

THE MIRACLE MOMENT

How Tough
Conversations Can
Actually Transform
Your Most Important
Relationships

NICOLE
UNICE

This book is a game changer for the way you see yourself and connect with the world. Nicole's wisdom will help you take your relationships and your life to the next level. Miracles are waiting for you!

ALLI WORTHINGTON, bestselling author, speaker, and business coach

We all know that one conversation we really should have but don't. We sabotage the relationships that could be most fulfilling and impactful because we don't know how to say what needs to be said. Nicole provides wise perspective and a practical approach to engaging in difficult conversations that are balanced with truth and grace—a powerful combination we often forget to use.

STEVE PERKINS, founder and CEO of Greenhouse Culture

With solid advice and practical phrases to use in the middle of any argument, *The Miracle Moment* does exactly what it suggests: gives you the power to make miracles happen in your relationships.

ELISA MORGAN, author, speaker, and cohost of the *God Hears Her* podcast

Navigating conflict is an essential tool as long as you are dealing with human beings, yet most people don't prepare and practice for conflict! Nicole has masterfully given us a start-to-finish practical guide for navigating the inevitable.

DAVID M. BAILEY, coauthor of the *Race, Class, and the Kingdom of God* study series

As you walk into a room of hard questions and tough conversations, Nicole invites you closer to see where grace exists. Her honesty and pursuit of truth refresh your soul and give you hope.

ERYN EDDY, founder of So Worth Loving lifestyle company and author of *So Worth Loving: How Discovering Your True Value Changes Everything*

Nicole has artfully distilled her experience as therapist, coach, and pastor into a chairside companion designed to help you navigate conflict with integrity while setting and holding boundaries. The book is a treasure of stories and exercises designed to resolve dilemmas. Nicole has been a blessing in my career with her ability to reframe/ reconsider situations, and her expertise shines through in this book.

JOSEPH BOWERS, CEO of The CREATION Companies

The Miracle Moment is a miracle indeed. Nicole Unice has created the ultimate guide for navigating tough conversations. As a woman over forty, I've had more tough discussions than I can count. Often I've avoided people and conversations out of "kindness," never knowing just how unkind my actions were. Nicole's introduction and step-by-step guide to identifying our intentions and feelings prior to speaking is a game changer. After devouring Nicole's new body of work, I'm armed with a plan and all I need to restore past relationships and future roadblocks.

AMEERAH SAINE, host of the *Brunch and Slay* podcast

Too many leaders underestimate the importance of tough conversations. They either avoid them or they insensitively barrel through them, blind to their own feelings and motivations, and often completely unaware of the impact on the relationships in their lives. Nicole's experience as a counselor, pastor, and coach powerfully equips you with the tools to have healthy and honest conversations that lead to true miracle moments.

JENNI CATRON, author, leadership coach, and founder of The 4Sight Group

As a counselor, one of the greatest needs I see in my clients is the desire for deep, life-giving conversations. Ironically, we often feel the need for this type of communication in the hard places of pain and

conflict—the very places where we are most tempted to withdraw from one another. Each chapter in *The Miracle Moment* is full of concrete teaching, engaging illustrations, and practical steps of application to help us move toward tough conversations with the people close to us. These tools can help us have more authentic conversations that will strengthen, rather than destroy, our most meaningful relationships.

LISA G. OULD, counselor and executive director of The Barnabas Center-Richmond

The most challenging spaces in life and leadership are relationships. In this must-read for leaders everywhere, Nicole Unice delivers a just-in-time, practical pathway to navigate the conversations we dread most. Nicole's unique ability to weave timeless wisdom with relevant stories provides a relatable and powerful tool for leaders in every walk of life.

GABRIEL SMITH, founder and CEO of 3rd Source

Nicole Unice gives us the principles and tools we need to navigate the challenge of living in healthy relationships. Yet *The Miracle Moment* is so vulnerable, honest, and relevant that once you've read it, you'll want to keep it close (for regular reference) so you stay positioned for more miracle moments in your life. This book would be relevant in the White House, not to mention boardrooms, offices, churches, kitchen tables, bedrooms, backyards, and front porches!

PASTOR DON COLEMAN, lead pastor of East End Fellowship and former chairman of the Richmond, Virginia, public school board

When many of us think about miracle moments, it's usually through the lens of something happening to us. What I love about Nicole's approach and coaching style is that she has witnessed how important it is for *leaders* to move in order for miracle moments to happen. We

can't just sit back and wait for them. Miracles happen when we look inside and put ourselves in position to experience them!

TYLER REAGIN, founder of the Life-Giving Company and cofounder of the 10TEN Project

The Miracle Moment teaches us how to think, feel, and react in an honest and vulnerable way. Nicole's insight into becoming a non-anxious presence can be a life-changing tool for self-awareness. Through this book, you will discover you have the courage to be an open and honest person in all your relationships.

DR. CHRIS PAYNE, senior pastor of New City Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

In *The Miracle Moment*, Nicole invites us to pay attention to what is going on within us and to be curious, not condemning. She gives us tools that anyone can use and lets us know that there is hope in Jesus. And she cheers us on the whole way. There is more for all of us!

KATINA NAPPER, strategic leader, consultant, and coach

With her discernment as a pastor and her experience as a counselor, Nicole is the coach you want in your corner. Her book will help you see what you're missing when you shrink from difficult conversations and show you how to press in for the miracle moment waiting on the other side. If you want to thrive in your life and leadership, let this practical book guide the way to transforming your relationships.

JULIE PIERCE, leadership coach, author, and speaker

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NICOLE UNICE



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INTRODUCTION

MIRACLES STILL HAPPEN

IT WAS THE LAST SENTENCE that caught my attention.

I had met Sam less than an hour before in my work with a nonprofit trying to move their culture from “scrappy startup” to an established and locally respected organization. When I’d arrived at our meeting place, a coffee shop run by the organization’s leadership development program, Sam was already waiting. He quickly stood, drink in hand, to greet me with a firm handshake. We found a table in the corner, away from the relaxed chatter between baristas and customers. Once we sat down, I could tell by his tight smile and straight posture that this wouldn’t be an easy assignment.

I wasn’t surprised—Sam was the organization’s director of operations and had been through a tumultuous staff shake-up. Their founding executive director had left under pressure more than a year before, and about a third of the program team had resigned since then. I had already spent hours interviewing all of Sam’s coworkers on the central

team, and their tension and pain were palpable. It was the last sentence in my conversation with Sam that unlocked the crux of the problem.

My first order of business had been just to listen to Sam's story. In all my conversations, I'd been searching for a way forward—and trying to identify those staff members who seemed willing to engage with the hard work of rebuilding a team. I wanted to make sure I got under the surface and understood each person's heart. I quieted my thoughts, focused on Sam, and said, "So, tell me your story of coming into this role."

Sam flashed a brief smile and folded his hands in front of him, knee jiggling to a silent rhythm under the table. "Well, my story is pretty important to my work here—I was one of the kids this program served when I was in middle school. I never thought I could use my business background to actually work for a mission I believe in . . ." He trailed off, the smile fading. "I still believe in what we are doing here. But sometimes I'm not sure the executive team know exactly what they are doing."

With his coffee untouched, Sam leaned in and paused, squeezing his interlaced fingers together. But once he began to speak, I wasn't sure he would be able to stop. It seemed as if Sam hadn't really felt heard in years, and was about to finally open up.

He filled me in on more of his background: He'd been on staff for eight years, often feeling trapped by the tension between the front-facing program for the community and the actual business of the organization. For years he'd been navigating the turbulent environment—before the executive director left and during the leadership vacuum afterward. Meanwhile, his responsibilities kept expanding, but his pay and hours stayed the same. He was understandably exhausted and frustrated. Over the next hour, he talked about his work, about inconsistencies in the direction of the organization, and especially about his department's supervisor, Abby.

By the time the deluge of words slowed to a trickle, Sam had stopped jiggling his knee and now cupped his cold coffee. He sighed deeply, then lifted his fingers from his drink, a half-hearted gesture of surrender.

“When Abby told my team, ‘If you can’t get on board, you might as well get going,’ I thought, *Are you kidding me? This is not the way a leader leads. You can’t say that to people, even if that’s what you mean. If something doesn’t change, I don’t know how much longer I can last.*”

I don’t know how much longer I can last. That’s the sentence that caught my attention because it expresses the very human moment in difficult circumstances when we must decide whether to power up or give up—and Sam had just revealed that he had reached that breaking point.

Throughout our time together, Sam had brought up Abby repeatedly. He had a long relationship with her—she had been his program director when he first came on as a high school volunteer, and he had celebrated her rise in leadership. Abby had now been with the organization almost fifteen years and was the leader with the most seniority. She had always been an important voice in Sam’s life, but for the last eighteen months, Sam felt he could no longer trust her in the same way.

He told me about the day he encouraged the development director to voice a concern on behalf of the team and Abby “just never responded.” And there was the time that Sam’s (now-fired) manager reassured him, after he’d put in sixty-hour weeks for months, that Abby would advocate for a position to give Sam more leadership and relief from the day-to-day grind. Lowering his head, Sam told me, “I was so disappointed that she didn’t do anything.” And then Sam was crushed when Abby seemed to throw him under the bus in a meeting. He wondered whether working so hard—even for an organization he believed in so passionately—was worth it anymore.

I wanted Abby to be the problem, I really did. By this point, I knew Sam was a well-regarded, hardworking staff member. I understood Sam’s frustration and his belief that all his team needed was to find Abby a better place in the organization and to hire an *experienced* executive. We often believe that by re-engineering job titles and positions, we can fix a workplace, but that kind of problem-solving usually

doesn't deal with the real issue—our own humanity. And before we can deal with all that “humanity” around us, we have to deal with ourselves. After just one hour with Sam, I had a hunch that he had let his anger and frustration lead him to the conclusion that the problem was Abby. But I wondered how the story might play out differently if Sam understood how to explore what was driving his frustration—and what steps he could take to reshape his experience.

To make matters more interesting, I had spent time with Abby and the executive team the day before. I found her to be a passionate (albeit tired) and committed leader who wanted to do right and had more than enough experience to lead the organization forward. Abby was bearing just as much emotional weight as Sam—no surprise there—but she was carrying it behind the scenes. She had to manage ongoing tensions among the executive team and a difficult relationship with the current board, who seemed more interested in sabotaging and second-guessing her efforts than actually moving forward. She was also worried about her oldest son, a junior in high school, who had recently decided he wasn't into school—or anything other than mumbling and staring into his phone. Abby had admitted to me (and was completely embarrassed for “being so unprofessional”) that she had found a marijuana stash in her son's room for the second time in a month and couldn't get her husband to engage with what felt like a red-alert problem in their home. Abby was flailing—trying to act as if she had it all together while her life was tearing apart at the seams.

“I thought I worked well with people,” she told me, “but right now it seems like all I have are more and more people with bigger and bigger problems.”

As in tune as Abby seemed to be, I was surprised at her response when I questioned her about the morale on the rest of the staff. “Things are good. I can depend on my team, and they do awesome work. I haven't been as engaged these last few months, but they know what to do and are doing a great job handling the changes.”

Now, having talked with both Sam and Abby, I felt like I was watching a train wreck. I understood how they had both derailed, and I was empathetic to both. Certainly, when considering their relationship, it's crucial to remember how the power differential between them played a role. Yet Sam did have the choice to confront Abby—but chose not to. Unbeknownst to Abby, Sam was carrying firsthand experiences and secondhand gossip about Abby that had damaged his trust and soured his view of her—but he hadn't yet acknowledged that growing tension within him. Conversely, Abby had chosen to grit it out under the weight of her work and personal challenges, and yet she had blind spots to serious issues that were eroding her most important asset: her relational influence and trust with her staff.

As I sat down to write my assessment, I realized that the entire team was at a critical crossroad. If they continued on the current trajectory—burying hurts, avoiding confrontation, sidestepping honest and vulnerable relationships—they were in for a world of pain. That kind of distress comes in the form of emotional baggage for people who leave the organization, continued frustration for those who stay, and more than anything, the incredible missed opportunity to grow, to flourish, and ultimately to serve the nonprofit's mission more effectively and passionately.

If their situation was left unchecked, I was certain this is exactly what would eventually happen to Sam and Abby. Yet I also knew the fallout from the stress and hurt on both sides could be avoided. If they were willing to acknowledge and confront their frustration and disappointment, they would strengthen their department and, I was sure, find their work much more satisfying. This could be a miracle moment.

What was happening between Sam and Abby—and what is happening between coworkers, best friends, husbands and wives, and parents and their adult children—is human. It's the struggle to express what's going on within us, to confront misunderstandings and mistakes, to

align our words and our actions in a way that allows us to be open, vulnerable, and courageous when a relationship isn't going well.

The problem is, most of us have never learned how to handle conflict, so our relationships tend to be superficial, transactional, and often unfulfilling. But it doesn't have to be like this for Sam, for Abby, or for you. There is another way.

Too often, though, we overlook and even run away from the pivotal moments that could change everything. After all, these interactions are fraught with difficulties, and miracle moments happen only when we refuse to back away from uncomfortable truth. They bring with them the possibility of failure, the missteps, and the inevitable awkwardness that come when you try to relate in a new way after being stuck in a pattern for a while. Yet these conversations are also the one route that can lead to renewed relationships and lasting change.

Let's Deal with It

We often have a feeling that something isn't right but can't identify what is at the root of our discomfort. Perhaps, like Sam, you have struggled with that frustrated, irritated, unsettled feeling you have when you want someone to understand you—and he or she is just not getting it. You may have experienced a vague sense that something is “off” with someone but don't have the words to express your concern and reconnect with that person. Or maybe, like Abby, you wish you had a better connection, better camaraderie, a better sense of “getting” your child or someone else you love but figure you must settle for what is.

Since most of us were never taught how to speak openly and directly with someone about how we feel, what we are experiencing, and how to move forward in a relationship, such struggles shouldn't be surprising. If you'd like to better navigate such difficulties, you've come to the right place.

I've spent the last twenty years as a therapist, pastor, and coach, helping people change the way they understand themselves and one another. In this book, we'll explore some of the issues we all face in conflict, like how to

- name the feelings that are driving your decisions and actions,
- learn to respect and respond to your emotions without letting them control you,
- identify the emotional triggers that set you off—and sabotage your relationships,
- get a conversation back on track when it's gone sideways,
- speak words that help—rather than hurt—the likelihood of your getting what you need,
- avoid having the same argument over and over,
- navigate a conflict with integrity,
- mend a relationship when you think you've blown it,
- decide whether to confront an issue or let it go,
- identify and keep yourself safe from toxic people, and
- become comfortable setting and holding boundaries.

Throughout the book, you'll find stories and exercises designed to help you resolve these dilemmas. I've learned so much from the people I've worked with, but even more from my own human experience, trying to navigate the tricky situations of marriage, parenting, and leadership. In trying to understand the environment that gives me and you the courage to change, I've put my relationships and experiences under the microscope. In the process, I've stumbled over my inability to hold healthy boundaries, to confront issues as they arise, to find the real problems that get in the way of trust and respect. I've ignored every piece of advice I've ever tried to give other people—I'm stubborn like that.

Yet even when I've failed miserably at important conversations,

interpreting my feelings, or speaking my mind gently but firmly, I haven't given up hope that change is possible. You see, I believe in miracles. I'll unpack what I mean when I talk about miracle moments in chapter 1, but for now, it's enough to know that these opportunities come in the very second when your frustration, hurt, or rejection makes you want to disengage—but you lean in instead. They exist in the unexpected space between two people trying to express themselves, trying to be understood and loved. They reveal themselves in moments of active listening, mutual compromise, and real apologies.

So if you want to do your relationships better, consider this book the best kind of therapy—it's cheap, it's available when you are, and you can take it at your own pace. Not only do I believe that we can all learn to relate in ways that will transform our relationships, I believe in a God who is orchestrating miracles designed to convince you of His love and grace. But whether you go to church, have been burned by church, aren't interested in church, or fall somewhere in-between, you are welcome here. The principles apply regardless of your own spiritual journey. *The Miracle Moment DVD Experience* and participant's guide take a deep dive into ways Jesus modeled and lived into relationships, and if this book piques your interest in that, I invite you to work through both of them as well.

Miracle moments require true vulnerability, as well as the willingness to express yourself clearly and allow yourself to be truly seen. You can make a choice to keep that troublesome relationship small and irritating—to keep giving up, shutting up, or blowing up—or you can step into the space where miracles happen. It won't happen every time or with everyone. It may cost you, as not everyone will be willing to change with you. But I believe in the power of miracle moments. And I believe there are miracles waiting for you.

CHAPTER 1

FIGHTING FOR A MIRACLE



*Wounds from a sincere friend are better
than many kisses from an enemy.*

PROVERBS 27:6

LOOKING BACK, I knew we were breaking every civility rule when we brought up politics. We were out celebrating my friend's birthday. I don't know why we started talking about the upcoming election. I don't remember who brought it up (it was probably me), but I do know that what had been a lovely dinner at a white-tablecloth restaurant devolved quickly from a heated conversation about policy into a personal conflict involving accusations like "You make me feel stupid" and "You are so stubborn."

Happy birthday, everyone!

By the time the birthday girl and I had returned to that polite iciness that covers friendship when words have gone too far, our other friend was hiding out in the bathroom. Sure that I had lost two best friends, my insecurity was on full alert. How had "productive" dialogue turned into a weapons of mass destruction-level conflict before we had even ordered dessert?

When was the last time you had a fight like this, one that led to inner turmoil because you felt unheard, judged, or disregarded? Perhaps your argument didn't end in verbal sparring. It might have happened entirely within your head because—once you sensed that you were being deeply misunderstood—you used silence and withdrawal to protect yourself. Perhaps you've been in the kind of spat where both sides launch a volley of conflicting opinions and then walk away. Or maybe you've been in a conversation that ends with one person lecturing and the other withdrawing.

Many of us have never actually had a *good* fight. We've never experienced a struggle that ended in healing and strength—for us or the other party. Rather than engaging with the person who has hurt or disappointed us, we've just sucked it up, stuffed it away, or distanced ourselves, perhaps believing that there's something inherently wrong with us or that it's just not possible to really be honest and still be loved.

When I think about what it takes to communicate openly and honestly, to move toward connection, to grab hold of a miracle moment, I think *fight* is the right word to use. The basic definition of a fight is “a violent struggle involving weapons.” You might be thinking, *Really? I thought good relationships are all about harmony and selflessness. What's the miracle in that?*

We all want to be known and accepted just as we are, but no one can do that perfectly. The violence comes in the form of the invisible but powerful struggle to be known and to know others. The weapons come in the form of words—words you choose, words you use, and words you withhold.

This battle is fought on two fronts. The first is the obvious one. It's the struggle you have to be understood by your spouse, your kids, your annoying coworker, or your pretentious neighbor. Jessica, for example, came to me because she was contemplating divorce. She insisted that she and her husband never fought. I politely nodded and kept a poker

face, but I was thinking, *Yes, you do; you just don't know it yet*. Neither she nor her husband was keeping a big secret, like an affair or secret addiction, from the other. As we talked, I realized that though she and her husband might not yell, they did use withholding affection and information from each other as weapons. Though they didn't insult each other verbally, they withdrew from each other—seldom sharing what they were really thinking and feeling. They weren't growing together through the challenges of life—building careers, parenting young children, keeping up their home. No, they didn't *fight*.

But maybe they should have.

These are the obvious battles. But there's much more.

The second front is more insidious—and more deadly. It's the battlefield of the conversation you have among others and within yourself. Every day, we talk to the people closest to us: spouses, kids, coworkers, bosses. At the same time, each of us carries on a dialogue with ourselves in our minds.

Drew, a talented, up-and-coming leader, came to me for coaching as he considered a big career change. He was having difficulty figuring out what he wanted and was paralyzed by the choices in front of him. Midway through our work together, I gave him homework to help him see his decisions more clearly. When we met to discuss the assignment, he confessed he hadn't done it. I asked him to be curious (something we will practice later in this book) and be an impartial observer of himself to consider the reason he had put it off.

"So, Drew," I said, "what kept you from actually following through and doing what you said you would do?" I sat quietly. A big part of me wanted to let Drew off the hook and rescue him from his own mistake, but I had a feeling that the real miracle would be missed if I didn't allow this uncomfortable interaction to move us forward.

The silence was obviously difficult for Drew. He began to struggle—and not just to find words. He actually began to squirm slightly, raising

his shoulders and jiggling his knees. It was like watching the 1986 movie *Aliens*. I half-expected a foreign creature to burst from his chest. At one point he tapped his own head with his palm. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me!” he said, his eyes down. “I don’t know why I think I can handle more responsibility when I keep messing up!” Apparently when I’d asked him to consider why he hadn’t completed his homework, I had stepped on a buried land mine neither one of us knew was there. I suspected that Drew’s procrastination in a little thing like homework was related to a much bigger thing that had greater ramifications for his life—fear of discovering that he feels inadequate inside, fear of failing, fear of not measuring up. Drew’s battle may be invisible and internal, but it’s just as real as Jessica’s, Sam’s, and Abby’s.

One of the greatest joys in life is the ability to experience freedom and connection with ourselves and each other. But the only path to freedom is engaging in the struggle to express what’s inside of us,

The only path to
freedom is engaging
in the struggle to
express what’s inside
of us, outside of us.

outside of us. In a rare moment of vulnerability, Drew, a successful, highly relational leader, allowed me in on the conversation in his head—the very powerful words that were keeping him from moving into his future. And though he didn’t realize it, the misalignment between his accomplishments and his self-perception affected the way he related to those closest to him as well as those who could help him advance

in his career. A similar disconnect between their inner thoughts and interactions with each other is impacting Sam’s desire to stay in his job and Abby’s ability to retain her team’s trust.

Most of us experience a one-two punch of pain when we feel overlooked or misunderstood. The first jab is a sense of being overwhelmed at our inability to communicate clearly. And then the knockout punch:

the shame we feel because we assume we should know how to navigate our relationships by now. Rather than growing in our ability to express ourselves and our needs, to honor our emotions, and to mature into the people we want to become, we shut down or lash out, resulting in even more pain. Rather than becoming more vulnerable and resilient, we decide we are essentially broken, unworthy, and incapable of being fully known and fully loved. This is a lonely place—having the gift of language but struggling mightily to use it.

I get it. Not only have I spent the last twenty years helping people find the words they need for this two-fronted battle, but I know the fluttery, clammy-hand feeling of staring down a confrontation personally. I know the agony of trying—and failing—to express what I truly mean to a loved one. I know that delicate moment of decision when I can choose to speak vulnerably in my search for a connection and risk rejection, or I can decide to land the verbal sucker punch that will make me feel clever and justified in the moment. Though 100 percent of us will have conflict, only the brave few will use it as the training ground that leads to a deeper, more meaningful life together.

These courageous souls will recognize and seize the miracle moment: the moment in a conversation when you want to shut up, give up, or blow up—and you lean in instead. It's not the moment you react to being hurt, misunderstood, or treated unfairly. It's the moment after the initial reaction, when you change course and respond differently.

MIRACLE MOMENT:

The moment in a conversation when you want to shut up, give up, or blow up—and you lean in instead. It's not the moment you react to being hurt, misunderstood, or treated unfairly. It's the moment after the initial reaction, when you change course and respond differently.

The plan is simple—but I'll warn you: Simple doesn't mean easy. Long-held patterns of thinking don't disappear overnight, and learning new skills takes time. But you can move from overwhelmed and under-prepared to confident and skilled in even the toughest conversations.

This book is divided into three parts designed to help you move inward for insight and then outward for impact. Part 1 will help you gain self-awareness as you discover how your emotions and thoughts work together, and how you can learn to recognize and respond appropriately to your emotions. We'll spend most of our time in part 2, where we will learn about self-expression. If you've ever felt woefully underprepared to handle a conflict, if you've felt like your words either don't work or work in overdrive, getting you into trouble, this section will be invaluable. We'll break down the mechanics of how to engage in a conflict, move toward reconciliation and compromise, and rebuild trust after it's been broken. Part 3 is on self-respect—making sure your actions line up with your words so you live with integrity, even in those times when you feel as if you've failed.

As we begin, I encourage you to think about a relationship that you want to improve. Take a moment to visualize what you would like to experience with that person. Do you wish your roommate understood you better? Do you long for deeper connection or intimacy in your marriage? Can you picture a constructive conversation in which you are able to be your full self and express your needs? Can you imagine deeper respect between you as you hear and learn from each other's perspectives?

Keep that visual in mind as you begin your work here so that your learning remains grounded in real life. You won't do it perfectly, but you will make progress. That's the incredible thing about being human: We are flawed, but we are never finished.