

F L I R T I N G



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### **Flirting with Darkness**

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# CONTENTS

Why I Wrote This Book ..... 15

## **PART ONE: FLIRTING WITH DARKNESS**

1. Confessions of an Ex-Suicide ..... 21  
2. Squirt Gun Drive-bys and Funeral Directors ..... 27  
3. The Shortest Verse in the Bible ..... 33  
4. Facing the Dark Lord ..... 39  
5. You're in Good Company ..... 43

## **PART TWO: DEFEATING DEPRESSION**

6. There Will Be Blood in the Battle ..... 49  
7. Weapon #1: Prayer Walks ..... 51  
8. Weapon #2: Scripture Scholar Scuba Gear ..... 59  
9. Weapon #3: The Magic Number of Greatness ..... 69  
10. Weapon #4: Endorphins, Anyone? ..... 79  
11. Weapon #5: Rewrite Your Story ..... 81  
12. Weapon #6: Own Your Oddness ..... 85  
13. Weapon #7: Friendventures ..... 99  
14. Weapon #8: Heaven ..... 107  
15. Weapon #9: El Roi ..... 117  
16. Weapon #10: Let God Love on You ..... 133  
17. Weapon #11: Dreamality ..... 141

**PART THREE:  
DANCING IN THE LIGHT**

18. Of Tolkien, Lewis, and the Phrygian Legend . . . . .	149
19. Theology and Thief-ology . . . . .	155
20. Brain Power! . . . . .	159
21. Bulletproof Souls . . . . .	161
22. The Chapter That Starts with a Lousy Joke . . . . .	165
23. The Thanksgiving Gratitude Attitude . . . . .	169
24. The Ineffable Tetragrammaton . . . . .	171
25. Briefcases at the Beach, Hitler's Art, and a Boy Named Pablo . . . . .	173
26. There's Music in the Clouds and a Bonfire in the Sky . . . . .	177
27. Don't Drink the Boos . . . . .	181
28. The Initial Singularity . . . . .	183
29. Forget the Mud . . . . .	185
30. Surfing the Wonders . . . . .	189
31. Octopuses and Pizza Slices . . . . .	195
32. The Two Most Important Questions . . . . .	199
33. When Holidays Are Hard . . . . .	201
34. Welcome to Hogwarts, You Muggles . . . . .	205
35. Promises, Promises . . . . .	209
36. Pomegranates, Tassels, and Healing Wings . . . . .	211
37. A Tribute to St. Olaf . . . . .	219
38. Ram in the Thicket . . . . .	221
39. The Interiority Complex . . . . .	225
40. Cue the Mic Drop . . . . .	229
41. Lions and Butterflies . . . . .	233
42. No, You're Not Depressed . . . . .	235
43. Dance in Defiance of the Dark . . . . .	239
Notes . . . . .	245

## WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

Every 40 seconds, somewhere in the world, someone will kill themselves.

There are 123 suicides each day in the United States. In fact, there are twice as many suicides as murders.

And, sadly, suicide is the second leading cause of death in the world for those aged 15-24.

It has become an epidemic in our time, especially among the younger generation.

That is why I wrote this book.

Suicide. Must. Stop.

((((( )))

For many people, the temptation of suicide arises out of a deep depression. So this book is devoted to defeating depression. I know it's hipster to say, "I've learned to live with depression," but I want to argue that we are not called to live with depression but to defeat it.

I want to begin this book the same way the Bible begins, with a picture of how God intends things to be. We are created to be kings destined to rule in God's kingdom, not slaves cowering to the dark lord of depression. Genesis 1:27 tells us we are created in the "image of God," and in the Hebrew language that phrase is *selem Elohim*.<sup>1</sup> All over the ancient Near East, this was the title given to kings. For example, the pharaoh who was called Amon-Re had a name that meant "the image of the sun god." All over Mesopotamia, the king was nicknamed for the god of that nation. The king was not only a ruler over all the land but also a high priest who mediated blessing to his kingdom.

So, if God decrees that *we* are kings and priests (Revelation 1:6), then it means we are to have dominion over the earth and subdue it, not live lives of those subjugated and defeated.

As someone who once journeyed quite a distance down the long, dark tunnel of depression and faced the temptation of suicide, I can assure you that *suicide is not the answer*. In fact, it's just the opposite. I believe no one *has* to live with the kind of deep depression that once stifled my happiness and contentment.

At its root, the answer to depression is a renewed hope, and my number one goal in this book is to help you find that hope.

Frankly, I'm all about hope.

The title of my last book was *Optimisfits*, a word of my own invention that is a kind of collision between the words *optimistic* and *misfit*. In my personal, made-up dictionary, the definition of an optimisfit is as follows: "a nonconformist; an adventurer; a person who lives with childlike wonder, wild abandon, and unapologetic optimism." This attitude is the best way of defeating depression in your life. Those of us who have embraced the identity of being an optimisfit proudly wear another label: rebels of hope.

We are rebelling against the kind of conformity and negativity that

make up the zeitgeist of despair in our culture. We refuse to fit into that system. Because it is killing us. Literally. We're going to look at depression through the lenses of personal story, the Bible, history, and science. They have all led me to one conclusion: You don't have to settle for just learning to *live with* your depression. You don't have to accept it as a character trait of your personality. No, you can rise above it!

This new outlook made all the difference for me.

It helped me climb up out of the deep well of my own despair and disappointment and breathe the fresh, pure air of renewed hope.

It can do the same for you.

PART ONE

FLIRTING



WITH

DARKNESS



# CONFESSIONS OF AN EX-SUICIDE

Let me start with a confession: I am an ex-suicide.

By that I mean I was strongly tempted to take my own life. I stared the possibility of suicide directly in the face, but in the end I walked away without having done the deed.

There was a time, though, when such an outcome was not at all assured.

Nearly 800,000 people worldwide die by their own hand every year. I was almost a statistic.

Sometime in my mid-twenties, I made a careful evaluation of my life, and I felt categorically doomed. So, I did what any “sensible” millennial would do. I pulled a large knife from a kitchen drawer so that I could use it to kill myself. Frankly, I thought it would hurt less to put an end to my life than to endure the continuous scorpion stings of despair that had become my daily bread.

I’d already done all the classic things suicidal chaps are known for. I Googled to find the most effective methods of how one could go about the inelegant business of offing oneself. I pondered many different scenarios. At night I would sometimes sneak up to the top of the tallest

buildings in the city and walk around the exposed edge—a makeshift version of a lethal tightrope. I once terrified an unsuspecting security guard, who, it turns out, was watching me. In my flirtation with the grim reaper, I put myself in other scary situations and wondered what it would feel like to end it all as I ventured out onto the brink of death. I raced around town at seriously excessive speeds on a rocket motorcycle without either a helmet or a license or any knowledge of how to ride the fool thing. The simplest mistake would have drawn down the curtain on my existence.

I guess you could say I was actively courting death. I was like Albert Camus, a famous philosopher and novelist who decided that life was absurd...and therefore not worth investing much effort in to protect. He allowed himself to be a passenger with a notoriously reckless driver and ended up dead at a young age in a car accident. For a time, I found significant appeal in somehow being a passive victim like Camus rather than taking matters into my own hands.

Fortunately, and perhaps undeservedly, I didn't fall victim to any of my foolhardy predispositions.

My guardian angel was obviously working a double shift.

((((( )))

Does recounting these stories about my flirtation with darkness sound as though I'm composing the dramatic lyrics to an emo song or penning an overly sensationalized melodrama?

Yes, I get it. Those of my readers who are a little older had parents in World War II or Vietnam and lived through stuff like the Cuban Missile Crisis, the cultural war between the hippies and the Nixon fans, or watched dumbfounded as the twin towers collapsed on September 11. They might cast a wry smile at my intensely dramatic personal angst.

They have been through a lot, and compared with such horrors, what are the problems of my generation?

Here we millennials are, lounging in Mom's basement eating Sour Patch Kids and playing endless games of Fortnite. We live with all the comforts of life, and yet we are unhappy, unhappy, unhappy. And some of us sometimes just want to die.

Though our rampant epidemic of depression might strike earlier generations as ridiculous and self-obsessed, it isn't. To us, the pain is all too real.

Even if you live in a run-down trailer park, suffering from downward mobility and economic hardship, you still live better than the kings of old. Once, I skated into a homeless camp where they were watching Netflix in their tents. Need I say more? We have creature comforts and amenities that earlier generations could only dream of. Still, Generation Why is depressed, and no one seems to know the reason.

((((( )))

One of the ancient Hebrew writers of the book of Proverbs understood exactly what I am talking about. Proverbs 18:14 spells out his perspective in all its raw power: a man's spirit can sustain him in sickness, but who can bear a broken spirit?

That phrase—a *broken spirit*—defined my struggle with depression and my flirtation with suicide better than anything else I'd ever heard. I'd reached a place where my spirit was just broken. Crushed, shattered, and battered was exactly how I had come to feel.

This was the result of a history of heartbreaks. I was recently diagnosed with complex PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) related to all the things I went through. My counselor confessed to me that I've had one

of the most difficult depressions she's ever had to deal with. It takes time to get past the hard stuff.

I felt like the martyr George Eagles, who lived and died in Queen Mary's day. Because of his great pains from traveling from place to place to "confirm the brethren," he was nicknamed "Trudge Over the World." This name fit me like a glove, jumping from airplane to airplane with a depleted immune system and ending up exhausted, burnt-out, and depressed.

((((( )))

I've witnessed and experienced my fair share of tragedy in my life.

One of my sisters died in a car crash when I was just a kid. I remember being pulled out of class by the principal and was dumb enough to think it meant my family was going to throw me a surprise party. Instead, I came home to find my family weeping over how Jessica had been killed in an accident. Before the accident she'd been joking that she'd always be single because Dad had told her she could only date someone who was godlier than her. "I'm the godliest person I know," she had said with a wink. And the next day, as we mourned her death, my brother commented that now she had found her man. She'd become a bride of Christ. Losing her remains the dominant memory of my childhood.

My dad's first wife also died in a car wreck.

My brother, who struggled for years with sickness from a brain tumor, Crohn's disease, and cancer, recently joined his mom and my sister in eternity. My family knows something about living in the shadow of death.

Then I was blindsided by heartbreak when a relationship I'd been in for eight years ended in tragedy, leaving me shattered and confused

and broken. I shook convulsively and sobbed my eyes out. In the days that followed I felt hollow inside—the prelude to months and months of total emotional shutdown when I felt nothing at all, becoming so numb that I was like a robot with dead batteries.

All that is going to leave a mark.

The devastating result of these tragedies was the accumulating slow torment of ten years of chronic depression. It felt like death by a thousand pinpricks or the continual dripping of Chinese water torture. Drip. Drip. Drip. An unending succession of droplets that wore away my self-image and self-confidence and my trust in God. It left me begging for death.

A broken spirit indeed.

((((( )))

There is no other emotional experience quite like depression. You are worn down by the inability to riddle out some sense in life as the gathering dark engulfs you with all manner of existential terrors.

Maybe, you begin to think, the universe is not a hospitable place for you.

All the things you really cared about seem out of reach or meaningless.

And you feel dead inside.

So, I had all the predictable responses.

I spent time staring at the walls.

I read Sylvia Plath. (Spoiler alert: She stuck her head in an oven. Happy trails...)

I drew the blinds and sat in darkness.

I made a music mix called “Laments.”

And I seriously considered killing myself.

Then something happened...and this book tells that story...



## SQUIRT GUN DRIVE-BYS AND FUNERAL DIRECTORS

I didn't always struggle with depression. But it is amazing how quickly things can turn around in your life.

Most of my high school years felt like one giant, never-ending party. I was like Tigger. Bouncy, bouncy, fun, fun, fun. My life made sense to me, and I was enjoying every minute of it, even if there had been some dark events in my past. If someone had asked me then to describe what life felt like, I might have used a phrase like “robustly flavored donuts of fun.” I wasn't dealing with any major existential crises or struggles with the Big Questions about meaning and purpose. I was fine with loving God and having a good time. That was my recipe for life.

I met all of the goals I set for myself in high school. I won the homecoming crown and was the student body president. I was selected for the All-League basketball squad and was one of the leading scorers in Orange County. I was soaring high.

I had crazy friends, most of them almost as nutty as me.

Because our school was near Disneyland, my friends and I practically lived there. When we were bored with the rides, we invented other ways to let craziness reign in the Magic Kingdom. We climbed up

above the entrance to the Indiana Jones ride and dropped leaves and twigs down on unsuspecting guests waiting in line and anticipated their shocked response. During the nightly fireworks show, we would scream out at the top of our voices, “We’re under attack,” and make like we were taking cover. We were frequently chased by the security guards for our juvenile stunts, but they never caught us. If they had, we might still be locked in a cell with the pirates of the Caribbean!

Other times we’d pretend to be mountain climbers and scale the 30-foot storage shelves at our local IKEA store. Or we’d dress in neon pink short shorts and violently flail about (what we were doing hardly deserved to be called *dancing*) at the screamo shows we would attend. We engaged in drive-by shootings with our water pistols, and once we ended up in a literal car chase when someone took umbrage at being drenched. We even snuck into a corporate recycling center so we could do somersaults in the foam pits, and we climbed a fence to make use of the outdoor hot tubs at a five-star hotel.

Some of these activities were definitely irresponsible. Maybe a little stupid. But we weren’t harming anyone. It was all pretty tame. And it was fun.

Christians gone wild!

Once a week hundreds of people crowded into my parents’ home for the Bible study I was leading. My dad was a successful pastor, and I’d followed in his footsteps. By third grade, I had my first experience of preaching. By the time I was 16, I was traveling to other churches to share with their kids...and sometimes even with the adults. I was the happy kid on *Mission Possible*.

((((( )))

I left high school early so I could train for the ministry. (A phrase which now gives me a case of the dry heaves...) I officially became a pastor during my senior year.

On the outside, everything looked great.

On the inside, I was struggling. I felt as if my future had been predetermined and I didn't have much choice. I was doing everything everyone expected of me, but I was growing cold and shriveled inside. I started feeling dead in my heart and soul, going through the motions without the emotions. It was a poor excuse for a life.

One day I was reading C.S. Lewis's book *A Grief Observed*. I had the stark realization as I browsed its pages that, like him, I had lost someone important to me—well, actually, several someones. And to top it all off, even more shocking, I realized I had lost myself. I realized I wasn't just unhappy—I was seriously and deeply depressed. I couldn't even figure out the right questions to ask. Like Mr. Lewis, I found myself inquiring about the shape of yellow.<sup>1</sup>

I was still acting like Pollyanna on the outside, but inside I felt more like Puddleglum.

The horrors began to howl inside my head.

((((( )))

I wondered if becoming a pastor was the right move for me. I was allergic to the sameness and tameness of much of modern Churchianity. I knew I could never fit inside that box of expectations. And, honestly, I didn't even want to.

I felt like David when he faced Goliath. The giant's armor is described in detail (1 Samuel 17:4-7) because the Philistines possessed a type of metal previously unknown to the Hebrews, and their overall military technology was far ahead of them. In response, King Saul put his own armor on David. But it didn't fit. It was nearly impossible to move around. The armor slowed David down and actually made him more vulnerable to defeat. Only when he pulled it off and cast it aside could he stand face-to-face against the giant (verses 38-39).

Interestingly, the Bible tells us of some of the relatives of Saul who were ambidextrous slingers and expert archers (1 Chronicles 12:1-2 NKJV). Back then, deft slingshot-marksmen were as lethal as snipers. So, contrary to popular belief, when David cast off his armor to use a sling, he actually had a military advantage over Goliath! I needed to cast off my armor and play to my strengths if I was going to face my own Goliaths.

But it took me a while to figure that out. Instead, I tried ever harder to fit into the mold. I believed I needed to be super serious, super somber, and super saintly if I was going to succeed as a pastor. Many of the people I knew who were “in ministry” were fine chaps, but they looked as if they were employed and deployed by the local morgue. That just wasn’t me. I was still the squirt gun–toting, raucous, rowdy, theme-park provocateur—a guy who would like nothing more than the opportunity to drive my Jeep into rivers just because I could.

I began to become convinced that professional ministry wasn’t my vibe. I agreed with the great Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who famously claimed that he might have become a minister if all the clergymen he knew hadn’t acted like undertakers. So many of the pastors I knew, God bless ’em, gave funeral directors a run for their money when it came to their dimly lit sanctuaries and their ponderous organ–driven songs about how “this world has nothing for me” and the like.

((((( )))

Julian the Apostate was a Roman emperor who tried to undo the work of his uncle Constantine, who had embraced Christianity and fought under the sign of the cross. Julian decided to reintroduce the pagan gods into Roman culture. Why? Because he believed Christianity made the Roman Empire weak. As William Barclay notes, he believed Christians were “pale-faced” and “flat-breasted” . . . and that even if the sun shone for them, they never saw it.<sup>2</sup> Of course, I’d never endorse

Julian's program, but when it came to how many of the Christians I knew behaved, I had to admit he had a point.

The great British social critic John Ruskin remembers playing with a set of jacks when he was a child, only to be rebuked by his pious aunt who told him that Christians weren't allowed to play with toys.<sup>3</sup> One wonders what long-term damage that did to his psyche...

This weak-kneed and legalistic Christianity was what I saw so many well-intentioned believers peddling. Their focus was on being "holy," which seemed to be a synonym for "miserable." I pursued this path with intensity, praying until the veins in my neck bulged or lying on my face, prostrate before a "holy" God. I tried to live up to the example of St. James, who was nicknamed "Old Camel Knees."

I devoured the most stringent writings of the Puritans.

One way or the other, I told myself, I was going to be one of these passionate God-fearers.

In my earlier book I referred to my squad and myself as optimisfits. But so many of the people I knew in ministry were more like pessimisfits. They seemed to fulfill the words of poet Algernon Swinburne, who once wrote, "Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown gray from thy breath."<sup>4</sup>

I was struggling and unhappy and becoming ever more depressed. Those early days in ministry were as colorless as the opening scenes of *The Wizard of Oz*.

((((( )))

My dream was to give a splash of hope and a dash of color to this world, but I found myself becoming an old soul in a young body—and not in a good way. I grew jaded and cynical, and I talked so much about

“sinners in the hands of an angry God” that even Jonathan Edwards himself might have told me to lighten up!<sup>5</sup>

I was becoming “religious” but not more like Jesus. I was becoming a Pharisee. I was defining myself by how much I had “given up for God.” And I assumed that the more miserable I felt, the more holy I was becoming.