

When Other People's Choices Hurt You

Ron and Judy called Ron's brother and his wife to say they have to drop their plans to split the costs of a vacation cottage on the lake. Their grandchildren will be living with them for the next who knows how many years. Ron and Judy's daughter, a single parent, met someone on the Internet. He lives in Brazil. Children don't work into his life plan. So she left her kids with the grandparents to pursue the man with smoky eyes and a sultry accent.

Sarah changed her locks. Changed her name. Eventually changed her address. He still found her. Stalkers don't obey restraining orders. Why did she have to leave a job she loved because of his sickness? Why is she paying the price for his warped thinking?

Dan sold his Motocross bike to pay for his artificial leg. The accident that took his limb—and now his bike—happened in a parking lot, of all things. Who drives drunk in a parking lot? Whatever his name was, he got away with it without a scratch or a fine or a jail term. He'd fled the scene and had never been caught. Dan now walks with a limp, emotionally as well as physically. Someone else's choice affects every day of his life.

I crossed the campus of a private college a few months ago while attending a conference. The summer work crew slipped into their tasks in sync with the exit of the past semester's students. I watched, fascinated, as two young men scraped old gum from the brick walkway between the grand, hundred-year-old buildings. The youth worked, bent and bored, with putty knives and sunburns. Scraping, scraping, scraping nickel-sized, tarry refuse from life's path. An hour later the young men had cleared only a dozen of the thousands of bricks the summer

promised them.

Waste cans sat proud, ready, and unused a few feet away. Unthinking, a semester's worth of students had tossed their exhausted gum on the bricks. Now, men with putty knives spent their days mindlessly engaged in the tedium of cleanup.

Other people's choices aren't always life-changing. Sometimes they're merely annoying, mildly disturbing. We still need grace to cope with their negative effects on us.

The math teacher grades on a twisted curve, which adversely affects your grade point average, which means the scholarship goes to another. Without the scholarship, your choices narrow. Now your workday looks nothing like you envisioned it. Combined with other factors, a teacher's decision changed the course you'd mapped out.

The upstairs tenants buy a dog—120 pounds of fur with bear claws for paws and a bad case of insomnia. The hardwood floor and lack of insulation between their apartment and yours accentuate the beast's heavy-footed tick-tick-tick, tick-tick-tick-tick from midnight to dawn. The dog's seeing a counselor for his sleeplessness. You wonder if the counselor takes people too.

Your mother wears army boots. And a lime green tutu over her leopard leotards. She's not motivated by dementia, but thrives on the attention she gets at the senior center, on the street, at Walmart, and at church. Her choice of a comic life undercuts your longing for respect in the community. She's adorable. You're irritable. Everyone thinks you're the one with the problem.

Your friend inadvertently copies you on an e-mail intended for someone else. The message mocks and belittles you. Years of trust and companionship disappear. Delete is not a strong enough response.

Careless or cruel, thoughtless or depraved, the choices others make affect us. Short-term. Long-term. Sometimes causing indigestion. Sometimes leaving scars.

We labor to breathe through the fallout of what those choices mean to us, our sanity, our stability, our sense of well-being.

When we stand in a muddle of misery someone else created for us, too weary to be creative, too worn down to embrace a trendy problem-solving technique or follow a seven-step plan to a new, improved life, we need an arm around our shoulder assuring us God hears, God understands, and is not stingy with hope.

How ragged is the hope you're clutching? It's no less valuable or essential than it was when it was new.

Is it hard for you to admit you're struggling with the aftermath of other people's choices? Did you think confessing how awful it is would make it worse? Or make your pain seem pathetic, or cheapen the tenacity you're working so hard to maintain?

Do the people you love and influence need a reminder of this timeless truth? "No one can measure the depth of [God's] understanding" (Isa. 40:28 NLT).

Or are you the one whose choices have changed someone else's life and you too struggle to find a reason to—or a way to—keep hope from disintegrating to powder in your hands?

In these pages, you may discover hope, as I did, carried on the wild flood of starting over words, do-over words, the "re-" words: restructure, recreate, revise, rewrite, refresh, rebound, reclaim, restore, resolve, reuse, relearn, recapture, relinquish, regroup, rebuild, rearrange, redeem.

Come a little closer. Tucked between the front and back covers

are stories of people like you walking through the aftermath or the current hot zone of other people's choices.

Between the lines are the stories of those who caused the inexpressible hurt. As you accompany them all on their journeys, you may respond, "That's me!" or "Thank God that's not me!" or "I had no idea how far-reaching the fallout." Each story offers an opportunity for you to discover far more than insights about the reverberations of pain, more than a pinpoint of light for the path you walk.

You'll find hope that—even when it's tattered—glows in the dark.

Excerpt from Ragged Hope: Surviving the Fallout of Other People's Choices by Cynthia Ruchti, ©2013 Abingdon Press Christian Living

Cynthia tells stories of Hope-that-glows-in-the-dark through her novels and novellas, nonfiction projects, and speaking events. Learn more about Cynthia and her books at [cynthiaruchti.com](#). Readers can also become a fan on Facebook or follow her on Twitter.