

**FUNCTIONAL
DYSFUNCTION**

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From Sour Grapes to Fine Wine

Dr. C. Errol Ball



Functional Dysfunction: From Sour Grapes to Fine Wine

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Acknowledgments

Writing this book has prompted me to explore my personal history in ways I never would have thought possible. While this work was both painful and therapeutic (even cathartic at times), it could not have been accomplished without the support of others.

From ages eleven to fourteen, I was fortunate to befriend a life-long companion in Rob Marquis when I lived in Maine. As I reflected on some of my pleasant memories on the sandlot or the baseball diamond, there was always the catcher, Rob, who went on to play collegiately. Rob remembers my Little League record of striking out seventeen batters in one game. He also recalls the backyard pickup baseball games, and the time when my brother hit the baseball so far that it went over the roof of an apartment complex across the street. Thank you, Rob, for sharing these fond memories with me, and for encouraging me to “put them on paper.”

I also want to thank my children. I am grateful that they knew very little of what I was going through emotionally and psychologically while raising them during my years

of medical school and residency. In the face of all my challenges, they have always remained my guiding purpose. They were easy children to raise; they didn't add to the stressors of residency and single parenting. And although they each had their own emotional life adjustments along the way, they never acted out or rebelled. They were the wind beneath my wings. Thank you, Brandi and Aaron. I love you. God has since blessed me with another child. You both have been great examples to your little sister, Grace. She is just as easy to raise because you have set such excellent examples for behavior and obedience.

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Lastly, I want to thank my Lord for his amazing grace and mercy. And sometimes in life, that's all you need to proceed with living.

Introduction

Life can be a bumpy ride, and for some of us, our greatest challenges can present themselves as early as childhood and in the worst of ways. How we deal with those early challenges is often what will shape our world and how we see it. This can either make our path crystal clear, or blurry and obscured, as we travel the road along life's journey.

As a physician and a minister, I bear witness to both the joys and the sorrows of my patients and congregants. I see the world as an interplay of body, mind, and spirit. And at the intersection of these two pieces of my life, I have come to find that every experience—whether painful or pleasant—offers an opportunity for growth, a chance to turn our sour grapes into a fine wine.

My early life, as you will come to find, began with a hefty helping of sour grapes. Now, years later, I feel as though the path I am on (albeit quite mundane) is my destiny. As I looked back on the road I have traveled thus far, I began to ponder from whence I came. And, in doing so, I realized that many others have likely shared similar

challenges and may benefit from hearing my story and the lessons I've learned along the way.

Some of my childhood memories are too painful to process, while others are all too vivid and I have vowed to take those "family secrets" to my grave. Yet they each live in my mind and soul, and they affect how I see the world and how I relate to people. I experienced firsthand how emotional trauma can affect every aspect of one's life. Never hearing the words "I love you" left an indelible mark on me. I knew that no child should ever have to yearn and beg to be loved. No child should have to wonder if they are loved. No child should have to somehow wrap their mind and heart around why they were molested for years in silence, as I did. I endured all of this, and more, and if I had ended up strung out on some numbing drugs—be it alcohol or some other form of chemical dependence—perhaps no one would have faulted me, and maybe they would have even shown a semblance of love, more clearly identified as pity. Thankfully, this was not the path I took.

It wasn't until adulthood that these and other wounds fully came to bear, presenting me with the choice to either deal with them or allow them to deal with me. As the years went by, I began to see the effects of my scars, and more specifically, the buried, painful, unresolved secret wounds of my soul and how they were robbing me of the coolness and levelheadedness that had once earned me the name of "Captain Cool" in junior high school.

Yes, the years have flown by. Titles have been added to my name: husband, father, minister, Bible teacher, medical student, and physician. This journey would not have taken place, and I would have remained in an emotional and psychological barren land had I not recognized that there is pain in change, and there is pain in staying the same. I chose the one that would move me forward.

This has been a bittersweet journey, one that has forced me to dig deep into my past and let those wounds bleed again so that I could heal. In this life, our childhood stories are not isolated. We sometimes paint a prettier picture of how things were to help us cope. This mindset then carries over into other areas of our life, be it staying in an abusive relationship, staying at a job that attacks your self-worth, or continuing with friendships that aren't healthy. But in our dysfunctional thoughts, we think these choices are better than being alone. So, being a doormat becomes the alternative. But why? Because our self-esteem is so damaged by our upbringing (or lack thereof) that we don't feel worthy of having it any better than we have it now? That wasn't my stance. I grabbed the bull by the horns, so to speak, and I took control of my life. I was determined to no longer allow things that go bump in the night of my consciousness to paralyze me from seeking the abundant life I desired. In time, it all came to fruition and I now have a deep sense of accomplishment and purpose. I have developed a life of fulfillment, self-valuation, and actualization in spite of it all. If this was within my reach,

it is within your reach as well. But you have to go get it. It will not be handed to you.

The time is now. No longer will you settle for a mediocre version of yourself. You have much more to offer, and the path is yours to create. No one but yourself can know the physical, emotional, and psychological obstacles that lie before you. To be the best version of yourself, you must break free from the vines of emotional and psychological poison that keep you thinking, *My parents ate the sour grapes so now my teeth are set on edge*. Instead, you must transform those sour grapes into a fine wine of wisdom, grace, and hope for a better future. For me, part of that journey involved gaining a better understanding of my parents and accepting that they did the best they could with what they had to work with. They did their best, being damaged goods themselves, just as we all have fallen short of that elusive “perfect” upbringing.

It is never too late to create a version 2.0 of yourself. But you must be willing to confront the skeletons in your closet and give them a proper and decent burial. Then move on and move forward, with proper closure for yourself and for others, so that you can take a leap of faith into a newness of life never before experienced. And that starts *now*.

Home: A Safe Haven for Survival

Every child wants their home to be a place of refuge and safety, a place of nurturing, where one's personality can blossom, flourish, and thrive. My home was not a safe haven. When I was faced with this reality in my childhood, it fractured my idea of what I had wanted "home" to be, and I was forced to adjust. I knew early on that rebellion would not be a viable option. By instilling fear at a young age, my father had kept me from engaging in any behaviors that would have brought on severe consequences. So, my only options were to comply, conform, and adapt. Yet I continued to hold on to that ideal of a "safe haven," as though it were a life preserver that could carry me through each day unscathed and intact.

We have all heard sayings like, "Home is where the heart is;" "There is no place like home;" "Charity begins at home;" and "Home sweet home," just to name a few. To my young, curious, and bright-eyed self, these idioms held great promise, and I soaked them all in. Come hell or high water, those phrases were going to fit into my

delicate mind, regardless of what my home life actually looked like.

At first glance, it might have appeared as though I had the ideal two-parent home. I was the youngest of four children. GiGi, the oldest, was six years my senior; Rob was four years older than me; and Ann was just eighteen months older. Rob and I were close, and over the years he became my mentor. We both loved sports. He was much taller and bigger, and he made it a priority to make sure I played with boys his age. He invested his time in helping me to be better.

I was cutely innocent, with a curly Afro and big brown eyes, and I was at the lower percentile for height and weight for my age. My ears missed nothing, without ever having to actively eavesdrop. Nor did my eyes, for that matter. Everything resonated with me. I was sensitive and keenly in tune with my surroundings. I felt blessed and fortunate to be able to call the names “Mama” and “Daddy,” and to rattle off the names of my siblings. I felt lucky to be the youngest and to have the older ones as my protectors, pacesetters, teachers, and buffers against anything that could harm me. I felt secure. But this was the mindset of a four-year-old. Eventually, even as things showed themselves to be less than ideal, for my own survival, I continued to see things as no other way but perfect.

In our house, everyone followed the rules. We all ate together for dinner. Everyone had assigned chores, and the beds had to be made with the appropriate angle shown

after the sheets were tucked. Early in his life, Daddy had worked in the military. He was a Vietnam vet from Alabama, who had served multiple tours in the Air Force so that his younger brothers would not have to go to war. Later on, he brought that same level of military discipline and rigidity as he ruled the castle at home. Mama initially stayed at home with us kids, but she began working once I entered first grade. Even still, she made sure to have hot cereal on the table for all four of us before we started our day. Either oatmeal or Cream of Wheat were prepared, and sometimes we were blessed with some sausage and grits. She often ironed our school clothes with crisp creases, and she always prided herself in saying, “I don’t want you all out here looking thrown away and making me look bad.” So, we were sure to never be seen at school with wrinkled or dirty clothes on our bodies when we were younger. On Sundays, we didn’t go to church or worship, but we had to come to dinner clean and decently dressed on that day. Later on, my siblings and I were sent to church while our parents stayed in bed.

When these rules were not followed, my parent’s preferred method of discipline was not to sit us down and explain what we did wrong and how we would need to correct that behavior. Instead, it was, “Get me that belt.” That was the first option, the second option, and the only option. This was not uncommon in my household, or in houses where the members looked like me and shared the same cultural similarities. It was an embedded method of

discipline that had been passed on from American slavery and was prevalent in the Black community, especially in the South. Unfortunately, centuries of African Americans living in slavery had ingrained these lasting behaviors. While slavery was abolished and we were now able to move out of the plantations, for many, the plantation didn't move out of us. If you got out of line, you got many lashes that were so intense, others would fear the pain, and with guilty conscience, were just glad it wasn't them. This was the case in our household. These beatings came about so frequently that I often wore long pants and sleeves in the hot and humid Carolina summers just to hide the shameful array of welts along my legs and arms. And the bruises on my arms? Well, I was told those were my fault because I should not have been trying to instinctively block the painful lashings.

Sometimes the beatings were doubled if we were thought to have been lying. One Sunday, I got a beating after church because I hadn't made my bed before leaving the house.

My father asked, "Why didn't you make up your bed?"

In shame of disappointing him, I dropped my head and shrugged my shoulders as I lied, "I forgot."

So, Daddy said, "Well, bring me that belt so that I can help you remember."

This happened for two more Sundays before GiGi stood up for me. She rolled her eyes at Daddy and said to me, "Just tell him you didn't have time."

So, seeing that as a lifeline, I took it and said, “Daddy, I didn’t have time.”

He smirked and said, “Well, okay then, next Saturday you are going to bed when the sun goes down so you can get up in time on Sunday to make your bed before going to church.”

GiGi was my hero. She was my half-sister as she was a product of a high school student’s curiosity with sex. But by the time she was two years old, our mother had married, and Daddy had adopted her, and we all had the same last name. As far as I was concerned, she was 100 percent my sister on that day because she had saved me from an ass whooping. She must also have had superpowers because she had rolled her eyes at Daddy and didn’t get in trouble. It was as if there was some sort of special relationship between the two of them, one that didn’t seem to follow a typical parent-child dynamic, but some other dynamic. It seemed as if it was her place to speak to him as though she were his equal. I would never have dared to roll my eyes at my father because I knew the consequences. At the time, I had assumed there must be some sort of sibling hierarchy in place where as you got older, you got more leeway. This did not turn out to be the case, as I would eventually find out.

Even as a child, I was keenly aware that there would be no room for error when it came to my father’s strict standards. One of my regular chores was to pick up the dog poop in the backyard. One time, as my work was

being surveyed by Daddy, he noticed a small pile that I had overlooked in the tall grass.

In hopes of avoiding punishment, I said, “The dog must have just pooped because I got it all up, Daddy.”

He fired back, saying, “You didn’t get it all up because that shit is old, it’s not fresh!”

I knew I was in trouble then. First for not doing a good job, and second for lying to him. I paid the price for missing the mark. In my mind, the consequence was fair; it was my fault and I deserved it. My home was an orderly machine, and everyone seemed to be treated the same. That taught me that when doing a job, I must do it right the first time or suffer the consequences.

I wasn’t the only one who lived in fear of these punishments; there was no partiality among my siblings. One time, Rob was with his friends at the nearby pool. In those days, the thing to do while playing with the girls was to swim underwater, sneak up behind them, and attempt to pull down their bikini bottom or untie their top. Rob had to have been in about sixth grade at that time. They were laughing and playing, chasing each other around the pool. All of this seemed commonplace as Rob’s white friends continued their antics, but when Rob joined in, it was no longer funny or appreciated by the cute, white, brash South Carolina girls. One of the girls got out of the pool and reported him. It got back to our father, and when my brother arrived home, he was beaten for nearly an hour until, by the grace of God, the phone rang. When

Daddy left the room to answer the phone, I went to my brother to offer whatever condolences I could. Rob had cried and screamed so loudly that he had lost his voice. The phone call lasted about five minutes, and when it ended, I distanced myself for fear that I would be next for trying to support a sibling who was being punished. Rob thought it was over, until he heard what sounded like the voice of God saying, “Robert! Where are you? I am not finished with you!”

The weeping and gnashing of teeth from the belt bruising his skin continued for what seemed like an eternity. Just as it seemed to finally be over, Rob found the strength within to say, “Daddy, you have beat me enough.”

Now, why in the world did he say that?! I went to bed that night with the pillow pressed tightly over my head as I winced from every strike that echoed from the belt. Rob’s remark had only brought about a second round of ass-whooping fury because our father had viewed his son’s cry for mercy as an attempt at talking back. The lesson of that night: Don’t talk back.

Throughout my childhood, I felt grateful to have my siblings to turn to, and I continued to hold tight to what glimmers of light I could find. In my young mind, I would tell myself, *This is a great home. I have two parents, a big brother, and two older sisters.* In truth, my siblings and I were a tight-knit group. We shared fun times, we enjoyed playing cards together, and we bonded on our walks to church each Sunday. We vented to each other

when needed, as well. We supported one another in secret during post-punishment shame and humiliation.

We would frequently find refuge in one of our rooms, where we could create a fantasy world of fun and laughter. But even this safe space became increasingly awkward for me as I learned that I didn't have a right to my own body. The inappropriate touching inflicted upon me by my big sister seemed to be done with impunity. GiGi even encouraged the others to play along sometimes. The wrong was done so often that it became right. I no longer looked forward to our sibling gatherings because I came to fear what would happen to me, and I wondered how I would ever be rescued, protected, or buffered from the shame. Occasionally, the door would open and Mama would poke her head in with what I hoped would be a maternal instinct that one of her cubs was in danger. But it was always just a blind peek to say, "What are you all doing," only for GiGi to quickly speak up to say, "Nothing."

The closing of the door resonated deep within me as the realization set in that there would be no rest for the weary for yet another day. It was like carving "SOS" on the sandy shores of a deserted island, only to see the plane fly overhead without ever noticing your call for help. Whatever excitement and hope I had felt at the thought of being saved was short-lived. I had hoped that one of those times my mother would call my name so that I could answer and potentially escape, but it was as

if I were invisible and had no voice. So, I laid in silence until it was over.

This was my home. Some people don't even have a home. It was my safe haven. This was drilled into my head often by Mama as she would say, "You have a roof over your head, food to eat, and clothes on your back, and that's plenty because a lot of kids don't have that. So be thankful!" So, in everything, I was thankful. I had to be, in order to survive.

Things That Go Bump in the Night

My childhood wounds of emotional and physical abuse—including molestation—were far-reaching. The older I got, the more apparent this reality became as it affected every area of my life and my relationships. As I entered my teen years, intimacy became something I desired, yet it was also where I felt most awkward. Boundaries were unclear; I was never sure what was appropriate and what wasn't. So, I played it safe, and I made sure to do nothing that would offend, encroach upon a no-trespass zone, or make a girl feel uncomfortable. More times than not, girls eventually lost interest and I was accused of moving things too slowly or not being engaged. I desired intimacy, I really did. It was the closest thing to feeling loved that I had experienced in my whole life until that point, and I longed for that connection. So, I continued to pursue intimacy over the years, albeit passively.

Having the age of innocence prematurely taken from you is one of the greatest atrocities one can experience. In

fact, many psychiatric illnesses and personality disorders have at their core some form of sexual abuse during the delicate years when a child is completely vulnerable, completely dependent, and completely trusting of those who are supposed to care for them, protect them, and nurture them. Sexual abuse also leaves its mark on one's soul, and many who once believed in a higher power have since shipwrecked their faith on the icebergs of unresolved wounds from their childhood. As children, we placed our unwavering trust and faith in our God-given caregivers, and many of us remained unapologetically loyal in spite of ill treatment, only to see the ramifications of that abuse when we tried to have fulfilling relationships later in life.

For me, the bunk bed was my place of trauma at every level. GiGi would tuck a bedspread or a sheet on the top bunk and let it drape over to cover the bottom bunk. From the ages of four to eight, this was my frequent place of molestation masqueraded as playing house. No words were said; there was only a strong hand, wrapped firmly around my wrist as we walked to my place of torment. I would be aggressively thrown across the bed as GiGi quickly snatched off my clothes or just demanded that I take them off. She would then get on top of me and commence with grinding and gyrating her body against mine. As I just laid there, her intensity would increase with moans and moments of repositioning my prepubescent body to her own satisfaction. The panting would increase as her musty body glistened with perspiration. When she was finally

finished and had her moment, she would just get up and walk away.

As the months and years went by, I became shell shocked, like a war veteran who has heard one bomb explosion too many. After the trauma of war, any sudden loud noise can take that soldier back to an experience he would rather forget. We now call this PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder. So it was with me. Undoubtedly, I had PTSD, although we didn't know it by that name back then. The sounds of a door closing, voices down the hall, or any bump in the night would put me in a place of hopelessness and despair. I was a mess. Again, my survival skills mounted as I learned to layer my clothing and wore jeans to bed. To me, an ass whooping for not getting into my pajamas was the lesser of two evils, so I took my chances of getting caught sleeping with my school clothes on. As I got older, I noticed that GiGi slept in her jeans as well.

I discovered later that people who have been hurt often turn to hurting other people; the victim often becomes the victimizer. As I observed GiGi and my father over the years, I noticed things that were puzzling to my young, observant eye. GiGi must have been about sixteen years old at the time, and she was quite the athlete. She was slender, lean, and topped out at 5 feet ten inches tall. She ran track, and played basketball and softball, too. (She eventually received a collegiate scholarship for her athletic abilities.) One day, GiGi was at home after her track practice and she was wearing very snug shorts. She was

complaining of her thighs and hamstrings feeling sore. She then was asked to lay across Daddy's lap. Since I was often invisible at home, I watched intently and silently wondered why everyone else was fixated on the TV show. GiGi laid on her stomach, with her hips across Daddy's lap, as he massaged her hamstrings and inner thighs. I cringed because I knew something didn't feel right about this kind of touching. I felt a reflexive sense of wrongness as I knew firsthand what right and wrong touching looked and felt like. Yet no one looked their way, only me. This went on for fifteen to twenty minutes in apparent normalcy as my mother was at work and would not be home until after nine pm. Knowing now that GiGi was a victim of abuse, this insight sheds some light on my own abuse at her hands. Perhaps her trauma then became the catalyst for the pain she ultimately inflicted upon me.

As GiGi got older, she eventually lost interest in me as she moved on to her own boyfriends, and then girlfriends. During high school, I was popular in sports; I was thin but athletically built. I was cute and shy, and I always had girls crushing on me. I was a good baseball player, and in Little League when I lived in Maine, I once pitched a no-hitter. The games were six innings long. I had already struck out seventeen batters and the final out was a line drive back to me, which I caught without hesitation. To date, my old buddy, Rob Marquis, tells me that this is still a record that has yet to be beaten. (My brother also left memories there. He once hit a ball so far that it went over the roof

of an apartment complex and sailed across the street. No one ever found that ball.)

By the time I was in ninth grade, I was often egged on by my friends with taunts like, “Man, she is crazy about you, I would hit that if I were you.” Other times, they would just say, “Man, I know you tapped that.” As I entered high school, a girl in an older class had let it be known through my sister, Ann, that she wanted to be my girlfriend. When it had first gotten back to me, I had liked the feeling of being wanted, but I took it no further. The upper classmen often worked in the school’s office, and one day she showed up at my class with a pass to check me out of school. She took my hand and said, “Come on, we are leaving.” This seemed all too familiar, and I began to feel a bit frightened, but I had to protect my reputation of being cool, so I never let her see me sweat.

We arrived at a house close to the school. She told me that a friend was allowing us to use the house since no one was home. (I was about fifteen years old at the time, and she may have been eighteen years old.) She immediately went into the nearest bedroom and took off her clothes. I followed her into the room and did the same. I scooted under the sheets and just laid there with her, nude. She leaned over and kissed my neck, then my lips a few times, but I had already assumed the position and remained supine. After about forty-five minutes of this, she angrily got up, put on her clothes, and said, “Get dressed and let’s go!”

When we arrived back at the school, it was time for basketball practice. Some of my teammates saw who I had walked in with, and they began to give me high fives and told me, "If you didn't hit that, then something is really wrong with you." By the end of practice, somehow word got out that nothing had happened, and I was labeled as either gay, or as they were inclined to say, "Captain is scared of the pussy."

I never defended myself because, quite frankly, I didn't know what to say. I couldn't say that I didn't want to have sex until I was married. It sounded righteous, but it wasn't true. Nor could I say she wasn't attractive, because that wasn't true either. She was gorgeous! Nor could I say I didn't want to, because I actually did, but that level of intimacy was stress-inducing and repulsive to me at the time. In my heart, I was still a virgin, although literally I was not, because that had been taken from me. A part of me had wanted to be with that girl, but in that moment, having my hand grabbed and being walked out of the school and brought to a strange house and a strange bed, I was transported back to my bunk bed trauma all over again.

Even years later, I continued to do what I had done that day; I just laid there. I began to wonder if I could ever have a normal relationship. Throughout high school, I still had those attacks of panic if my bedroom door was opened unexpectedly. These instances would bring about moments of regression, and I would find myself again sleeping with

my school clothes on. All it would take during a peaceful night of sleep was to be startled by the slow squeaking of the door opening. My older mind would reason that the door had creaked because of the night breeze coming in from the open window. This made logical sense, yet it would be days before I would feel comfortable again to sleep without pants. I often prayed to be able to just go to sleep and not be frightened by the things that go bump in the night, be it the wind making the door move or just a parent peeking in on me and then shutting the door.

These moments of insomnia and sleeping with my clothes on were not acceptable. I knew it was weird, but I wasn't sure how to fix it. I had come to the realization that I was seriously damaged goods. I made it my mission to have a girlfriend because I still desperately wanted to feel loved, but for some reason I picked girls who were no good to me or for me. I knew they each had their own issues that they took out on me, but the pain of being alone felt worse than being ridiculed, mistreated, or laughed at. I mistakenly believed I could fix it all and make the relationship more functional. I didn't realize at the time that this was a failed attempt to fix myself and my own damaged childhood by finding relationship "projects" to work on while I subconsciously worked on myself.

My world lens had been tainted and obscured by my unresolved trauma, and I eventually grew tired of being in dysfunctional relationships. So, I decided to be done with girls for awhile. I prayed on it, and I resolved that since

I considered myself to be a virgin, I didn't want to even entertain the thought of a relationship with a girl unless she was a virgin, too. That way, we can both explore the idea of intimacy in our own time and at our own pace. This seemed to be a noble prayer coming from a seventeen-year-old. However, I got more than what I bargained for. At the time, I didn't realize that if I verbalized this prerequisite, if a young lady wanted me badly enough all she would have to do is say she was a virgin, and to me, it would be an answered prayer.