

The human dilemma.

Life is messy.

This is the human dilemma. You're not doing it wrong.

Life isn't a color-within-the-lines exercise. It's a wild and outrageous invitation full of uncertain outcomes. Sometimes it is beautifully rational, at other times it lacks all logic. What appears to be a step back today, may turn out to be the first marvelous step forward ten years from now.

The mess of life is both inevitable and unexpected. It is filled with delightful mysteries and frustrating predicaments, indescribable joy and heart-wrenching suffering.

There is no plan you can devise that will solve the mess. There is nothing you can buy, learn, or accomplish that will eliminate the mess. Finding the love of your life and the perfect career won't either. There is nothing you can start doing or stop doing that will eradicate the mess. There's nothing you can tell yourself that will make the mess magically disappear, and you cannot think your way out of it. The mess is here to stay. It's unavoidable. It's just life.

It's what we do with the mess that determines everything. You can ignore it, avoid it, deny it, blame others, shame yourself, and exhaust yourself pretending your life isn't messy. But when you wake tomorrow morning, the mess will still be there. Or you can realize that the mess serves a powerful purpose.

To discover that powerful purpose, we first need to accept that the mess is not the problem. The problem is our erroneous belief that everything should be immaculate, orderly, neat, tidy, and in its place.

Everyone has their own mess to contend with. Our tendency is to think that we are the only ones with a mess, that our mess is messier, more embarrassing, more shameful than other people's mess. It isn't so.

You don't have it have it all together. Nobody has it all together.

Acceptance is the only way to make peace with the mess. This acceptance will lead you to a profound acceptance of life, others, and self. It isn't surrender or defeat. It isn't conceding that there is nothing we can do about the mess. It's just a penetrating awareness that the meaning of life isn't to solve the mess. That's not the goal.

This radical acceptance of self, others, and life may be

the beginning of wisdom. I'm not sure we can ever truly appreciate anyone or anything until we have made peace with the mess. Are you ready to make peace with the mess?

Life is messy, but we figure things out. We laugh, we cry, we grow, and we move on to new beginnings, second chances, and amazing possibilities.

A more beautiful question.

The gateway between confusion and clarity is marked with a quintessential truth: We are wounded and broken. Acceptance of this truth allows us to make peace with the mess.

I am wounded and broken. We all are. We are self-conscious about our brokenness. We are sensitive and insecure, even embarrassed, about our woundedness. But we needn't be. We are all wounded and broken.

Why are we so surprised when we discover that another person is broken? Perhaps because we are so intent on ignoring our own brokenness. Everyone is broken, everyone is wounded, to pretend otherwise is to open ourselves to vast and ongoing deception.

But it's okay that we are broken. It's only a problem if we subscribe to the false notion that we have to try to keep everyone and everything from being broken.

I am broken. Pretending otherwise is exhausting.

But let me share with you the real problem with our brokenness. In our wasteful, consumption-addicted society, we throw broken things away. So, we don't know what to do with our broken selves. What do we do with broken people, broken relationships, broken institutions, broken families, and of course, our very own broken selves?

This is an important question, but a more beautiful question holds the answer. It is one of the most beautiful questions I have ever stumbled upon: Can something that has been broken be put back together in a way that makes it more beautiful than ever before?

This is the question that all the words on these pages cling to.

It may seem like an impossible proposition to our straight-line, everything-in-its-place, secular minds. But I marvel at how God doesn't use straight lines or right-angles in nature. We invented right-angles and straight lines to prop up our insecure humanity.

The perfection of nature is marked by crooked lines, brokenness, imperfect colors, and things that seem out of place. The perfection of creation is achieved through its imperfection. And so it is with human beings. Your imperfections are part of what make you perfectly yourself.

If we put on the mind of God, we discover one of the most beautiful truths this life has to offer: Something that has been devastatingly broken can be put back together in a way that makes it more beautiful than ever before. It is true for things, but it is even more true for people, and it is true for you. This is the source and the summit of hope.

We believe that once something is broken it can never be as beautiful as it was before. But that's not true. It's true that it cannot be exactly the same as it was before, but that doesn't mean it cannot surpass its former self. You don't look at a wonderful tree that loses some leaves and limbs in a storm, and say, "It's ruined forever." But we say that about ourselves and others.

The Japanese have a beautiful artform called Kintsugi. It is a form of ceramics, and I have been meditating on it for the past several years. In our disposable culture, if we

break a vase or a bowl, we throw it away and buy a new one. This simple act allows us to maintain the illusion that life is not messy. It plays into our delusion of perfection. But life is messy, perfect is a myth, and the wisdom of the Japanese art of Kintsugi has much to teach us.

When a vase or bowl or cup is broken, artists gather up the broken pieces and glue them back together. Though it is how they put them back together that is steeped in wisdom and beauty. They mix gold dust with the glue. They don't try to hide the cracks. They own them, honor them, even accentuate them by making them golden. They celebrate the cracks as part of their story.

This is a beautiful lesson. They don't pretend the vase was never broken. They don't pretend that life is not messy. They don't pretend they are not broken. When we pretend to be someone other than who we are, our true self hides in fear and shame; the fear of being discovered and the shame of not being enough.

The most beautiful and surprising lesson the Kintsugi artform teaches us is this: We are each other's wounded healers. *We each possess the gold dust needed to glue other people back together, making them more beautiful and loveable than ever.* Our love, connection, acceptance, generosity,

community, and kindness are that gold dust. This is astoundingly profound.

There is a vital truth here. Kintsugi ceramics are staggeringly beautiful. There is an honesty to their beauty that is missing in the artificial perfection of mass-produced items. Once repaired in this ancient method, Kintsugi pieces are more beautiful, and more loved than before they were broken.

This idea creates vast confusion and cognitive resistance for us. We don't believe that something that has been broken and repaired can be more beautiful, and more loved, than ever before. But hope depends on overcoming this false belief. Moving on from this false assumption is essential to making peace with our own brokenness and a vital ingredient in all healthy relationships.

Someone who has been broken and healed can be more beautiful, and more loved, than ever before. Embracing this truth is liberating. But it is easier to do once we realize it's okay to be broken. It's normal, in fact—part of the human condition. Once we embrace this truth, we are on the path of hope. When we reject it, we are on the road to despair.

Can someone who has been broken be healed and become more beautiful and more lovable than ever before?

This is the central question in our journey together. I am convinced the answer to the question is yes. But as you will soon discover, arriving at this conviction was no easy feat. This book is my own messy and imperfect grappling with this question. If at any point in this book you find yourself lost, confused, or disoriented, return to this question. It is the North Star we are exploring. Whatever topic we are discussing in the pages ahead, though they are vast and varied, we will never be far from this question.

Someone who has been broken and healed *can* become more beautiful and more lovable than ever before. That someone is you. My singular hope as you make your way through these pages is that you discover this to be true.

Inadequate.

These pages were born out of three years of excruciating suffering. There are no words for what I experienced. Even words dripping with meaning leave so much unsaid. But words are all I have. They are my craft. I am a wordsmith, a smithy of words, and so, I have done the best I know how.

The easiest thing would have been not to write about this period of my life. I was tempted to set aside the journals that much of this content was drawn from and never revisit them. But they kept calling to me, so it is my hope that this whole mess will serve you in some way that is unknowable to me.

Writing makes me feel inadequate. It's one of those things that you never quite get right. I know I can never get down on paper what I see with the eyes of my soul. And still, I try. It is a most glorious frustration. Most days I feel like a dedicated but clumsy translator, trying desperately to translate what I experience, feel, hope, and observe. There are times when I feel like I am so close, only to wake up the next morning, read yesterday's pages, and discover I am still so far away. If you have ever felt inadequate, unequal to the task at hand, deficient in any way, then you know how I feel—and I thank you for your grace and understanding.

Still, it's the possibilities that draw me forward. The possibility of love, community, greater meaning, connection with others, all the firsts and lasts of life, old friends and new adventures. And the possibility that I might write something that stirs your soul.

This isn't like other books I have written. It's messy. I haven't tried to smooth out the rough edges. It doesn't start and end neatly. There are no chapters or parts. Each section is unto itself. I wrote them for myself, at different times in different places, never expecting that anyone else would read them. You will be able to tell which parts were written during my times of trauma, which were written to help me move forward, and which are reflecting on those times in my life. I have made no effort to hide that. Though I have tried to organize them loosely into a journey for you, and I have adjusted the original journal language in most parts to address the reader. Some of the transitions from one section to the next are rough. In my journals, those rough transitions wake me up and force me to pay attention when I re-read them, so I have decided to keep them.

Leonardo da Vinci observed, "Art is never finished, only abandoned." And so, I abandon this book to you now, hoping that somehow, imperfect and inadequate as it is, it will speak to you wherever you are in your journey and open your heart to undiscovered possibilities . . .

The worst year of my life.

Everything was fine until everything wasn't.

We are never ready for the storms of life. They rarely announce themselves. These storms come at unexpected times and in unexpected forms. They come in all shapes and sizes, and teach us that life is unpredictable and messy. You can search for shelter from the storm, but sometimes there is none to be found, and you find yourself completely exposed. Some of life's storms are mild enough that you can make the best of them and dance in the rain. But others are so violent that they knock the wind out of you, leaving you gasping for air and questioning everything.

Between Thanksgiving and Christmas each year I work through a series of exercises that help me reflect on the year that has been and plan for the year to come. The process has evolved over the past thirty years, but I have always begun with this question: Has this been the best year of my life so far?

For decades I had an extraordinary run—magical, really. One year had been better than the other, and the next year better than that. The answer to the question year after year was a resounding YES! Until a few years

ago, when the answer was NO! I didn't have to think about it. It was clear. It wasn't even close. The answer was unequivocally no. This was uncharted territory. It was the first time in my life this had happened. It wasn't just that the past year had failed to outshine the year prior. It had been the worst year of my life.

I reflected upon it. Analyzed my part in it. Considered the roles other people had played. Hoped it was an anomaly. Optimistically explored how I could overcome this *slump* and made plans to turn it around. *It being my life.*

This didn't work. The following year was worse again. The slump continued, deepened, and I set another record for the worst year of my life. I was headed in the wrong direction and I was afraid. When something happens once, it's an event. When something happens twice, it becomes a pattern.

Disappointed but not broken, I retrieved some lingering hope from the depths of my being, bandaged up my battered ego, and put together a new plan to restore the trajectory of my life.

That didn't work either. Actually, it's not that it didn't work, but that all hell broke loose in my life. Literally. In that third year I saw the worst of many people. In just

twelve short months, I was deceived and betrayed by so many people, in so many ways, that I became at times stunned, enraged, disoriented, and depressed.

Betrayal awakens you with such a jolt. It electrifies you in such a way that you are not sure you will ever fall asleep again. And yet, all you want to do is sleep. You hope you will wake and discover it was all just a dream. But you can't sleep. And it is not a dream. This nightmare is your life now.

The dark side of humanity came to visit me, not in one situation, but in a series of plagues. Some I brought upon myself and others were inflicted upon me. Some I have come to understand and some I may never. Some I have recovered from and others have me lying awake some nights wondering if I ever will.

For better and for worse, they have shaped the man I am today. I would like to say that I allowed each of these experiences to make me a better person, but I cannot, and I refuse to pretend. It's just too exhausting.

Some of the experiences leave me sad, others leave me disappointed and heartbroken, there are some that make me hungry for revenge, some just leave me a little jaded, and I have allowed others to make me more cynical than

I would like. It was a season of tragedy and betrayal in my life, and I will never be the same. The most difficult of these experiences have left me deeply wounded—so wounded, that some days, I stare at my scars in disbelief, and I wonder how wounds so brutal didn't kill me.

What did I do wrong?

This was the question I kept asking myself: What did I do wrong? It's sick, but I think I wanted to blame myself. I ruminated on this question for weeks and months, and ruminating on the ways you have been wronged is unhealthy. Still, I kept pondering the question, over and over again. But there are no answers to some questions. At least no answers that will satisfy us. One question answered gives birth to five more questions.

One of life's enduring mysteries is that you don't have to do anything wrong for your life to go horribly wrong. When we are abused, rejected, hurt, betrayed, or manipulated, we search our hearts and minds, wondering what we did wrong. Maybe you did things to open or close doors, but it is not your fault.

People make choices and they hurt us, but it's not our fault. Don't take it personally. I know it sounds ridiculous, but it's profoundly true. When a man breaks up with a woman and says, "It's not you, it's me," unconsciously he's being outrageously honest. The drunk who says, "I wasn't thinking" isn't lying. She wasn't thinking about her husband and children. The man who cheats on his wife and says he didn't think about how it would affect his wife and children isn't lying. When we get in these self-destructive places, we are so self-absorbed that we don't think of anyone or anything else. That's why they call it selfishness.

Unexpected.

Life didn't turn out the way I expected. In some ways it has exceeded my expectations, and in other ways it has disappointed them. Never in my wildest dreams as a child would I have imagined the life I have lived. The adventures, experiences, and opportunities, the love I have given and received, and the success I have enjoyed have all far exceeded my expectations. But I also never

imagined in my worst nightmares the dark side of these bright lights.

We all end up living unexpected lives.

There are hopes and dreams that didn't materialize that I grieve, but I have been surprised and delighted by other unexpected gifts. And there are hopes and dreams that I am glad did not come to fruition. The unexpected goes both ways.

But these are not the things that make life most unexpected. It's the truly unexpected things, those we don't hope for or fear—particularly those that come out of nowhere and break our hearts. You wake up one morning and discover that your life has been changed forever, because of something you did or something someone else did. It's the things we don't plan, the things we never imagined would happen. It's those unexpected events that slap you so hard in the face that you can taste blood in your mouth.

Nobody's life turns out the way they expect it to. We shouldn't be surprised. Nobody looks back on life to discover it unfolded exactly as they hoped or planned, but I found myself particularly unprepared for the inevitability of the unexpected. That's the paradox: It is inevitable that we live unexpected lives.

Life doesn't unfold according to our plans. But sooner or later, we each have to decide how we are going to make the most of our one, brief, unexpected life. It is then that we come face-to-face with two enduring truths: We cannot live without hope that things will change for the better, and we are not victims of our circumstances.

Hope is not always as accessible as we would like. It often seems just out of reach at those times when we are most in need of it, when our hearts are broken, our minds downtrodden, and our souls crushed. Yet, even in those moments, we have a choice. The unexpected is either a curse or an opportunity. We get to decide.

When your reality becomes a nightmare.

Sometimes life just hurts. I knew I was in a dark place when my thoughts during the day were as disquieting as the nightmares I was having at night. What's the point of waking from a nightmare when what you wake to is the reality of the nightmare?

There were mornings I would wake to a moment of

relief. I would think, *It's okay, it was just a bad dream*. But then my hope would be demolished as I wiped the sleep from my eyes and realized it wasn't just a dream. This was my life now. I didn't know if sleep was my friend or my enemy. Sometimes it was hard to know where the nightmare ended and reality began.

Pain, trauma, and grief distort time. I would tell myself, "This is not a dream. It's not even a nightmare. This is my life." But that wasn't true. I would say to myself, "No. This is your life *right now*." And just adding those two words—*right now*—changes everything. It may be your life right now, but that doesn't mean it will be your life forever.

Still, you relive things in your mind. And reliving them re-traumatizes you. But you can't help yourself. You wonder if you could go back—which of course you can't—but if by some magic or miracle you could have a mulligan in this one situation, would you have done it differently. You mull it over in your mind, consider a thousand ways that it could have gone differently, and still, you are where you are. That's the thing about the scariest carnival rides—you end up where you started. But that's no way to live. Reliving these things over and over again in your mind.