

BROKEN

BROKEN

Making Sense of Life After
Your Parents' Divorce

TIM BAKER



TH1NK
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For my brother and sister



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PROLOGUE

BROKEN THINGS

NO ONE SEEMS TO WANT broken things.

I know this because I've seen Dumpsters filled with broken toys and torn coats and ripped-open pillows thrown in with half-eaten sandwiches and old milk cartons. Broken things do not serve useful purposes and they do not help advance society and they are not the kind of thing you want to have around. No one goes shopping for broken things. No one gives broken things as gifts.

I wonder if broken things have their own private story about their lives as loved and unbroken things. Could a broken and discarded toy tell a story about the day he was unwrapped and played with and cherished? Would he speak of those days with that certain sparkle in his eye, the kind of a sparkle that shows how much those unbroken days meant to him? Would those old shoes gathering dust in your closet tell stories about that last hike or the time you kissed your date good night for the first time?

People crave unbroken things. Do things crave to be unbroken? Do people?

What about those of us who were the bright and shiny gift someone's eyes sparkled over as she held us in a blanket and

presented us with pride and hope before the church or grandmother or best friend? At least to someone, at some point, we were hoped for. And then that thing happened to us—our parents divorced or abused us or abandoned us, and ultimately broke us. Now do people want us?

Who would? Broken toys are tossed aside. Used wrappers are thrown away. Broken people are discarded too. I know this because I've seen people left in their brokenness, discarded by their parents, their friends, or the people who loved them the most. Discarded because they were "too broken." Discarded because that's what you do with broken things.

After my parents divorced, I felt psycho-weird-strange-abnormal; I felt like I had rabies all the time or like I was psychotically depressed on the inside or like I couldn't laugh without knowing I was going to have to cry alone afterward. It sucks being broken, like that thing that can't be fixed, like that thing no one wants. No one wants a broken thing. Sometimes it feels like no one wants a broken me.

LAYERS

I'm not entirely sure how we're supposed to learn about brokenness, and I'm not sure how we're supposed to get to the place of being more healed. I don't know how to make God notice that I'm still not totally fixed, that I want to be healed and whole again, and that I want to be able to praise him honestly for who I am and what he made me to be.

Maybe God doesn't just wave his hand or make a declaration of healing. Maybe it's something I have to journey through. Pos-

sibly, the journey is the healing process that God has designed. To be honest, I'm not sure.

I guess it's a choice—like a life choice. We can stay here and stay broken, or we can move ourselves forward and, fueled by the desire to be whole again, we can begin learning what it means to be unbroken.

My best way of understanding it is like this: We have to organize our lives into layers, taking each layer and living it again. We start with the layer that represents when we were born, or the earliest layer we can remember. And then the next layer. And then the next.

Imagine each of these layers set out before you on a table. They sit there like a pile of thin tissue paper, each page different from the others. You take the first layer and study its texture, color, and size. You go through the process of hating that layer, then understanding it, then loving it, then embracing it as who you are.

Each layer has to be understood and loved differently. Some layers we can deal with quickly. Other layers will take years to learn, understand, and accept.

JOURNEY

The worst part of reliving those layers is, we often can't remember many of the early ones. They're there, but some memories, like old, faded photographs, are hard to make out clearly. Now and then we catch an old memory floating through. We can barely make out the characters in the picture or tell what the subject is.

Sometimes these old memories are out of focus. Often they are woven together. Awful moments combine to make an awful

family memory. The problem with these memories is that the ones that come to the surface are often the worst ones, or they're fake ones. You know those fake ones, I'm sure. They're the ones you create in your mind to compensate for missing or really awful memories.

Looking through these layers of old memories is a long process. Maybe this is the way God wants it. Is he watching us study and learn and accept? Is he holding us while we search through those layers? Is he taking each one off, only when we're ready? I don't know. But I believe in God, and I know he's real. I figure he doesn't want us to stay broken.

Each layer leads us closer to understanding how our parents' divorce pulled us apart and made us feel like something lying with the old banana peels and the rest of the stinking trash. Looking at each layer helps us realize that God is putting us back together, piece by piece. He's showing us that we don't belong in the trash, even though we felt trashed, we were never really there. Life broke us, but we are not ruined. God puts us back together, and he does it slowly because if he did it all at once, I imagine we'd probably explode.

HOPE

This feels like good news. Like *the* good news.

We stand broken before God, and he does not look past our brokenness. He sees our broken souls and spirits and our hurting hearts. In this physical world, where we often bump meaninglessly into each other, ignoring each other's hurt and pain, God does not do that.

He sees.

He knows.

He seeks out.

He heals.

Hope isn't about trusting psychologists, medications, or any other man-made healing tactic. Hope is built on what God has done for us and others in the past. It is built on knowing what God has done and trusting that he'll continue doing that, even for and in *us*. So we hope that God will heal us, but that's not like the hope we have that today's mail will bring a check for a thousand dollars or the kind of hope we have for better weather. This is an unusual hope. A certain hope.

We trust God because he promises healing. We trust him because he does heal.

He heals us. Even broken us.

MIRACLE

And that healing is a miracle.

The truth of God in us is this: Divorce might break us, but we do not have to remain broken. Even though our lives are damaged, God makes that damage a miracle. Even though our lives feel beyond repair, God repairs.

This miracle is a *possible* miracle. The miracle of being healed from divorce often feels like we're asking God to reattach a severed limb, but I imagine that to God it is as easy as replacing a lightbulb.

Part of the miracle of God's healing is the actual healing. Another part is watching it happen. We do not sit idly by and

wait while wearing a blindfold. We get to watch God working in us.

There is pain in our parents' divorce, but there is also a hefty miracle. This is that miracle: God loves us, reaches inside us, and reshapes what divorce wrecked. Only God can do this and, truth is, God's the only one who really wants to do it. Want, combined with ability—that is God's miracle healing in us.

So we reach through the layers. We discover the memories. We relearn who we are. We uncover the beautiful thing God made us to be, that thing buried under the yuck of the pain. And in the process, we become again what God planned all along. His healed child living whole-ly for him.

This is our life-process.

It begins now.

Here we are, God. Heal us.

ONE

MEMORIES

IF SHOES MAKE THE MAN, then Vans sneakers are the kind of man I am. I'm forty, and I don't race bikes anymore. I've never been on a skateboard and I'm not really cool enough to wear my Vans. Still, these sneakers are my connection to the old me. I wore Vans when I was a kid. I wore them before the divorce. And I love them like I love my childhood.

I need that connection because I have forgotten so much of what I have lived through. Even though it feels like a completely empty attempt, if I keep wearing these shoes I will always have my childhood with me somehow. It makes sense if you think about it. Shoes aren't memories, but they make me feel like I have memories.

Memories of our childhood go in two directions. There are the memories we can remember: good or bad times during our childhood that we easily recall. Then there are those memories we can't recall: good or bad missing moments. This can be agonizing. If we don't remember our childhood, how can we know what we were like?

Whatever our memories, remembering is important—reaching back and rediscovering what we can remember, and searching for

what we can't remember. The journey toward understanding the layers of who we are begins with journeying into the past. We need our memories. We need to remember who we used to be. Before the before. Back when things were as God intended. If we choose not to remember and if we choose not to deal with our memories, we won't understand why we act or feel the way we do right now. We have to face our memories so we can live our future.



My memories.

Southern California smells like fresh flowers and saltwater and coconut suntan lotion.

Everywhere I go there are people in bathing suits. There are sandcastles and ice-cream trucks with kids crowded around. Everyone eats out all the time—fast-food tacos or Jack in the Box. Kids spend all day with their parents or friends. They build forts in trees or wage wars against invisible armies or race bikes up and down the street. Or they spend all day at the beach. They party and they play and they do not hurt.

Our family of five exists as part of the Southern California culture. We are good like everyone else. We eat at Jack in the Box like they do. We go to the beach and build sandcastles and crowd around the ice-cream man. We have many cool friends who race things and ride things and cook out a lot. My older brother, my younger sister, and I spend our days in our huge Southern California backyard.

There's the tree fort that I helped my brother and his friend build. We listened to Alice Cooper's "School's Out" over and over

as we hammered and sweated, created and sawed, and built on to our mom's favorite avocado tree. She said it was okay, and we hated avocados anyway. Many people stayed in our fort, but our most memorable guests were several thousand bees that swarmed from a neighbor's hive.

In the garage, we and several other kids from the block put on a last-minute Halloween play and horror house. There was a magic show, a few performances, and this one part where we used cooked spaghetti and olives to make people believe they had their hands in a pot of brains and eyeballs. There's the driveway, where I learned how to ride my green Schwinn without training wheels. Not too long after that, I learned that the metal poles on my seat made sparks on the driveway. I learned to pop wheelies and make hard turns just so I could make those sparks. I like to think there are scrapes from the metal on that driveway right now.

If you'd asked me when I was six if there was another world out there beyond Southern California, I would have said no. If you had asked me if any place smelled sweeter or if there was any other way of existing on this planet, I would have said no. That's because there really wasn't any other way of existing. Not when you're six. Where you're living ought to smell sweet. And your parents are your security. If you had asked me when I was six, I would have told you how secure and strong and protecting my parents were. I might have told you, in my own six-year-old way, that my parents were my world. They were my anchor. My compass.

I miss Southern California and I miss my childhood. I hate that my childhood was wrecked by divorce. I hate that I have this story to tell.

I wish I was still six years old.

MEMORY WAREHOUSE

Sometimes it feels like all our memories are kept locked up in a huge warehouse. We each have our own warehouse, a large room filled with aisles of shelves, each aisle representing a different experience. There are aisles that represent a favorite house. Aisles filled with memories of family vacations. Aisles packed with good memories. Aisles loaded with bad memories. And we continually walk those aisles, searching for and remembering our past.

If you had the chance to shop for your memories, which aisle would you shop in? Would you stand in the aisle where you learned to ride a bike? Would you walk the aisle where you and your brother were still together? Would you visit the aisle where your family was actually happy, whole, and healthy?

See, most of us have great memories of our families, and most of us have very bad memories too. They're all in there, locked up in that memory warehouse. Even when we have the opportunity to look around the warehouse, we often choose to stand in only one aisle of memories.

But if we don't look around, searching through all our memories, good and bad, we get locked into only one perspective about who our family is. Some of us recall only memories of our family drama. We easily recall those moments when our parents constantly yelled. We recall our abuse. We recall the agony of our parents' divorce. But when we stand only in that aisle of negative memories, those memories become our identities. We become perpetually hurting people who will never get through our parents' divorce.

Others of us choose to recall only good memories. Yeah, there are rows of negative moments in our lives, but we shop along as if we can't see them. We choose to walk around good memories of steamy Christmas meals and chilly ski trips. But by only recalling the positive moments, we become always positive but secretly unhappy and internally conflicted. Our insides are confused because we know there's more to our memories than we are choosing to remember.

Still others of us would love to recall all of our memories, but we can't. We'd love to walk more than just the three aisles of memories we constantly walk; we know those other memories are there. But those aisles are barricaded, lined with huge guys holding grenades and machine guns. Those memories are locked up because someone in our family doesn't want us walking those aisles. Walking them gets us into trouble or attacked.

And then there are the aisles I walk, and maybe you walk these too. We walk only a few rows of memories because they are the only rows we're aware of. We are missing many memories. They're absent, removed, burned. Whatever happened, somehow we can't find them. So we constantly recall the few memories we have, reliving every last moment. Maybe a new memory is added once in a while. And when a new one is added, we cherish it and relive it. Doesn't matter if it's a good or a bad memory either.

Shopping for memories is that thing we need to do, that thing that often feels impossible. Some of us want to shop, but looking for new memories is painful. We desperately want to seek out more of who we are and learn to look into our families and remember, but that remembering feels awful.

GOD AND MEMORIES

There among those stacks, rows, and shelves of memories, God wanders around recalling the things he's watched us live through. There among all those moments that make up our identities, God looks over our history and sees the times he lovingly acted on our behalf and the times he lovingly didn't act. I imagine God wandering among my own memory-filled shelves, recalling and laughing and weeping and celebrating. I know God does that because throughout Scripture he reminds people of their history. This is the same God who knew Moses' childhood pain and his murdering past. This is the same God who knew about Paul's hatred for the church and his pious religious past. This is the same God who knows your aisles, your forgotten memories.

God was there at your family vacations. When your parents divorced. The time you hit your brother. God was present for all of those moments. They are an ever-present reality for him because he loves you. He was there when you were hurting and he was there when you celebrated.

This is tough theology. Tough because some of us would rather there were moments that God didn't see—those private sins or moments so personal we wouldn't want anyone to see them, including God. Especially God. It's tough because we often want to hide from God. Yeah, we want him to know about our hurts and pains, but only those we're comfortable with him seeing.

And it's tough because if God saw and knew and was present, why didn't he stop the bad things from happening? He knew what was happening in our parents' marriage, so why didn't he make it better? God saw that they were splitting and that the split was

going to break us, so why weren't we protected? If God didn't protect us, can he truly love us? Anyone or anything that claims to love has to have within it the capacity to protect. That protection has to be a part of that love. If God truly loves us, wouldn't he be willing to shield us from those painful memories he knows about?

Could it be that God has a greater purpose, idea, or plan for us and that purpose will now be fulfilled as a result of our parents' divorce? Is there something in God's plan for our futures that means we have to first remember all our past hurts before we can move forward?

ABSENT MEMORIES

Some of us actually walk the aisles of memories and don't remember much. We have this idea that there are certainly more aisles, but we can't find them. If you've lived through this, you understand how agonizing it is.

Psychologists will tell you a variety of reasons why many of us don't remember our childhoods. Some believe memories are blocked by traumatic experiences. Others believe we choose to forget because our memories are hurtful or because we don't feel comfortable focusing on negative experiences. Whatever the reason, we often don't remember, and not remembering all of who we used to be can be excruciating.

This is called stress-induced amnesia. When we experience trauma—a car accident, seeing someone killed, living through divorce—those stress-filled experiences stop our mental processes and cause us to forget everything. If that event hadn't been so traumatizing, we might remember more. For those of us who don't

remember much about our lives since our parents divorced, that's amnesia working.

Stress doesn't just make us forget. It also causes us to make up fantastic stories and memories about our families—things that never happened. Our parents fighting over who has to pick up groceries becomes a new story: "Mom and Dad beat each other up because neither wanted to feed us." Mom and Dad having one good meal together with the family transforms into a fairy tale: "We were the happiest family."

Sometimes we don't remember, or we remember our past in a skewed way, because we're told to remember it that way. Some of our families make it taboo to remember anything about our lives together as a happy family; bringing up a joyful memory is met with a "we don't talk about those things anymore" message. Some of us remember our family as a wrecked thing, yet other people have told us that our family was really wonderful. Confusing. And the same can work in the opposite direction. Some of our families want to have only good memories. When we talk about a bad memory, our family insists it never happened.

ACHING MEMORIES

Some of us are haunted by the memories of our families. We remember everything: details about vacations, particulars about Christmas dinners and Thanksgiving meals and all those good times spent together. And now that our parents are divorced, those memories mock us. We are constantly reminded about what we lost. It's always there telling us that we once were whole.

It hurts. It's an aching memory.

The cruelest part of these memories is that we can't help but relive them. We want so bad to have our families back that we'll gladly walk those aisles over and over, searching for what went wrong and for details we don't ever want to forget—moments that are beautiful and that we can cherish.

It's important to embrace that ache. It's okay to celebrate what we used to have. God wants us to embrace those things, even the hard things. They make us who we are. And they link us back to life before our parents divorced, which is an important part of the healing process.

REMEMBERING BEFORE THE BEFORE

The moment my parents split, a new me was created. From that moment forward, all of my identity was formed and fashioned subconsciously by the fact that I came from a divorced family.

Because our identity can shift like that, remembering ourselves before our parents' divorce is essential. But what happens if we genuinely can't remember *anything* about our childhood? Or, even worse, what happens if all of what we remember is terrible? Some of us were older and we have a clear understanding of who we were and what life was like before the divorce. Others of us remember, and what we remember is too rough. Or we had no clue—or if we had a clue, it's been long forgotten.

Because I had forgotten a lot of my past, my beginning point always felt like it was in flux. I knew that I was born, but I barely remembered anything about my family; it was always that great unknown. The key for me was in finding old family photographs.

One day I came across this old picture of me when I was about

nine years old. I was wearing werewolf fangs and had werewolf hair glued to my face. Dime-store fake blood dribbled out of my mouth, like I had just sucked the blood out of the photographer, who had taken the picture as lasting proof that werewolves do exist. That picture became my link to Kid Tim. It opened a door. I searched for more pictures.

Finding them was not easy. We had moved a lot, so locating the right box with the right pictures became a several-year journey. The more I looked, the more I realized that my family didn't take a lot of pictures after the divorce. Maybe pictures reminded us of too much pain. I'm not sure.

One summer, I was searching in Mom's house and found a box filled with slides of me and my family. Those slides told the tale of my childhood: I did smile when I was a kid. We did take vacations. There was joy and happiness.

I stole as many pictures as I could.

That same year, my wife had some of these slides transferred into real photographs and gave them to me on my birthday. I remember opening that photo album and looking at those pictures. I remember crying as I really looked at who I was as a kid: I had blond hair. I had an excited smile. I had big brown eyes. I loved to make stupid faces and do stupid things just so whoever looked at that picture would look at me. I was a hellion and a handful. I was me.

It felt so good to meet *me*.

It's good and right and healthy to remember. Before we think about our parents' divorce, we have to consider those good times that are long past. We were happier. We were healthier. For many of us, there was love and family and togetherness. Some members

of our family might not like us remembering those times, but that doesn't mean we never lived them.

Remembering only part of our story is like beginning a good novel in the middle. The story does not make sense, we don't fully know the characters, and the ending feels disconnected and contrived.

WHAT DO WE DO WITH THIS?

The first important step on our journey out of brokenness begins with prayer. I'm going to suggest prayer many times throughout this book, because prayer acknowledges the ever-present help of God. We have to pray because we have to communicate with him, the Healer, if we want to become truly healed. So we implore God to begin this journey with us.

We pray . . .

"God, please walk my aisles."

We say this because inviting God to walk through our memories is the best way to start. When we say this we are really saying, "God, I am surrendering all of my memories to you. I surrender what I remember and I surrender what I don't remember. I want you to reveal what I don't currently remember but that you want me to know."

"God, please walk my aisles with me."

Inviting God to look into our memories isn't all we have to do. I imagine that God wants to walk with us. Can you imagine what that might be like, if that could really happen? It'd be like wandering

through your grandmother's closet with her and taking the time to let her tell you all the stories she remembers about each object: the shawl Grandpa gave her, those shoes she wore to the ball. I imagine God doing the same thing. He'd pick up our memories and remark often: "Ohhh yeah. I remember that. Coke spewed all out of your nose. I laughed." And "Suuurre! I remember that shirt. You wore it when that girl tried to kiss you. Yeah, made me kinda queasy too." God is personal and he is present. Those moments aren't at all out of character with who he is.

"God, please take these memories."

It's important to take the most awful and painful memories, look them over, and then place them in God's shopping cart. These memories are the ones we need divine help with. We place them in God's cart, but that's not the last we see of them. These are the ones God brings back at just the right moment so we can deal with them and be healed through them.

"God, please fill these shelves."

We need to ask God to fill the empty shelves where we know our crucial memories belong. We might ask him to replace them or to help us recall them. This is what I'd say to God, but I wouldn't just say it. I'd probably demand it. I'd be adamant. I'd want my memories.

SURRENDER

I've always imagined that moments with God wouldn't be spent singing or bowing or hovering in his presence. Moments with

God would be spent cuddling in his lap. I can't imagine any other posture. Maybe lying there, we'd sing to him, quietly, in a whisper. Maybe we would whisper one stanza of an old hymn and between each stanza he'd whisper-sing back, "I love you, oh how I love you," melodically and right in tune and step with the hymn we're singing to him.

When I think about surrendering to God, that's the posture I imagine taking. And in his presence and in that posture, I would do this, and I hope you'd agree that you'd do this too: I'd surrender to God all those awful memories. I would say to him out loud all of my painful memories and all of my happy memories. I would confess my anger at not remembering all of my childhood. I would say everything. I would say everything because I can. I would say everything because he wants me to.

We can say to God how we long to be able to walk all of the aisles of all of our memories. God wants to be involved. So here, at the beginning, we have to invite him into the process. And we should want God involved. Whether our memories hurt or not, whether they're pleasant or painful, we need God smack in the middle of our memory aisles.

God is wandering the aisles of your heart. He's wandering your memories. He's dying for you to invite him into the journey from being broken to being whole.