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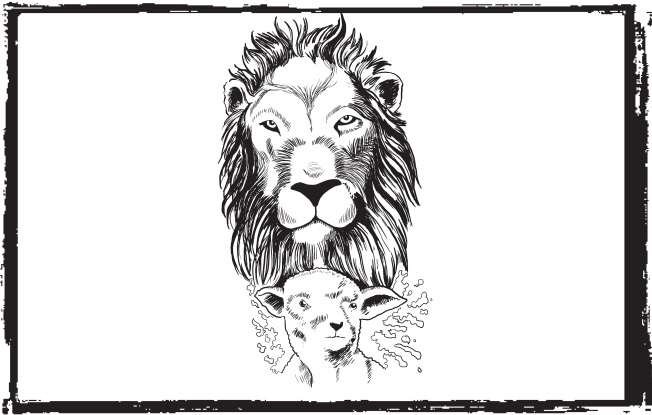
When Your Weakness
Becomes Your Superpower



Plano, Texas



PART ONE:
LOSS



1

BUTTERFLIES OF EDEN

*God saw all that he had made, and it was **very good**. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.*

Genesis 1:31 (emphasis mine)

“My mother left me, and I stayed behind in the Garden of Eden.” This is how Itzchak Belfer described his entry into an orphanage at age seven.¹

Belfer, who became a famous painter and sculptor, was born in April 1923 to a religious Jewish family in Warsaw, Poland, as one of six children. His father was a poor merchant and a leader in the local synagogue. He died when Belfer was only four. Belfer’s mother struggled to provide for her children. In desperation, she took her son to live in the Warsaw orphanage.

As a child, Belfer had quite an imagination and enjoyed drawing. In the orphanage, he was provided paper, brushes, and paints, and was even given a little room of his own to paint in. He made the most of his time in that orphanage, describing the time as precious moments of happiness. It was there that he learned his love for art and started his career. Somehow, in these desperate circumstances, Belfer was able to make an inner journey to his own belovedness. He discovered, in spite of being an abandoned child and living at the orphanage for seven years, that he was a person of worth and sacred value, loved by God and others.²

His was no run-of-the-mill orphanage. This particular Warsaw orphanage, which Belfer described as his Edenic space, was run by a legendary man named Janusz Korczak. Korczak, who wrote under

the pen name Henryk Goldszmit, was a Polish Jewish educator, children's author, and pedagogue. Most know of Korczak by the final courageous moments of his life. He marched hand and hand with the children of his orphanage and boarded a train heading for the Treblinka extermination camp. There, he and his little flock were murdered by the Nazis in 1942. Korczak willingly chose this fate rather than abandon the children he so dearly loved, many as gifted as little Itzchak.

Korczak's orphanage was a haven for hundreds of children. Also known as "the Doctor," Korczak empowered them with values of responsibility and respect. He established a functioning parliament, court, and newspaper in the orphanage, and each child had individual responsibilities to fulfill. Korczak believed that every child had value and needed an opportunity to learn, grow, and express himself or herself within a community of equals. Arguably, no one in history more thoughtfully described the plight of childhood abandonment and created a way to bring dignity and a chance of flourishing to children. To be a citizen of the Warsaw orphanage was to be adopted into a new family, and Korczak was the father.³

Korczak came from a well-to-do family. As a child, he was deeply impacted when he saw so many children his own age growing up in poverty and squalor. When Korczak was eleven, his father had a psychotic break and was hospitalized. His father died when Korczak was eighteen. Korczak knew firsthand what it was like to experience loss at a young age. Perhaps it was some fear of abandonment and the possibility of going mad that drove Korczak in his own work.⁴

Belfer left the Warsaw orphanage just before the Nazi invasion. He enjoyed a distinguished career as an artist, with much of his work preserving the treasured memories he had of Korczak. Many of his pieces bear Korczak's image, and his works have been displayed in numerous exhibitions both in Israel and internationally. One of his well-known sculptures stands in the city of Günzburg, Germany. It depicts Korczak surrounded by a group of his children.

In 2021, Belfer died in Tel Aviv at ninety-eight years old. He was the last living survivor of Korczak's orphanage. He sustained a spirit of deep joy and appreciation for his time there. He literally

transformed what for some would be an insurmountable challenge into a vehicle for expressing transcendence in the world. Through his paintings and sculptures, he took the ashes of his childhood and painted the world more beautiful.

In Korczak's orphanage, Belfer found his "Garden of Eden" a place of innocence, protection, and nurture; a place where he was affirmed and encouraged to create and express his inner life in community with others.



Maya Angelou (born Marguerite Ann Johnson, April 4, 1928) found her place of Eden in her grandmother's home in rural Stamps, Arkansas. After her parents' divorce, three-year-old Maya and her four-year-old brother, Bailey, were placed onboard a train with tags on their wrists that said, "To whom it may concern: Stamps, Arkansas, care of Annie Henderson." They were sent to a small, segregated town, where Maya was raised by her grandmother Annie, whom she called "Momma." There Maya was encouraged to read and study, which ultimately led her to become academically advanced compared to other children her age.

In Stamps, she was mentored by a well-educated woman named Bertha Flowers, who taught her the value of the spoken and written word. Bertha had Maya memorize and recite passages from the books she would loan her.

Like the orphanage for Belfer, Stamps became an Edenic place where Angelou felt safe and secure, a refuge of learning that gave her hope for the future. While she faced many great challenges throughout her lifetime, she carried her Edenic place with her in all her travels. Maya didn't allow her pain and abandonment to break her but used it to become a dancer, scholar, poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist.

Maya Angelou painted with ashes. She published seven autobiographies, three books of essays, and several books of poetry. In her creative work she was able to access a place of inner pain but use it to bring healing to others through her artistic expression. She is cred-

ited with a list of plays, movies, and television shows that spans more than fifty years. Among dozens of awards, the little girl raised by her grandmother in Stamps also received over fifty honorary degrees.⁵

I deeply resonate with Angelou's journey. In the early years of my childhood, my personal Eden was my grandparents' backyard. I, too, called my grandmother "Momma." Like many children from the crack epidemic of the 1980s, I was born addicted and was abandoned by my biological mother at birth. My biological father is ... well, you'll see.

I was legally adopted by my grandparents. Grandpa was a World War II veteran who had experienced abuse and abandonment in his own childhood. My grandmother worked as an office administrator and then manager in the cafeteria of our local high school. My grandparents moved from New York City to settle in Ocala, Florida, in the late 1960s. Both provided for me and made sure I had the necessities of life, but neither was particularly affectionate or warm.

I spent a lot of time by myself, using my imagination to reshape the reality of my abandonment and isolation. The neighborhood boys used the hill in the front of our house as a bike ramp. They would subversively come racing by, hit the hill, fly into the air, and haul tail, laughing, down the road, as my grandpa ran cursing after them. That was the extent of my social interaction outside of school.

From my earliest memories, I was always launching into some entrepreneurial venture or another. I had a copper piggy bank with two of the legs broken off, replaced by simple screws. A great deal of my childhood life was consumed with filling the wounded, peg legged piggy with dollar bills and coins.

I was your run-of-the-mill child entrepreneur those first ten years. I did the standard enterprises: lemonade stands, raking leaves, and picking up pecans to save my grandpa's lawn mower blades (a quarter for every bag). At one point, I took up the somewhat unusual venture of caterpillar hunting. We had a small vegetable garden, an assortment of flowers, and banana trees in our backyard. During caterpillar season in Florida, anything green would be eaten alive by the caterpillars. My grandfather thoroughly indoctrinated me in the narrative that these hairy little worms were the enemy. I justified that

their death was warranted and became an adept hunter. I would fearlessly pluck them from any object and place them in empty peanut jars. My grandfather kept hundreds of these jars in his workshop, a small building that he built with his own hands in the back corner of our lot. I would pack these jars with caterpillars. They would crush each other in the sealed space, green caterpillar guts smearing the glass. I can still remember the smell of suffocating and deceased caterpillars when I would pop the lid off the jar.

The first time I brought Grandpa a couple of filled jars, I felt a sense of sorrow as he poured them into a basin of water and drowned them before my eyes. The sorrow was quickly overcome, though, by money as he placed a handful of coins in my hand, which I then dropped into Mr. Piggy. After that first time, he reduced his offer of a penny per caterpillar to a nickel per jar of caterpillars. I brought him hundreds of caterpillars at a time to be mercilessly drowned.

My expertise as the Steve Irwin of caterpillar hunting grew to include secret forays into the neighbor's yards as well. Who's to say those suckers wouldn't make their way to our backyard? After several seasons of this work, I learned a shortcut. The caterpillars would form cocoons in the trees. Over time those cocoons would be swollen fat with entire communities of caterpillars. Hundreds in a single location. I started finding ways to climb the trees and cut the cocoons free. I used a rope and pulley system to snatch them off the branch.

It was caterpillar genocide, really. I don't think I actually grasped the concept that caterpillars eventually metamorphosed into butterflies. I was focused on filling my bank. I'm surprised my grandpa was able to afford our deal, but he always honored his commitment of a nickel per jar.

Aside from caterpillar season, I found other ways to pack the piggy. I would make tickets, set up a stage in the backyard, and position stuffed animals as my audience. I would sell the tickets to my grandmother (my only live customer for many years), then put on shows with comedy, dancing, and acting. I created menus for a back-porch café (again, my grandmother was my only customer), where I served tea and cookies—provided, of course, by her. A dollar per show, sometimes multiple shows per week.

When that got boring, I started a church. I preached sermons while pacing back and forth on a stone wall that served as my stage and pulpit. I would carefully rehearse these gospel presentations, then invite my only church member (grandma again) to come and worship. At some point the collection plate would come out, and my one loyal church member would drop in her “tithe.”

Later, I started my own publishing company of sorts. I made my own version of handwritten graphic novels on big sheets of paper folded over and stapled at the seam. I created illustrated stories, comic books, and adventure novels. After stapling the sheets together and creating a cover, complete with made-up ISBNs, I sold these books to my only customer (again, my grandmother).

Grandpa had had his own home décor and yard ornament business back in New York City. He was the kind of man who could build anything. Alongside his workshop in our backyard, he also built a small home for my great-grandmother to live in. We called it “the bungalow.” Grandpa built that two-bedroom, one-bathroom bungalow from the ground up. He was an amazing craftsman, proficient in masonry, carpentry, plumbing, electrical wiring, and essentially anything else. I remember following him around trying to help with projects, carrying his tools, and holding his nails. It seemed to be one of the only ways I could connect with him. He didn’t talk or show affection, so joining him in projects made me feel close to him, and I enjoyed learning how to build stuff, which was great fun.

It seems I was a bit too effeminate for Grandpa, though. At times, he called me names, like “sissy” and “faggot.” He was not amused by some of my more flamboyant theatrics in shows, sermons, and dance routines. This caused a creeping suspicion in my soul that something was defective about me. Also, it normalized for me that people who love us also harm us. As an adult, I realize his words wounded me, and to this day I struggle with forming deep relationships with other men.

Grandpa was the epitome of masculinity and warrior strength. Soldiers like him were not supposed to show emotion. My great-grandmother Edith lived in her bungalow until she died at 103. When she died, Grandpa was devastated. I saw him cry for the first

and only time at her funeral. He said, “Goodbye, Momma” through his tears.

My biggest entrepreneurial venture in those days was the creation of my own amusement park. After a trip to Disney World in Orlando, I was inspired to create my own version right there at 812 Northeast Ninth Avenue in Ocala, Florida. Grandpa’s extensive workshop materials provided everything I needed: wooden sawhorses, hundreds of empty milk crates, pipes, aluminum sheets, blocks, buckets, many of his yard ornament pieces, and fake stone creations.

The backyard was a veritable treasure trove of old tools, supplies, and building materials of various kinds. I began the normal process of innovation, rearranging those materials in new and creative ways. I turned my monkey bars into a kind of monorail system and built a wheelbarrow roller coaster. Stacks of milk crates became a climbable tower. Ropes crisscrossed the air between trees as a kind of zip line system. Those were some of the key attractions.

I designed the entire theme park from scratch, mapping out how visitors would move from one attraction to the next. I progressed from “Bunyon’s Bridge” to the rope swing with a ninja turtle (me in a Michelangelo turtle mask with nunchucks); then I rode in the milk crate train safari, which ended in a real wooden slide. I climbed the stone wall beset by crocodiles that led to a stage where I provided an epic Indiana Jones–style enactment, going on finally to a “meet the characters space” (again personated by me, disguised as Dick Tracy, the detective).

After weeks of mapping out the space, designing the rides, and creating the flow (I would serve as the tour guide), I drew up some fliers. I went down to the homes where a couple of neighborhood kids lived and invited them to come check out my park, which I told them would open Saturday at 9:00 a.m. The cost was only a dollar—much more reasonable than Disney World or Busch Gardens! I handed some kids the fliers directly, while others I left on front doors.

The big day came. I dressed up like Indiana Jones, ready to host the crowds of neighborhood customers coming through the park.

My dog, Rambo, was my assistant. The day passed by slowly. No one came. Finally, I resorted to leading my stuffed animals through the adventure, along with Rambo, who seemed to enjoy it very much. At the end of the day, my only paying customer was . . . again . . . my grandmother.

Yet, at no time in my childhood can I remember feeling a sense of failure about all this. I was buoyed by the sheer joy of creating, the excitement of putting things together. The imagining and planning were energizing. Even if only my stuffed animals enjoyed the result, I never felt discouraged or exhausted.

Today, one of my roles is local church pastor. As with any endeavor, some in the church world analyze effort using mathematical means. It is not lost on me as a minister that institutional metrics only measure statistics: who shows up, how many, and how much they give. I wonder if this is something that gets educated into us in school. In *Think Like a 5 Year Old*, my friend Len Wilson describes this documented phenomenon as the “Fourth Grade Slump,” the time when children become aware of their peers, which leads to dynamics of power. Kids’ interests shift from the joy of creating to the satisfaction of finding approval through others.⁶

Interestingly, in the church world, too, we inhabit a system that encourages the seeking of approval but diminishes the joy of creativity. Success and failure measure who consumes what you create but ignore the process of creation.

This is in part what Jesus meant when he said, “Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:3). Recovery from sin and all the isms of its aftermath includes rediscovering our childhood superpower of untamed imagination.

My grandparents’ backyard was a kind of Eden for me, a place where I learned to hone my creative prowess. Even in my selfish quest to ruthlessly slaughter all the caterpillars to fill my piggy bank, somehow butterflies survived and flew freely there.

Contrary to so much fundamentalist Christian teaching about original sin, a Christian doctrine highlighting the bankrupt nature of our human condition from birth, in the Bible the starting point

of our story is “very good.” Everything that is, God creates out of his own Word and will and calls it good. God creates human beings, male and female, in the image of God, and calls the whole masterpiece *very good* (Gen 1:31).

For an Anglican cleric living in eighteenth-century England, *very goodness* was the starting point to understand God and humanity. John Wesley, and the Wesleyan theological position that bears his name, reminds us that this goodness precedes any business about being irreparably bad. Original sin is a way to talk about the current fragmented condition of the human race.

In a journey toward healing, if we don't get the starting point right, we can end up on the wrong path. If we are irrevocably bad and powerless to change, not much of a response is required on our part. We are born bad, stuck helplessly bad, and salvation is collapsed into being rescued and “going to heaven when we die” if we can just recite the correct creedal formula. But the biblical idea of “salvation” is much more expansive than this.

Jesus' name literally means “he who saves.” The Greek word used to describe how Jesus will “save his people from their sins” is *σῶζω* (*sōzō*) (Matt 1:21). To “save” is not only about rescue or erasing penalties on a divine score card. It also denotes relief from suffering, healing from disease, or to make well, whole, and restore to health. The biblical vision of *shalom* (a world at peace) is much more expansive than saving souls for relocation to heaven when they die. It's about God's kingdom breaking into the world now. It's about the healing, renewal, and well-being of the entire cosmos. It's a holistic vision of God's reign on earth.

Salvation is a journey of restorative healing that requires our ongoing response.

Wesleyan theology, or “practical divinity,” emphasizes waves of grace and a journey of transformation that begins in this life and continues into the next. God's first word to us is “you are my beloved, with whom I'm well pleased.” We were once “very good,” but through sin became wounded and in need of healing. Now, through

a relationship with Jesus, we can be restored to our original goodness and find healing in this life.

It's quite remarkable that the starting point for Wesley's understanding of humanity emphasizes this *very goodness*, considering the *very broken* world in which it was developed.

The Methodist movement, which Wesley led, sprang to life in a society plagued by immense poverty, suffering, and evil. Wesley was a priest amid one of the worst crime waves in English history, a time of massive inequality, exploitation, alcoholism, and prostitution. The masses viewed the church with skepticism and associated it with overall corruption.

Wesley had his own wounds to contend with. He documented his spiritual convulsions in his journals. He was plagued with a sense of doubt and not-enoughness and questioned his own salvation regularly. Yet it was this upheaval in his own soul that drove him to lead a movement that changed the world.

After a meticulous effort to live an upstanding religious life, and a failed attempt to be a missionary to the newly forming American colonies, Wesley had a conversion experience on Aldersgate Street in London on May 24, 1738. There, someone read from Martin Luther's preface to Paul's letter to the Romans about the nature of being *saved by grace through faith*. The understanding that Wesley had in his mind, made the long journey into his heart. He described the experience as feeling his heart "strangely warmed."⁷

This was a formational event that set Wesley on a new spiritual course. Yet a close reading of his journal conveys that he still struggled spiritually following the Aldersgate experience. Wesley felt a powerful call to those unreached by the existing church. He was heavily criticized for his outward-oriented fervor, and many churches closed their doors in his face. His ministry became one primarily with those outside the church.

On April 2, 1739, at the compulsion of his friend George Whitefield, Wesley took up the "vile" practice of field preaching.⁸ Preaching outside of a church sanctuary was highly frowned upon by the religious establishment. Yet, from that point, a transformation occurred in Wesley's spiritual life, documented by a marked change in

the nature of his journal entries. For Wesley, the movement inward to his truest self and upward toward God was not complete until it had moved outward to others. The lifelong journey of grace is about growing in love for God and neighbor.

The people called Methodists worked against political corruption. They structured a systematic distribution of food, medicine, clothing, and loans. They organized jobs for the unemployed, educated orphans, and secured shelter for the homeless. Methodist gatherings were places where people of all walks of life came together as one.

Those first communities were places of embodied hospitality. They were places of healing that were *accessible*, *safe*, and *real*. Let's take a look at these three words.

- **Accessible:** The communities were formed in the normal spaces where people gathered, and spoke what has been described as “plain truth for plain people.” The only requirement for membership was “a desire to flee the wrath to come.”
- **Safe:** The communities met in smaller, intimate groups. All people from every social status were welcome, and harmful behaviors were not tolerated.
- **Real:** People were invited to come to terms with and express their brokenness. Methodist small groups asked, “How goes it with your soul?” People were invited to name their woundedness in a community of reciprocity and mutual support.

The Wesleyan way of “salvation” is a vision of holistic healing that takes place in community, begins in this life, and continues in the next. This starts from the utter conviction of the goodness of humanity, but also holds in tension our current brokenness.

Our human story begins in the goodness of a garden around a tree of life (Gen 2:9). The garden is an important place. Life starts in the garden of creation, with the first humans walking with God in the cool of the day (3:8). Life gets reset in another garden, one of

flower-covered graves—a cemetery with an empty tomb (see John 20). Life continues eternally in an urban garden, where we once again gather at the tree of life (Rev 22:1–5).

There was only one restriction in that first garden paradise: don't eat from the other tree, the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen 2:16–17). God gives us the gift of free will. We can choose to follow directions, or not. Of course, we chose the latter and turned utopia into a dystopia, something we have become quite experienced in doing throughout the ages. In our rebellion against God, sin, death, and evil enter the equation.

The first portrait of God after this "fall" is a loving God immediately seeking us out with the graceful call, "Where are you?" (Gen 3:9). God has been calling out "Where are you?" over us ever since. Our free will characterizes all creatures and things and can be used for good or ill. God has built into creation a certain kind of vulnerability. We do not just helplessly participate in a predetermined universe, but we can interact and shape what it becomes. So, free will opens possibilities, both good and bad. We can clearly see there is an element of randomness to the universe.

Many of our conceptions of God are tyrannical, a micromanaging God ruling over the universe in a deterministic fashion. In this view, God sits on a cloud, zapping people from on high, deciding this person will die in an accident today, that person will get cancer, or this baby will be born with his organs outside his body. But the Bible reveals a different God, one who is shaping a world with divine purposes and possibilities. Humans can use their own creative potential to heal or harm what is taking shape. So, "sin" is not simply rebellion against God but against creation.

Profound goodness, beauty, and truth are baked into us and God's "very good" creation. These are the ingredients with which we and the universe are made, yet those ingredients are currently corrupted. Not only does humanity need healing; so does creation itself (Rom 8:22). Death, disease, and natural disasters (natural evil), as well as human evil flourishing in individuals, institutions, and systems (moral evil) are obvious features of our current fragmented cosmos.

Painting with ashes requires us to understand where we fit into this larger story. We begin with the “very good” nature of God’s creation, in which human beings are supremely good among all created things (Gen 1:27–31), and knowing that *very goodness* is still a possibility now and in the ultimate destination (Revelation 22). But we acknowledge that this truth is paradoxical, for pain, struggle, loss, and death, are enduring realities. We all find ourselves sitting in the ashes from time to time.

**Many who have learned to paint with ashes
first had to rediscover their inner
Garden of Eden.**

This involves the movement that Nouwen spoke of as a journey to our inner self. The process of healing is fundamentally a “recovery” of something that was lost. Becoming a “new creation” in Christ is not about *brand spanking new*, which is the obsession of an age typified by consumerism and waste. It’s about something being renewed, healed, and restored to former goodness. The masterpiece is already inside us. Sometimes we just need to invite God to clean off the mess obscuring the surface.

Inside every caterpillar is a butterfly. The creature is the same in genetic and molecular substance but achieves a new state of being. It is the messy liquification and reconstitution process of metamorphosis that reveals the creature’s true form. This is true of humans as well.

Somewhere in the course of our lives, there is an Eden, a place of innocence, where union with God, and “walking with God in the cool of the day” is the norm. A space where we have access to the tree of life. We all have one; some of us just need to look harder to find it. But then for everyone one of us there is a fall.

Itzchak’s Garden of Eden was destroyed when his beloved doctor boarded a train with the children he had given his life for, heading for an extermination camp.

Maya Angelou’s father showed up at Grandma’s house in Stamps when she was seven and took her and her brother up to St. Louis, Missouri, to drop them off to live with their mother, Vivian. During that brief stay, Maya was raped by her mother’s boyfriend, Freeman.

Under fear of his threat to kill her brother, Bailey, she intended to hide the rape. But because she was bedridden and bleeding for several days, her mother discovered the abuse. Freeman was arrested, Maya testified at his trial, and he was sentenced to prison. Before he could get carted off to the jail, he was assaulted and stomped to death in a vacant lot. Maya felt that her court testimony had led to his death. She went into a period of silence for five years and carried feelings of guilt for the murder of her attacker. She returned to her grandmother's house in Stamps, but she carried the trauma of her abandonment, abuse, and pain the rest of her life. Her Eden had been destroyed.

My Eden was destroyed too, in my grandparents' backyard when I was just ten, the details of which I will share in the pages to come. That was the beginning of my "fall," which would ultimately lead to darkness, alcoholism, cocaine addiction, arrest, and imprisonment. It was in that backyard that I ate from my own personal tree of knowledge of good and evil. It was there that I "died" and my innocence was lost.