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The Biggest Loser Is . . .

Lost: your dream, your cozy home, your career, the job you thought would carry you through. Lost: your marriage. Lost: the last breaths of life of someone you cherish—your child, your soul mate, your mom or dad.

Each loss is different. Though some are more sudden, others engulf our lives slowly, one foreclosure letter at a time, one cancer cell at a time, one inch of water at a time. Some losses thrash us in an instant: “Put your personal belongings in a box. An officer will accompany you to the door.”

Crisis means we’re punching numbers on the phone—911 numbers we never thought we’d punch with such desperation.

But here we are.

Of course, I don’t know your story. But you have one, or you would not have picked up this book. I have my stories, but this book is not about me. It’s about you, where you are now and where you *can* be.

There are “survival” books that just don’t raise the future bar high enough for laughter, love, and adventure. These should not be considered possibilities for people after great losses, but actual probabilities. I want to try to paint that picture with words and a practical perspective that will

turn your head from facing backward to looking ahead expectantly and then moving forward, from pain to gain, from loss to love and laughter.

Likely you feel beaten down. Not just your bank account if you're in bankruptcy. Not just moving into a space you never imagined you'd need to cram into again. Not just rehashing why you lost your job, rehashing the "what-ifs." When you face the death of someone you cherish, your soul weariness is unreal. Your emotional tank is empty, and your body lets you know it's feeling the hit as well.

You may feel you'll be down forever.

But, my friend, the human spirit, though feeling crushed at this moment, is neither docile nor capable of being submerged forever. While you may not feel it now, or even believe my words now, there is an irrepressible possibility within you for a different life you can't imagine at this moment.

Our human spirit is resilient beyond our imagination. But that strength, even rebirth, seldom exerts itself when life is smooth and easy. When income is steady, creativity is unnecessary. When good health and strength for the day are givens, seldom do we improve our diets and self-care. When death has not touched cherished lives around us, we seldom contemplate what is truly worth investing the last ounce of our strength for someone, or a cause that matters. A life of ease is seldom a catalyst to catapult us to a more meaningful, expansive life.

When life happens, tragedy happens, whether we participated in the cause or not, we have that sense of loss. Whether we reel and are swept from our feet, or we feel just a gentle unsettling breeze, at some point we ask ourselves, "Where do I go from here?"

It's not uncommon for our thinking to be clouded by thoughts of "I'm a loser." We remember with anguish folks people have branded as losers, and now we're doing that to ourselves. Let's change that script like a popular television show once did. At that time, they gathered folks who had poor health habits that had resulted in unhealthy bodies and too many pounds. The competition to slim down was a good thing and the biggest loser was actually the winner: a healthier body, money, and other perks as well.

We can change our big loser events into big winner outcomes.

You can live a life you never would have lived had this crisis not happened. But don't let me convince you; rather let the evidence roll.

Steve Jobs was once squeezed out from Apple, the company he birthed. Apple is now the most valuable company in the United States. Valued at \$338 billion, it creates products that Grandma Hattie would never have dreamed of. She and Aunt Minnie would be shocked at the things I can't live without today that did not exist in their world, like Apple computers, iPads, and iPhones. Steve created this company, led it most of the way, and was key in its huge success.

We don't know how long Apple will be the most valuable company, the hot stock to own. But Steve Jobs came back after being squeezed out to become the human symbol of technology, creativity, management, and marketing acumen. He had a career most would envy. And, remember, he was once, for all practical purposes, fired!

Having lost his battle with pancreatic cancer, Steve Jobs leaves a legacy of innovation, a company responsible for the employment of almost 60,000 people, the most admired company in the world since 2008. Customer loyalty for Apple products is unprecedented. Would Jobs have envisioned such success back in 1985 when the board removed him from management decisions and he resigned rather than stay on the sidelines? One can say that Jobs experienced quite a party in his life after that initial loss.

Basketball star Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team his junior year. He is regarded as the greatest basketball player of all time with an average of 30.12 points per game, achieving ten championships with seven in a row.

Opera singer Marion Anderson was denied the opportunity to sing in Constitution Hall on Easter Sunday because of her color. This rejection marked a milestone in the Civil Rights movement. The president's wife at the time, Eleanor Roosevelt, arranged for her to sing on the steps of the Lincoln Monument instead. Overnight she became an icon. Dr. Martin Luther King was in the audience.

My friend Ginger found herself in an unimaginable nightmare. Ginger

initially experienced all the negatives of being the biggest loser. When her husband was incarcerated, she lost her marriage, her job, her home, her insurance, and her identity. Here are Ginger's own words:

"Top 5" Things Lost in One Year

My Marriage. Our once secure, thriving marriage of sixteen years was changed forever due to a prison sentence my husband received for white-collar crime.

My Job. My successful, full-time job as the CFO of three businesses was lost.

My Insurance. Both medical and dental coverage for our family were gone as a consequence of losing my full-time position.

Our House. The town house where we lived for ten years was lost through foreclosure.

My Identity. I no longer knew who I really was as I struggled to redefine my roles and purpose in life as a wife, mother, management executive, and sole provider for six children ages three to sixteen.

The Ginger I know today, many months into this ordeal, has become a more direct, loving, Mama Bear mom. She's discovered financial resources and ways to live on less that few of us ever imagined. Working with flexibility in a part-time job, she juggles being personal taxi driver, homework supervisor, home manager, and single parent for her growing children.

Ginger's small space is so efficiently utilized, you'd think it was her home of choice. I see her identity changing to become self-sufficient in ways not only necessary, but satisfying. And more changes are yet to come. We'll come back to her story later. But for now, are you beginning to see, as I am, an indomitable spirit within that Ginger never knew she had?

As I've listened to people in their times of loss, I recognize that we share similar experiences. Life as we knew it stops. In our jumbled thinking, we first try to analyze and sort it all out, to make sense of the chaos. "What If?" is the major theme. In the process, we discover a new view of

people and things. Unwanted change brings surprises in our perceptions. We also feel alone—and in fact we may be. This becomes a foundation for new connections. Let's explore these shared experiences.

WHAT IF?

What's the difference between the person who stays in the stagnant space of looking backward, whining, bitter, and even taking on the permanent mantle of "victim," and those who begin to see a glimmer of hope and grasp it with a tenacious grip they never knew they had?

The answer depends on what they do with the big "What If?" question.

First, let's be honest and admit that we all do play the what-if game.

If I had parented differently, my child would not be . . . addicted, incarcerated, involved with the wrong crowd, whatever. The list of what-ifs for parents of struggling children, even adult children in their fifties, is endless. This particular what-if is a double-barrel loss. First we revisit every mistake we ever felt we made while raising our child who is troubled, destroying his or her own life, or at least not moving forward by our definition of success. Second, we are tempted to compensate by overcare, overinvestment, overindulgence, and overcompensation. These overreactions deplete us, and keep that child—young, middle-aged, or vintage—in a dependent state.

If I hadn't taken out that home equity loan . . . I wouldn't be facing this foreclosure. The national foreclosure rate is now one out of every 583 homes in the United States. Realtors predict millions more in the next few years. The upside is for those who purchase that foreclosed home at a savings. Here is the percent saved in several states by purchasing that foreclosed home.

- 52% Maryland
- 47% Illinois
- 44% California
- 44% New Hampshire
- 44% Michigan
- 42% Delaware

42% Tennessee
40% Wisconsin
40% Ohio
40% Oklahoma¹

However, that savings to so many buyers also represents great loss for many others. Those numbers represent people who have lost their homes, and you may be one of them. The buyer may have saved from 40–52 percent of your home’s value. But the money they saved is money you lost. Losses are rarely lone events. That home loss likely represents loss of credit rating, loss of treasured memories, and devastation to your personal pride.

If only I had not charged all that stuff, I wouldn’t be sitting in this bankruptcy office today. That assessment of blame may be perfectly correct, but planning a solution and forgiving yourself while committing to a different future is better than rehashing why you purchased each item you could not afford.

My friend Ginger moved from 1,900 square feet to 1,100 square feet with her family of seven. Other young widows, families, and adult children have had to move in with parents or friends. So an initial devastating loss is accompanied by loss of solitude and personal space. As difficult as this sounds, I’ve heard many follow-up stories, of three-generation regroupings who’ve made huge changes learning to flex with the needs of the new family group. They’ve come to love and appreciate each other in a way they never would have experienced had they not combined their households.

The three recent home foreclosures in my neighborhood all started with divorce. Personal esteem usually hits the skids among the many losses with divorce.

I’ve listened to close friends in painful divorce proceedings go through a lengthy list of what-ifs. Secret keeping, wandering affections, addictions, self-centeredness, overspending, excessive thrift, hoarding, giving away too much, being in denial, being truthful or blunt—the if-only lists alone could fill a book. While divorce, of course, means loss of your spouse, typically a squadron of other losses accompanies this:

Loss of companionship

Loss of support—financial, intellectual, social, and emotional

Loss of hopes, plans, and dreams

What-if thinking is normal, common. Thankfully there are support groups and you may even have trusted friends and family to come alongside you, and be a measure of reality against what your perceptions might be.



Life happens! Crisis, chaos, brokenness, death, and destruction are part of every human's experience.

There is some value in spending some time and mental and emotional energy considering the what-ifs. We humanoids have the capability of *learning* from our mistakes. Let me share exhibit A from my own life.

I love hiking, especially hiking with women friends in new places. We've hiked Acadia National Park in Maine, and also headed to Oregon for new adventures. The trails were beyond awesome, beautiful, serene, and sometimes strenuous. One Oregon stop was Crater Lake, the deepest, purest lake in North America. We hiked its rim and marveled at the change of water color as light and sunshine touched its surface and depth with lavender, even magenta, and more shades of blue than I have ever seen.

A boat ride was available so we trooped on, settled in, and began to see this work of nature, the handiwork of our Creator God, up close. The ride was too short; I hungered to experience more of Crater Lake. As we landed and prepared to leave, an additional option presented itself. A few folks (in hindsight I realize they were mostly young people) were leaping into the lake from a cliff. Intriguing! Our family has, many times, jumped from the twenty-foot cliffs above Table Rock Lake, Missouri, into the warm, summer waters—a pleasure indeed. Two from our group, our fearless leader, Carol, and myself, trooped up the path to the jump point.

Hmmm. Thirty feet looks a lot higher than twenty feet. My mind was not computing that the water was sixty-six degrees—in other words, COLD. Also, that temperature means the molecules are more tightly packed together, more like a board than a soft comforter. These facts weren't getting my attention.

What I was very aware of, in every nerve of my body, was the beauty below that I must enter, experience, feel! I could imagine the sunshine in the free fall on my face. Wouldn't the sheer beauty of this water be heaven-like to enter?

I leaped.

The descent was more than I dreamed. Descending through the clean, pungently scented air was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. As I neared the water, its colors seemed rainbow-like in variety and softness, yet intensely exciting. Exquisitely alluring Crater Lake beckoned. And then I hit water.

Immediately I knew something was terribly wrong. In one instant, I wondered if my legs would move. Pain told me something was amiss. I seemed to be going deeper from any dive I'd ever taken. Then—yes, my legs moved. And even the pain could not take away the gift of the beauty of the multicolored layers of water that I plunged down through and then began to rise through; they were more exotic than I had imagined.

Eventually I surfaced, thankful for all my moving parts. The rocky place where one could clamber onto the shore looked much farther away than it had from my lofty dive point. There were no options, but simply a requirement to swim to it.

Can you imagine being thankful when your knees hit submerged boulders? I was glad to feel them. It meant I could climb out! Carol sat on a magnificently shaped protrusion looking like a mermaid. I was glad to reach her outstretched hand.

It would be weeks later, after lots of black and blue skin returned to normal colors, when I conceded that something else was wrong and went to my orthopedic doctor. The diagnosis? Compression fracture of vertebra lumbar one. Had the broken bone moved one more inch, my spinal cord would have been severed—and there would have been no walking, no swimming, no leaping again.

Why confess this goofy, impulsive, practically life-threatening act to you? Because I've learned from it. The first and obvious lesson: No more cliff jumping (especially with my Medicare card tucked safely in plastic in my hiking bag!).



At some point we must simply stop the questioning.

Actually, I've learned several more valuable lessons from this. One is that my adventuresome spirit can morph into risk-taking. I need to pause and consider the possibilities. Is this risk worth taking? I also learned that my children are still adjusting to the loss of their dad. My foolish action frightened them. "What will Mom do next?" I needed to think more thoroughly about possible outcomes and about impact on others who care about me.

Life happens! Crisis, chaos, brokenness, death, and destruction are part of every human's experience. Some good can be derived from pondering "What If?" Evaluating our behavior keeps us from repeating our mistakes. What was our part? What might we have foreseen? Were we part of the catalyst? Could our actions and reactions have led to a different outcome?

Realize that you and I may never be able to figure out the answers to all these questions, though. If other people are involved, we do not control them. In fact, we often discover that we have less influence than we thought. Weather, another driver, a law we ignored, medications, and reactions—the list of variables we can't control could go on forever.

The truth is, at some point we must simply stop the questioning. At some point we've got to take our what-if lists (whether they're written or simply rolling around in our minds getting bigger like a snowball rolling downhill), crumple it up, and throw it away.

What might help you do this? One friend wrote the long list and

literally lit a match, put it to the paper, and watched it burn.

Another imagined the what-ifs as if they were taking up many rooms. She mentally gathered them up and pushed and squished them into a small compartment. She closed that door. When her mind wants to wander into that compartment, she sternly refuses to go there.

Most of us must realize that if we cannot truly let go and stop the what-if stuff, we must compartmentalize it, confining it to a limited piece of our thought life. If we don't, the endless cycle of unanswerable questions will impact today's behavior and tomorrow's plan. And that won't be pretty.

How sad it is to see an adult who behaves irrationally in some circumstances, or childishly, in irresponsible ways and says, "It was because . . ." They put forward an event or person as the "reason" (actually, an excuse) for their problem or ongoing weirdness.

"When we were teens, you . . ."

"In my first marriage . . ."

"I've never gotten over . . ."

"You made me . . ."

These people expect the world and folks around them to tolerate their inappropriate, rude, or bad behavior because they have not resolved their "Where do I go from here?" question.

I sometimes compare those insistent what-ifs to papers in an old-fashioned file cabinet. Nowadays we tend to file things electronically with unlimited space. But the old-fashioned file cabinets had only a few drawers and limited storage room.

In my comparison, we throw all the stuff of loss and all the hurt and brokenness that goes with it into the file cabinet of life. While some good can actually come from sorting through the "files," trying to make what sense we can out of seemingly senseless behavior and aftershock. And some good can come from throwing away certain questions, theories, and even memories. A bit of sorting is necessary or it's simply impossible to close the drawer with the overflowing mess. But closing that drawer with things in as much order as we can muster provides a great sense of peace and freedom to move on.

A word of caution: Sometimes a memory box, well filed, flies open at an inconvenient time. For example, I've wept at the silhouette of a stranger in an airport who so resembled my husband—and he's been gone five years. What did airport security and the other hurrying travelers think of this weeping solo woman? I cared little and could control my tears even less. That memory box had to be quickly shoved closed as I had to get through security collecting all my stuff and rush for a remote gate or miss my flight.

What if? Sort what you must, discard what you can, and compartmentalize the rest so the endless rehashing does not weigh down your future. We'll talk more about this in the next chapter. But let's look now at a likely positive outcome from your loss that you may not have noticed yet.

THROWAWAY PEOPLE

There's an amazingly helpful new discovery that can be made in the midst of loss. If you have not experienced it yet, I can promise you that you will. And you'll be richer in spirit for this discovery. I'll illustrate it through a story found in the Old Testament.

I trust you find, as I have, that we have a source of great strength and insight in the most-read book in this world, the Bible. I'm especially intrigued by David. His adventures, messes, and triumphs have him firmly in two camps: a humanoid who can get it all wrong and an admirable mentor who can show us how to live life boldly and well. Read leisurely through 1 Samuel 30, letting your imagination create mental pictures. Meanwhile I'll summarize this unusual event.

David and his army of men had followed the Philistines, ever their enemies, leaving their families and children in Ziklag. They returned to find that the Amalekites had raided the town, capturing all their wives and children and burning everything to the ground. Their first wave of emotion was grief. Grisly, strong, courageous warriors wept, and wept loudly. To say that things did not bode well for captured women and children in war is a known fact from all of history.

Anger followed. These usually loyal comrades decided the disaster

was all David's fault. Had he not led them away from their families? They talked of stoning him. One single follower, Benaiah, had killed a lion in a pit on a snowy day. As a group these mighty men of valor had killed hundreds, even thousands of their enemies. David had cause to fear for his life. He responded with two wise moves: he looked for and found encouragement from God, and he sought advice from a wise spiritual leader.

In his desperate loneliness David entered an "Only God" moment. He reached that moment when nothing could or would work. It was God or nothing. He had no lifeline to reach toward, no best friend, Jonathan, to confide in, no wife to console him. Only God.

God gave him courage again, which David would need in large measure, to hear the words of the spiritual leader. He was to strike out on a hunt to find the raiders. He would need to advance in front of his warriors, leading them. Remember, they were threatening to kill him. He exposed his back to them. This action took courage indeed. David was a leader acting like a leader.

David's traveling army came upon a thrown-away person. A young slave, sick and weak, had been thrown away. His owner had detected something wrong, decided the slave could no longer be useful and healthy, and left him. Abandoning him with no food or water was a death sentence, even if he had been well.

David's men revived the thrown-away slave with what we know now was "right on" recovery food. David questioned him and discovered this slave had been with the Amalekites' raiding party. He knew of the Ziklag kidnapping and the location of the Amalekites' stronghold.

For David, noticing and then being kind and caring to this throw-away person was life-changing. The Amalekite slave owner's discard became a treasured resource.

What followed? A long battle, the total recovery of families, and gained flocks and herds. As is usual with humanoids, the ending was not all happy. People squabbled and were greedy. But we see here an important truth: Throwaway people exist, and their numbers increase with times of loss, chaos, and crisis.

The person who is perceived as weak, the one who doesn't seem to

add to our worth or further our purposes any more, becomes a cast-off casualty.

Often we don't know these throwaway people exist, or we ignore their plight until we're in a hard place. But when we hit the hard places ourselves, something turns in our souls. It's called compassion. We see the invisible hurting child, the weeping mom on the two-year anniversary after her teenage son was shot, the barbed wire and razor metal defining the edge of the prison while defining the reality of the hundreds of inmates crowded within. Suddenly we see the hurt because we are hurting. Suddenly the prison is more than a place we look away from. It's home to someone we love.



Loss means less, but less is not always a bad thing.

We see the teen athlete who always needs a ride home and has no one to cheer him at competitions. When the referee raises his victorious wrestling arm in victory, his searching eyes scan the stands. But those whose approval he most seeks are not there. The known presence of a parent who is there for him is a comfort he'll never have.

Our own suffering opens our eyes. We see the previously unseen. Their pain touches us. We connect. Sometimes the connection comes because we've become that throwaway person ourselves, or at least we feel like it. We recognize a truth that our Creator has known from the time He formed the first human, through the conception of each and every person who has ever breathed on this planet: There is value and purpose for us all.

We come to the realization that there should be no throwaway people.

So whose lives were changed by the discovery of the dying slave along the path of David's soldiers? This young man, who is nameless in the story,

had a future. I'm sure David kept his word and protected him. Since this slave's scouting direction meant the entire army received back their wives and children, I would expect that all of David's army and their families included him in their community. Did he return to Egypt, reunite with his relatives, have a family of his own? We don't know.

Did David ever ignore a sick, young, abandoned slave after this encounter? I imagine not. I would expect that David, a man "after God's own heart," felt compassion and saw value in people who had been invisible to him before.

Andy Andrews, the author of *The Butterfly Effect*, was homeless in his teen years. His fellow homeless friend actually became his valued mentor, teaching him important lessons in life. As they walked around a hotel swimming pool, where a kind employee allowed them to "bathe," using towels to dry, his friend unexpectedly pushed him in the deep end of the pool. Shocked and surprised, Andy asked, "Why?"

"Welcome to life," his fellow homeless friend answered. And the friend began to talk about how you recover, how you treat those who mistreat you, how you move on. These days of Andy's literary success have not crowded out nor diminished Andy's respect and the treasured lessons he learned from his fellow homeless mentor.² I'm sure the homeless we do not see are in plain view to Andy.

After your loss, you'll notice people you never saw before. They are all around you. Look around more closely. You'll see others that were invisible to you before—others shopping in the resale shop, others at the food pantry. We develop a new appreciation of Jesus' prayer He taught us: "Give us this day our daily bread." Daily bread is the only thing Jesus taught us to ask for. Most of us have that in abundance, but many invisible people do not.

You'll hear of folks who've shared a similar experience to yours. You may even reach out. You may be in similar groups for courage yourself, and you may even encourage and strengthen others when you've been on the journey long enough.

Your sense of isolation and despair will be forced back by the knowledge that you are not alone. Of course, no one's loss is just like yours. But

there are common threads, and you are strengthened and comforted by “like” shed tears.

THROWAWAY THINGS

People are more important than things. Right!

It’s just stuff. Right!

You can’t take it with you. Right again!

If the things around us, left in the aftermath of loss, are just stuff, why do they become so important in our struggle to move forward? Because our emotions ramp up and heighten their value. Factual value has been swamped by feelings.

Loss wraps its fingers around our budget, stomach, our heart, and the warmth of our bodies in winter and coolness in summer. We’re different from the people we were before our loss. We whine and complain about loss of income, financial equity, and comforts we had when we had more.

Loss means less, but less is not always a bad thing. Less stuff means less to worry about, keep up, protect, and manage. Having less can mean time to do something else that’s not stuff-focused.

But that’s easier said than felt and done. The fact is that inanimate objects sometimes take on a life of their own due to loss. How important is this reality? A popular television show, *Hoarders*, illustrated this in its extreme. A real person, in a real living space, collects and collects until normal living is crowded out of his or her life. Some shop randomly in stores and at garage sales. They can never part with an object though it may be useless, or they have four hundred shirts, most of which will never be worn. The camera crew must crawl through tiny paths that are a maze through crammed spaces. Usually spouses and children abandon the hoarder if they possibly can.

Hoarders are an extreme, but I use the comparison to make a point. Things have meaning. Sometimes in the wake of loss these things can have purpose and value, either practical or emotional. Other times they can become dead weights hanging around our necks that interfere with healthy forward thinking.

Since the things around each of us are as different as our losses, we’ll

start with simple questions that apply to us all regardless of that thing we are clinging to.

Question # 1: To whom does this belong?

Wouldn't you think this question unnecessary? Not from stories I've heard in my world. It's such a simple criteria and one that's overlooked, to everyone's detriment.

One young widow was devastated when the brothers of her husband took all of his clothes, tools, and other personal belongings and divided them amongst themselves while she was at the funeral home finalizing plans. The blow of the industrial accident that took his life, leaving her with two young children, was intensified by coming home to the second loss exemplified by his empty closet. She courageously required the return of her husband's belongings with the statement that she'd consider their desires for his things—later.

In the immediate aftermath of divorce, sometimes pictures are discarded—pictures that, if saved and tucked away, might be precious to someone later on. This is certainly a tricky call, and no one can decide about the value of photographs but you. If you can wait a bit to make that decision, time may bring perspective or even more healing than you imagined. Yes, it's your picture, but it might have more positive value to someone else later than it has for you today.

This question of ownership gets sticky in divorce, second marriages, and other messes in life. If separating parties can step back and let their consciences speak rather than their anger or greed, things are more likely to land with the person to whom they belong.

Question # 2: What is the optimal time to decide for you, given your circumstance?

Parents whose eight-year-old died suddenly were cruelly told that because they did not empty her bedroom quickly they weren't entrusting their loss to God. Widows are often the recipients of such unwelcome advice on dealing with their husbands' belongings. The reality is that some clean out that closet in the earliest weeks after the loss, while others wait

months or years. What we do with stuff and when we take that action isn't about the calendar or other people's opinions or expectations. It's whether our actions are best for us and contribute to helping us move forward.

Children who lose a sibling or parent are often comforted to be given something personal to remember the person they loved who was such an important part of their life. A thing as simple as a comb or brush can be comforting and may even become a life treasure, not for the value of that inanimate object, but for the person it represents.

A worn fishing pole, a bit of wood trim from a burned home, a worn pair of paint pants with splotches of a gazillion colors—sometimes the unexpected can be a treasure worth keeping.

It's not uncommon for quilts to be made from squares from favorite clothing of a treasured person lost.

One tailor/seamstress provides a comforting service accepting clothing and fashioning dolls to commemorate a person lost. My young widow friend has had a doll representing her husband fashioned for each of her young children using his favorite clothes and reflecting his profession and hobbies. Fireman dolls, police officers, golfers, and moms holding baby dolls have become treasured keepsakes. This might sound extreme for some. For others, it's just the right thing in a season of life, a gift that in some season is a thing that matters. That doll may be hugged on until worn, but just for one season and then packed away. Timing questions have a way of resolving themselves.

Some good advice after any traumatic event is, Don't make any big decisions in the first two years after loss, whether due to divorce or death. While that two-year plan may be optimal, the reality is that many don't have that luxury. Divorce may require a quick home sale. Death of a spouse may mean the survivor can't make that mortgage payment. My friend Ginger had to lighten up her children's possessions of toys, clothes, her own belongings for kitchen, furnishings, and even keepsakes as she moved to their tiny townhome.

Question # 3: What is the true emotional quotient of that thing?

Professionals who come into the hoarders' lives help them see the real reason behind their hoarding. When they are being challenged to give it up to the Dumpster or retail shop, they hold on to that thing even tighter. An unseen void, maybe even unidentified before, is ruling rather than reason.

We don't have a professional peering over our shoulders coaching and advising us as we touch that object we're clinging to so tightly. So how can we evaluate more honestly the emotional quotient of an object?

One valuable measure is what I call "the tear factor: how much, how often, and why."

One thing that we have in abundance after loss is tears. These droplets of water that leak from our eyes at strange times, or that gush like a torrent, are one of the most common experiences we all share regardless of our loss.

I've watched a young man cry angry tears over being fired from his job. I've reached to hand more tissues to my pastor friend who had lost his wife. Just mentioning the kind of pie she enjoyed turned on that uncontrollable faucet, even though we were in a busy restaurant.

I've puzzled over an Old Testament Scripture that declares that God collects our tears in a bottle:

You number my wanderings;
Put my tears into Your bottle;
Are they not in Your book? (Psalm 56:8 NKJV)

What's important about collecting tears? It's God's demonstration to us that He cares for us in our times of great sorrow. He refers to wiping the tears from our eyes. Between humans, that is often the most tender moment shared, one wiping the tears from the other's stressed, tired cheeks. From the thirty-five verses in the Bible that mention tears, it's apparent that He is quite interested in why we cry. God was not impressed by floods of tears from His people when they were whining because they did not get their way. They cried when they dictated to God what they wanted Him

to give to them. They cried when they thought what they gave to God was what He wanted. And they were wrong. He wanted their tender, repentant, obedient hearts more than dead bleeding animals.

What's in my bottle of tears? Bitter, selfish tears? Tears over stuff I lost? Tears that I invested in stuff rather than in people? Tears of remorse for the things I've done wrong? Tears of sorrow for the good I could have done and didn't—because I was distracted by lesser things? Or tears of regret over time spent taking care of things instead of treasuring precious people in my life?

What's in your bottle of tears? Crying can be cleansing, stress relieving, and a positive change point. A time of weeping can become a time of separating the “what was” from “what is” and from “what I want” in the future.

I have a wish for future tears in my bottle. I want them to be tears of joy and thanksgiving. I have a wish for future tears in your bottle. May they be joy and thanksgiving over the new things and new people that fill the void in your life after loss.

Look again at that object you are clinging to. What is its tear factor? Is it that important?

Remember, loss means less, but that's not always a bad thing. Less stuff means less to worry about, keep up, protect, and manage. It means time to do something else that's not stuff-focused.

One reason we need to let go of things is that usually there are at least a few good new additions after our season of loss. To separate the “not-good adds” from the “good adds,” we can ask ourselves this next question.

Question # 4: Does this thing represent my new life in a good way?

A simple example from my life is a very strange little table in my living room. It is a rescued table that my creative sister salvaged and painted with brilliant animal faces and birds, rendering its crooked legs in the likeness of the patterns of a giraffe. It's a very old table, but a recent gift to me. It sits in a visible space once occupied by my husband's oversized easy chair. While I do still have that chair, it's now in a cozy corner of a bedroom.

Much to the dismay of my daughter and daughters-in-law and their

tasteful design thoughts, this table just looks weird in my traditional living room that also houses a one-hundred-year-old, functioning pump organ. The colors on this table are crazy. My sister could not find a brilliant enough orange for the parrot feathers so she secured what road crews use to paint the iridescent orange line in the middle of highways. I love this table! It's symbolic. I go to Africa annually on my new mission. Energized, focused, and having fun, this Africa endeavor is a huge part of my single life. The bizarre rescued table represents that. This table is definitely a "good add."

While the oversized easy chair might seem to be the right scale for that space, it represented my life before my loss. This crazy little rescued table represents my life today.

Recognizing that some things must go, ask yourself this question:

Question # 5: Where is a good landing place for this thing?

Does it matter? Think *Titanic*. Think Heart of the Ocean diamond, a blue diamond fashioned after the famous Hope Diamond. While its reality is not confirmed, the tale of the young lovers and the symbolism of that jewelry represent mystery, memories, treasures gained, and treasures lost. *Titanic's* heroine, Rose, saves it for decades only so that, in her last years, she might return to the site of the sinking of the *Titanic* and throw it overboard. Celine Dion singing, "My Heart Will Go On," while wearing the replica, has moved audiences and popularity charts by moving our hearts. Star-crossed love happens, if not in our own life, in the lives of someone we love.

Our treasured thing may not be worth \$2.2 million like the Heart of the Ocean diamond, but if it moves our emotions, thought should be given to a good landing place.

If your housewares are too good to discard, you might consider giving them away. Universities have struggling students who need a few items for their tiny kitchens. Goodwill and Salvation Army Stores have been my shopping centers when setting up my young adult son in a different state. Donations are good. Think who could use this, who would appreciate the meaning of this? Don't think discard; think recycle. Give this item a new

life and yourself permission for a fresh start for yourself.

As you begin to look at your stuff differently, you might be encouraged by the words of a wealthy businessman. *The Financial Times* recently interviewed Leif Lundblad, a Swedish entrepreneur. Successful businessmen often publicize their formulas for success. His advice: Beware of wealth. He says, “I have money, but it’s not good to have too much because you become a bit, I wouldn’t say lazy, but things become a little too easy.”³ Lundblad offers a bit of consolation for those undergoing the stiff discipline of having to get rid of some belongings: Lost resources may be motivators for action! That loss might prevent your life from getting too easy.

Leif’s wise saying has its roots in Scripture. We’ve been saying that loss is not necessarily less. Proverbs 30:8 reminds us, “*Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.*” Wealth can tempt us to believe in our own invincibility, self-sufficiency, and lack of reliance on God. Poverty can tempt us to steal or even gamble with what we have. Life happens to us all. Our loss can be the beginning of future gain. A good buffer against extreme living and overvaluing stuff is to read the book of Proverbs and simply live by the book.

FINDING NEW CONNECTIONS

When we’re slogging through life’s rainstorms or in a season of life with black clouds around our souls, we usually feel alone. And sometimes we keep that reality a secret and try to “soldier on” so no one will know the storm we’re in.

That aloneness may make things worse. We deny ourselves the encouragement of others. We’re vulnerable to poor decisions in our secret world of pain. And we don’t take advantage of knowledge and understanding from those who’ve weathered the storm. While we’ll look at this extensively in the third chapter, let’s look at the aloneness factor now and how it impacts us.

An intriguing archetype in movies is the hermit who has become a recluse. Bizarre behavior, strange surroundings, suspicion, misreading others’ intentions: all of this makes for intriguing story lines. In the movie *Up*, the widower even pushes away the good-hearted boy scout. In old

westerns the recluse poked a rifle out the window at any human who approached. While these may be fascinating characters in movies, truth is stranger than fiction, and we see these characters all around us. In fact, we may already be those characters, or we may be on our way to becoming reclusive if we move from being alone to actually isolating ourselves.

Our loss may cause us to initiate spinning a cocoon that becomes our hiding place.

Yes, it requires humility to tell someone of the storm we're in, and that we don't see a way through it, let alone out. We hide the temptation we're struggling with, fearing judgment and shame. But humility signals to God that we're willing to learn, willing to change, willing to stop being self-sufficient. Self-sufficiency is probably an unreachable goal at the moment anyway. Humility softens our hardened exterior and heart, and communicates to another person that we're willing to listen.

Rarely is it possible to push back from the strong pull to hibernate without *huge* measures of forgiveness. In fact, this is so important that we'll spend a chapter on the major role this plays in moving forward.

Determine, my friend, to find some way not to become isolated in your loss. It is typical after a significant upheaval to lose friends, watch family members become scarce, and find it easy to feel like you are the only one in the storm.

My friend Ginger felt isolated and alone even with her six active children in full motion around her. Who could she really trust with the truths about her husband? "Will they shun me too, just when I need them most?" she wondered. The answer may be yes.

Your concern that the people around you might not want to help you, or might even reject you, may be valid. That's why being proactive to find new connections will likely be necessary. You have choices. There are support groups for loss recovery, for all kinds of losses. There are empowerment groups for health improvement and weight management. Group support for gambling and other addictions, financial discipline, and all kinds of issues may be meeting in your local library or community center. Your church or worship center probably has some resources. Mega churches may provide a support group where you can enter unnoticed

for a while until you are ready to participate. It has been said that the loneliest place can be in the midst of joyful people lifting their hands and voices in praise—when your own heart is breaking. Hang on, and remember that this time of adjustment is only a season. You can become that joyful person again.

The Internet can be your friend, or it might be a foe. You can follow blogs that uplift and inform you, or you can use this tool to escape to the wrong places. Look for sources of help and encouragement. Websites can contain new suggestions or reinforce what you already know, but have felt hesitant to act on. Women from every continent visit my website for widows. Of course, connecting person-to-person in real time without the use of computers would be nice, but a website could be a port in the storm, better than feeling you are the only one going through your particular storm.

Books can become companions and lifelines during this time of recovery after devastating events. Reach out for the influences that feed your hope and help you feel connected to others who have suffered and begun again to thrive.

WHAT YOU HAVE GAINED

We started this chapter feeling like the biggest losers, fearful of what losses might follow the initial traumatic losses in our lives. But let's take a minute to look at what we have gained.

New eyes to see throwaway people.

New compassion for those who were neutral or unnoticed before.

Less stuff in our life to distract us.

The precious awareness that we are not alone.

Are you beginning to see that where you go from here is not defined by your loss? I hope so.

Great loss usually means looking backward, clinging tenaciously to threads of the past. While looking back is necessary for a bit, we must eventually release the dream we've lost—whether it's a home that's now rubble or lost due to foreclosure, or a treasured relationship that's over.

My widow friend Ferree Hardy describes her loss: "Life changed

forever that day. Widowhood was nothing like I expected. The pain was so deep it was frightening; and then it went deeper still, to a place where tears watered tiny, shriveled up seeds of joy and strength. Did you know they grow best when buried in total darkness? When you can't see them, can't imagine."

Ferree describes what happens in nature that can happen in us as well. Those tiny shriveled seeds of joy and strength have gone underground. But tears of loss are rivulets of strength that furrow to the most unreachable parts of your heart. And something new starts to happen.

Another friend, Dorothy, describes it this way: "In the darkness of the night the stars come out. The brilliance of the sun does not compete. It takes the quiet darkness to see the stars come out." She should know. Dorothy welcomed back her young husband and lover from World War II—not as the healthy pilot who went to war whole, but as a paralyzed man she would need to care for. Amazingly, he did eventually walk again, but during those months of hospitals and no good news, the dark of her night seemed endless.

And then the stars came out.

At this moment they are hiding in the dark, but the stars *will* come out.

My friend, your tears of loss, as you let the dream go, are watering the seeds of a new dream. You just can't see it yet.