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Chapter 1

TRYING HARD

Reckoning with Life's Deepest Loss

“Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God.”

1 JOHN 3:1 (KJV)

A THREE-HOUR TREK transported us from the desert of Southern California to the ski slopes of Bear Mountain. It was my son Larry's senior year of high school. We had cleared the schedule for a couple of days of skiing, cherishing time together before the fast-paced spring would lead to his graduation.

We arrived shortly after the ski lifts opened that day, secured our rental gear, and headed for the slopes. We anticipated non-stop fun in a beautiful setting, sharing one of our favorite father-son activities.

Just off the lift on our first run, we paused to adjust our gear and get our bearings. It didn't take Larry long, but the muscle loss

in my legs due to chemo treatments during the past year's battle with cancer made me feel as if I were skiing on matchsticks. *I'm going to have to go easy this trip*, I thought to myself. I hoped Larry wouldn't think his recovering dad was slowing him down.

Just over a ridge, a few hundred yards down the slope, I paused to wait for Larry. He wasn't far behind me on his snowboard when we'd started down the run. Now, several minutes passed, and still no Larry. I assumed he was resetting his bindings or adjusting his gear.

Ten minutes. Still no Larry. As I grudgingly knelt to remove my skis in order to begin the laborious climb back up the ridge to check on him, he finally came into view. Before I could ask what took him so long, he slowed to a stop next to me and sat down, breathless.

"I fell and hit my head."

He sounded matter-of-fact and seemed uninjured, so I wasn't too worried. "You're okay?" I asked.

"Yes, but I have a really bad headache. I think I hit my head."

He had told me that already. His repetition was my first warning sign.

"Hey, Dad, how long have we been here?"

I laughed, thinking he was messing with me. He didn't laugh.

"How long do you *think* we've been here, Larry?" My concern was growing.

"I don't know, maybe two days?" He was serious.

He didn't recall that we had arrived only minutes earlier and this was our first trip down the slope. Now I was scared.

"Larry, unstrap your snowboard. We need to get to the first-aid shack right now." We began the long, downhill march, moving slowly to be sure he didn't lose his footing again.

It wasn't long before the medics diagnosed Larry with a serious

concussion, declared an end to our ski trip, and sent us to the closest hospital emergency room. The staff rushed us through processing and prepped Larry for an on-the-spot CT scan. The whole ER ordeal took about four hours, during which time Larry's memory worsened and his questions continued with frequent repetition.

It was both alarming and a bit humorous. He seemed fine except for his memory. After doctors calmed my worst fears, I began to entertain both myself and Larry by telling him a different version of the story each time he asked me, "What happened and why are we at the hospital?"

"You ran into a truck."

"I did?"

The next time, I answered, "You plowed into a skier old enough to be your grandmother."

"I did? Is she okay?"

The next, "You attempted a massive ski jump and hurt your head."

On that one he smiled proudly. "I did? Did I get a lot of air?"

Time after time, he asked the same questions. It didn't matter whether I told him the truth or a fiction: he remembered none of it. Finally, the doctors cleared him of serious concerns, gave us care instructions for a severe concussion, and we were sent on our way.

After a short meal, we began the slow drive home with me glancing at my nearly grown son in the passenger's seat. His expression stole my breath. He was clearly trying hard to remember, and migrating toward panic that he couldn't. I slowed and pulled the car to the roadside. Larry's eyes were wild with fear.

"Dad, I don't remember *anything!*"

Larry, typically a quiet, composed individual, is rarely one to express alarm. But in this moment, he was truly terrified.

For all of his trying, he was utterly lost. No recollection of where we were, how long we had been there, how we got there. His growing realization of memory loss overtook him.

What could I say to my son who'd lost all connection to reality? His reference points were gone—his identity was a blur. Psychologically, he was free falling, and no amount of *trying to remember* would help him.

LOSS OF SELF

Something very similar to Larry's memory loss can happen to all of us on spiritual and psychological levels. This kind of traumatic loss involves equally distressing feelings of confusion and helplessness.

First, consider the idea of *loss*. Not all losses are the same. We think of little losses in terms of missing car keys or a lost ball game. We think of big losses in terms of lost relationships, careers, loved ones, financial security, or personal health. The bigger the loss, the more devastating it is, and the deeper it reaches into our psyche, triggering an even deeper loss.

Perhaps one of the most significant losses anyone can face is the *loss of a sense of self*. Something breaks inside of us, and leaves us feeling valueless, meaningless, and hopeless. We wonder if we will ever find our way again.

Have you ever lost your sense of self or faced a time when life made you wonder who you are? *Why* you are? How many times have you asked yourself, *Who am I, really?* Such experiences (on a soul level) are disruptive and alarming to our inner worlds—like a spiritual and emotional concussion.

What can we do when we don't know who we are? Do we sink into despair? Scramble to pull ourselves together and try harder? Do we start over, again and again hoping to magically “get it right” or “find ourselves”? It's confusing and disorienting to face circumstances that leave us asking, “Who am I *now*? Who am I *supposed to be*?”

Ten years ago, I thought I had solid answers to these identity questions, established through hard work over many years. Then, what I thought was solid ground dissolved from under my feet. Circumstances unfolded that evaporated my reference points in life, which left me feeling disoriented and grasping for something to hold onto. A bit like Larry's memory loss, a deep, spiritual loss descended into my heart and mind—a sort of ultimate loss.

This deep loss of self (identity) is psychological, emotional, and spiritual—meaning it impacts our minds, our feelings, and the deepest part of our hearts in complex ways that are intricately interwoven. It triggers a confusing, frightening, spiritual free fall, like being plunged into the deepest part of a murky lake, swimming for the surface, but not being sure which way is up.

That day on the slopes, I knew Larry and I were vulnerable to injury, but I had never considered how vulnerable my soul was to a similar experience. Life hadn't taught me that yet.

Ideally, life goes like this: We work hard in school, graduate, and pursue our dreams. We are told, “You can be whoever you want to be!” Through hard work over several years, we try diligently to build a sense of self—an identity. Then, subconsciously, we tie our hearts to the things we achieve. We come to believe these things define us and give us security and meaning. We draw value and happiness from them. In ways we don't consciously perceive or intend, they begin to own us.

Even when the life work is harder than we expect, we press forward, anticipating that there's a payoff. *Someday, somehow this is going to fulfill and secure me.*

But underneath all the trying, we subconsciously anchor our sense of self to weak things—things that are fragile, losable, and breakable. Knowing we are tied to things that can come undone, we live in subtle fear, trying and hoping to secure our *selves* and avoid deep loss. We bury our fear, tuck our fragility neatly out of sight and mind, and try to secure the self we are constructing. But we know at our core, life is inherently dangerous and can suddenly destabilize and toss us into deep loss.

When identity loss actually unfolds, it is no fun. Losing our fragile selves is painful and emotional. In our desperation for answers and hope, we tend to replace the old “house of cards” with a new one, equally flawed. Scrambling for stability, we look for new places to root our hearts—a new relationship, a new job, a new social media profile, a new people group. We move from one weak place to another. We try on new selves, and each new identity will eventually fail us like the last one.

The cycle repeats itself, unless we break it. But how? Well, that's where God steps in and walks with us into deep loss. He's breaking us free from a broken cycle.

Let me share more about my long walk through deep loss.

FREE FALL—MY SEASON OF LOSS

My most significant experience with identity loss happened twice, and both times it rocked me to the core. It sent me digging for deeper answers and made me eager to understand my “concussion of soul.” More importantly, the ultimate loss made me yearn for

a primary identity that could never be lost, no matter what life threw at me.

Although I am a pastor, my theology was flawed, and my expectations of God were faulty. My identity was, at least in part, built on weak things. Despite that, God graciously walked with me through a deconstruction of the life I had built *for* Him, and then He put it all back together in a way that sort of blew my mind. The white-hot heat of life events melted the weak and fragile elements of my identity and left me, for the moment, in what felt like that psychological and spiritual “lostness.”

Today, I wouldn’t trade the journey for anything. One day, you will feel the same way about your loss. But that doesn’t stop it from being painful or terrifying right now.

My first loss of self came with a cancer diagnosis. This gave way to months of life-or-death uncertainty, a year of intense treatments, and a couple more years of gradual recovery. After two decades of hard work, my busy pastoral role in a large ministry came to a grinding halt. Unavoidably, I had a new identity—cancer-guy. Chemotherapy and sickness left me incapable of trying and unable to sustain my life roles. That year was filled with many dark hours of asking, “Now, who am I? I can’t do or be the things that define me . . . now what?”

The treatments were effective, and cancer went into remission. But restored health merely gave way to a second wave of deep loss. Just when I expected to return to my *normal*, God had other plans. He called our family to follow Him and move away from everything we knew as “familiar” or “secure” and everyone we loved. The call required us to leave twenty-two years of fruitful ministry and flourishing relationships in Southern California. We relocated three thousand miles to Connecticut to serve a small, hurting church family in post-Christian, postmodern New England.

We obeyed Him, though I now regret my early resistance and personal unwillingness. My hesitation to trust and follow God should have been the first warning light on my spiritual dashboard that my identity was more bound up in fragile, temporal things than I ever knew. Too much of my sense of self was tied to my trying and my personal achievements.

In the first loss, God revealed to me how fragile my health is and how temporary I am. In the second, He reminded me how vulnerable and fragile the rest of life is.

It's all losable.

This providential chain of events was a spiritual, emotional, and psychological growth curve as I've never experienced. The next two years became a slow, murky swim, in search of the surface. Strangely, though I was surrounded by loving people, I wrestled internally with that deeper loss of self and feelings of disorientation. *Who am I, now? Who am I supposed to be? What if I am not able to be who others expect me to be?*

I was oblivious to the identity structures that had subtly come to define me over decades, until God lovingly removed them, and replaced them with unfamiliar things. With my identity lost, I felt psychologically lost and dazed, trying hard to remember. It was such a strange experience. As a longtime pastor who had counseled many twenty- and thirtysomethings over the years, intellectually, I knew the answers. Theologically, I could teach the answers. Biblically, I could quote the answers. But personally, in these seasons, I needed to *experience* the answers. What I knew to be true was unavoidably being forced from my head to my heart.

In both losses, my go-to response, at first, was to sit and stare—numbness of soul. There were often tears. My many years of trying to build a solid identity proved fleeting. The questions that

had haunted me first in the chemo chair found me again two years later on lonely winter mornings in Dunkin' Donuts.

I sat alone, sipped coffee, and grieved my losses. *Why would God remove my diligently constructed, strong foundation?* Emotionally immersed in a New England winter, I faced overwhelming personal and ministry challenges, and wrestled daily with the desolate thoughts of “Now what? *Why* has God done this, and *where* is it all going?”

To know me during those years, you probably wouldn't have seen the deeper struggle. This was profoundly personal. Through the losses, most moments were not sorrowful, and not every day was gray. There was joy in the midst of grief, thanks to God's patient grace. And the years proved God to be faithful. Beautiful and fruitful outcomes have grown from what seemed to be barren seasons. But it has taken every bit of a decade to understand God's loving and patient deconstruction and reconstruction process of my soul.

Maybe this book will save you some time and give you back some of those years of wondering what God is doing. Maybe it will ignite flickers of hope within you.

SPLINTERVILLE

Identity loss reminds me of the stunning, scale-model boats a friend of mine builds from ultra-thin balsa wood. With scalpel-like precision, he crafts railings, bunk beds, hatches, and fully operational doors from the impossibly thin sheets of fiber. But he tiptoes around his creations because even a stiff breeze could collapse months of microscopic construction. Spilled coffee? It's over. A fist pounded on the table?

Welcome to Splinterville.

Nobody ever took a vacation on a balsa wood boat. The scale model looks good, but it can't float. It is made of fragile materials; it is not designed for the harsh realities of the sea.

Such are many facets of our lives. We live with a similar kind of fragility in our souls. We unknowingly build balsa wood selves. Our psyches are glued-together bits of not-built-to-last materials—health, looks, income, status, ethnicity, accomplishments, relationships, and social media profiles. We are perpetually haunted by comparison, the opinions of others, competition, and fear. We are forever trying to measure up to the world around us. When we do, we feel good. When we fail, we feel loss.

It's all very fragile and vulnerable. It's all extremely weak. One stiff breeze and . . . Splinterville.

We actually believe our balsa wood selves can sail, and we are shocked at the collapse when we attempt to navigate life's rough seas. Sudden loss exposes our identity structures (a term we will explore more later). Balsa wood faith and identities fall apart, and we are confronted with our weak selves and fragile building supplies. Our faith and sense of self are often constructed with faulty, performance-based, try-harder materials. Then life's hardships put us to the test. Jesus' little brother, James, called it the testing or trying of your faith (James 1:3). Too often we are ill-equipped to understand how faith in Jesus informs and transforms our true identity, and therefore unexpected loss jolts us to the core. It reveals how fragile we really are, and how badly we need more durable identities made of better, stronger "stuff." That's where we are headed in the pages ahead.

Loss of identity is a lot like my son's concussion and resulting amnesia. Truth is out there, but we are separated from it. This

separation leaves us feeling alone in a world full of people and gives rise to identity confusion and inner questions. *How do I find my true self? Is it up to others to define me? Is my true self within me? How can I form a strong identity that won't collapse under any life loss? What should I do when I don't know who I am?* This subconscious search leaves us emotionally and spiritually hungering in a world filled with many flavors of philosophical and psychological solutions. We can “try on” new, therapeutic versions of ourselves like we try on new clothes. Each of them is a cheap and fragile substitute for what we actually seek.

Where is the strong sense of self that is most *truly you*, and yet somehow more durable and stable than you *alone*? Where is that foundation that doesn't depend on you to try harder? Where is that identity that is unique, stable, and a “one-size-fits-one” solution?

Wouldn't it be nice to be able to stop trying, to finally have a durable identity, and to grow into it and enjoy it? Now that would be the best kind of *living*.

DEFINING IDENTITY

Before we proceed much further, let's define some concepts.

Your *identity* is “your deepest idea of who you are.” It is “the story you tell yourself about yourself.”¹ It subconsciously drives everything else in life. It is the definition of you that you have adopted—your source of value, your core trust, where you subconsciously look for meaning and validation.²

We all have an identity. We want and need a solid or truthful one, and we work hard to construct and secure “the one” that we believe is best. This identity causes us to think, *This is me . . . this is my fit . . .* In times of upheaval or personal loss, subconscious “who am I” ques-

tions are thrust from the backstage to the front stage of our lives—out of the shadows and into the light of examination or contemplation. We are forced to reckon with either a strong or weak identity, and whether our process for shaping it is valid or vulnerable.

Identity is not only factually “who I am,” but more influentially, it is “who I *think* I am.” For we all tend to believe the things we tell ourselves about ourselves. Yet “what I think about me” won’t be enough. A strong identity requires objective facts, outside of myself. “What I think” will need to be validated by some external, reliable authority. This is where I will place my core trust. So, regardless, my identity will always be partially a product of what I think (internal processes) and what others say (external processes). In other words, identity is constructed both from *without* (external to you) and *within* (internal to you). And it is both a process of *discovery* and of *development*.

We always ultimately look outside of ourselves for affirmation of our identity. We are hardwired to need someone external to us—someone we value, respect, or love—to approve our identity. It must be someone we trust. Only then will the identity we seek become solidified in our psyche.

Though the term “identity” is familiar in our cultural conversation, personal identity formation takes shape as a subtext of life. Like breathing, it is an involuntary function of the soul. Is a fish aware of water? Were early humans aware of gravity? Likewise, most people are not consciously aware of their identity. Few ever pause long enough to consider how they are forming a *self*. But the fear of it falling apart or the evident anxiety when it does reveals the inherent fragility of our identities.

God calls identity the “inner being” (Eph. 3:16) and desires this part of us “to be strengthened with power through his Spirit.”

When this inner “self” is weak, we feel frustrated, anxious, fearful, defeated, and unhappy. When it is strong, we feel secure, fulfilled, valuable, purposeful, and happy—at least temporarily. This is the unseen dynamic that often drives our emotions and hence our behaviors. God also refers to identity as “the heart” (Prov. 4:23) and challenges us to guard and maintain it carefully because it is connected to all other facets of life.

The subconscious “who am I?” questions always demand answers and yet are never fully, permanently satisfied with the answers our temporal, fragile world provides. For this reason, these questions are also haunting because of the intrinsic weakness of the balsa wood processes we’ve adopted. Past success is never enough for an unbreakable future identity, as our identity continues to demand greater success or sustained security. On the other hand, past failure demands ongoing reconstruction of a new, better identity—penance, reparations, and reinvention to compensate for the flawed self. Failed identity demands that we start over, try harder, and build better. Either way, identity built on success or failure becomes a monster we cage and feed. Eventually it eats through the cage and devours us as well.

Amidst all of this *trying* to achieve identity, we are conflicted, intuitively desiring to be more than what we do. Our core identity simply must be more than the sum of our successes or failures. We yearn to be valued for who we really are, and to fully know and realize our truest selves.

If we build with weak things, we must try feverishly to protect our creation from loss. When it collapses, we try hard to hide the shame and fake it, only to rebuild using alternate flimsy materials. In this sense, the concept of identity is either strong or weak. It

motivates or demotivates us. It stabilizes or destabilizes us. It gives us either a sense of meaning or meaninglessness. A strong identity results in a positive self, while a weak identity results in a negative self. But both are deceptive in ways we will soon see.

Identity formation is the phrase we will use for how we construct or maintain our identity. It's the process we trust to define ourselves. Every waking moment, we subconsciously work to establish, maintain, or improve our identity. And everybody builds an identity from one of *three sources*. On the journey ahead, we will contrast all three—two fragile sources and one durable, trustworthy source. Growing in this third option transforms and grounds our hearts deeply and authentically.

• • •

When life hits us so hard that we lose our bearings, we are forced to turn somewhere. Do we despair, try harder, or reinvent ourselves?

What if it's simpler than all that?

Maybe you're like my son that day in my car. In your psychological and spiritual concussion, you may not know where you are or who you are, but there is a way to remember. Despite what your identity loss may look or feel like right now, there is immeasurable good to be discovered from it. Your free fall can have a soft landing and a more beautiful outcome than you could imagine. But first, you'll need to understand what's really happening within you.

Let's discover God's identity process. If you belong to Him, it will help you trust what He's doing to redefine and refine you. It will give you hope and anticipation of the new identity that He is shaping within you. If you don't yet belong to Him, understanding God's heart for you may make you want to be His child as well.

1: Trying Hard

Take this identity journey with me. There's a long, winding road between where you are now and where you will ultimately feel "safe at home."

It's possible to stop trying to achieve your identity. But the journey is not what we expect.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."

PROVERBS 3:5-6