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## **Part 1: Longing for Wholeness**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **Searching for Wholeness in Romance, Motherhood, or Career: Why a Broken World Leaves Us Disappointed**

Girls have long been trained to be feminine at considerable cost to their humanity. They have long been evaluated on the basis of appearance and caught in myriad double binds: achieve, but not too much; be polite, but be yourself; be feminine and adult; be aware of our cultural heritage, but don't comment on the sexism. Another way to describe this femininity training is to call it false self-training. Girls are trained to be less than who they really are. They are trained to be what the culture wants of its young women, not what they themselves want to become.

Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*

In 1996 a romantic comedy with a disturbing message to women debuted in movie theatres.

Despite its underlying meaning, *Jerry Maguire* was a blockbuster hit. The film centers on the life of sports agent Jerry Maguire, who ultimately marries his assistant, a single mother named

Dorothy, for what he describes as "loyalty." Dorothy proclaims her love for Jerry at the outset of their romantic relationship, but Jerry is rather distant from Dorothy throughout the film. Finally

acknowledging the difference in their feelings, Dorothy suggests a separation. In the climactic romantic moment of the film, Jerry returns to Dorothy and gives a long speech declaring his love.

"You complete me," he tells her, and Dorothy accepts him immediately. "You had me at hello,"

she replies, even though he has been insensitive and inconsistent in his treatment of her throughout

their relationship. Dorothy is desperate in her desire for wholeness, and she appears to believe that

she can only find that sense of completion in romantic love.

Although it is unlikely that Dorothy will find a long-term sense of wholeness through a romantic relationship, many of us join her in this search for completion through love. We continue this search despite an underlying awareness that it will likely leave us dissatisfied. Henri Nouwen writes, “Many marriages are ruined because neither partner was able to fulfill the often hidden hope that the other would take his or her loneliness away. And many celibates live with the naïve dream that in the intimacy of marriage their loneliness will be taken away.”<sup>1</sup> Romantic love, however, is not the only path we search for wholeness. *If I could have a child to love I would feel like a complete woman, or If I was the perfect mother or wife, then I would be happy*, we might tell ourselves. Or perhaps, *If I could feel successful, like I was really good at something, then I would be satisfied*. Because of an internal sense of incompleteness, we may engage in destructive behaviors like substance abuse, excessive dieting, or sexual promiscuity to fill that void. Alternately, we may search for wholeness in motherhood, a successful career, or even Christian service, only to be disappointed when we have reached the goal and still feel like something is not quite right.

“I am 45 years old, and I have come to realize that I don’t even know who I am,” June told me in one of our early counseling sessions. “I know that I’m a mom and a wife. I do fine at my job and I have some friends, but somehow it’s never quite enough. *I’m* never enough. I just want to feel *whole*.” June’s cry of the heart, that something is missing in her life, that she never feels like she is enough, is one I have heard from countless women, from women I counsel in my psychotherapy practice to students in my psychology classes. I hear about the pain of this struggle in conversations over coffee with girlfriends, and I recognize the ache of feeling that I am “never enough” in my own life.

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1972), p. 85.

I remember as an adolescent thinking about how happy I would be when I got to drive a car or go to college. As a college student, I could not wait to graduate and get married. As a young married woman, I just knew that finishing graduate school and getting a great job would bring satisfaction. As a professional, motherhood became my next goal. And, in fact, I did love getting my driver's license, going to college, getting married and becoming a mother. I was grateful for each new experience and role, which made it all the more confusing and guilt-producing when I still felt like something was missing.

Pastors and Bible teachers encourage us to find our meaning and identity in Christ, and they remind us of the God-shaped hole inside us. When we try to fill that void with romance, success, or even motherhood, we are bound to be disappointed. Only when we draw from the living well of God can we truly be satisfied and filled. Most of the Christian women I know desperately want to be rooted in the love and protection of God. We want to be filled up with God's presence and to find our peace and identity in Him. When we don't see that happening in our own lives, we add that to our guilt and self-condemnation.

This book is for women like June and me, women like my counseling clients, students and girlfriends – women who long for wholeness. It is for the women who have entrusted their stories to me and allowed me to walk alongside them on journeys in and through brokenness. This book is also for the countless women who may have never sought out counseling, but resonate with June in their sense that something is missing or flawed within them.

### **Why Don't We Feel Whole?**

Women feel broken in many ways. Often, our relationships are one of the primary sources of our pain. We may have experienced a deep relational loss – and now we feel lost as well. Our current relationships may be hurtful or even abusive to us, or the wounds from a past relationship may continue to plague us. We may be struggling in a relationship with a spouse or significant other, mother or father, boss or co-worker, son or daughter, friend or sibling.

Perhaps the relational brokenness is actually a byproduct of pain that is deep within us. We often feel deficient because of an underlying sense of inadequacy. We females frequently possess an endless list of dislikes about ourselves: flabby thighs, boring personality, bad hair, oily skin, poor speaking abilities, minimal talent, no athletic ability, etc. When I asked June in one of our counseling sessions about her strengths, she struggled to come up with any. She was, however, able to describe in vivid detail the first time her mother asked her if she had gained weight, or the numerous times her father told her she wasn't smart enough to make it in college. We may have grown up hearing critical comments from parents, peers, or siblings. As adults, we sometimes internalize those harsh statements and become our own biggest critics.

Even those of us who try to “do it all” and be a dutiful mom, a loving wife, a productive career woman, a thoughtful friend, and an active church member are often plagued by the guilty sense that it's never quite enough. We may look successful on the outside but feel conflicted in the inconsistency between the “*I have it all together*” image we portray to the world, and the “*I'm barely holding it together*” reality that we live with on the inside.

In contrast, even with our greatest efforts some of us couldn't portray that "*I have it all together*" image to the world. We may feel damaged all the way through. Perhaps we feel defeated in our depression, anger or anxiety. "*If I could just kick this depression, I would feel whole again,*" we may think to ourselves. Yet our efforts fail, and we are left feeling more depressed than ever before.

As much as women want to experience wholeness, it is a daunting task. It seems, at times, that we are surrounded by forces working against us in our desire to feel complete as women. Some of those forces are broad, rooted in the ways women have been oppressed politically and socially throughout history. Some are quite narrow, imposed through our families of origin and the messages we learned from our mothers and fathers, our grandparents and siblings.

Some of the things that work against our natural desire to feel whole are cultural messages.

When we turn on the television, we see women's bodies selling everything from cars to beer to jeans to perfume – not *women*, women's bodies. This is an important distinction and one that is so ingrained in our media that some of us have become numb to it. In advertising, women's bodies are split up into pieces, so we see sexualized photographs of a woman's lips or hips or breasts. Women's bodies are not women's whole selves. When women are valued for their beauty and sexual appeal, to the neglect of their many other capacities and gifts, it fragments them. It teaches all women, both the fashion models and the media consumers, that women are important primarily for the sexualized *part* of them, rather than for their *whole* selfhood.

### **Searching for Wholeness in the Church**

Some of us may see the negative messages about women in the media and popular culture and turn to the church as a haven of safety. The church, at its best, reflects God's love and relational nature. As God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are in constant fellowship with each other, so the church is called to reflect that fellowship and love. In such a God-reflecting community, the church provides a place of healing and restoration for both men and women. In an ideal Christ empowered community, the hurting can find comfort, the rejected and ignored can find acceptance and love, and each individual's unique gifts are embraced and utilized in service of Christ and his kingdom. The church is not just a place to go, but a place to *be* – to live out our callings and identities in what my pastor calls a “community of the broken.” We are called to walk alongside other believers as we receive God's grace individually and corporately for every aspect of our lives. However, the church is filled with imperfect people just like you and me. This supportive community of love and respect is not always what we broken human beings offer or experience in the church. Consequently, the church can sometimes be a disconnecting place for women as well.

Despite the radical way in which Jesus ministered to and with women, women's roles in today's churches can be quite limited. Even though we read about the prophetess Anna (Lk 2:36), the disciple Tabitha (Acts 9:36), and the businesswoman Lydia (Acts 16:12-15) in the early church, many churches today do not allow women to hold positions of leadership. Shirley Gillett writes:

The lessons the church and society taught me regarding my gender left indelible scars. Despite all the talk about ‘different’ ministries for women, as opposed to ‘inferior’ ones, it was pretty obvious to me, even as a young child, who was important to God. No one who says that men should do all the speaking, run things, and make all the decisions should really expect women not to get the

message of their inferiority. I remember as a little girl crying myself to sleep at night, wondering why God didn't love me as much as a little boy.<sup>2</sup>

A woman who turns to the church for support in a disconnecting world may be personally gifted to teach or lead in some way. In order to participate in the community of the church, however, she may have to deny those God-given skills. She may not even realize her gifts because of lack of consideration.

Women receive messages from the church not only by those things we are *not* allowed to do, but by the social activities and opportunities that *are* geared towards us. Most churches offer women's Bible studies or prayer groups. However, if we examine the activities specifically geared toward *social* connection we often find an emphasis on stereotypically feminine activities, such as arts and crafts, cooking, or having a mother's day out. Women usually organize these events and many women enjoy these activities; there is certainly nothing wrong with them. However, just like the media may teach that the value of a woman is found in her appearance, churches sometimes send a similar message: the value of a woman is in a *certain kind of woman*. Where are the activities for the woman who enjoys basketball and fishing but can't cook a meal or thread a needle? What kind of community does the middle-aged divorcee or the married but childless 35-year-old woman find in the church? How are the gifts of the successful businesswoman or the human rights activist affirmed and celebrated in the church? The church can be a wonderful, healing place, and we are called to live life in the community of the church. However, churches are filled with broken people, and sometimes our churches can be a fragmenting influence as well.

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<sup>2</sup> Shirley Gillett, "No Church to Call Home." *Women, Abuse, and the Bible*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger and James R. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996) p. 107.

### What is Wholeness?

Thus far, we have spent our time exploring reasons women may not experience wholeness. We may feel less than whole when only certain parts of us are valued, like our sexuality or appearance, or when we are taught that we must be, act, or look a particular way to be real women. When we internalize these messages and begin to believe them, we may find ourselves unwittingly playing a part in this struggle. For example, when I peruse *People* magazine while standing in line at the grocery store and find myself critiquing the featured female celebrity who has gained 25 pounds or has dropped so much weight that she is just skin and bones, I am contributing to the problem. The woman on that magazine is a real person – with many aspects to her personhood. When I overemphasize the importance of one aspect of her personhood, such as her body, I am not treating her as a whole woman.

What does it mean to treat someone as a “whole woman,” or to *be* a whole woman for that matter? In light of this question, identifying what wholeness is *not* seems easy; it is a bit more challenging to define wholeness. Although the women I talk with sometimes describe wholeness as being something like perfection, I have found in my counseling practice that those who pursue perfection at all costs often suffer damaging consequences. For example, many anxiety disorders can be understood as a consequence of a pathological pursuit of perfection. Perfection implies an emphasis on performance and doing, but wholeness encompasses all of our being.

One of the definitions my college dictionary offers for being whole is “restored” or “healed,” as in “She is a whole woman again.”<sup>3</sup> Understood in this way, wholeness is a hope-filled concept. If wholeness is equivalent to perfection, then we are all destined for failure. We will never

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<sup>3</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 1380.

experience wholeness through sheer will and hard work. Our hope is that, despite our messy lives and our inability to live perfectly, we have a Savior who redeems us – who has already made us whole. And even though we may not *feel* whole, wholeness is ultimately not about our feelings. Isn't that a relief? If I rely on my feelings to tell me whether or not I am whole, then my "wholeness" is likely to change with each success and failure. But wholeness is not based on our own subjective feelings. Rather, wholeness begins and ends with our hope in Christ and who we are in him. The reality is that, even if our feelings lead us to believe otherwise, Christ has *already* restored and healed us – he has already made us whole.<sup>4</sup>

Another definition my dictionary offers for wholeness is "healthy."<sup>5</sup> In contrast to being perfect, a whole woman, according to this definition, is a healthy woman. In the same way that we can improve our physical health through dietary or lifestyle changes, we can improve our emotional or relational health through practical life changes as well. Becoming whole does not mean being a perfectionist, but it does mean that we can *do* something. Although our culture, our families, and even our churches may not always be affirming and empowering, we need not be in the victim role. Instead, empowered by the reality that Christ has already made us whole, we can be agents of change in our own lives and the lives of others. For example, we can look for ways to break maladaptive patterns in our thinking and our relationships. We can stop focusing on appearance – both ours and others – over other essential aspects of personhood. In short, we can actively pursue emotional, relational and spiritual health, trusting that "it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil 2:13).

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<sup>4</sup> See also T.F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983) for a theological discussion of Christ's mediatorial role on our behalf.

<sup>5</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 1380.

Taken together, these two definitions illustrate the paradox of wholeness. Wholeness is both a gift from God to be received and a goal that we can actively pursue with Christ's help.

Wholeness is already underway through Christ's redemptive work, as well as something that is not yet complete. Wholeness is not merely a self-help program that we can achieve on our own, but it is also not something we just passively absorb by osmosis. Just as we are reconciled to God by grace through faith alone, we are also called to *live* holy lives. One way we can begin to live holy lives is through the pursuit of what the Hebrew prophets called *shalom*: "In the Bible, *shalom* means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight* – a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed...*Shalom*, in other words, is the way things ought to be."<sup>6</sup> Human beings, created in God's image, ought to be healthy, restored, and healed.

This kind of *shalom* is something we experience when we live responsively and responsibly in God's kingdom. We experience wholeness when we live *responsively* to God and his good gifts. God has already restored us, healed us, and made us whole through the redemptive work of Christ, and living responsively means that we trust in this foundational truth and accept God's gift of grace. We also experience wholeness when we live *responsibly*, when we take an active role in being a good steward of the gifts God has entrusted to us. Empowered by Christ and rooted in our knowledge of who we are as children made in God's image, we can make practical changes in our thoughts, behaviors and relationships to move toward health and wholeness.

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<sup>6</sup> Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 10.

## Wholeness and Men

If wholeness means living responsively and responsibly, is that call to restoration, healing and health for women only? Of course not! Although this book is intentionally written for women, the longing for wholeness is a *human* longing, not a female one. The topics we will struggle with in this book, from negative self-talk to painful emotions, from sexuality to relational wounds, are in no way the sole domain of women. For example, when I examine how unrealistic images of perfection in the media affect a woman's body image, I am not suggesting this happens *only* for women and not for men. When my husband was in high school, he grew six inches in one year. As a 16-year-old, he was 6'6 inches tall and weighed only 150 pounds! Despite his protein shakes and workouts, he could not add weight to his frame. If you think women are the only ones who worry about their appearance, just go to your local gym and ask yourself why so many men are there trying to lose weight, build mass, or perfect their bodies.

As a therapist, I have had the privilege of being a part of many people's journeys – both men and women – and the issues we will explore in this book are not exclusive to women. Although I am going to focus on how women might uniquely struggle with these things, I am not suggesting that men and women are psychological opposites. Although your local bookstore likely has piles of books exploring how men and women are as different as night and day (or Mars and Venus), social science research actually leads us to a different conclusion. The reality is that we aren't so different after all. Decades of research on psychological traits and behaviors indicates that there are actually very few consistent differences between the sexes, and that males and females are much more alike than we are different.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>See Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, "What Do We Mean by 'Male-Female' Complementarity"? November 2004 paper given at the Evangelical Theological Society, San Antonio, TX.

However, just because men and women have more similarities than differences does not mean that men and women *are* or experience life in exactly the same way. My oldest brother is nine years older than me, and he used to half-jokingly tell me we had different parents. He did not mean this literally; we are full siblings. Rather, he meant that the world I grew up in, as the youngest of four, was completely different than the world he grew up in as the firstborn. In a similar way, males and females sometimes feel as if the worlds we live in are vastly different. Consequently, the way in which males and females struggle with common human issues, like self-worth and sexuality, may differ. M. Gay Hubbard suggests that men and women, although more similar than different, may experience life in different ways: “Women struggle with their lives *as women*, with their woman’s sense of self and worth, relationships, social tensions and conflicts, roles, and expectations (personal and group).”<sup>8</sup> Men also struggle with their lives *as men*; men also long for wholeness, healing and restoration. For the purposes of this book, however, we will focus our energies on how women struggle *as women* and how we can begin moving toward wholeness and health.

### **A Blueprint for the Journey: Where to Go From Here**

This book is divided into four parts. In the first part, *Longing for Wholeness*, I will discuss reasons for our sense of brokenness and desire for restoration. The theological concept that we have been made relational beings in the image of God will be introduced as a guiding framework

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[http://eastern.edu/academic/trad\\_undg/sas/depts/psychology/mvanleeuw](http://eastern.edu/academic/trad_undg/sas/depts/psychology/mvanleeuw); Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace: Love, Work, and Parenting in a Changing World*, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1990), especially ch. 3; or M. Gay Hubbard, *Women: the Misunderstood Majority* (Dallas: WORD Publishing, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> *Women: the Misunderstood Majority* (Dallas: WORD Publishing, 1992), 177.

for our search for wholeness. In the second part of the book, *Growing Inward*, I will explore how women often feel lacking in our minds, bodies, emotions, and identities, as well as ways to grow toward wholeness in our inner lives. In the third part of the book, *Growing Outward*, I will examine brokenness in our relationships and sexuality, and how we can grow toward wholeness in our lives with others.

I will conclude our study of wholeness by examining the paradox of finding wholeness even in our brokenness. You may be inclined to believe that a book about wholeness will teach you how to “get it together” by the end of the book – have all the answers and know how to perfectly manage yourself, your thoughts, your relationships, etc. Please be warned that I make no such “get it together” promise for this book! The reality is that, in spite of our good intentions and genuine desire for wholeness, we mess up. Bad things happen to us or to those we love. It is tempting to think of wholeness as the absence of brokenness – but brokenness is part of the human condition. Wholeness is a paradox. Jesus is the perfect example of wholeness, and his life is characterized by suffering. True wholeness comes from joining with Christ in his suffering and finding healing in that. Our concluding examination of brokenness is not meant to be a “bait and switch,” in which your hopes that you would learn how to lead a happy, pain-free life are suddenly shot down. Instead, it is meant to be a reminder of the truth of the situation in which we find ourselves. We live in a fallen world where things are not the way they are supposed to be. Part of being whole is accepting that truth. Of course, brokenness is not the full story. God redeems our brokenness through the work of Christ. Therefore, we will conclude our study of wholeness by examining how we can follow Christ’s example and allow our own brokenness to help us reach out to hurting others in a real and genuine way.

### **Growing in Community**

As we will discuss in chapter 2, God has created us for relationships, and all of the ideas and suggestions in this book are best explored in the context of a safe and committed relationship. Recently, a women's small group at my church read the manuscript for this book. The women in the group are diverse in occupation and age (ranging from early 20s to early 60s), and each week they read a chapter or two of the book and met together to discuss it. After they had finished the book, I attended one of their groups for them to give me feedback and tell me about their experiences. "I'm so glad I read this with a group of other women," one of the members commented, "It would have been a completely different experience otherwise." Women in the group commented on how the diverse experiences and perspectives of the other group members challenged them to think about and reflect on the ideas here in ways they would not have thought about on their own. "Please remind your readers that this is a book meant to be read in relationship with others," one of the members urged me. "It wouldn't have been the same book for me without the community experience."

In the last section of the book, *Growing in Community*, I provide a guide for you to engage in this journey toward healing and wholeness in community with a small group, partner, mentor or counselor, or trusted friend. This book is not intended to substitute for professional counseling when it is necessary for things like depression, anxiety, or abuse. Rather, the ideas presented here are intended to be conversation starters, leading to deeper relationships, not as a replacement for relationships.

At their best, relationships bring value and meaning to the events of our lives. However, they can also bring disabling and long-lasting pain. As a clinical psychologist, I believe that most, if not all, of our emotional problems are either rooted in or impacted by personal relationships.

Consequently, healing from emotional pain will be most effective when it is done in the context of an interpersonal relationship. As relational beings made in God's image, we grow best in relationship with others. When my accountability partner and I meet for breakfast on Fridays and talk about how pride and selfishness are keeping us from God and others, the changes I make in my life are rooted in and grow out of my relationship with her. Without that conversation with a trusted friend, I would be less likely to pay attention to my selfishness and the call to live like Christ – sacrificially and selflessly. Relationships are the context in which growth and change takes place.

When I see a woman in counseling, I often ask her to reflect on a number of thoughts or questions during the time between our sessions. In this way, she can do the work of therapy all week outside my office. The last section of the book is not merely a study guide. Rather, it is filled with the kind of questions I ask the women I counsel, questions for discussion and reflection, as a conversation starter, a guideline for sharing, and a framework to assist you on your own personal journey toward wholeness. Although these questions can be used for personal contemplation or journaling, they are meant to be examined with others in the context of a secure and trusting relationship. As you read through these chapters, some of them may be more applicable to you than others. My prayer is that you would embark on this healing journey in community with a partner or mentor. Together, you can exchange ideas, reflect on your own experiences, and be encouraged to persevere when you feel like giving up.

### **A Word of Encouragement for the Journey**

When I was in college, I began running. Just writing that sentence still brings me joy, because let me tell you – I was *not* a runner. In fact, I hated running and dreaded gym class for as long as I can remember. But due to some changes in my life, I decided to tackle running during my senior year in college. Eventually, I even ran a few road races, for which I trained with a friend who had been a cross-country runner.

Training was really helpful, because when I started running I had no idea what I was doing.

Basically, my thought process went something like this: *Running is running; just put one foot in front of the other. If you get to the end, it's a miracle anyway. Who cares how you got there?*

While it did always feel like a miracle when I reached my destination, I found that it was often pretty hard to get there because of the way I ran. I didn't drink enough liquids, I didn't set my feet correctly, I forgot to breathe or my breathing was too fast, I tensed all the muscles in my shoulders and arms, I turned my whole body from side to side when I ran, and I took really short strides. As a result, I got tired very quickly, had limited endurance, and would struggle through numerous muscle cramps on any given run.

However, when I started training with my friend, my whole running experience was transformed.

He taught me to correct my stride and count out my breathing. He suggested that I imagine holding a penny between my fingertips to keep me from making fists and punching my arms from side to side, which tired me out in minutes. I still use those techniques when I go jogging. My friend didn't run my races for me, and he couldn't make me into a better runner if I wasn't

willing to do the work. He did, however, give me the tools to make my journey an easier and more productive one.

You, too, are on a journey, and it is yours alone. No one else can run it for you. However, as a Christian psychologist, I can offer tips, suggestions, activities, or images that may assist you on your journey. Each chapter of this book concludes with a “Tools for the Journey” section. Some of these “tools” come from personal experience, some from research and reading, others from my counseling practice. I may offer suggestions for recognizing ways in which you’re slowing yourself down, causing yourself needless exhaustion, or experiencing unnecessary or inappropriate pain on your journey.

However, as much as I believe in the benefits of counseling, please do not read this book in the hopes that a psychological technique will give you a quick healing fix. True wholeness is found in one place, and that is Christ alone. But God also uses human care and human wisdom to assist us on our journeys. I was helped along on my running journey by my friend’s training before the race, but I was also helped by the volunteers handing out needed water and shouting words of encouragement during the race. God speaks to us through his word, through prayer and worship, but he also speaks to us through human agents – coaches and cheerleaders on our journeys. My hope is that I can be a little of both for you during this journey toward wholeness.

Any woman who desires wholeness and is willing to engage on a journey toward emotional healing and wholeness is stronger than she thinks. The women I see in counseling are consistently stronger than they think, and part of the joy of counseling is walking alongside them

as they rediscover that inner strength. By embarking on this kind of journey, you are brave enough to admit that something is not right. You are courageous enough to try to change. This is an incredibly vulnerable position, and yet the women I counsel, and I believe you who are reading this book, also, will do it anyway. You truly are stronger than you think.

