and encourage his masculine soul to shine, he will find he doesn’t have nearly as much idle time to get into trouble or the desire to drift into the dark places. He’ll be too busy loving his real, awesome, amazing life. This is what Jesus meant when he promised to give us “a rich and satisfying life.”⁴ Good soul nourishment, an enriched environment, wisdom skills, and a heart of service can work miracles in a man who has lost his masculine mojo or who simply wants to be the best he can be.

Myths versus True Heroes

Our deepest desire in writing this book is for you to become the hero of your own story. But what does that really mean?

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Are we talking about becoming like Heracles, the mythological hero from ancient Greece who was known for his courage, strength, ingenuity, and physical endurance—but was notably lacking in character? Or like one of the popular Marvel or DC superheroes who disguises his true identity? The popularity of superhero movies in our day suggests that many people—men and women alike—are longing for something more than what they find in their own lives. But who could measure up to the exploits of these mythical heroes? No one! Like so many other male myths, these make-believe heroes leave us feeling weak and inferior, unable to live up to an impossible standard.

Though many people equate heroism with power, strength, ingenuity, and maybe a hint of mystery, true biblical heroism has more to do with faithfulness, authenticity, loyalty, and commitment than with physical ability or bicep girth.

Think of the days of Noah, when no one could imagine floodwaters erupting from the earth and a mighty deluge of rain pouring down from the sky.⁵ God told Noah to build a gigantic boat so that he, his family, and two of every kind of creature could be saved from some crazy, never-before-seen flood that was coming. But God didn't include a CAD program and a laptop with his instructions, and it took Noah 120 years of hard work to build the ark—amid a torrent of ridicule from his neighbors.

Twice the Bible mentions that Noah accomplished everything God asked him to do.⁶ By his decades-long obedience,

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he became a hero to his family, to God, and to all the generations that would follow him. By choosing to believe God's word to him over what he saw and heard, Noah became a hero of faith.

Even the most impressive superhero from a comic book or blockbuster movie can't hold a candle to Moses, another true biblical hero. He did not cower in fear, even when Pharaoh kept refusing to let God's people go despite falling victim to numerous plagues, including the death of his firstborn son. No, Moses kept coming back to face the stubborn monarch until Pharaoh finally relented.

Neither did Moses cower later on at the Red Sea. He marched everyone right through the parted waters and then into the wilderness. Moses led the Israelites out of captivity and toward the Promised Land, day after day. Even though the Israelites often veered away from God, Moses never abandoned them. He delivered his people to the front door of the Promised Land.

Moses was a hero of persistence, refusing to give up and meeting Pharaoh's pride and the waywardness of the Israelites with God-given determination.

King David's courage was evident even when he was a young boy spending his days minding sheep, writing psalms, and playing a harp in the wilderness. In those days, the giant Goliath was known for his incredible strength, and he was the hero of his tribe. But being a hero to the wrong crowd is not heroism at all. When Goliath terrorized the people of Israel, no man was brave enough to fight him. So David,

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who was too small to wear King Saul's armor, became the courageous hero who put a stop to Goliath's terrorism and taunting.

David had two things going for him. First, he had courage that was fueled and directed by an awesome God. All those years of communing with God in nature, writing psalms of praise, and tending sheep had made David spiritually secure and unafraid. In addition, after years of driving away predators from the flock, David knew how to handle a slingshot, which was a perfect weapon against a much larger foe.

David was a hero of courage. His physical skill and deep trust in God helped to secure a victory for his people against seemingly insurmountable odds.

In the New Testament, the apostles were ordinary men who lived for Jesus, serving him and spreading his Word, even when confronted with cruel treatment, ridicule, and death. They weren't perfect, but they were persistent and wholehearted in their heroic dedication to Christ.

*Heroes are made by the paths they choose,
not the powers they are graced with.*

BRODI ASHTON, *EVERNEATH*

In our day, the world longs for such examples of faith, persistence, and courage. WE NEED HEROES! More precisely, we need every man to be a hero—including *you*. We

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believe God brought you to this book for a reason. You have a destiny, designed by God, to pursue a heroic calling. Your journey may not look like any other man's, but if you will implement the seven heroic truths we discuss in the coming pages, you will not regret it. You will be well on your way to living the abundant life that God has promised. We believe that every man, beginning in childhood, dreams of becoming a hero in some way. But not every man is willing to do what it takes to answer God's higher calling.

Are you ready to live an extraordinary life? A life of true biblical heroism? We hope and pray that you are.

If you are willing, let us show you the way to the soul of a hero.

COME EMPTY

Heroic Secret #1: Begin as a Child



*Courage, child:
we are all between the paws
of the true Aslan.*

C. S. LEWIS, *THE LAST BATTLE*

You may not feel as if you have the raw materials for heroism. But let us assure you, you have everything you need—which is to say . . . *nothing*. Believe it or not, the emptier you feel and the more you realize how much you don't know, the less there will be for you to unlearn when you answer the call of the Master Teacher. Just come as you are, bringing only your honest self, and you will be well equipped.

Come as You Are

Have you ever thought about the differences between a women's retreat and a men's campout? The women assign a planning committee months in advance and schedule all kinds of activities—from crafts to skits to music to games. They arrange for real meals with vegetables, appetizers, and fancy cupcakes. They also have a decorating committee so the facility will be done up as pretty as a fancy boutique hotel. They make cute little name tags. They have breakout sessions and discussion leaders, as well as artsy pamphlets that feature the full agenda and the speakers' bios. It's enough to make a guy's head spin.

Men, on the other hand, start planning the camping weekend the night before it begins. They call a hunting buddy and ask him to bring any elk or deer meat he has in the freezer. Appetizers are bags of chips and packages of store-bought cookies. A complete dinner for a man is Doritos, Oreos, and a venison steak. That's it. Breakfast is scrambled eggs by the

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dozen and pounds of fried bacon. Maybe some pancakes if the guys are feeling ambitious.

Whatever clothes and toiletries men need on a campout should fit in a gallon-size ziplock. Done. It's a total come-as-you-are, no-fluff, no-bother affair.

Some guys will bring their guitars. Others will have their Bibles and share a few verses. Somebody else will pray. Another will bring horseshoes.

Men don't like to talk a lot, so there are no planned discussion groups. No need for an itinerary. It just unfolds and happens. That's how most men roll when you let them do what they really want to do.

In a dress-to-impress, get 'er done world, most men are starving for a no-frills campout. Can you imagine joining a group of laid-back, welcoming buddies who have no expectations for what you should say or do or wear or be? Without any need to impress anyone? Leave behind that stuff you've been hauling around that's weighing you down and come out to the piney woods. Breathe some mountain air. You are welcome and wanted, no résumé required. The bacon's frying and the coffee is percolating. Grab a plate and mug, pull up a chair or a log around the warm fire, and put your feet up. You belong.

Can you feel it? That feeling of "Ahhhh . . . this is good." That feeling of coming home to yourself, surrounded by others who are doing the same thing.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus, the Master Teacher, invites us to come.

Just come.

That's where we want to begin this book—with an invitation to just show up.

Come empty-handed. Come like a kid on a campout. Bring nothing but yourself and a deep sigh of relief.

Plenty of Nothin'

“Steve, I got nothin’,” men will tell me.

And I reply, “Awesome. Plenty of nothin’ is exactly what you need to start again.”

In a spirit of shared brokenness, I offer an example of a time when I had to admit I had nothing.

Misty and I had been married for only a few years, but the thrill was gone, to say the least. We were feeling low, helpless, and stuck. It was a place neither one of us thought was possible when we married with such hopes and dreams and self-confidence—not to mention years of collective knowledge about relationships. But we'd hit the proverbial wall as a couple, and neither of us was able to understand or hear the other. So we did what I have advised thousands of couples to do during my years of ministry: We went to see a marriage counselor together.

Misty gave her perspective and revealed that she felt nothing for me. I knew it was true, but it was extremely piercing to hear her say it out loud to another person. It brought the full weight of the sickness in our marriage right into my lap. Then I told the counselor that I had also reached a point where I felt nothing. Not even anger. No feelings at all.

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The counselor let us know that she heard us and understood how painful it must be (because that's what counselors do). Then she surprised us by saying, "It seems you both have something very powerful in common: You both feel nothing for each other. So let's start there. Let's start with common ground."

And that's what we did, even though what we felt for each other was *nothing*. Whether the counselor knew it, I don't know—but *we* knew that God not only meets us at the bottom of life but is also a specialist at making something out of nothing.

When the counselor asked us to start at zero again, we had to unlearn some bad habits and assumptions we had brought into our marriage. She encouraged us to become more curious, childlike, and humble, willing to learn with fresh eyes and an open mind about the unique person we had married. As it turned out, we were more complex than any how-to book we'd read or marriage class we'd taken had given us credit for.

We didn't know it then, but we were entering a master's-level training course, led by a wise mentor, on how to love the actual *us*—not the image of the perfect couple we had assumed we would be, but the honest, actual, real people we were. To earn a master's in "each other," and to do it well, we had to come empty—stripped of our pride, assumptions, expectations, and habitual ways of handling issues—so that we could be filled back up with wisdom and love based on the reality of who we really were. We had to create a *new*

marriage in which we could both be our best selves and flourish together. We also had to humble ourselves before God, admitting we were stuck and numb and without vision. We asked God to refill us with his love and his Spirit and show us the way to real connection.

Allow me to fast-forward the story to tell you that he did that and more!¹ To our surprise and everlasting gratitude, God answered our empty-handed prayers and filled us up with true love and passion that was based on deeply listening to, understanding, and appreciating each other. We brought what we could to him—our tired and discouraged selves. He took that offering and multiplied it as we practiced the Master's lessons of love. Our thankfulness for God's work in our marriage still overflows.

Spiritual Multiplication

As I was writing this chapter, I began to think of all the metaphors Jesus used about bringing him something empty or very small (like a mustard seed) so that he can do the filling up, the growing, and the multiplying for us—supernaturally. Turns out his life and teaching were full of such examples.

There was the time he asked to borrow a boat from Simon, a scruffy fisherman, and used it as a floating pulpit to preach to the crowd that had gathered on the beach. Afterward he told the surprised fisherman to row out deeper and cast his nets. The men in the boat probably laughed at him because they had been fishing all night and had

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caught *nothing*. Nada. Nichts. The nets were so empty that not even a minnow could be found. But because they had just heard him preach, and because it was Jesus, the ultimate Master Teacher, who had asked for their cooperation, Simon decided to humor him and obey his suggestion. They soon found their nets so full they had to call another boat of friends over to help them drag in the abundant catch.²

Soon after the men had pulled in their haul of fish, Jesus gave them a real mission, one with eternal meaning: “Follow me,” he said, “and I will show you how to fish for people!”³ Four fishermen left their nets and boats that day and started the Master’s training course in how to reel in people with Good News from God. They just walked off down the dusty road, a bunch of guys who smelled like fish, with nothing but their robes and sandals, following a teacher who promised miracles and meaning. They didn’t know it then, but together this motley crew would change the world—bringing hope and meaning and eternal life to multitudes of people. And it all started with an empty net.

Remember how Jesus multiplied two measly fish and five little loaves of bread into a miracle feast for five thousand hungry men? He wasn’t satisfied with giving everyone just enough. He turned that little meal into such abundance that there were twelve basketfuls of food left over—a doggie bag for each disciple to enjoy later.⁴

Give Jesus whatever you have and let him bless it; then stand back and watch for the overflow.

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The disciples also saw Jesus ask that six stone water jars, each capable of holding 20 to 30 gallons of water for ceremonial washing, be filled with water. The result was 120 to 180 gallons of the finest wine. Talk about abundance!⁵

Every empty thing that Jesus fills he seems to fill to overflowing, beyond what is needed. Truth be told, God seems to enjoy showing what he can do with little or nothing.

The first step on the journey to uncovering your heroic masculine soul is simple: Start humbly and bring what you've got—even if it's a whole lot of nothing. God can work with that. In fact, his power is perfected in our weakness.⁶ A self-reliant, biased-for-action know-it-all doesn't have enough room in his heart for God's best surprises. But the man who holds out his empty bowl and asks God to fill it—as the Lord sees fit—is the one who will discover the true meaning of abundance, purpose, and significance.

A Beginner's Mindset

In most of the great stories of men-turned-heroes, there is a point where they must let go of all their pride and previous knowledge, allowing themselves to start over with a child's mind and be mentored in the master's ways. Jedi knights had to let go of their own logic and learn the way of the Force. When Doctor Strange, a brilliant surgeon, lost the use of his hands, he had to humble himself, let go of his arrogance, learn a mystical new way of seeing, and harness a new kind of power to help the world. Almost

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every superhero movie shows the point at which a mortal man realizes he possesses a power that must be harnessed, trained, and used for a cause greater than himself. But in order to do that, he must let go of his former way of doing things to make room for new wisdom. Often a wise mentor helps in the process. Think of Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda in *Star Wars*; Mr. Miyagi in *The Karate Kid*; Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia*; Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*; and Dr. Sean Maguire in *Good Will Hunting*. Even Winnie-the-Pooh has a wise mentor in Christopher Robin. Typically the mentor begins by encouraging his student to become a beginner, to drop old ways of thinking at the door of the classroom.

The hero's saga begins with an emptying of pride; the unlearning of old, habitual ways of thinking; and yielding to the master, who knows a better and higher way. In his teaching parables (brief stories with a point), Jesus was forever saying, "You have heard it said . . . but I tell you . . ." In other words, "Common wisdom says thus-and-so, but I will teach you a higher way of viewing and doing things."

The journey to uncovering your heroic soul begins with embracing a childlike (not childish) mind and heart—letting go of old and unhelpful thought loops—and opening yourself up to God's higher way—the Kingdom way of doing things.

One of the most profound and humbling master life lessons that I (Dave) had to learn was when my middle son started using heroin at the age of eighteen. Back in the 1980s,

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addiction training wasn't part of regular doctoral counseling programs. My wife and I had no idea that the issue of addiction was unique and complex, and that "doing what felt natural" as a parent and therapist wasn't going to cut it. We sent our son to a regular counselor, who tried traditional therapies with him, and it was a complete failure. I also set up a couple of situations that I just *knew* would work—where God would do a miracle and my son would give up drugs.

Those, too, failed miserably.

Finally my wife and I dropped what we thought we knew and came to God like two confused kids in need of guidance. We gave up trying to save our son by our own wits and started praying. We settled in for a long wait as we gave our son to God and trusted him to work in our son's life in any way he wanted.

During this time, I was teaching Sunday school. One Saturday evening, our son disappeared with the car and didn't come home—and we had no idea where he was. We had been through enough drama by then to know that he was most likely on a run—a drug binge—and oblivious to our worries and concerns.

Tired, discouraged, and in a lot of emotional pain, I had nothing left in me to prepare a Sunday school lesson. And because I was a psychologist and a Bible teacher, I thought if I told the class what my family was going through, they would judge us as failures and maybe even walk out. But I was too broken to care.

On that pivotal Sunday morning, I showed up empty

and shared what was happening. To my surprise, the class responded with empathy, understanding, and tremendous emotional support. They undergirded us with prayer. We were no longer alone. What a huge relief! Because I had come to class empty of wisdom, with no lesson, offering only honesty, God was able to move in tremendously healing ways. Little did I know it was right where he had wanted me all along.

Next we gave up everything we thought we knew about parenting—things we'd learned from our experience and our background in counseling—and we joined a group where we listened to addicts in recovery. This, too, was hard on my ego. As a therapist, I was used to *leading* groups. But now I was just another frightened dad in need of help—which was also exactly where God wanted me.

When I introduced myself at one of the initial meetings by saying, “I’m here because my son has an addiction problem,” one of the young recovering addicts just about came out of his chair.

“Ha!” he said. “That’s what my dad used say. But he found out it was *him* who had the problem!”

I was taken aback, but as I got to know that young man, it turned out he was right. My wife and I soon learned that addiction was in large part a family issue, and we learned to take responsibility for our part in our son’s emotional pain. But we also learned that loving an addict means throwing away a lot of what comes naturally to parents. We had to relearn how to love our son and establish boundaries. To stop

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rescuing him when he was arrested. To set limits. None of this was easy. In fact, much of it was difficult and unnatural and painful. But our new mentors—recovering addicts and their parents—helped us learn new, healthier ways of coping and caring for both ourselves and our son.

It took ten often harrowing, roller-coaster years. But our son has now been free of addiction for thirty years. We got him back. And I can tell you with 100 percent certainty that it was nothing we can take credit for. It was all God. We came broken. We came empty. We gave the whole mess of our son's addiction and our parenting mistakes to God. When we were at the point of humility—realizing we had *nothin'*—the right mentors appeared with fresh lessons for us. Our best teachers were young, outspoken, recovering addicts in holey jeans and ragged T-shirts. You never know what your best mentors may look like!

I know there may be parents reading this who feel they have forever lost a child to drugs, to the street. My heart goes out to you. I wish I could jump out of this book and hug you personally and pray for you. In fact, over the past few decades, I have been able to minister to parents of prodigals who are in deep pain—not as a know-it-all counselor, but as a fellow pilgrim who has traveled the long, chaotic, painful road and who has learned healthy ways to cope from unlikely teachers in the trenches.

It happened only because I gave up plotting and trying. I came empty and honest to people who loved our family and prayed for us, and to fellow pilgrims who put their

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arms around us and taught us new and better ways through the long, unknown journey ahead. It didn't feel like much of an adventure, but looking back on it, I see that being a parent of an addict is an adventure like no other. It's often like being in a movie where the hero has to duck in and out of near disaster, where crisis comes out of the blue, where monsters lurk and horrible pits of despair must be crossed. There are mountaintop moments of hope, often followed by dizzying drops into discouragement. There is also a heightened awareness that without God and prayer and fellow pilgrims, you have no chance of making it through alive and mostly sane. If that isn't an adventure, I don't know what is.

*Relying on God has to begin all over again
every day as if nothing had yet been done.*

C. S. LEWIS, *THE COLLECTED LETTERS OF C. S. LEWIS*

The late Gary Smalley was a prolific writer, a hilarious speaker, and a good friend. He said that when problems came along, he learned to say, "Whoopie! God is about to teach me something new!" Wouldn't it be great if, when a problem came into your path, you immediately took a childlike approach and came eager and empty-handed to your Master Teacher, ready to learn the new lessons he has for you?

Give It All to Jesus

At the height of his earthly ministry, Jesus prayed an interesting prayer. After prophesying sorrow for those who had witnessed “so many of his miracles [but] hadn’t repented of their sins and turned to God,”⁷ he prays, “O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, thank you for hiding these things from those who think themselves wise and clever, and for revealing them to the childlike. Yes, Father, it pleased you to do it this way!”⁸

A few verses later, he offers an invitation: “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”⁹

In this passage, Jesus sounds like more than just a wise teacher. He was obviously feeling parental and fatherly toward the twelve men he had mentored and loved. When we say, “Come to me” to someone who looks weary and burdened, what are we inviting him or her to do? We want them to come into our arms, where we can give a good old bear hug.

This same theme appears again in Matthew 19, when Jesus tells his disciples, “Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them! For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are like these children.”¹⁰ Something about our coming with a childlike spirit—open, willing, without pretense, without anything to offer—pleases the heart of God.

When we are world-weary and beaten down, it takes a lot of affirmation and assurance to get us back on our feet. Especially when we have deeply disappointed ourselves and

others and need the kind of forgiveness we can't earn—the kind of forgiveness that can only be called grace or mercy.

If you've ever read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, by C. S. Lewis, you will remember the selfishness of the youngest brother, Edmund. Because of his obsessive desire for Turkish Delight, he sells out his siblings to the rule and realm of the wicked White Witch. All manner of trouble, mischief, and tragedy ensue. At Edmund's lowest point, as he's about to be killed by evil forces, Aslan, the great lion and Christ figure in the story, sends a rescue party to save him.

Lewis then describes a long, private conversation between Edmund and Aslan as they walk together through a field: "There is no need to tell you (and no one ever heard) what Aslan was saying, but it was a conversation which Edmund never forgot."¹¹

By forgoing his typical use of detail and dialogue here, Lewis conveys that what transpires between Edmund and Aslan is holy and private. Even the reader cannot venture into that holy of holies, that private moment of forgiveness, assurance, redemption, and validation.

Edmund comes back from his ordeal a changed boy. Humbled. Restored. Wiser. Aslan will hear no more of Edmund's past mistakes and wrong choices, nor will he allow anyone else to speak of them. Most heroes must go through some kind of failure or brokenness on their journeys, and that part of Edmund's heroic coming-of-age is now over. Yet it reflects a profound recognition of our own need to be rescued and forgiven. It knocks the rough edges of pride from our spirit.

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Edmund is later knighted in Aslan's presence and goes on to become a wise ruling prince of Narnia, but in truth, Edmund's identity has always been that of a royal hero. He may have looked like a boy who would sell out his family for a bite of Turkish Delight, but Aslan saw through this false self. And when Edmund was exhausted of all desire to hide and pretend, when he had nothing to say or offer, when he realized he could not save himself, Aslan quickly, thoroughly, and deeply forgave him and reminded him of the hero he was destined to be in the kingdom of Narnia.

It takes some of us boy-men a while—and many mistakes with our own forms of Turkish Delight—to finally come to Aslan empty-handed. But rest assured, when we are ready to arrive in Aslan's presence with a whole lot of nothin' to offer him, we will open ourselves up to untold riches—hearts overflowing with grace and gratitude, along with a new identity and a fresh mission.

No matter how old you are or where you are in life, it is never too late to become the hero of the story God is writing for you.

Just start as a child.

Come empty into God's strong and fatherly arms.

Jesus said, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are like these children."

MATTHEW 19:14