

A Good Name Is Rather to Be Chosen

It's a little scary being the new girl, walking into a private school full of teachers and administrators and secretaries and maintenance men. They've been laboring here long, and I've only put in one week.

Who will I be in this place?

I tidy the bookshelves and make a nifty bulletin board. Hang a few pictures of my family over my desk.

Bring myself into the school.

The first week of in-service meetings is a barrage of information, and through the fire hose come unexpected streams of character assessment.

The superintendent sits at the end of the conference table and tells the new teachers about last year's senior class. They were an amazing, impressive group of students. Will this next class be like that? We will see.

The woman whose door opens across the hall from mine is quiet and unimposing. But her name is spoken loud from every direction. The students love her. She gives every senior a collection of pictures she has gathered of them over the years. Students say her name when asked what has impacted them most.

Names never come alone. They are always followed by adjectives: "Then the Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil'" (Job 1:8, NIV).

I was just reviewing how to say a whole list of descriptive words in Spanish: *lazy, hardworking, friendly ...*

What descriptions go behind your name?

We do not live to impress people. I learned that freeing lesson several months ago. Yet our reputation matters because it reflects on the Father. The same adjectives that go behind His name should go behind ours, for His glory.

The good news about adjectives is that Jesus died on the cross to make it possible for us to change them.

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3 Lessons for Our Daughters From Miley Cyrus

My Facebook feed was on fire with posts about the Miley Cyrus ... er ... performance at the Video Music Awards. People reacted strongly—most negatively, but a few defending the 20-year-old.

And that, I guess, is the thing that makes me feel a little nauseous. She is 20 years old. Just a baby.

How does a darling little girl go from Disney stardom to that moment where she finds herself nearly naked on a stage in front of millions doing obscene things with a foam finger? I'm not in show business, but does that seem like a good career move?

As I watched it on YouTube (where it will undoubtedly be viewed a gazillion times or until someone does something more outrageous next year month—shock value has a very short shelf life), I thought about all the moms with daughters who are

figuring out what to do with the star they once idolized.

For what it's worth, I think Miley's story contains some golden teaching moments:

1. No matter who you are, you need people. I don't know if Miley has bad advisers in her life or if she's positioned herself outside their counsel, but this is what happens when you stop listening to the right people. With the life-defining decisions like "Should I keep it classy at the VMAs or become a really well-paid porn star?" you gotta have input from people outside your situation. It's imperative.

Take Miley out of the equation for a minute, though, because I've seen girls make this same mistake a million times over issues that were much lower profile but no less important to the outcome of their lives. If you can't get three good people to sign off on a big decision, beware. If you have to reject the counsel of or distance yourself from the people you've loved and trusted your whole life, beware.

Let's teach our daughters: Surround yourself with wise people and trust them to help you make the big decisions. Especially trust their judgment if you're about to do something that has any chance of going viral.

2. Popularity is a harsh mistress. We've seen this child-star trajectory many times. They desperately try to outrun their Disney image until they run out of road and crash badly. It's not surprising.

The growing-up process is hard enough without having an audience watching and commenting on it. Becoming our real, true selves can be treacherous even when we're not being paid to pretend to be someone else. And you better believe with all that adoration comes a whole freight train of criticism—and not the constructive kind.

Child stars live in glass houses beneath a constant barrage of stones being thrown by the masses. They are loved and loathed. Worshipped and wrecked.

In Miley's performance, I saw a girl who has received the attention of the masses but still feels she has to fight to be seen. She lives in a world where someone newer, fresher and prettier is always nipping at your heels, and sex always sells.

Let's teach our girls: Don't sell your soul for the applause of the crowd—it's a two-edged sword. Be authentic. Be true. Be love. Everything else will fall into place from there.

3. Could we talk about Robin Thicke for a minute? Married man. Twice her age.

Let's teach our daughters: Real men protect women. They don't use them for cheap thrills or big ratings. They don't.

And to the men in the audience and behind the cameras: You don't gawk at a woman who's making a bad decision with her body. You look away or offer your coat. Because you can't criticize exploitation while also consuming it.

Oh, and let's teach our sons: Be a real man.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of the newly-released Beautiful Battliefields (NavPress). She knows the most beautiful things can come out of the hardest times. Her Goliath came in the form of her husband's terminal illness, a battle they are still fighting with the help of their four children, a veritable army of friends and our extraordinary God. Bo is a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Ore.

Education That Creates a Way

How one inner-city church provides structure and support for kids to keep learning all the way through college

On Wednesday nights in Zion, Ill., children ages 5-12 can step into a world of colorful, giant cartoon characters that includes an oversized spin-the-wheel game boasting cash prizes and an opportunity to receive a snack pack of food.

“For some kids, this is all they have had to eat that night,” says Luis Reyes, founder and senior pastor of Church of Joy and its Sidewalk Sunday School ministry.

And if the kids keep coming back, they get even more. Through the church, they gain access to tutoring, a food pantry and clothing.

“We noticed that some of the kids didn’t know how to read the Bible,” Reyes says of the tutoring effort. “Then we realized they didn’t know how to read at all. So we started the Success Center to provide tutoring services.”

The Success Center is an 8,000-square-foot facility with a computer lab, project room, cafeteria and classrooms where more than 50 first- through sixth-graders receive group tutoring in reading, language arts, writing, math, science and social studies.

Kids who receive these services have a high probability of being inducted into the church’s teen leadership program at 12 years of age. Teen leaders help out in every aspect of the church’s ministry, from cleaning, cooking and taking care of younger children to working in the office. A teen leader receives a T-shirt that indicates their leadership status and is worn like a badge of honor.

“The cool thing for kids is to come on a Friday night revival service, go to college days, join the dance and step team, and become a young adult here,” says associate pastor Jordan Jones. “The kids are sitting there, saying, ‘I want to be like Demetrius or like Sierra,’ instead of wanting to be like Beyoncé or Chris Brown. We’re giving them examples of young adults to look up to.”

Teen leaders adhere to a strict code of conduct, and if they show exceptional academic excellence, they may qualify for a scholarship to a private Christian school.

“I wanted to earn that scholarship when I was in the eighth grade,” says Demetrius Hollins, one of the church’s young adult leaders. “I barely passed eighth grade, but I stepped it up in teen leadership by helping to set up the services, cleaning and helping with the kids.”

Hollins made honor roll during his freshman year in high school, and when he needed surgery for his legs, Reyes found a surgeon who would perform the surgery for free. The surgery cost Hollins a month of his sophomore year, but he caught up the following year and became the first high school graduate in his family with a 3.0 GPA.

After high school, Hollins enrolled in Church of Joy’s Bible college, a four-year program with free tuition for students who grew up in the Sidewalk Sunday School program.

“Our students couldn’t afford to pay for tuition,” says Reyes, who founded the college. “The school is only for kids who have stayed with us throughout the years from Sidewalk Sunday School. Right now, it’s closed to outsiders. Students who go through the college must commit to staying here to help with the ministry.”

Bible college students receive free housing and a stipend for working at the church. They receive three years of training with a practicum apprenticeship in the fourth year and can receive training in the creative arts, multimedia, education and pastoral care as well as a ministerial certificate.

For most students in the Bible college, they become the first person in their family to finish a college education.

A Sidewalk Shelter

Luis Reyes remembers running the streets at night for fear of losing his life if he returned home. Yet today God is using his journey to create a safe place for thousands of children, giving them a hope they never knew could be theirs.

Luis Reyes grew up on the streets of Waukegan, Ill., one of the roughest parts of Chicagoland, located about 40 miles north of the city.

“I ran the streets,” Reyes says. “I acted out at school, and I was in so much trouble that they parked me in front of the principal’s office in my own cube. They put me in special education all through school. It wasn’t until I got into the Army and took an assessment test that I found out that I had a normal IQ.”

At age 16, Reyes walked into an empty house and found a note on the table that said, “We’ve moved. Go live with your friends.” His bed and belongings were all that was left of his home life.

He moved in with another family, finished high school and joined the Army. After the Army, he joined Church for All Nations in Colorado Springs, Colo., where he served as children’s pastor.

Soon, though, Reyes felt a call to return to the rough streets of his childhood to minister to kids he knew were living in circumstances just like he did, running the streets in the middle of the night because they didn’t want to go home. He recalls how the trajectory of his own life changed the day someone reached out to him in his troubled teen years.

“One day this 20-year-old girl invited me to a Youth for Christ meeting,” he says. “She said there was pizza, and I was hungry so I went to the meeting. I gave my life to Christ at that meeting, and everything changed.”

And so, in 1997, fueled by a sense of mission that wouldn't let up, Reyes and his wife, Tricia, packed a U-Haul truck and headed back to the Chicago area, where they started the Church of Joy in Zion, Ill., just north of Waukegan, and launched a ministry called Sidewalk Sunday School.

A Fledgling Start

The Sidewalk Sunday School model was birthed by Bill Wilson, a minister in Brooklyn, N.Y., abandoned by his mother on the streets of Pinellas Park, Fla., as a child and taken in by a Christian gentleman who paid his way to attend a Christian summer camp. Those acts of kindness changed Wilson's life, and he eventually graduated from Southeastern University in Lakeland, Fla., and pioneered one of the first bus ministries to children in the United States—a ministry that now reaches tens of thousands of children each week and has since spread to other cities across the nation.

Wilson is an essential figure in what has since become Church of Joy's success, having served as a mentor to Reyes in one of the bleakest seasons in Reyes' adult life.

“We came with some support from our home church,” Tricia Reyes says of their early days of planting the church. “But as the ministry to the kids grew, we discovered that the adults that joined our church at the time didn't want these kids mixed in with their kids.”

The kids bused in for the services were usually rough around the edges, and parents from the adult congregation complained they used foul language around their children. Gang members slipped into the meetings, and fights broke out with increasing regularity during services.

“You could count on it like clockwork,” recalls associate pastor Jordan Jones. “Right when Pastor Luis would be in the middle of his message, a brawl would break out. I’m talking about 11 guys who are 6 feet tall, punching on each other.”

“We lost over 50 families,” Tricia Reyes says.

With the loss of the adult congregation, funding for the church dried up. Luis and Tricia Reyes stepped in with their personal finances to fund the continued outreach to kids, but they eventually lost their home and their cars and had to move into the church basement.

The impact on Luis was severe.

“[He] went into a deep depression for six months and said he was going to commit suicide,” Tricia Reyes says. “Our daughter Madison was 2 at the time. Most days, when I would get home with Maddie, I would check the house first before I unloaded her to make sure he didn’t commit suicide. Luis is the type of man that when he tells you he is going to do something, he does it.”

Thankfully, Luis didn’t follow through with his intent. Instead, Tricia and a longtime church member named Juanita carried the ministry while he recovered from the deep depression.

“I felt like a failure,” he says of that time. “I had brought my wife out here, started the church with the backing of my home church, and was overcome by darkness. I didn’t see a way out.”

But somehow during that trying time, Reyes found the strength to reach out to Wilson with a phone call—which came while Wilson was in the middle of a church service.

“I asked Bill, ‘What should I do?’ I could hear crowd noise

around him, and he shouted to me in the phone, 'Don't quit!' and hung up," Reyes says.

After that, Reyes traveled with Wilson for three years, learning how to raise support for children's programs. Adults who supported the vision of reaching inner-city kids eventually joined the church—but Luis had to implement policies to protect the congregation.

"After one service, there were a bunch of guys in the game room, and I knew something was up," Jones says of the time when change in church policy was imminent. "Suddenly this guy punches this other guy and a brawl breaks out. We call the police and push the guys down and put handcuffs on them. We kicked them out, and they turned around and told Pastor Luis, 'I'm going to [expletive] kill you if I ever see you on the streets.'"

Death threats had become routine, and as the crowd was hauled off by the police, Reyes says he knew things needed to change. They needed to keep the ministry secure for the sake of the children and teenagers who wanted to be there. And so today, a visitor is thoroughly questioned by a security guard before coming into the building. The staff can spot gang colors and mannerisms and can discern whether the person wants to come into the service to fight, to scope out girls or guys, or because they're interested in God.

Rescuing Kids Like Kiki

One of the kids who came because of an interest in God was Kiki Lee, 18, who began attending the Sidewalk Sunday School ministry when she was 4 years old. By age 10, she was one of hundreds of kids who would get up and dressed on their own to wait outside in varied conditions—snow, cold, rain or sun—for a bus to pick them up to attend services.

"I was living with my grandmother at the time because my mom couldn't take care of us," she says. "During a Wednesday night

service, God spoke to me that He had a plan for my life and I'm not going to be what I see outside of these walls."

That moment changed Lee's outlook on life, but at 14 years old, her mom took her from her grandmother's home to move to Sterling, Ill.

"I thought it was going to be stable, but my mom started drinking a lot and got into a lot of trouble," Lee says.

Eventually, she and her family of six siblings found themselves living out of a van, and they moved back to Zion when she turned 16. Her mother dropped her off at her godmother's place of employment—a godmother she hadn't seen in three years—and told her she'd be living with her godmother from that point forward.

While her godmother let her attend church, Lee's mother fell back into the pattern of living with abusive boyfriends—and she abused Lee as well, sometimes waiting for Lee to return from church so she could beat her. When Reyes saw the bruises, he told Lee he was going to get her out of her home. The church, her schools and her siblings called the child abuse hotline many times, but when officials followed up on the calls, the home was always clean and her mother deflected accusations of abuse.

"That's why we started a girls' home and a boys' home," Reyes says, referring to a beautiful two-story home with five bedrooms where Lee was eventually invited to stay.

"I remember opening the refrigerator, and there was food!" Lee crows, having been accustomed to living in homes with empty refrigerators.

Similarly, Demetrius Hollins was 16 when he moved into the boys' home—a home that offered him a completely different world from the one he knew.

“I went to sleep every night hearing gun shots,” he says. “My brothers would push me down and hold me so I would miss the bus to go to church. I always managed to slip out of their arms to get to church.”

Today, Lee and Hollins are young leaders in a revival that has erupted and is attracting thousands of African-American children and teenagers to Church of Joy. Lee is the drummer for the worship band and attends Bible college. Hollins also attends Bible college and is a young adult leader.

“For our kids, our services [are] the only piece of Jesus they have to hold on to during the drama at home,” Hollins says.

He should know—that “piece of Jesus” kept him from succumbing to the pressures of joining a gang while growing up, which his brothers did and are now serving time in prison.

“I would cry and would call [the church] until I got picked up,” Hollins says of those early days of attending church while living in his troubled home.

Jones affirms the importance of the church’s outreach to kids. “Most of these kids are walking past their big brothers smoking weed on the porch or mom passed out in bed from being too drunk to get to church,” he says.

“I tell my drivers that when you pick up a kid, you’re picking me up,” Reyes says. Today, the church’s fleet of 18 buses and vans pick up 500 to 600 kids in 11 cities in the tri-city area every week.

The Spirit of Elijah

At a recent Thursday night service that targets teens ages 12 to 18, Jones exhorts those in attendance to be fathers who have hearts for their children.

“Most of you don’t know where your dads are at today,” he says. “Don’t expect their hearts to be turned toward you.

God's heart is turned toward you, and He is your father. You be the father that has turned your heart toward your children."

Jones and Reyes believe God is using them to bring the spirit of Elijah through these children.

"In Malachi 4:5-6, it says, 'Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse,'" Reyes says. "This is a sign of Jesus coming back to His church. The father is where the child receives his or her identity. If they don't have fathers, they don't have an identity."

For most of these children, Reyes is the only father they know. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, two out of three African-American families have no father. Reyes believes African-Americans are in crisis, given the widespread fatherlessness and the 1,800 abortions performed on African-American women each day.

"If there isn't a change in the current trend, the African-American man will be extinct by 2040," he says.

Reyes believes God has called him and his church to fight this trend of fatherlessness and abortion. As such, he has launched Black People Against Abortion, which leads protests in the area with a different attitude.

"We tell moms that they can raise their child," Tricia Reyes says. "Most of these moms are frightened young teenagers who want to do what's right, but they feel trapped into getting an abortion. We encourage them to be a good mom and give their child life. We will help them by connecting them with organizations that work with moms in crisis."

The organization is leading Pack the Park on Sept. 20-22, 2013, at Shiloh Park in Zion, with 1,800 African-American teenagers and young adults expected to participate. Reyes is challenging teens and young adults across the nation to join him in bringing young people back to biblical Christianity.

“Men are being raised up who will gather children to turn their hearts toward Christ,” he says. “Children gain their identity from their father, and the biggest ministries to youth right now are led by men such as Mike Bickle of the International House of Prayer. We’re the next generation of young pastors building ministries for African-Americans that’s appealing.”

As of press time, Church of Joy is in negotiations for a multimillion-dollar building being donated to the church. Reyes sees the gift as a reward for the church’s faithfulness to give a cup of cold water in Jesus’ name to children in desperate need of such compassion—something he knows firsthand can change a life.

Leilani Haywood is a Kansas City, award-winning writer and columnist. Her work has been published in the Kansas City Star, Metro Voice and other publications.

Find out more about Luis Reyes’ Sidewalk Sunday School ministry and how it’s impacting thousands weekly at

Glimpsing God's Breathtaking Majesty in Worship

"You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power. For you created all things, and they exist because you created what you pleased" (Rev. 4:11, NLT).

The sight of our exalted God and resurrected, glorified Christ must be so overwhelming that the only logical response is extravagant praise and worship. A glimpse into the throne room pulls from the heart unrestrained worship and adoration.

The biggest, most flamboyant words language can produce—*glory, honor, power, worthy*—don't quite give full expression. Those standing before the throne throw their crowns at the feet of the Lord God Almighty, as if nothing they could have accomplished or that might honor them belongs to them. Every position or success has no worth other than to be offered as gift to the King.

This song of worship states that the King created all things and that those things are in existence still because it pleases Him for them to exist. Translate that into your heart this way: *You exist because you are a pleasure to God.* He created what He pleased, and He pleased to create you.

Even in the midst of this breathtaking vision of the majesty of heaven's throne room and the glory of heaven's King, there is His love for you. It is part and parcel with His glory, honor and power that He loves you beyond comprehension.

Isn't it beautiful—this scene that only our hearts can see? Does it sweep you away in its pageantry and splendor? Yet the glorious, all-powerful, eternal God at His most exquisite is mindful of you. He's not aloof from the adoration poured out on Him but returns it in equal measure. Not in worship, certainly. But in boundless love.

Let your heart see this scene. In the inner sanctuary of your

own soul, worship with abandon. Let the wonder that you are precious to Him, known by Him, created because you please Him just by being—let it all wash over you and capture you in the great undertow of love flowing from Him and drawing you in.

King of kings, Lord of lords, Creator, Sustainer, only God, I worship you with my whole life. I pour out my life at Your feet. May it be a sweet-smelling aroma of worship. May it please You and give You some small echo of the joy You give me.

“Ordinary human motives will appeal in vain to the ears which have heard the tones of the heavenly music; and all the pomp of life will show poor and tawdry to the sight that has gazed on the vision of the great white throne and the crystal sea.”
—Alexander MacLaren (1826-1910)

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Radiate

Tricia (Inpop Records)

Tricia Brock—the voice behind successful radio singles “One Girl Revolution,” “We Live” and “Stand in the Rain” by the band Superchick—releases *Radiate*, her debut solo album, on Aug. 13.

Brock joined the contemporary Christian girl band, which has sold more than 1 million albums and had five No. 1 singles, soon after high school and toured the world with the band as a young single. Now a wife and mother, she says the new project

is a chance for her to connect more personally with listeners.

Radiate includes “Enough,” a song about trusting God when life isn’t going well; “Mirror, Mirror,” which speaks about the temporary things people chase; and “What I Know,” a tender piano ballad of praise to God.

While some themes are universal, Brock—who goes simply by Tricia now—feels the new project may endear itself to older listeners outside Superchick’s primary fan base.

“Honestly, I’ve always felt like a big sister to our fans, being there to encourage them and let them know other people have felt the same things they are experiencing and that they can make it through,” she says. “But now that I’m a wife, mom and working woman, I also have a whole new respect and understanding for a new group of people.”

While the band allowed Brock to deliver positive messages to the teens-and-younger set, she’s also aware that feelings of insecurity and self-doubt follow women well into their adult years, and they’re emotions she has also faced.

“Even as an adult, there are different areas that make me feel the same way I did in high school—that I’m not good enough, that I don’t measure up,” she says. “I have bad days, where I feel easily discouraged, depressed and listen to the fear. But those moments, in particular, are the times where I have to hold on to my faith and to let my heart be convinced of the things that my mind knows.”

The new record allowed Brock the chance to collaborate with her husband, Nick Baumhardt (Stellar Kart). The duo wrote the album and recorded it in their home studio, and Baumhardt served as its producer.

Camp

Roebuck Media

Lives are changed and unconditional love modeled when a troubled towhead meets a clueless counselor in the new drama *Camp*.

The 111-minute film released to theaters in February and makes its home video debut Aug. 7. With a budget of \$200,000, the film tells the story of Ken Matthews (Michael Mattera), an investment adviser who signs up to be a camp counselor to impress a client. He's paired with 10-year-old Eli (Miles Elliot), an abused boy who has become bitter and hateful. As the story unfolds, the reluctant counselor manages to break through the walls of Eli's heart to make a connection that changes them both.

Writer and director Jacob Roebuck says the film was inspired by events in his own life. While serving on a local church staff, he was required and initially reluctant to participate in a mission trip to help abused and neglected children at the Royal Family Kids Camp.

"In my heart, I felt the call to go help these kids," he says. "The call went against my wiring. I didn't work with kids. But I also knew better than to ignore what could be a divine prompting. I still resisted interaction with children, many orphaned, who desperately need contact with loving, caring adults."

The film not only focuses on the special ministry of youth camps and personal evangelism, but also addresses themes of abandonment, abuse, neglect and the need for men to step into their roles as fathers and father figures.

“The camp experience, learning to care for the fatherless, has become the heart of the story we want to tell with our film,” Roebuck says. “Why was it so hard for me to connect with kids? Where did the wall come from? Why is it so hard for men to step into the place of father?”

Roebuck says he hopes the film will “inspire people to open their hearts to forgotten children who need adults in their lives.”

Camp is rated PG-13 for brief language, mature thematic elements, brief violence and a crude gesture.

Become the Power Couple the Enemy Can't Stand

“During the rule of Herod, King of Judah, there was a priest assigned service in the regiment of Abijah. His name was Zachariah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron. Her name was Elizabeth. Together they lived honorably before God, careful in keeping to the ways of the commandments and enjoying a clear conscience before God” (Luke 1:5-7, MSG).

Now, this? Is a wonderful life! This is exactly what I want my marriage to look like. Zachariah and Elizabeth, living in the same call, walking in the same truth, pursuing the same character goals. And in response to the way they've fashioned their family, God gives them the keys to the next generation and they give birth to the bridge between the years of dark silence and the years of brilliant redemption.

So many dating couples fall into the trap of giving themselves primarily to one another. They give up ministry, get immersed

in the process of falling in love—which is a *great* process, and it definitely deserves some attention, but they often don't find a way back to the things that God had spoken to them before the hearts and flowers fell.

It's easy to believe that finding the right person actually *is* the bulk of God's purpose—kind of like the finish line—and all that we were doing before was a diversion to keep us occupied while waiting for the ultimate matrimonial prize. If that's our mindset, we can easily spend the bulk of our energy after "I do" on keeping our marriage safe, our stuff safe, our time safe and our kids safe.

I've watched hundreds of couples walk this out, and I've found that the most excellent and exciting relationships are those that allow God to multiply their kingdom purpose rather than trimming it down to fit inside the safety of the American dream.

Husbands and wives who encourage one another to step into the fullness of God's call and character, who push each other to become carriers of His authority to the world around them (even when it's costly), and who keep their vision globally and eternally focused—those marriages are not just happy. They're dangerous.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of the newly-released *Beautiful Battlifields* (NavPress). She knows the most beautiful things can come out of the hardest times. Her *Goliath* came in the form of her husband's terminal illness, a battle they are still fighting with the help of their four children, a veritable army of friends and our extraordinary God. Bo is a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Ore.

Finding God While Fighting for Your Husband's Life

Editor's Note: Bo Stern's husband is fighting a rare disease, ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease.

I fear I'm becoming more and more like my grandmother as I pepper every conversation with thoughts about how fast time is moving. But it's true. I can't believe it's June, and I can't imagine where the first half of 2013 has gone. For me, it's been consumed with three main things: book promo, ALS and ALS.

ALS gets to count for two things because it requires double the resources that anything in life ever has or, I suspect, ever will.

The past two months in the land of ALS have been difficult, draining and, honestly, unlike anything I've ever experienced before. My husband, Steve, finds himself in a season in which nearly everything he does requires herculean efforts, most especially breathing and eating.

Consequently, he has to fight for every scrap of emotional fortitude in order to keep himself on top of the wave instead of underneath it. It's incredible and awful to watch. I can't begin to articulate how much I feel a) impressed and in awe of the man I married and b) utterly inadequate to be all that he needs.

I've never had a front-row seat to a battle of this magnitude, and I don't want to be dramatic, but I can tell you that I hit a point about a month ago where I realized I am being changed by this. I'm being changed in ways that are wonderful and ways that might need a little healing when we get to the other side, but I know with certainty that I am not the same girl who went into this war three years ago.

I know my thoughts sound a bit murky, and that's only because they are. I'm working very hard right now to sift the gold

from the chaff, the beauty from the ashes. Some days it's easy. The strong stuff rises to the top and we float with it, immersed in the wonder of being held by a God who has not abandoned us to this process. We feel His life surrounding, keeping, sustaining. And some days finding the beauty in ALS is like walking uphill through quicksand.

And herein lies the conundrum at the heart of my writing life: How much do I focus on this disease, and how much do I try to dodge and weave its reality? Because in the beginning, I thought I could. I thought I was able to pick bits and pieces and sew stories out of other, more beautiful thread. Thread that is easier for people to read. Thread that might possibly make my life look prettier and more together than it is. But now I see that a neat compartmentalization of this battle is not just difficult; it's impossible.

My life is sewn with two colors right now and not just one. This one thing—this steady erosion of my husband's strength—is packaged up with everything else. It's the pop-up at the bottom of the TV screen (boo!); it's the flavor in the soup that you just can't seem to shake; it's your neighbor's wind chimes that sometimes are less clangy than others, but you always know they're there.

It's our reality, and reality for us has gotten pretty noisy and bossy in the past few weeks, which means that I can write airy sentences about graduation or summer or how I really love my Nutribullet (I really, seriously do), but all those words are weighted with anchors, keeping them tied to the shore of this new reality.

And so sometimes I worry. Not for me, because writing is cathartic for me. I worry for you. I worry that the people who love us will grow weary of this war and its sorrow.

Our hope has been to bring awareness to a disease that so few people ever see up close, and so I think I've tried to put the best face on it, lest our story becomes just too much. Too sad. Too long.

But real is real, and life is life, and God is either good in the too much or He's not good at all. And I can tell you: He is. So good.

I recently read a quote in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 that said, "We are not as those to grieve without hope, but we are not as those who hope without grief." It's exactly right. Hope and grief for me right now are my inhale/exhale. They are the one-two punch that drives me to the one true Source of everything. And I hope that our story—our real, true story—moves you to Him as well.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of the newly-released Beautiful Battlegrounds (NavPress). She knows the most beautiful things can come out of the hardest times. Her Goliath came in the form of her husband's terminal illness, a battle they are still fighting with the help of their four children, a veritable army of friends and our extraordinary God. Bo is a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Ore.

Glorious Ruins

Hillsong Live

Hillsong Music

Hillsong Live frequently proclaims the transforming power of Christ, and listeners will once again encounter that on the group's newest release, *Glorious Ruins*. The phrase refers to the concept that God can breathe new life into the ashes of destruction. The title track highlights that concept with lyrics such as "Let the ruins come to life/In the beauty of Your name/Rising up from the ashes/God forever You reign."

The new project, which features 12 new songs (14 on the deluxe

edition) written by team members Joel Houston, Reuben Morgan, Ben Fielding and Matt Crocker, is a melodic mix of modern pop rock recorded at two Hillsong churches in London and Sydney.

There are high-energy anthems, such as “You Never Fail” and “Where the Spirit of the Lord Is,” as well as stripped-down acoustic ballads such as “To Be Like You.” The album opens with the pop rock sounds of “Always Will” and ends with the affecting praise of “Anchor.” The modern hymn hybrid “Man of Sorrows” is already making the rounds in churches around the globe.

In what may be a first for the group, Hillsong Pastor Brian Houston delivers a lively half-hour sermon at the end of the project’s deluxe edition on the album’s concept. It’s a fitting reminder that not only are the songs on the project written with the church in mind, but that the ministry behind Hillsong Live is created and nurtured out of local churches.