

Standing Up When

LIFE

FALLS DOWN

Around You

Elizabeth B. Brown



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Some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

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To my BELOVED

Our cherished children

Kim, Paul III, LeeAnne, and Brad

And our grandchildren

Lauren, Ashley, Paul IV, Michael, Kaylee, and Mara Kathryn

*When I sit on the porch talking to God about my life, I am
going to thank Him for you.*

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There is no way for our family to express enough gratitude to those who have been our guides and support as we traveled through travail. Our family—close, extended, and friends broadly spread—each of you has made a significant difference in our lives. The best and most wonderful things of life cannot be seen or even touched. They are felt by the heart. Thank you!

Prologue

I write this book with aching sadness yet also with sure knowledge that doing so is a blessing. I want to share how we found our way to joy after a loss that knocked us to the ground, because someone, somewhere, doesn't feel he or she can. I am happy to tell you of the gift of faith and the blessing of caring family and friends. But, more than anything, I want to arm you with the tools that make recovery and recalibration possible. There are choices to be made in difficult times that will fill you with gratitude for life or allow you to sink further into despair.

Life has its incredible days; it also has days when it is hard to stop the flow of tears. Just keep pressing forward. A deep peace and an abiding joy can fill your spirit even in such times. Hold tight to the idiom that every day may not be good but there is something good in every day. See yourself as on a venture to find ways to overcome the hurt, not forget the past. There are ways to live with whatever has happened without hopelessness.

You may feel the world is over, just like a caterpillar locked in its cocoon. Cocoons are dark and frightening. Breaking free takes time and effort. The good news is that as a caterpillar breaks free

it becomes a butterfly. It transforms from crawling in the muck to flying in the sky. So can you! I know such metamorphosis is possible.

We are programmed to work best by following the instructions of the designer. The body rights itself, the emotions balance, and with each problem overcome we become stronger and more able. Be aware that you are in a war. Battles to prevail over emotions that beg you to wallow, wail, long, and rage are hard fought. Giving up is easier—but it is not better.

This book is not filled with religious clichés or pious laws. It is about trusting God as you wonder *why*. It is about making critical choices to live victoriously instead of merely surviving. Joy comes as you choose gratitude when instead you want to despair; you must find good in the present to break the chains that bind you to the past.

Wisdom embeds. Your walk and faith become simple. You trust God's care even as you understand your choices, not a magic eraser, will wash away the anguish. Come with me as we discuss the anchors and lifelines that steady your rocking boat in life's storms.

Hang in there, friend. You are on a journey that has the power to make your life rich and deepen your appreciation for the moment. Everyone wants happiness; nobody wants pain. But you can't find the rainbows without the rain. I pray you may find hope and appreciation for your journey in *Standing Up When Life Falls Down Around You*.

Joy is a choice. It can be *your* choice. The more you sing in the rain, the less disheartening the storm.

Come. Let us share together. Time is too precious to be squandered on anguish.

Standing Up

What happens to you is not as important as your response to it.

- **ANCHOR:** I learn what to expect and grab the lifelines that are anchors in the storm.

Hello, friend. I am sitting here this morning with you on my mind, wishing I could wave a wand and help you put your life back together. I'm trying to do the same with mine. Sadly, you know as well as I do that nothing can magically erase loss, injustice, unfairness, hurt, and guilt. Life must be processed, in and out, for the heart to fill with hope. This process requires intentional effort to let go of the past to find joy in the present. This is a tall order when it seems easier to give up than to stand up.

I don't know your specifics. That isn't necessary. But I do know you picked up this book because you or someone you care about is in pain; life has fallen down around you. The fallout feels heavier

than you can lift and bigger than you are; your emotions are chaotic and out of control. You are knocked to the ground and recovery seems impossible. You simply aren't sure you can get back up. *Where is the hope?*

This book may help! At the very least it may arm you for future challenges, but I suspect you may be trying to navigate through a crisis now. Like me, you are probably not coping with a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps problem. This is an it's-all-over, it's-not-going-to-change, it's-ended issue or, perhaps worse, you have to live with the ongoing problem. Recovery seems daunting. Do you have the strength?

Who could understand what you feel? Who could describe the shock when you were hit out of the blue, believing all was well and then—wham! Perhaps you saw the inevitable demolition about to happen. Who would appreciate your dauntless efforts to prevent the calamity? What if, most devastating of all, you recognized the crisis gathering and prayed fervently that the collapse or injustice would not happen? Yet it did!

What do you do when what has happened cannot be reversed; when health is irreparable; when a mistake, decision, or action cannot be revoked? I've been there. Like you, I wondered *why* and wished I could turn back the clock. But now I am facing another catastrophe and this time I am armed. I first learned to travel through the rodeo of grief and its gruesome emotions by grabbing lifelines to pull myself from the devastating cocoon of longing for my daughter LeeAnne. She died from a viral encephalitis one week before her seventh birthday.

Anguish after Lee's death consumed my joy for six years. That was twenty years ago. I trusted that her death was within a greater life design, but I longed for her presence. It's not that I didn't face reality. It was not that I didn't trust God's care for our child. It was simply that time did not erase the pain of longing. During that period I spoke in conferences with thousands of families in grief,

physicians, and caregivers who sought ways to recover from their personal tsunami or help others do so. I returned from each session in deeper despair as I shouldered their burden as well.

We all journey through many challenges in life. Most we handle with grace or resign ourselves to the reality after much mumbling and whining. But the truly devastating crises of life can encapsulate us for a lifetime unless we choose to let go of what is no more. Through helping so many with their struggles, I saw played out in real lives the anchors that help some stand, while others merely wrapped themselves in victimhood, even those with deep faith.

It was in writing *The Joy Choice* that I realized the length of time I rummaged in grief was a choice—my choice. I determined to choose joy. I chose to see what I had, not what was gone. I grabbed the lifelines shared in Scripture and played out in the lives of those who remained unbroken in spite of personal disaster. That doesn't mean I quit missing my daughter, especially when memories would cavort. Instead, I learned to turn missing LeeAnne into times I relished the memories. I know you are seeking the same.

Truly, knowing what to expect and how to survive deep hurt is a gift, for life is quiet only in moments. There are critical choices necessary in the midst of the horrid times in life. We must be wise, because while some choices make our situation better, others make regaining balance and finding hope more difficult.

Life doesn't remain quiet for long. We began another epic journey when Kim, our first child, began a valiant three-year struggle with leukemia in 2010. I refused to believe she would die. This was merely another life challenge. Kim had four children; she would certainly fight and win her battle with the disease. And she did fight—but she lost. She died on my birthday (more than sad!) and we were again thrown into a devastating tsunami. I knew I could choose to rail against the loss or be grateful for the time I had shared my precious daughter Kim's life. I assure you the anguish

wanted to consume our beings, but as a family we chose to turn away the negative to dwell instead on the gift of her time in our lives.

Losses, injustice, and unfairness are part of life. We pray we never suffer a wound we can't survive. Regardless of how impossible it seems that you will survive this one, be assured you probably will, as most do physically. However, I believe you want more than merely to survive. You want to look forward to your day. You want to pursue the promised *abundant* life. That may seem a stretch

when your mind is so connected to the past. Yet surviving while remaining focused on your losses, injustice, or unfairness is like allowing your anguish to live rent free in your head.

Remaining focused on your losses, injustice, or unfairness is like allowing your anguish to live rent free in your head.

Perhaps surprisingly, men have a more difficult time than women during the first two years of recovery after a catastrophe. Their statistics of longevity and health plummet: four times more suicide, three times more accidents, six times more strokes, and ten

times more heart attacks. Also, 40 percent seek refuge in drugs. Women fare better, at least at first, but their statistics plummet in the third year and follow much the same pattern as that of men.¹

Why? Perhaps because from the start women let out their feelings, sharing their anguish with friends, family, and even the grocery checkout clerk. Men tend to stuff it, suck it up, and wrap themselves in armor. How can they talk it out when the classic question to a man is “How is your wife/mother/girlfriend?” Or, when on a more personal level, if he is asked “How are you?” his typical reply is “Fine” or “It’s tough.”

My husband, Paul, and I, like you, have confronted plenty of hurdles as we traveled life together. But each storm we handled fueled our confidence that we could weather the next. We dealt with the financial issues of a young married couple in graduate

school, marriage challenges when there was only time for learning and little for loving, baby responsibilities, career shifts and moves, and then a child with chronic health problems. Most would agree that watching a child hurt is far more arduous than handling one's own pain. It certainly was for us.

We agonized for our two-year-old LeeAnne when her diabetes was declared brittle, which simply meant she hosted a multitude of complications. Still, thanks to God, she blossomed. She was a charming beacon of light. We were wrapped around her like ants on sugar. But then she was gone. I understand why many marriages crumble after a child's death. Death would have been easier than survival as a united family. It was two years before tears were not a constant companion and six years before memories brought laughter.

I was fortunate. A dear friend, Suzy Williams, offered wise counsel after LeeAnne's death. She assured me there were common elements in any disappointment or loss and she asked me to remember that, regardless of what we felt or what was expressed:

- everyone was hurting.
- no one was going crazy.
- each of us would process our pain differently.
- what each of us needed for comfort would be different.

As my emotions screamed and my thoughts seemed haywire, her words resonated. *These feelings are normal.* Knowing what I might experience was critically helpful. Recognizing differences in the ways each of us coped freed me from feeling my way of coping was also the best for others in my family. My hope is that this book will be as helpful for you as her words were to me.

Hurts bring anguish that gnaws on one's spirit, relationships, and happiness. My soul grew tired from longing for LeeAnne. It became apparent that there were only two choices: *grow bitter and*

wither, hanging on to the hurts and injustice, or *survive and thrive*, thanking God for the gifts of life, both the good and the bad. I surrendered. I couldn't do it on my own, leaving God's guidance in the background. I needed a pathway to joy.

Faith offers no panacea, no quick fix for life's challenges, yet Scripture is the Designer's guide for *what works* and *what doesn't work* when life's problems cause joy's demise. The Bible is filled with stories of real people. Some valiantly overcame their problems while others wore the robe of victimhood. People today are no different. We all know those who bemoan their difficulties as if they are a badge of sainthood while others glow with an inner peace despite their problems.

I clung to Jesus's words: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."² I wanted that! I wasn't searching for pie-in-the-sky in the afterlife. I needed help in the here-and-now. Perhaps you do too. Faith offers hope, but be assured it is also in the line of fire. You question, *If God cares, does He care about me?* and *Though He is able, is He able to help me?*

No matter the cause of our distress, our pathway back to joy requires the same things: *a choice to be grateful for what was and a decision to appreciate what is*. Of course, we cannot be grateful we were abused, our marriage ended, or our child dropped out of school. It is impossible to be happy for our war with disease or injury. Time doesn't make the hurt from the chaos of such tragedy go away. The gut-wrenchingly difficult decision to focus on the gifts of what was and the positive lessons learned through the struggle assuages our pain as it strengthens our character. Character is forged in times of challenge just as a photograph is developed in darkness.

At first I bumbled through grief's course. It was only when I shifted to focus on how blessed we were to have shared LeeAnne's life for seven years that light began to shine in my darkness. I built in little trigger thoughts—lifelines—that helped me turn away

the negatives. I studied what was normal and to be anticipated. I chose to see what I had, not focus on what was no more. I chose to live with joy, even with a hole in my heart. I found anchors to steady my tilting boat.

When Kim died, we plainly hurt just as much as we did during LeeAnne's struggle for health and subsequent death, but I am handling "me" with much more wisdom. We as a family are committed to clutching the threads of recovery. I know if you are reading this book you are also seeking a path away from your anguish to a sense of joy. Recovery requires both *time* and *choice* to grasp the lifelines that anchor us in a harbor of calm.

Friend, there is good news: *you are searching for help*. You want to learn the steps to break the strangleholds that bind you in unquenchable longing or anger. That says a lot about your courage and tenacity. It takes a lot of strength to determine to work through the thoughts that want you to give up and hang on to the unchangeable. You are seeking a guide to move forward, even as you fear that very act will dishonor someone so precious to your life, let a culprit off the hook, or force you to recognize the situation is irreversible. You want to understand your programming, what to expect, and how to cope with what cannot be changed. You want justice, not revenge. You seek to find purpose, the something good that comes from overcoming bad.

Recovery requires both time and choice to ease the hurts of life.

In *Standing Up When Life Falls Down Around You*, I'll deal with the internal storms caused by loss, injustice, and wrongs, as well as the innate power each of us has to find happiness in our midst. We will address the issues for which all of us seek insight.

- How is it possible to be happy again?
- How can I move forward when the hurt is so great?
- How do I alleviate anger or guilt that is so powerful?

- How do I calm chaotic emotions when there might not be a happily-ever-after solution?
- How do I trust God when I am struggling with doubt?

Many people do not make it out of the zone, a football term that implies a tunnel of chaos, characterized by pain. Former certainties struggle with confusion. Fear of what comes next reigns. Such times are a zone of pain. But just as in the game of football, you can break free and make it to your goal line.

There is no question—happiness is an easier choice for someone splashing in puddles than for someone drowning in a swamp. Fortunately, there is wisdom that can guide you through the choices necessary to pull you from any waters, no matter their depth. I have intentionally addressed some of these concepts several times. Some are too critical to recovery to overlook. Hopefully, repeating these lifelines will highlight their importance.

If you are muddling with an issue addressed in a chapter, read the chapter several times. Highlight a phrase that addresses your need. Write out a plan to address the issue. Underline an anchor.

Happiness is an easier choice for someone splashing in puddles than for someone drowning in a swamp.

Hold tight to the lifelines to recovery. Handling a crisis in life requires courage, determination, and intention. I hope you are coping rather than muddling as you deal with your tsunami.

Be warned: all tough times put you at a crossroad where you choose either to be responsible for thoughts and decisions that incite your emotions or to join the ranks of those who drape themselves in black. One path leads you toward an abiding sense of joy, even with the challenge of great hurts. The other path holds tight to the past and its anguish, guaranteeing a lifetime of pain not only for yourself but also for those who care about the wounded. You may have taken

some vicious hits. A good share of us have serious pain—health issues, divorce, addiction, wretched children, a despondent spouse, or low self-esteem. Guilt. Loneliness. You may have started with good intentions but became blindsided along the way. Still, it is true that all in life lasts for but a season. As you know the sun will rise, so also believe that this period of hurt will end. It was always so. It will always be. Recognize that just as seasons change, you, too, are in a process of change.

Recovering after a stunning blow begins with your own desire for a life that is not just lived on the surface but is rich and deep and high and wide. Come, let's journey together so that you will change for the better, not the bitter.

LIFELINES

1. Life doesn't stay quiet long.
2. Abundant life is for now, not just the afterlife.
3. Faith offers no panacea, no quick fix, just a guidebook of choices for *what works* and *what doesn't*.
4. It is choice, not just time, that eases the hurts of life.
5. Happiness is an easier choice for someone splashing in puddles than for someone drowning in a swamp.