

## Chapter One

---

### The Survivor in Us All

The world is fascinated with survival. We tune in to watch the daily, unfolding news stories of people who are surviving hunger, airplane crashes, tsunamis, kidnappings, mudslides, disease, or a night wandering lost in a national park. When we can no longer deal with all the natural disasters and traumas of the news, we switch over to more scripted tales of survival on reality TV. We can't wait to see whose marriage will last another week or who will make it to the next round of the singing, dancing, cooking, weight loss, and cross country race competitions. For over a decade, the Emmy winning reality series *Survivor* has had millions of viewers cheering or jeering ordinary people trying to find food and shelter amidst island chaos and impossible tortures created to turn survivors into losers and losers into survivors. Even Gilligan's Island, with its forever stranded, wacky cast, is still in syndication on TV Land after more than four decades! Will they every get off that island?

The plots of the most popular and gripping movies center around surviving. Our favorite seasonal classics, such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Sound of Music* and *Ben Hur* are actually tales of survival. Oscar winners *Schindler's List*, *Gone With The Wind*, *Titanic*, and, most recently, *12 Years a Slave* are old and new classics that teach us what it means to endure. It doesn't matter if the characters are fictitious or historical, or whether the backdrop of their struggle is war, zombies, the apocalypse, or true evil depravity. We love them all because they deliver the triumph of overcoming amid the horror of prejudice, intolerance, and disbelief. Survivor movies out sell any other genre of entertainment, as do print biographies detailing true stories of endurance. And country music, with its soulful stories of survival, has become one of the most popular music genres.

In another realm, the word survivorship has been coined to bring respect to the many who have braved cancer, abuse, and trauma. Thousands of survivorship conferences are now held around the world where experts, celebrities, and neighborhood heroes teach, discuss, grieve, and cheer the victories and agonies of overcoming lives. In every arena, stories of survival mesmerize, horrify, and encourage us all at the same time. They keep us on the edge of our chair, and coming back for more. Why? What is the fascination?

I believe these stories deeply resonate in most of us because there is a survivor in us all. Some of us have overcome natural disasters, while others have come through a divorce or relationship split, a grim medical diagnosis, unemployment, or the death of a loved one. Some of these experiences seem to naturally find closure; others seem to have no end, good or bad. Regardless, we are guided by an innate, God-given desire to survive. It is one of the most basic physical and psychological mechanisms that we are born with, critical to set us on a course to sustain our lives.

We also love survivor stories because our culture loves winners, and survival acknowledges that a battle has been won and a winner declared. We are drawn to the winners because they seem to have one of our society's greatest and most valuable commodities: control over their fate. Or at least for the time being they appear to have outwitted or outlasted their demons, adversaries, and circumstances.

### **Learning the art of survival**

Survival isn't just something we do; it is something we consciously or unconsciously study because we are all doing it on some level every moment. At some point it seems to transcend our entire being. I recall particulars of my own survival journey with the detail of colors, faces, and places. There are clear moments that I recall in my mind. And there are those moments that are layered in my physical body, where muscles twitch and my skin chills in

response to sounds and smells that trigger my survival instinct. Some make me smile and others perceptively draw in my shoulders as if still protecting myself from any pain.

Spans of time lived out in split seconds arise in my mind like video pop-ups pointing out the back-story of bravery and treachery. There are moments that seem simple and indisputable and others that are inexplicable. Sometimes survival is taken for granted and minimized. We breathe involuntarily. We sleep because our body demands it. When we're thirsty, we reach, without much notice, for a glass of water. At other times survival is so glamorized and exaggerated on celebrity TV that it seems we will not ever capture its essence.

Never before has there been more of an expectation and sense of entitlement to live longer, healthier, and happier with the means and probability to do so than now. If we expect better homes, greater incomes, and higher educations than our parent and grandparents, then we expect better resources all around for an easier or more comfortable life. We've gone from surviving with fishes and nets to barely being able to live a few hours without the Internet. The merging of our pop and scientific cultures has generated a new survivor culture that has rewritten all the rules and game plans. Sixty is now the new forty, and we are expected to age gracefully (with new cosmetic lines designed specifically for baby boomers) and to begin new entrepreneurial careers instead of retiring to Florida. Decide how long you want to live and there's a strategy to do it. My husband Rich says he will be content to live and accomplish his goals in 75 years. My sister Tess will feel cheated if she doesn't begin a new career at age 80 and outlive artist Georgia O'Keefe, who died at 98. Both are making health and lifestyle choices now so that their chances of such a survival are increased. Pick your desired lifespan and game plan, and there's a strong probability that you will achieve it.

Because everyone plays in this game of survival, a growing portion of our economy is now generated by how well a “good survival” plan is marketed and embraced. Grocery chains and retailers have created their own in-house lines of organic, “healthy” products to meet enlightened customer demand. We are saturated with articles, books, and blogs of how to eat, think and exercise for a better life. And we have to keep reading because the rules are constantly changing: one decade proclaims salt should be eliminated; the next promotes adding more salt into your diet. One medical study says don’t eat eggs; the next says eggs are a great source of protein. Women are encouraged to schedule yearly mammograms, then told they can be harmful and unreliable. Sometimes the rules of survival are hard to keep up with.

### **The ambivalence of survival**

If buying organic to stay alive was all there was to the act of survival, life would be so much easier. As much as our society is focused on ensuring a lengthy survival, the reality of our lives tells a different story. More than half of us live with a persistent and painful poor health condition. The other half takes care of someone with a health problem like chronic pain, depression, or anxiety that just doesn’t go away. And life careens out of control no matter what we do. Company downsizing eliminates our job. A drunken driver veers into our lane. An inherited gene puts us at risk for a rare disease. Our spouse leaves us with no warning.

Survival is far more than staying alive or being the last man standing. It isn’t always black and white or cut and dry. Unlike movies or reality TV, it doesn’t necessarily come with a convenient or timely close. At best, survival is an ambivalent journey. Most survival experiences are battles of triumph versus failure, exhaustion versus determination, innocence versus guilt, and shame versus pride. It is never the end of the story. Life during and after survival can

be messy, painful, uncertain, and ambiguous. You survived the car wreck, but how do you deal with the incessant pain of your broken back. Your father pulled through his stroke, but can no longer talk or feed himself. You received a good divorce settlement, but are filled with anger and feelings of abandonment.

Survival does not promise happy endings or a painless existence. With each reason for living, there may be another doubting it. My father questions his survival every day. Now in his eighties, he longs for heaven. He wakes up each morning and sighs with both gravity and gratitude realizing that he is still here for another day in his painful earthly existence. He reminds me that with the beauty of life may come the beast of living.

There are events in my own survival journey that have urged me to believe my place remains here on earth and others that beg me to give in to whatever the opposite of surviving is: surrendering, perishing, taking that last breath on earth to be alive again in my heaven. My area of clinical research and psychology expertise in the field of chronic, long-suffering conditions helps me unravel the tangle of distress that often follows the emotional and physical pain in survival. But, more frequently, it complicates my life because I ponder and reflect on the undertows of our integrated health and health-care. With every scientific correlation between physical, emotional and spiritual life, there is an anecdote contradicting the connections I make between pain, depression, loss, and survival.

### **The sails of hope and prayer**

A common response to crisis and survival in people of many religions and spiritual paths is hope and prayer. Recently I travelled to Ephesus, Turkey and visited the home of Mary, the mother of Jesus. I passed a wall that was a city block long where people tied their prayers written on tiny scraps of paper and ragged cloth. Everywhere I see people hope and pray. Sometimes their

prayers are answered and survival goes on. Sometimes their hopes are unfulfilled, and they go on differently than they imagined.

There is a continual push and pull between hope and prayer for those seeking relief from God. Day after day, the hope to return to what life was before takes shape as a kind of prayer. When the answers and resolutions we seek don't come, hope wanes and prayers stall. It gets harder and harder to believe. The two beautiful sails of hope and prayer that once carried our dreams are now tattered and torn.

For more than 20 years I have returned to God through my prayers and my faith relationship while battling chronic poor health. At first glance, my faith tells me to pray harder and longer, to keep keeping on until my problems go away. Yes, I believe with all my heart in the power of hope and prayer. But, after two decades, I need more than the advice to keep praying and to never give up. I'm desperate for another layer to the explanation of why sometimes the answer to my prayer is no, or silence, or that God's timing is not my timing.

What now jumps off the pages of any of the self-help books and spiritual guides on my shelf is the absence of any promise that my prayers will be answered as I think they should be. That is why I will not attempt to explain why your prayers have or haven't been answered. And I will never tell you to pray harder and longer. I will, instead, present another possibility, one that becomes the wind to fill our sails of hope and prayer and transcend the daily emotional roller coasters, disappointments, ambiguity, and negative spirals that the mere act of surviving creates. I call this path Sacred Survival.

### **First the sacred, then the survival**

We have many stories of people trying to survive—to find purpose, meaning, and answers to life, often in the midst of some traumatizing and horrific events. To start our journey into Sacred Survival, we must first go back to the

beginning, before the survival stories, and remember the sacred story. God's first recorded acts in Genesis are acts of creation, which He blesses and declares holy. But He does not conclude His creation with man until He has first brought order out of chaos, light out of darkness, and provided everything necessary for an abundant life. In so doing, God declares both life and survival sacred. Man's life after creation is just as holy and sacred as the initial act of His creation. That desire for an ordered, light-filled, and abundant life is at the core of our very existence. From taking our first breath as a new born baby, to enduring unimaginable pain and suffering, we are innately designed to cry out like our Creator, "Let there be...!"

Survival must then be viewed as a sacred process which can move us past declaring, "I survived!" to honestly asking, "So why is life so miserable?" Sacred Survival is an intentional process that sets life on a course from being bearable to becoming beautiful. The simplest acts of survival can be attended to, practiced, improved, and appreciated so that the life changing journeys through sacred survival can be extraordinary.

The root of the word *survival* implies this sacred origin. It originates from the Latin combination of the words *super* (meaning in addition) and *vivere* (meaning life). The root word *sur* means over and above. So as much as survive means to live, it means to live over and above merely staying alive. It is living over and above an ordinary existence. It is far more than how it is frequently used to exaggerate circumstances with hyperbole and embellishment, as in, "I survived my mid-term exams" or "I survive the first meeting with my future in-laws." Survival is life itself, and not only life, but abundant life, as Jesus promised. So how do we make sense of life's painful contradictions and live over and above?

**Prepare for the unexpected**

As you embark on this journey of Sacred Survival, you will soon learn that what comes out of the actual practice may be different from your original intent. You see, sometimes we have a purpose for our acts but the results are not what we expected.

For example, when I began gardening, my purpose was to end up with big, red, healthy tomatoes. That's what I envisioned. Instead, year after year I harvested tiny tomatoes with black spots, or no tomatoes at all. I didn't end up with what I started out hoping for. I did, however, end up with a wonderful experience. I made relationships with people, with the farmer's market, and even the earth. We go IN with a set purpose. We come OUT with something else - an experience.

What I am speaking to you about is this: We are called to a deeper form of survival—a Sacred Survival--where we choose not only life, but abundant life in the midst of pain and suffering. This instinct is firmly rooted in our biological, emotional, and spiritual identity to such an extent that we will build or break our relationships with God, each other and ourselves depending on how we pursue survival.

Everyone has either suffered in their life, is suffering, will suffer, or knows someone who is suffering and in pain. That's a lot of suffering. It was the subject of my doctoral research, and to relieve another's pain is the passion of my heart. I want to share what persistent survival looks like for me, and how it has made my long-suffering not just a little more tolerable, but sacred. As you continue to read, I am asking you to broaden your definition and practice of survival. I am asking you to consider that there is a sacred dimension to every survival experience that can free you to live on a level you never thought possible.

### **The six S.A.C.R.E.D. principles**

Maybe you are stranded on an island of all out suffering or of daily indifference. Maybe you've been too tired, angry, or alone to believe that your life can be more. I'm offering you new possibilities. Just begin with one of these practices: **Strength, Acceptance, Compassion, Relationship, Exits, or Decisions.** See if you don't feel a little better and love a little more. Your survival begins now.

## **Thoughts to contemplate about your survival**

1. Describe your survival instinct and where you feel it kicking in.
2. What do you believe about your survival to date? Discuss when it is accidental versus intentional.
3. What are some stories of survival that give you hope? Why?

