

SHATTERED
SHAKEN
and
STIRRED

RECONNECTING WITH WHAT MATTERS MOST
AFTER LOSS AND ADVERSITY

GILBERT AHRENS

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Acknowledgements

At its core, this book is a love story. The subject may not be love, but the object certainly is. This book is the direct result of my witnessing of incredible, spontaneous love and support from family, friends, neighbors, co-workers and complete strangers. This huge outpouring of love in action was both humbling and inspiring.

There were more people involved than I can possibly remember, and many of whom I never met and still don't know. This book is my humble gift of thanks to this incredible group of people who loved us in an unusual time of need. While this book may be the kind of gift that deserves to be left unopened (or re-gifted!), it is at least for me a demonstrable way to express my thanks collectively to many people whom I cannot adequately repay individually.

There are, of course, many people who deserve specific mention. My parents, Gil and Christine, and parents-in law, Ray and Maxine, have epitomized gracious, loving parents. My sister, Margot Hayes, and brother in-law, Greg Hudson, have proved that family and great friends need not be mutually exclusive.

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Finally, my family deserves a special prize for putting up with me during this long-winded project. The writing of this book was unusually difficult and it tested and strained our family beyond normally tolerable thresholds. Nevertheless, my wife Kim continued to be lovingly and patiently supportive. Without her, I'd be a mess and this book would certainly be nonexistent. Our daughter Olivia kept me in high spirits during low points, and her joyful smile was a constant reminder of my blessings. My girls make me the luckiest man on earth.

Dedication

For:

Kim: my wife, love, partner, and inspiration to believe far beyond what can be seen.

Olivia: living proof that miracles happen daily.

The One who reigns above all: the One from whom all is given and to whom our all is deserved.

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CHAPTER ONE

BECOMING SOMEONE ELSE



The unplanned inevitable journey...

My Dear Child:

You were with us, too, don't you remember? No, of course not. You were too young, so you were spared the hardships that your mother and I endured. I have not wished to deceive you...only to protect you. But the time has now come for me to lift the veil and show you how my world once was; in the world that I knew where there was suffering and hardship. I want you to know these things in case your world falls off its tracks or becomes – before your unbelieving eyes – unexpectedly and inexplicably shattered.

We were in a devastating automobile accident, the kind we had always thought happened to “someone else.” On an otherwise beautifully clear, crisp autumn evening in 2002, while traveling outside Denver, Colorado, our car was hit head-on by a drunk driver traveling 95 miles per hour. We had been going about 60 mph.

Yes, we survived...but barely. Over time, the physical and emotional stress and strain wore away at our ability to withstand; so we fell down, broken. When we got back up, we looked and moved a little differently than we had before. We thought differently and saw

differently and felt differently. Not necessarily worse, just...different. We had changed and been forever transformed. Not just by our accident, but through it.

In the blink of an eye, *we* became someone else. We lost who we were, and our hopes and dreams of what we'd envisioned our life would be like. That life is now so long ago that it seems like a ghost. It is certainly dead. But we are not. Instead, we pierced the veil that separated the world we knew and entered one we could never have imagined.

Our adversity was not unlike many others'. The experience of loss is unique to the sufferer, and there is no way that you – or anyone else – can fully comprehend another's individual anguish. It is lonely and isolating. Nevertheless, the solitary journey of loss is ironically what we all have in common. It binds us together because, of course, that lonely road is more crowded than you can imagine. Eventually, everyone is on it...but you may not realize this until you pierce the veil.

I pray that you never experience the challenges that come from loss, adversity, or heartache. And yet, I know my prayers are futile because it is inevitable that you will. We just don't know when or how. Nevertheless, try not to be bitter because it may very well be the thing that brings you back to life. If you look hard enough, you will see that the crowded road – the one you dread most – is paved with living, healing grace.

But first, you will have to wake up.

CHAPTER TWO

DREAM OF THE RETURN



The life you once knew will depart in three...two...one...

Your mother and I gazed up at the mountains as we stepped out of the Hotel Palazzo Murat after another wonderfully relaxing lunch at our favorite restaurant. The view to our left, toward the village and the ocean, was serene and tranquil, while the view of the mountains to our right was mesmerizing.

The town of Positano rose up from the Gulf of Salerno in Italy and climbed impossibly steep mountain walls. The buildings and dwellings hung suspended from the edges of cliffs as if dangled from the strings of a heavenly puppeteer, their posture and perseverance boldly defying gravity. The very walls themselves of the buildings in Positano could tell their own stories of adversity, pain, compromise, and triumph.

This hillside town was an immense human achievement. It was captivating and yet a little ominous. Your mother and I often joked that we always needed to look up the mountain

before crossing the street to make sure that those cliffside buildings weren't cascading down on the village like some surreal avalanche. We felt excited and privileged to now call this place home.

Your mother and I paused on the sidewalk in front of Palazzo Murat, taking in the views and breathing in the air that was for us so carefree. We looked up and admired the cobblestoned streets that led to our house high above town. We were fortunate to have a home that offered a sweeping view of the town and ocean below. As always, we took a moment to appreciate the view from below, looking up at those buildings and the steep, winding roads that we were about to climb back.

Your mother was always the better hiker, so I let her lead the way. Living in Positano energized her like no other place, and she practically sprinted back home to tend to her flower garden. Every time we returned home from town, we rejoiced in both the journey completed and our little home that was such a sanctuary. We felt incredibly blessed.

While your mother raced ahead, I took my time admiring the ocean below, the lemon trees and wild flowers by my side, and, of course, the houses all around that seemed to be glued to the cliffs of this rugged terrain. I loved the smell of the ocean air and the feel of the cobblestones under my feet. I loved feeling the uniqueness of each cobblestone and how the uneven roughness of so many combined to make up the timeless character of this town we lived in. I thought about the steep hills and the effort it must have taken to create the roads and lay the stones I walked on. Those guys had some serious determination. I wondered if they worked as free men for hire, or as slaves. Either way, they had courage and tenacity; and they produced a functional work of art. This walk home always put me in a reflective mood, especially after a good lunch with wine.

When I finally arrived at our house, I was ready for a nap. The wine at lunch, the heat of the day, and the strenuous walk up the hill all conspired to make a mid-day snooze an absolute necessity.

Our back patio was in an olive grove and offered the perfect place for a little slumber. I rolled onto the reclining chair, closed my eyes, and took in a big breath of the fragrant air. My mouth salivated and relived my meal at Palazzo Murat as I again savored each of the seafood, wine, coffee, and gelato. Such a meal, if possible, could be better only in heaven.

It seemed like we were living there, in heaven, I thought, as I was about to doze off. Your mother and I were both content; for good reason, I reflected in my state of semi-slumber. We lived in Positano, and you had just turned seven years old, were doing great in school, and seemed to be everybody's best friend. We had always considered you a blessing and you had certainly brought immeasurable joy to our family. And, thank God, we had our health. I let those good feelings ride and carry me into a blissful, deep sleep.



The tart fragrance of lemons pierced the gentle air, subdued by the essence from the ancient twisted bark of olive trees. Both aromas were carried to me on an invisible carpet of dirt that was subtle, yet thick, in the reassurance of eternal agelessness. This tantalizing bouquet of citrus, wood, and earth was unique to our adopted home in Italy.

As my nose came alive, I thought I should get up and check on your mother, as I hadn't seen her since our walk home. How long ago was that? Certainly hours, but it seems like ages ago. I tried to lift myself out of the chair I was lying on.

Somehow, for whatever reason, I couldn't move. I couldn't even lift my head, which felt like it was being pulled further and deeper into my chair by an invisible force that was

unbearable and unrelenting. I felt too weak to resist so I didn't fight it too hard, especially when I was so tired. I figured I had earned a few extra minutes and this particular moment, lying here in our garden, was enjoyable – except for feeling like my head was in a vice. Giving in was easier than fighting, and the extra pull beyond gravity felt strangely comforting.

I felt unnaturally relaxed as I chose to enjoy this feeling and not question this new strangeness. Life was good, and this moment was wonderful. The air outside was warm and cozy, and I felt some assurance that your mother was somewhere close by, probably pruning her roses and getting pricked by thorns, as usual. Life was indeed good and worth savoring for a few extra moments.

But the peculiar feeling returned, and I realized I needed to get up. I tried again to get my mind awake and snap out of my sleepiness. I attempted again to pull myself out of my chair, but I still couldn't do it.

Wow, I must be really tired, I thought, though not quite trusting that belief. What time is it, really? Have I overslept? I searched for a clock somewhere and my heart skipped a beat when I realized that I couldn't open my eyes. I thought I was awake – or at least somewhat aware – but now I couldn't make sense of where I was. The world was opaque, a cloudy, milky fog.

Suddenly the throbbing kicked in and took control of all of my senses. It began as a dull, blunt pounding metronome that quickly changed into sharp, searing clasps of pain, as if my head were attached to the rim of a flat tire running over cobblestone streets.

Then, just as I thought the pain would intensify, it changed. Suddenly, I could not feel the pain so much as hear it. A herd of elephants danced inside my head around my brain.

Thankfully, the elephants soon departed, but they were replaced by a faint smell that was oddly familiar. Though distant, I could tell that it wasn't a fragrance I liked. I could tell that it had nothing to do with citrus or wood or earth. This was something foreign and definitely not welcome.

Without further notice, the smell of ammonia rushed into my brain as if swept by a tornado through an open door. Ammonia meant that something wasn't right, and I felt both unnerved and nauseated. My heart skipped another beat as I tried to move...but could not. I then attempted to open my eyes, but my eyelids were immovable, as if stapled shut.

I summoned all my strength to escape these strange assaults on my senses – the throbbing, pounding pain and the stinging smell of ammonia. I didn't want to leave my wonderful dream, but the ammonia in my face demanded that I do so. I fought off the ammonia and tried to deny the awful intrusion by sending myself back to my olive grove. Oohhh, I thought, it was such a good dream. And I'm still so tired. Let me go back there...just for a little while.

The ammonia came again, in an unwelcome, horrible wave. It folded over me, and I tumbled down cobblestoned streets in an inescapable and awful awareness that we were not in Positano. We never had been. The ammonia slapped again against my forehead. Reluctantly, I disconnected from my dream and opened my eyes.

The world then awoke within me, and it was not the world I had just been in. We were not in Positano, and you were not seven – you were not even yet one. Your mother and I had always dreamed of moving to Positano, but it had never happened. Now, that dream was over. That world had never existed except through our hopes and dreams, and I now realized with harsh clarity that, in all likelihood, that world now never would. In the blink of

an eye, our world stopped in its tracks – life as we knew it was over. Not dead, just changed forever. We were derailed by an involuntary track change that had thrown us into a ditch not of our own digging.

About the Author

Gil Ahrens has helped dozens of businesses grow, change and evolve. As a business executive for more than two decades, he has advised business leaders and companies on working through the challenges of both growth and adversity. Early in his business career, he co-founded a consumer electronics company. He then worked as a strategic planning executive in Japan for a large global manufacturing company. He was most recently a Managing Director of Investment Banking at J.P. Morgan.

Gil was born in Suffield, Connecticut and now resides in the San Francisco Bay Area with his wife and young daughter. Together, they all succumb to the whims of Sparky, their domineering Jack Russell Terrier, and Bella, a demur Scottish Terrier determined to dominate every inanimate object.

He attends Menlo Park Presbyterian Church and was an elder at Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco. He is on the board of directors at Abilities United, a non-profit in Palo Alto, California that helps champion those with developmental or physical challenges. Gil holds degrees from New York University and Boston University.

Gil is passionate about ice hockey, Formula 1 racing, University of Texas football, and good cigars...a vice he acknowledges freely.



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