



## CHAPTER 1



# Deeper (IN)

*Love is like a tree: it grows by itself, roots itself deeply  
in our being and continues to flourish over a heart in ruin.  
The inexplicable fact is that the blinder it is, the more tenacious it is.  
It is never stronger than when it is completely unreasonable.*

—VICTOR HUGO<sup>1</sup>

**I REMEMBER BEING ALONE.** A lot. Not that my parents weren't there; they were. But what I feel as I journey through memories is almost nothing. A vacuum. Emptiness of substance, emotionally, spiritually. And I see myself alone. Playing alone. In my room, mostly. Or in the family room with the '60s red shag carpet. My mother somewhere in the house reading. My father gone, at work. Or angry. Mostly, I remember being alone.

Some of my first memories are of my best friend Sheila, who lived right across the street, and several other friends who lived just houses away. Our neighborhood felt like one big playground. Our mothers sent us outside in the morning, and we played together all day long—first in my backyard, then in all the others. It was magical. It felt safe. I belonged. Until we moved.

My father's anger and inability to stay very long in any job meant we moved several times as I was growing up. At the end of second

grade, we moved from Cincinnati to Lexington, Kentucky. I still remember looking out the back window of the car as we pulled away, waving to Sheila and sobbing. My sense of security was slipping away with each mile.

Lexington was hard. Then McAllen, Texas, for seventh grade was harder. On the border of Mexico. Culture shock. Then North Webster, Indiana, for eighth grade and high school. A tiny, one-stop-light lake town. Another kind of culture shock. Each move was harder. And as an introvert—an extreme, please-don't-make-me-talk kind of introvert—I had more and more trouble connecting in life. Friendships were lost with each move. I was lost more and more with each move.

A disconnected teenager will do almost anything to find affinity and affirmation. It's a bit of a cliché. Troubled teen makes bad choices. That was me. Without any emotional or spiritual grounding, without any sense of myself, I was desperate to find the people who would provide that. The summer before my senior year of high school, I decided I would do whatever it took to be popular, to finally fit in, belong. I wouldn't compromise my grades, because my grades were my identity. But I would compromise myself in every other way. In our school, the popular crowd was smart—honor-society smart. And the popular crowd partied hard. Drinking. Drugs. They were very happy to bring me in and took great joy in my corruption. I was finally in. And I was more alone than ever. Darkness and depression swallowed me whole.

Word that I was out of control, struggling, reached three teachers. These three ate lunch together every day in an office with doors open, open to students who wanted to talk. Two of these teachers knew Jesus. And one was my physics teacher. One day during a lab, Mr. Kitson called me into his office, closed the door, and started talking about Jesus. I wasn't raised in church. I knew next to nothing about Jesus—except that Christmas and Easter had something to do with him. I didn't have a grid for anything he was saying. I might

as well have been listening to Charlie Brown's teacher: "Wha wha wha wha wha, Jesus, wha wha wha." But what I knew when I returned to my lab was something about Jesus was important, and someone cared enough about me to throw me a lifeline.

A few weeks later, as I stood in our kitchen holding a knife to my wrist, I had a rare moment of clarity. I could end it now. Or I could try the God thing. Since I had nothing to lose and the rest of my life to gain, it seemed like giving Jesus a shot was a good idea. The next day I asked Mr. Kitson what I should do. He pointed me to a church within walking distance of my house, filled with people who loved Jesus, and he said I should get a Bible and read the book of John. I immediately did both.

The people at that little church embraced me, and the youth group took me in. I started reading the book of John and I could not stop. The stories were alive to me, and it was all such amazingly good news. How come no one had ever told me about this Jesus? News this good, a story this good, everyone should know. When I finished John, I kept reading, making my way through the New Testament. A few months later I was about midway through the book of Romans when my youth pastor called the question: Was there any reason I wasn't ready to follow Jesus? All the reasons not to were gone.

We knelt together at the altar rail of the little church. Just the two of us. And I prayed. I told Jesus I'd messed things up. I needed him. I needed forgiveness. And I would follow him. I gave everything to him that day. And a world sideways and gray turned suddenly upright and full color. When I opened my eyes, everything looked different—which I know sounds weird, but it really did. Like going from an old black-and-white TV to HD color. And I felt different. Joy came in.

So much changed when I gave my life to Jesus. But the depression of my childhood still hung like a shadow around me. Six weeks later I began my freshman year at Vanderbilt University, knowing little about my new faith and even less about myself. I began to learn more

about Jesus and what it meant to follow him. I learned about Bible study tools, Scripture memorization, serving, prayer, and many good things that formed a foundation of faith in my life. My head learned a lot about Jesus, and I loved him more than ever. But my heart was disconnected from so much of what I was learning, unable to experience the truth of his love for me. I worked hard to do all the right things, because that's what a perfectionistic performer does. And it helped for a while. And then it didn't. At the core, I was still alone.

I realized gradually, through years of counseling and healing prayer, that I had no sense of self. No sense of myself at all. I was afraid that if you peeled back all the layers of me, there was nothing at the core. Nothing of substance. That after more than twenty years on this planet, I really didn't exist. It seems crazy, but there it is: The part that is uniquely me, my spirit, had never been seen, recognized, blessed, connected. The aloneness I'd experienced as a child and the lies that came with it had embedded in my soul. I struggled for years with depression as I walked into greater measures of healing.

I am still walking. Still healing. Still becoming more fully who I've been all along.

## **ROOTS MATTER**

For trees and everything that grows from the ground, roots are the life source. And since we are made from the dust of a garden, the same is true for us. Nourishment for our soul—our mind, will, and emotions—comes through the roots. What we are rooted (IN), what we are connected to and through, matters.

As an only child growing up in many ways emotionally and spiritually disconnected, I put down a very big root in isolation. My identity drew (in part) from this root of isolation, nourishing the message that I was alone, unloved, unchosen. My true self withered, and false self flourished, as my identity—my sense of self—grew twisted, misshapen by lies.

At the same time isolation was rooting in my life, my grandparents gave me a gift of belonging. They purchased a farm in Wilmington, Ohio when my grandfather retired, with the intention of creating a special place for their grandchildren. For me, that place was magical. It was the constant in the midst of all our moves. It was long days with my cousins. Coffee cans filled with fireflies. Barn cats. Tractor rides. Pond frogs. A secret clubhouse (OK, maybe not so secret) in the shed. In this place, I also put down a very big root. My identity drew (in part) from this root, nourishing the message that I belonged. That I was not alone. That I had a place. The gift of the farm and my time there nourished my true self in a way that sustained and formed me, in spite of the lies.

That place, the farm, remains in me. Those memories and all that's embedded in them, the belonging and safety, are life to me. Every time I see fireflies or Queen Anne's lace, it all comes back. In the summer we'd pick these beautiful lacey white flowers and put them in empty jelly jars filled with water and drops of food coloring. Then we'd watch as the flowers slowly began to change colors. The stems of the flowers drawing the blue or red or purple up into the lace. Just as those flowers were changed by color they drew from the water, I was changed by the stability I drew from the farm.

## **ABOUT A TREE**

Our unique stories shape us, for better and worse. Memories embedded in our souls (neuroscience would tell us exactly where in our brains) hold emotions connected with our beliefs about what we experienced (or didn't experience). A child who remembers being alone holds sadness and the belief she is unwanted, unchosen. A child who remembers being connected holds stability and the belief she has a place. It's all in there together, with a whole lot more. And it all forms the soil we draw from, the places we are rooted. We are all a very mixed bag of nuts—the good and bad together.