



youth
specialties

Confessions of a Not-So-Supermodel
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CONFESSION: WHEN I WAS LITTLE, I THOUGHT THAT IF I SWALLOWED A WATERMELON SEED, IT WOULD TURN INTO A BABY IN MY BELLY AND MAKE ME PREGNANT. I ALSO THOUGHT I MIGHT GROW UP TO BE A SUPERMODEL SOMEDAY. LATER I LEARNED THAT SWALLOWING A WATERMELON SEED IS HARMLESS AND WILL LEAD TO NOTHING MORE THAN SOME MILD INDIGESTION. I ALSO LEARNED THAT A TATTERED AND FRAYED GIRL LIKE ME IS BETTER SUITED FOR TRUNWAYS THAT ARE NOT SO GLAMOROUS.

Perhaps you're wondering who the enchanting beauty queen on the previous page is. You know—the one with the stylish pink dress and the not-so-stylish bandage on her twisted ankle.

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Well, that's me.

The photo was taken in the fall of 1996. I was sitting on top of a luxury car as I rode through a small-town festival parade. It was my senior year in high school, and I was a festival queen—a far cry from the supermodel lifestyle I'd once dreamt about. The stylish supermodels of the 90s—Nikki Taylor, Cindy Crawford, Tyra Banks—were people whose lifestyles I sought after. But somehow, through a weird chain of events, I ended up sitting atop a car as a festival queen.

It's obvious I'm no supermodel. Unless you count my dog, no one thinks I'm famous. No one has ever followed me around desperately trying to snap a picture of me as I dine at a ritzy restaurant or carry my grocery bags into my house. In fact, when compared side by side, the dreams of my youth and the realities of my life seem as different as Sanjaya Malakar and Carrie Underwood. But I'm guessing that if these two *American Idol* stars wanted to, they could pull off a pretty decent duet, in spite of their obvious differences in style and musical genre.



It's the same for me as I look at the differences between the life I'd imagined as a supermodel and the indisputable gift that is my own "super-model" life. When I became a festival queen and, later on, a youth pastor, one might think I didn't make it, that I wasn't any kind of supermodel at all. But I have become one—in a

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wonderful, different, unexpected Sanjaya-and-Carrie type of way.

I write to you, beautiful young friend, because not so long ago I was a teenager like you, searching for something to give my life meaning and purpose, and wishing for someone to love me. In my journey I found something I think will be worth your time, something that could change the way you look at yourself and the direction of your own dreams.



TRIPPED UP

A few years ago I was on my way home from a National Youth Worker's Convention and had some time before my flight. I was wandering around an airport bookstore when I stumbled onto something that would eventually lead me here, writing to you. Now when I say "stumbled," I mean it literally—I tripped over my little travel suitcase and went hurtling into a display at the Hudson News Bookstore in the airport in Columbus, Ohio. Not only did I scatter the display and send about ten books to new homes on the floor, but I also ended up on the ground myself, scrambling after the books I'd just knocked over. There probably weren't many people watching, but I was embarrassed—so I picked up one of the books I'd landed on and pretended to studiously read the back cover.

That book had a profound impact on me. It was called *Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write about Their Search for Self*

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(Harper, 1999). It was written by a college student named Sara Shandler who'd begun working on it when she was just 16. Shandler's book was a response to another book written five years earlier, Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (Riverhead, 1994). Both books were about girls and the challenges they face, but Sara Shandler got the stories straight from other young women like her who were in the midst of the struggle. The idea intrigued me. The young women in Shandler's book shared about the difficult issues shaping their lives—ranging from family dysfunction to drug abuse, friendship to eating disorders. I read each chapter with tears in my eyes, marveling at the harsh realities girls face each day and wondering where they find hope. I was saddened and frustrated that there were very few glimmers of healing to be found in the book, very little evidence of wholeness.

The hope I did see sprang from the honesty of the girls willing to share their stories. Sharing a story can be healing in itself, a freedom someone experiences when something pent-up gets set free. But something major was still missing. As the author wrote of the thousands of stories that had poured in for this book, I thought of all the young women who had written, desperately desiring to be heard. Although it wasn't the purpose of her book, I wished Shandler had included the stories of the girls who had found wholeness and strength through the struggle, the ones who had found redemption and forgiveness. As I thought about how I'd wandered through the murkiness of adolescence, I realized the girls in the book—and the girls I minister to back home—were all wandering, too. They hadn't yet found that they could emerge from the wilderness into a land of purpose and plenty.

I shared this observation with the girls at the camp I attended every summer. I read a few of the stories from the book with them, and told them how I wished it had included stories

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of hope and inspiration in the midst of those same struggles. I longed to read of the girl who—through the struggle, after the tragedy, in the midst of darkness—found a new reason to live. I longed to read of the girl who suffered pain or obsession but found that light and transformation were available to her. I wasn't looking for every story to turn out perfectly in the end. I was looking for the stories of girls who didn't have a perfect life but were willing to live by faith and to chase after their God-given dreams anyway.

I guess I was looking for a story more like mine. I once lived in darkness. I once lived with fears and dysfunctions—in fact, I still do. But God brought me into a place of light, a place where I could deal with these struggles in a way that reveals the person God desires me to be.

I grew up in a state of semi-confusion and youthful hope about my dreams. I would stare into my bedroom mirror, envisioning myself as a runway model—believing that if I worked hard enough, I could become the next great supermodel. But this dream also scared me. I would have died if I ever found someone spying on me as I posed in the mirror. I held these dreams of my heart tight inside, fearing that if I revealed them to anyone, then I might be held accountable to them or be seen as a failure if things didn't work out. In my mind it was better to be safe and keep my hopes and dreams to myself than to share my dreams and be let down in front of everyone.

It's not easy to be a teenage girl. I'm sure you have your own struggles. Struggles (plural) camped out in my teenage mind and body for a long time, and I didn't even realize how some of these struggles were damaging my understanding of myself and even my relationships. So, after reading a book about girls I didn't know and considering my own story, I had to ask...

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...Is there anyone else? Is there anyone else who has been able to find her way through the struggles that keep her from seeing who they are in Christ and the dreams God has given her? I had to believe there were others who had seen the truths beyond all of the lies. There have to be others who, in the midst of struggle, have found a new reason to be alive.

I brought all these thoughts to the girls at camp that summer. I told them I wanted to find the girls who recognized God in the midst of their circumstances (even during the most painful and unjust ones), to share the stories of girls who were in the heat of life but were holding on to something far more stable than their temporary and sometimes false selves. I wanted to offer a sequel of sorts—one that showed resilience and strength gained from having a relationship with Christ through even the hardest times.

After my talk that day, I hung out at the front of the room among metal folding chairs while sounds of lunch being prepared rang in the nearby kitchen. I expected all the girls to exit the room where we met, but instead a line of girls formed in front of me. Each one of them had something unique to share with me, her own story of hope. One girl, Natasha, urged me with fiery determination to never stop believing in this dream to help girls find their voices for God. I will never forget what she said to me, “Pastor Brook, I’m going to write that book for you someday.” She was talking about a book in which she would share her struggle and how God gave her strength to get through it. She was determined to find a way to share her story of hope and redemption with others.

Who knows what Natasha is up to today? Maybe she’s working on writing that book. Or maybe she doesn’t even remember that little talk we had that afternoon in the heat of summer. But I know I felt deeply her strong desire to be heard,

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and it reinvigorated my belief that God is at work in all of us. And it made me want to tell my own story.

So here I am, writing a book I dreamed about years ago, and telling you I wasn't always so sure of myself. I sit here a few months away from giving birth to a daughter of my own, and I wonder, "How on earth am I going to say anything that makes a difference to you?" But it's the same feeling I had that day at camp when sharing my heart with young girls yielded great fruit. So I'm trusting that something good will happen again. I'm hoping you will read something here that will speak to your heart and help you realize how awesome you are in God's sight.

I dreamt about being a supermodel my entire life. Now I know what that dream was for. It led me here, to this place of sharing with you.

SUPERMODEL BABY

We don't usually categorize babies as supermodels. So to say that I was born with a supermodel birthmark, or something that set me apart to become a model, really wouldn't be fair. But as far back as I can remember, I daydreamed about becoming a supermodel.

Brooke Shields was perhaps the most famous model of my childhood days, and I knew she'd been modeling since she was a very young girl. I believed there was a supermodel living in me, too. I even had a book about Brooke, filled with pictures of her when she was young. The pages were worn, and I'd read the beauty tips over and over again. I still remember most of them: "Always throw away mascara after six weeks." "Wash your face each night." "Don't pick!" The similarities in our names (Brooke/

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Brooklyn) just added to my hopes of being like her someday. I even had bushy eyebrows like hers (which were totally in style in the early 1990s).

I landed my first “gig” in front of the camera when I was just a month old. Of course, it wasn’t really modeling—it was just a formal photo shoot for a baby portrait like so many



parents are more than happy to pay for. But that picture generated a story that would help me believe modeling was in my future. My loving parents took me to a photographer who discovered I was very flexible, like Gummy from the Claymation show I used to watch on TV. So the photographer positioned my hands under my chin, ran over to the camera, and snapped the picture before I completely lost circulation in my tiny wrists and toppled over onto the velvet-rug-mountain thing I was propped up on. The moment was perfect,

producing a picture where I looked stable and in control. It was clear that I was a prodigy, a natural in front of the camera!

This early display of flexibility and camera-friendliness on the rug mountain was the beginning of my modeling dream. Growing up, people told me I was photogenic and that I should consider a career in modeling. I loved it when folks would compliment my height or my green eyes. My grandma was especially supportive of my hopes to become a model. She affirmed my intelligence, my personality, and my appearance, helping me believe I could be a big-time model someday.

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I started modeling for an agency at the age of 10. Grandma would drive me 45 minutes into the city for short photo shoots, and I would stare out the window wondering how I became so lucky.

As I look back at the pictures, it's clear that some of the advertisements I did back then weren't the coolest. I remember one photo shoot where I wore an orange-and-navy-blue striped jumpsuit and pretended to talk on a telephone. Most of the ads were cheesy—far from the more professional shots you might see in *Vanity Fair*. In fact, I always thought my best shoot was the one at the very beginning when I was a baby propped up on a rug. I like to think it reflects the real me, the one who hadn't been shaped by the world's expectations yet. It's a little embarrassing to admit, but I still like getting this old baby picture out and admiring it. I wasn't worried then about what I was wearing or what was holding me up. The picture was a true reflection of the person I was becoming—the person I was proud to be.

Babies and little kids are comfortable with who they are. They don't worry about what other people are thinking. I wish things could stay that way. I wish we could continue living in a state of contentment, unmarked by the critique of others. I wish our dreams and confidence in who we are could stay intact. But normally that doesn't happen. Instead, as we grow up, we begin seeing ourselves in comparison to those around us.

THE SUPERMODEL DREAM

The images I saw on TV as a kid encouraged girls to be beauties and princesses. I wanted to be those things; but I wanted to be other things too. I secretly liked “boy shows” like *Transformers* and *Thundercats*. But I knew that if I didn't submit to girl callings, I might miss out on the dream.

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As a teenager, media outlets like MTV and teen magazines reinforced this desire to fit into the girl world, which always reassured my ambitions to become a supermodel. The world loves this type of girl: Why would I want to be anything else?

Here's the message I was hearing and believing: "If you are young, beautiful, and in front of the camera, your life will be filled with happiness, love, and money! Could anything be better?" At the time the world's sales pitch had me convinced there was nothing better than "having it all" (good looks, a successful modeling career, acceptance from the world, and a nice paycheck to buy more stuff). What I didn't know was that my ambition to become a supermodel would fuel an unhealthy image of myself and create an emptiness I didn't really know how to fill.

People have to make sacrifices to attain their dreams. Living out a dream requires faithfulness and an unwavering persistence that keeps you from giving up. The really great athletes in my high school class didn't divide their time up among an assortment of different sports and clubs. They focused on the one thing that gave them the most joy. They were passionate about training and didn't quit when they got discouraged. My friends who have become doctors and lawyers gave up lots of time and money (and sleep) to live their dreams. Aspiring writers may dream of winning a Pulitzer Prize—but before the awards start pouring in, they've usually had to hold on when the pay was small and the accolades nonexistent. So I shouldn't have been surprised that becoming a supermodel would take every ounce of courage and faith I could find.

Courage isn't really a problem when you are a month old and you don't know any better than to just be who you are. But what happens when we become aware that we live in a world marked by social status, cliques, and popularity? What happens

when we become aware that other people are watching us and perhaps even judging us? For me, this realization happened right before middle school, and it made me reevaluate my abilities as a future model.

MIDDLE SCHOOL TATTOOS: AWKWARDNESS THAT LEFT A MARK

I wish someone could have warned me about the fifth and sixth grades. Like many other people, I experienced these years as a frightening and awkward period when nothing looked proportional, pretty, or put together. During this time, I took to heart every comment about my looks, my personality, and my qualifications for popularity.

Even in the midst of this time of great physical and social awkwardness, I was doing print-ad modeling. I continued to get phone calls from the modeling agency. It was steady work for a time. My parents were very proud of me. My grandma was very dedicated and would pick me up and drive me to the photo shoots. During our rides to the city, she taught me many wonderful things. But there was one thing I had to learn on my own: that my longing for happiness, security, and self-worth would never be satisfied by modeling alone.

Each modeling success brought me a time of happiness, but these moments never delivered lasting fulfillment. Nonetheless, I held on to the hope that modeling might provide all I needed. Gracing the cover of *Vogue* was still a dream in my heart. But slowly things began to change.

Over the course of my middle school years, feelings of awkwardness and uncertainty began taking over my life. It was

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like someone turned on one of those giant fog machines you see at concerts—the ones that fill the stage with smoke until it surrounds everyone on the floor. There were moments as a young teenager when I couldn't see a thing, and I had no choice but to stand frozen in the middle of it. Sometimes the fog would clear for a little while, but just as I'd start to make sense of my surroundings, another blast of fog would cloud everything again.

The fog came in all kinds of shapes and sizes. There was the boy fog, the hair fog, the make-up fog, the parent fog, the grade fog, the teacher fog, the friend fog, the friend-turned-boyfriend fog, the “who will I room with during the winter retreat?” fog, the clothing fog, and many others. You've probably experienced this yourself. We all go through times when it's hard to see who we are and the dreams God has for us. Sometimes the fog will lift for a while and you can get a glimpse of the real you, but then it settles in again, and all is unclear.

Somewhere in the middle of the fog, my modeling dream was still there. I could still catch a glimpse of it from time to time, but my self-consciousness and feelings of inadequacy wouldn't let me see the full picture anymore. I had the support of my family, but they needed my enthusiasm to continue—they couldn't make me continue modeling or make me want to go further. After a few brief years of modeling, I didn't feel very comfortable with it anymore. I felt uneasy in front of the camera and shy about being photographed. It didn't help that I was getting taller and clumsier. With the sixth grade came braces and some really freaky side bangs (which didn't help my self-confidence or my belief that I was getting closer to a Brooke Shields existence). I could barely see the dream through the fog, and it was discouraging. On days when I had a shoot, I'd be filled with this contradictory mixture of excitement and dread—though

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I could never really say what I was dreading. So my modeling work tapered off, as did my interest in continuing.

Eventually, I stopped accepting calls from my agency and didn't do any modeling work for quite a while. I was okay with this. I didn't have to worry about the anxiety of performing anymore. I spent my time doing other things. I practiced volleyball, spent time with friends, listened to music, and talked on the phone. Modeling—and the dream that went with it—faded into the background.

It wasn't until my senior year in high school that the dream popped up again in the form of another modeling opportunity. My mom took me into Columbus, Ohio, to be seen by a modeling agency. I walked down a short runway as experts critiqued everything from my look (hair, face, body, height, weight—you name it!) to my confidence level. Then, the coolest thing happened. I was offered a chance to go to New York City to establish myself as a model!

But something inside me said “no.” It was that same fear, something I couldn't explain, that surfaced again and made me shrink back. My mom was willing to help me do whatever it took. But there was something missing, and I just couldn't follow through. I felt unsure about the whole thing, so I allowed another opportunity to fade.

Late in high school I discovered a relationship with Jesus Christ, and this relationship began to inform my understanding of life and its purpose. By the time I headed off to college, I knew I wanted to help people. I knew God had a special calling just for me. But how did my dream of becoming a model fit into that calling? I didn't know, so I buried the dream under a busy school schedule, volunteerism, and athleticism—knowing

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all along that a modeling career was something I still wished could happen.

Burying something doesn't necessarily mean that it goes away in a person's mind and heart. Today, I look back on those days and I can see what my problem was. I wasn't living. I was just surviving. I was empty inside, searching for something to fill the hole that the modeling dream had left in my life.

I think of those times when we are caught between believing in our dreams and being frustrated by them as times of wandering. We find ourselves journeying through a wilderness, uncertain of the path that leads to the clearing. We're searching for something that will fulfill and sustain us, but we aren't sure which berries along the path are poisonous and which are good. I was eager to find a way out of the wilderness I'd wandered into. I was looking for something that would give my life meaning—but that something I'd always thought would give me meaning (modeling) now scared the life out of me.

When we're lost in the brush of life, unsure about the direction we should head, sometimes we freeze—paralyzed by our fears. We give up pursuing our dreams and instead chase anything we think might give sustenance to our souls and direction to our hearts. I tried to fill up my soul with friends, with parties, with boys, and with honors. I never understood that I was getting nowhere, just wandering around in a big circle.

Have you ever felt this way? Have you ever felt like you had a dream that was impossible to achieve, and trying to chase it just frightened you? Some people are gifted with great confidence in their dreams. But most of us are not so sure of ourselves. And even the people who possess the most confidence still doubt sometimes. So what do we do? Where do we turn when we are directionally challenged? Where do we

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turn when we've met a dead end? Where do we turn when we are exhausted and not sure of the path to start down?

I suggest we need to start over. And I think the place to begin again is with our dreams.

We have to recognize the dreams God has planted within us. Those God-given dreams can be easily confused with other desires that might come to us from others or our own selfish ambitions. For example, there was a time in my childhood when I thought I wanted to become a dentist. I had a classmate whose dad was a dentist, and she always had really nice things. Now, to be honest, I hate the dentist. (Well, not *my* dentist, he's actually really nice.) But the thought of someone drilling into my teeth or scraping at them with a metal hook that looks like it can pierce my cheek freaks me out. Becoming a dentist was never God's dream for me; it was something I thought I wanted because it might bring me a big house with a pool and a yard and maybe even a cool little fire pit to roast marshmallows.

The dreams God plants in our souls are closely related to the gifts we've been born with, the gifts we should develop and pay attention to. Often, it's these gifts and strengths that lead to our dreaming (especially when we are children and uninhibited by the world's understanding of success). Knowing God loves you and created you with dreams and gifts is a good start to finding your way out of the wilderness. Knowing God is working in and through you right now to bring to life something amazing for our world is even better. But getting to that point may require that we deconstruct the way we see ourselves.

It's kind of like looking at your life as a Lego creation. You can take it apart to see how it was all put together, and then put it back again with the new knowledge you have. In the

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end, all the same pieces are there. Most likely, though, your new creation will look different from when you started.

Some time around the fifth or sixth grade, I began basing my sense of self-worth and success more and more on what other people thought of me. Temporary and unstable peer-directed goals were slowly replacing the gifts, plans, and purposes God had given me. I was doing things to gain approval from others, and my “dream” was to be viewed as talented and successful. My life was a tall, unstable Lego tower reaching toward the sky. (Think Leaning Tower of Pisa here, except more likely to fall over.) The good in me was barely visible, because it was covered by a false self that wasn’t me—it was a version of me defined by everyone else.

Deconstructing my Lego-tower life took a long time, because the building had settled and had been sitting the same way for quite some time. However, when I finally took the tower apart and saw all the good pieces I had to work with, I was able to build a new construction. Instead of an unstable tower easily toppled by any toddler or small puppy, I became an elegant one-story fine arts building full of all kinds of beautiful, wonderful, and different pieces. Instead of a tower—where my gifts and joys were piled atop each other so those on the bottom were buried so deeply I forgot they were even there—I became an open space where God could move things around and move in me freely.

As you go through this process of deconstruction and reconstruction, you’ll begin to see yourself and your dreams in a different light, a light not so scary. And you may find that your dreams, seen in this new light, don’t look exactly like you thought they would. My supermodel dream became very different once I fully embraced the knowledge that I was a beloved child of God created for a purpose. The dream, in essence, was the same.

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It just came into the world in a different way. Instead of my dream coming into the world by way of the modeling runways of New York or Paris, it came into the world via ministry to girls (a ministry you are a part of as you read this book).

So that's why you haven't heard the name Brooklyn Lindsey. Most supermodels are seen in magazines, on television, in fashion shows, on the runway, or at least in the occasional Guess jeans ad. But you won't find me there. You're more likely to see me at the local pizza joint, at Starbucks typing on my computer, or sharing a Frappuccino with students. You may see me in Victoria's Secret—but only when I have a coupon for a free lip-gloss or something.

I've become a supermodel in a different world, a world governed by different rules. I'm still walking a modeling runway, but it's different from the one I dreamed of as a young girl. My runway is long, and I've tripped in my metaphorical stilettos more than once. Regardless, I'm still hiking it, one foot after the other, moving toward what I've always wanted to be—original. Life is my runway, and hopefully if I get the “walk” down, it will be an example for girls to see and learn from. Today, my understanding of what it means to be a supermodel is completely different from what I imagined back in sixth grade. Let's just say that I've become a more literal interpretation of the word. The traditional definition of *supermodel* is far from the realities we know. (For example, Gisele Bundchen is a supermodel, and many of us are like her...minus the perfect curves, face, clothes, and million-dollar bank accounts!) I am part of a new breed of supermodels—a group you can be a part of if you desire.

LIVING THE DREAM

There is something deep inside me that has always told me I am special, loved, and unique. That same something is in each of us, but often it tends to lie just below the surface, waiting for us to respond. It's the knowledge of God's love and work in our lives. But just because we know God loves us doesn't mean that we believe it or respond to it. It can be hard to really believe that you are loved when Abercrombie tells you you're really not that beautiful unless your perfectly sun-kissed hair is streaming across your face as your swimsuit-perfect body floats away in a boat with a beautiful guy. Trying to find such confidence when growing up can be like searching for your earring on the bathroom floor when you are late for school. We struggle to see what we're looking for because we're in such a rush, in such a race, it's hard to slow down and find what we really need. I didn't know many people growing up who were 100 percent sure of themselves every day. But there is something unique in each one of us—something special that should make us proud and even excited about our futures. But it often lies dormant because we are all trying to fix the outside and make ourselves into little clones of one another. Each commercial, each TV show, and each magazine fashion tip moves us further and further from the knowledge God has been whispering in our ears.

Maybe you've never heard these messages from God. I started listening, really listening, when I was about your age. I started paying attention to the little things that God had placed in my life as indications of who I really am and what direction I should go. Finally, I realized that the chewing gum of the world had lost its flavor, and I was ready for something more lasting.

This book is about finding what is lasting. It's about finding the real you, the person you are in Christ, who is right there with you on the journey. It's about the hope that comes

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in remembering that you are God's beloved child. It's about learning to recognize God in your everyday life—which is essential to understanding what living in freedom is all about. The Bible tells us, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1). As we explore what living a life of freedom means, we'll tackle some tough questions. And, hopefully, we'll begin to develop some answers.

As you read this book, I hope you will find yourself taking a good look at your life with Christ, the friends you surround yourself with, and the dreams God is forming in you right now. You can live those dreams.

I know, because I'm living mine.

YOUR CONFESSIONS

Use these questions for group discussion or personal reflection:

What was your childhood dream? Is it still a dream now?

What images do the words "wilderness" and "wandering" evoke for you? What wilderness times have you experienced in your life?

What kind of "fogs" and distractions most often cloud your world? What clouds your view of your dreams? How about your view of your relationship with God?

Describe your Lego life. What kind of building would it be? What do the rooms look like? Does your life need a major renovation?

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The Bible says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5). Do you feel like you can trust God with your dreams? Why or why not?