

JASON WILSON

Cry
Like
a
Man

FIGHTING *for* FREEDOM *from*
EMOTIONAL INCARCERATION

DAVID  COOK™

transforming lives together

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PROLOGUE

Men: We've scaled the heights, lifted and carried enormous burdens, sailed vast oceans, and have even broken free from the atmosphere that enfolds us from birth to death to fly among the stars. We mine the minerals and metals of the earth and create incredible machines that serve to propel us to our next aspiration. Yet amid all the risk and reward, the dilemmas and dangers, and the thrilling advances we've made, men have yet to conquer the most basic human ability—to cry.

Want to hear something shocking? It's impossible to be strong all the time.

With all the theories, credos, and misleading mantras—"Man up," "No pain, no gain," not to be outdone by the mother of all misguided intelligence, "Real men don't cry"—men are left with nothing in their emotional toolboxes to help them cope with the shards of life. If we're struck in our hearts, our health, or our wallets, there's no room for weakness. When we vent, we're perceived as complainers. When we hurt, we're wimps. When we're tired, we're being lazy. When we fight, we're rebels. When we're discouraged, we're depressed. When we hesitate, we're double-minded, and when

we cry, we're soft. With all these predetermined judgments about us, it's no wonder why so many of us "fake it to make it."

From childhood through early puberty then into manhood, we're conditioned to swallow our pain, expressing little but indifference and detachment about the chaos around us. It only makes sense that internalized stress and confusion build over time, creating a force that will eventually find a release hatch. And we all know what that looks like: self-medication, aggression, violence, until we finally hit the wall and break. And how many people do we take down with us along this destructive path of denial and pretense? Family members, girlfriends, wives, children ... ourselves.

I realized after a lifetime of holding it all in—the injuries from cruelty, neglect, and the loss of so many loved ones—that men couldn't and shouldn't have to withstand the pressure they were never designed to endure alone. The barriers I had subconsciously built, brick by agonizing brick, were merely a defense that was keeping the damage inside—pushing it down deeper and deeper. I couldn't control it. I couldn't control anything. I was a prisoner of my own emotional incarceration without the slightest idea of how I got there. The key was right in front of me; I just couldn't see it.

Suppressed feelings of anger and anxiety in men have reached epidemic levels, changing the landscape of society within families, schools, cities, and ultimately within prisons. And if it's not addressed now, it's simply going to kill us. It's my prayer that as you read this book and open your heart, you may see a little of your own journey within its pages—stories of trials and triumphs enabling you to unlock the cell you've been living in for far too long.

God (whom I often refer to as “the Most High”) has played an enormous role in releasing the inner turmoil of my past. His presence wasn’t something I was aware of early on, but as I grew older, losing my way in the critical decisions that would shape my future, I struggled with His very existence. Even the name “Jesus” held little importance. Paintings of Him cradling lambs or bouncing children on His knee seemed less than masculine, even “soft.” I rarely thought about His stunning bravery—willingly submitting to the brutality of evil men, even being nailed to a cross—and what it actually meant.

As my relationship with the Most High developed, I began to use the Hebrew name *Yahushua* when referring to Christ, and you’ll notice that name throughout this book. But many times you’ll see “Yah” used for both the Father and the Son, as they are and will forever be One. It’s personal and reflects the greatness of who They are to me ...

Heavenly Father, Savior, Friend.

In the time I spent getting to know Yahushua, my desire to empower other men became stronger. I asked my pastor, Gregory Alexander, to teach a men’s Bible study on discipleship. To my surprise, he chose to focus on David and his mighty men instead of on Yahushua and His disciples. We started in the cave of Adullam—the place where David fled for his life. After a brief discussion, the class moved on, but I didn’t. Something intrigued me about this cave.

The tangible result of my research is The Cave of Adullam Transformational Training Academy (CATTA) under the umbrella of The Yunion—a nonprofit organization I launched in Detroit in 2003. As I began to identify the direct connection between male fear

and transparency, and the freedom that comes with being vulnerable, I created CATTAs Emotional Stability Training. Martial arts and biblical principles are used to teach boys and young men how to introspectively conquer their negative emotions instead of succumbing to them.

My passion and pursuit in telling my story in this book is to help boys and men find their strength to become courageously transparent about their own brokenness and to shed light on the symptoms, causes, and effects of childhood trauma and “father wounds.” To free them from emotional incarceration—to see their minds renewed, souls weaned, and relationships restored.

Cry Like a Man is my own story. It has strong elements of racial terror because that has shaped my journey. Ultimately, it is the tale of how I came to overcome every source of anger, hatred, and self-condemnation that had kept me in an emotional prison.

No matter what your age, ethnicity, or social status, you can break the cycle and escape the mental prison that keeps you confined to the limits of misconstrued masculinity. Learn to feel without fear. Accept that you're not a superhero and remove the cape. As men, our “Kryptonite” is the grinding lifestyle that keeps us working when we need to rest, fighting when we need to seek peace, and worrying when we need to pray.

As you walk through the past with me in the pages ahead, my deep desire is that you will discover the power, love, and self-control it takes to truly cry like a man.

TRAGEDY AND TEARS

You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain't about how hard you hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward.

Sylvester Stallone, *Rocky Balboa*

It's expected for a young man to test the boundaries, push the envelope, and see how thin the air is outside the pocket. His testosterone is pumping, girls are flirting, and he feels invincible ... that is, until he eventually meets his match.

Until that day arrived, my mother tried to push Larry back inside the lines, but it just wasn't working. Ignoring his curfew on a regular basis, he sometimes found our front doorstep only after day-break. My father's patience ran out on the night Larry drifted into the house, smelling of marijuana, and disrespected Mama. Oliver

couldn't hold it in any longer and threw a punch. I don't think my brother saw it coming, but I'm sure he felt it.

Larry could set off Oliver with one look. This rebellious teenager, like a typical young man, was easily deceived by deadly untamed emotions. In a last desperate attempt to rein him in, my parents sent him away for his junior year to live with our aunt, Louise, in Pensacola, Florida. Pushed out, quarantined, exiled ... all those thoughts must have run through his mind before leaving his friends and family.

It was plain to Larry and my dad that any regard they once shared was now gone. They had both stepped over that invisible line, from tolerance to contempt. Larry's disrespect was grounded in Oliver's womanizing, and Oliver's unwillingness to deal with his own shortcomings was not an issue up for discussion. His blatant philandering coupled with my mother's worrying was enough to put Larry on that plane, and he left.

While he was in Florida with Aunt Louise, Larry's memories of his biological dad, Sinclair Sr., flooded in with the early tide. Funny how we recall only the things that support what we want to be true. Larry wondered whether his dad was as callous as he remembered; perhaps he had changed over the years. There was only one way to know for sure.

Believing everyone deserved a second chance, Larry picked up the phone, hoping to find a man eager to reconcile and start over, a father ready to renew their relationship. With luck, Larry would hear the words he was aching for: "Come home."

Oh, the power of selective memory ... yearning for the man who slapped his older brother with a butcher knife and beat his mother

senseless. Though we try to resist, the circle of life keeps twirling around an irresistible center of gravity. The core of our personal universe, the beginning of our creation—our fathers. And after vacancy has dusted off the cobwebs of our unsettled recollections, we reach out one more time.

Larry could only hope that his heart's tug would be met with a fatherly hug.

The phone rang; Sinclair Sr. picked up, and ... he was still the same. The same mean, selfish person he'd always been. Larry's plea for compromise was met with the same cold resistance and unconditional rejection. The final knife dug straight into the childhood wound he had inflicted years before. There was no real reason for him to act any differently. Sinclair never paid a dime of child support, never sent the boys a birthday card or took them somewhere on vacation. No special treats like basketball tickets or a new toy just because. If there was ever a doubt (or hope) in Larry's mind about his father's true feelings, it became clear in that phone call.

A father's affirmation is foundational to a son's confidence. In retrospect, after years of helping boys heal emotionally, I can now see it was neglect and abuse that fueled my brother's misguided quest for affirmation. Redemption has been known to take a lifetime but also can be as quick as a single smile.

At the end of Larry's school year, he returned to Detroit wiser. The sunshine, scenery, and closure had washed him with an affirming sense of optimism. Everyone noticed it, and everyone was hopeful. It was so good to have him home.

As his senior year at Central High began, Larry surpassed all expectations. With his good looks and untamable personality, he

single-handedly organized his school's first marching band, then became its drum major. Extraordinary ... that's what Florida A&M University (FAMU) decided when they gave him a full-ride scholarship as a music major. For the first time in so very long, Mama's pride in her wayward son was justified. Larry had done a complete 180 as he applied his talents and made genuine strides toward a successful future.

Mama had an unusual look about her that year. Finally, she was content.



Like any metropolitan city, Detroit had its mix of affluent neighborhoods with tree-lined streets and manicured lawns as well as urban patches of concrete and crime. Each area came with its own unique demographic. Our family was far from poor and lived in a nice middle-class neighborhood. Both of my parents were blessed with dependable jobs. Mama was an optical technician, and my father, passionately referred to by his clients as “Big O,” worked as a successful barber with an impressive clientele. This meant that my brothers and I, unlike other boys growing up in that neighborhood, never needed to sell drugs for survival. We were fortunate to have the encouragement of peers and role models who promoted accountability and offered support.

Reconnecting with a close friend like “Mane,” Larry regained a big brother to help him through the challenges that continued to hover around him. Mane had a couple of years on Larry and the maturity to keep his head up and his nose clean. When he graduated

Central High two years before Larry, it was no coincidence that my brother's decision-making slowly but undeniably digressed.

And despite Larry's questionable company and choices, Mane loved him. His time with Larry gradually thinned to occasionally seeing each other on the block. Still, their forged brotherhood remained strong.

Sometimes I think people feel the desire or need to recover something wrong in order to make it right. To retrieve that detestable thing that's too heartbreaking to leave the way it is. To salvage what we can before it disintegrates.

Larry returned to his familiar ways. He found a new crew—or perhaps they found him—and their influence was unmistakable. Though Larry's kind spirit and sheer likability was a blessing to many who knew him, it could also be a curse.

I think ultimately that was the reason my brother was approached by members of his own circle. Larry's charisma was perfect for drug distribution. With that infectious smile and legions of friends, he was trusted and celebrated. He had everything they needed to dominate the marketplace. And in their midst, Larry left the safety and support of his own and crossed the line into a threatening environment of unbendable loyalty and persuasive obligation—an atmosphere that didn't permit the luxury of saying no.

Larry's insolent ways toward my parents resumed and accelerated as he pushed the boundaries and tested the waters. Finally caught stealing money from Oliver, Larry would have been kicked out of the house had it not been for the FAMU scholarship. If he could only make it to the end of the school year.

The equilibrium of our home leveled off as Larry prepared to graduate. I'm sure it was a day Mama didn't think he would live long enough to see, but there he was standing on that stage in his cap and gown. He proved his mettle. He had accomplished what he set out to do. Soon the summer would be over, and he'd be on his way to Florida A&M. There was a collective sigh of relief from our family that day. Though I was only a little fella at the time, I hailed my superhero and marveled at Larry's seemingly unlimited talent. He was unstoppable. I was absolutely sure he could do anything.



It was late afternoon on Sunday, July 3, 1973, when Larry drove our mother's car down a neighboring block. There was still plenty of sunlight, though it was sinking steadily toward the horizon.

With a caravan trailing him, Larry's party on rims echoed the bass lines of multiple stereos bouncing on ten. Mane was on his front porch when Larry pulled over and called out to him.

"Mane, take my mother's car and park it out front of my house for me."

Mane hesitated. But with his friend leaving for FAMU soon, he would have few opportunities to show his friendship to Larry before he headed to Florida.

"All right ... all right ... give me the keys!" he replied, though later he would tell me it didn't feel right.

There was music blasting and girls laughing as the keys flew into Mane's outstretched hand. Still, in all the commotion, Mane noticed something strange. A group of men in a nearby white Cadillac

Fleetwood got out of their ride simultaneously and ushered Larry into their vehicle—the same car that neighbors told my mother would pick up Larry while she was at work.

The caravan sped off and out of sight.

During the exchange with Mane, my brother never let on that anything was wrong, but something wasn't right. He had left his wallet and identification under the front seat of Mama's car. It wasn't like Larry to make such a careless mistake. Careless or cautious?

Mane delivered my mother's car to our house and left.

The next morning on Monday, July 4, Larry wasn't in his bed.

A mother's intuition can prove to be unnerving and discerning. Mama tried to stay calm, but in her growing restlessness, she began calling around. No one had seen him. No one had heard from him. He had vanished.

On a day when crowds celebrated with barbecues and fireworks, our block was eerily quiet. No ribs cookin' or rockets poppin'. Only blank stares of friends and neighbors fearing the worst for my brother's safety. Mama fought her intuition until Wednesday ... the day when a certain beloved superhero finally met his match.

Larry's body was discovered by a couple of fishermen in the Belle Isle shallows. He was still wearing his superhero cape—his clothes—but the Kryptonite had done its damage.

The scream of a mother whose child has been murdered and thrown away like trash is enough to turn your blood cold. There's nothing you can compare it to. It begins in a place so deep it's difficult to reach, until it surges beyond physical, mental, and emotional limits. Your heart explodes into a million pieces, and it feels as if the soul dies with it.

Torrential tears raining down, not a sunny day in sight.

My mother lay in the arms of her best friend, Byrda, while my father made his way to the city morgue with the horrific task of identifying Larry. Despite all the disputes and scimmages they had, my dad was truly tormented by what he saw, what he found out, and what he *didn't* find out. The description of Larry's death was vague at best. Even my father's appeals to the police for the smallest details were casually dismissed. They acted as if Larry was simply a thug—with or without a grieving mother, a little brother. No talents, no opportunities, no free ride to college. Just “another dead nigger.” Just a statistic that washed up on the murky banks of the Detroit River two days before.

Sinclair was in Florida when a long-distance call came with the grim news. Initially he was in shock and refused to believe that something so horrid was true. But once he saw our grandmother Margaret weeping inconsolably, he knew Larry was gone. Then came the inescapable regrets: *What did I say to him? What didn't I say to him? If I could go back, what would I tell him?* My brothers didn't always get along, but they still loved each other.

The autopsy revealed that no water had entered Larry's lungs, which meant he was dead before going into the river. Larry was an expert swimmer on the high school swim team, so the thought of him drowning was absurd. Rumors abounded that he was thrown from the Belle Isle Bridge, while his girlfriend would later say that he owed money to the guys in the Caddy.

The most consistent theory of those who knew him best was that the men in the Cadillac turned a profit by using his charisma and street respect, and when Larry wanted to get out, they showed him

the exit. But it was all speculation. Truth is, he was playing a game that couldn't be won.

I don't know how or why my brother was killed; I only know I miss him.

His obituary consisted of ninety words and a poem. Only ninety words to sum up his seventeen years of life, a young man who just the month before wore a graduate's smile and held a golden ticket to college. It was small type, a narrow newspaper column, a nightmare in black ink that couldn't be washed away—not with soap, tears, or the water of the Belle Isle shallows.

My mom was slowly losing her mind, initially ripping up the life-insurance check that was issued for the death of my brother. After days of consoling her, my dad eventually calmed her to the point where she could cope with the insurance company issuing a new check. Whether she had destroyed the check out of her helpless anger or survivor's guilt now that he was gone, my mother knew that no amount of money could compensate for Larry's empty bed.

First her father, now her son. Was anyone safe? And what about her youngest child? From the time Larry was killed, Mama wanted—no, she *needed*—me near her. I was a form of the Most High's grace to her.

The funeral overflowed with more than a thousand people. In attendance were Larry's closest friends, kids from school, his marching band, everyone from our neighborhood, family from out of town—even Sinclair Sr.

Larry's biological father had a right to be there, and only he knew the demons he battled when getting the news of his son's murder. He

did not, however, get a warm welcome from my mother, brother, or father when he approached the limo to join us.

My dad irrefutably dog-checked him at the car door, saying, “I will [expletive] you up if you step one foot into this limo.”

You could always count on my dad to let you know exactly where you stood with him. He rarely held his tongue when it came to speaking his mind, especially in the presence of someone as spineless as Sinclair Sr. It was the first time I ever saw him—the villain who always won. Or did he?

As a grown man today, I’m disturbed not only that he abandoned Larry after scarring his childhood with memories of abuse but also that he never offered one dime to help with the funeral costs. My father paid for it all, in so many ways.

I was three years old at the time, without an adult’s perspective or ability to understand the gravity of what had happened. I was left to sift the wreckage through a toddler’s mind. To wander into Larry’s room looking for him and never finding him. To cry every night when he didn’t come home. I couldn’t grasp why my larger-than-life brother—my superhero—had flown away and left me without saying good-bye.

Every time the doorbell rang, I expected him to be standing there, but he never was. And he never would be again.

How I wanted just one more hug, one more laugh, one more song.