

CHAPTER 12

THE BOTTOM OF THE PIT

“The more you dig, the deeper the hole. Know when to stop digging and start climbing.” -Sally Webb

It was during this time that I had a phone call from the UK. Dad had been diagnosed with bowel and liver cancer. He had been losing weight without a diet for a while and hadn't been able to work out the cause. In my mind, I thought he'd have chemo or radiation and all would be well. However, my husband did some digging on the type of cancer and discovered that it wasn't looking good. I called Dad to ask what the prognosis was. He had been given five weeks left to live.

The company that my husband worked for was outstanding. He booked the tickets and the business lent us the money to pay for the flights. The kids and I were on our way to see him within five days. We saw “Grandad” in hospital, connected with Christine and all the family, rented one of the cottages in the village where the kids had been born and got on with what needed to be done. The first two nights, the kids and I baked in the middle of the night as we couldn't sleep, despite our best efforts. And in three weeks, we saw Dad go from the hospital to the hospice to the grave. Christine and I did three

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night shifts together with Dad. We were told on the first night that he would go then. We reminisced and told stories of love and laughter.

Richard had stepped up and was on night duty with his kids and mine while I was with "Grandma and Grandad." My husband arrived just in time and was there when we really needed him. He saw Dad just in time. On that fourth night he passed. We then had a week to go through the funeral and return to NZ. Christine and I had our one and only argument ever, around the arrangement of one of the songs at the funeral. The grief for us both was overwhelming.

This was the first time I really wept. Mum had always told me "weak people cry." I had held back so many tears at painful moments in my life. That English "stiff upper lip" had been my go to. I very rarely cried until now. The floodgates opened, and as I grieved the loss of my dad, a huge amount of pent-up anger, frustration, sadness and grief from the last forty years was released. My husband often commented that something changed in our marriage when my dad died. And he was right. I was no longer going to live a life of falsehood and emptiness. It all looked good on the outside. But it had a bad odour on the inside. I was dying from the inside out. Something had to change.

I travelled back with the kids in one row on the plane, while my husband was about ten rows in front of us. He was shattered. I believe that in our marriage, he was as lost as I was. He wanted to do the right thing, yet, I guess, he was as empty as I was. Our lifestyle, instead of feeding us, was killing us. We were totally unaware of what was happening. He ate, had a glass of wine, took a sleeping pill and was absent for the rest of the flight. Meanwhile, I had two restless children and my own grief to deal with. This whole experience was a wake up call for me.

My husband was away a lot with work, doing what he loved and was good at—entertaining and hospitality. He would come home, sometimes to a mess as the kids were playing or dinner not yet cooked. I was busy with everyone and everything else. Things were not going according to plan for him.

He had two lives. One where he was in control, living the high life, earning a good wage, and being the centre of attention. Then one where he was not in control, where money was going out fast and he was the last on the list.

I believe that fathers give children their identity and are the head of the household. Mothers give children community, compassion and connection. In our case, my dad hadn't been present in my day-to-day life at home and from my perspective, Alexander's dad ruled life at home. We were coming from very different perspectives. Both our mums had always been given everything they needed from a material and external perspective. They had an image to keep up. Neither my husband nor I had the skills, wisdom, insight or experience to know how to bridge the gap and get back on track without us knowing that gap was getting deeper and wider.

I believe we were two people with open heart wounds trying to heal them through what we did. I look back now with real compassion for us both. We were looking for love, a sense of connection, belonging and identity in all the wrong places. My husband ploughed himself into work, and I did the same with the children. During this time I was in the Parents Association for the primary school, President of the local Pony Club and involved in Arthur's prep school's Parents and Friends Association. In true Sally style, I was full bore, giving it one hundred percent in all I did. I was there to support those who were doing the work and paying it forward for my children and the families around us.

It is so interesting to be writing this and reflecting. Looking through the lens of a healed heart. All I wanted was to be seen and heard, to do my best and be kind. I had so much love to give and wanted to help. I always said "Yes" and somehow always got it done. I was heading down the same track again. I was going round the mountain again. Filling my cup externally rather than internally. It all looked good, however, it was exhausting and never ending, going from one commitment to another. I had my priorities really out of kilter. I was a people pleaser, hoping that by being all things to everyone, I'd feel better, have some significance and some standing.

By now, Martha was riding. A good friend of my husband's had invited Martha to ride her pony and then introduced us to an amazing lady Diane Sergeant and a stunning schoolmaster pony called Pokey. These beautiful ladies poured into us, and we learnt heaps. Martha qualified for Horse of the Year at the age of six, and this started the ball rolling. We ended up buying a pony for her, grazing nearby, going from strength to strength. These were incredibly special times. Martha and I would go away for weekends, travelling up and down the country competing while Arthur and his dad would have quality father-son time together. It seemed an ideal answer. It was a win-win. The girls had quality time together and the boys the same.

I was still unaware that this was driving the wedge between us, and it was going further and deeper. Our marriage was dissolving before my very eyes, and I couldn't see it. I was pouring everything into the children, in particular, the pony. It all worked nicely around the prep school Arthur was at. We were both busy. Alexander was bringing in the majority of the finance to support the ponies, the preparatory school fees and the outstanding lifestyle we had. I worked part-time for Project K, ran the home, looked after the extensive garden and facilitated all the kids' sports and social activities. We were living separate lives without knowing it. I was empty, exhausted, and run down. Despite all my hard work, I could see this beautiful life on the surface crumbling underneath. And I had no idea how to fix it.

I had fallen out of love with my husband. He, or all that he could bring, could not fill the empty hole I had inside. We had tried so hard to fill our empty buckets with skiing holidays and an abundance of social gatherings with other families with kids at the same schools or in the same sports teams etc. And in public, we looked great. However, the cracks were expanding. Our outgoings were more than our incomings. I took on a second part-time job doing some administration work for a local coffee business with nine cafes in an effort to try and make ends meet financially.

I was truly blessed by all the wonderful people I got to work with and for. Outside looking in, I had the perfect life. The two children, the dog, the ponies, the Land Rover Discovery, the float and all the

right horse gear, not to mention full use of the holiday home at Lake Taupo and the boat. Martha was nailing her equine shows each week in the summer and hockey in the winter. Arthur was nailing it with his hockey, enjoying mountain biking and hanging out with his mates. Meanwhile, I was miserable and heading for a breakdown. And I had absolutely no idea. How did I not see all of this at the time?

Reflect and Reframe

It is so hard to see the wood for the trees when we are in it. Looking back, it's as clear as the light of day. The pressure of performance, worrying about what other people think, the need to be seen and heard, valued and understood were all indicators. I might as well have had orange flashing lights on my head. All of the above was slowly but surely taking me down into a pit of doom and inner turmoil of severe anxiety and stress. It may have looked good on the outside, however I was a mess on the inside. I started to drink in the evenings at shows, trying to alleviate the pain. I struggled to walk some nights... and still the pain was there.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. My world was so small at that time. I didn't know about life coaching, about the value of seeking wisdom and insight from those who had been there and come out the other side. I had no idea there would be people out there who could walk me through a structure who would serve me and enable me to turn my upside-down world the right-way-up. Had I known this, the rest of this book would have been completely different. I would have been coming from a place of "I want to", not "I need to." I would have realised that everything I did at the time was coming from a place of fear. Fear of not being good enough, fear of rejection, fear of failure. I was desperately trying to fill my empty bucket. I had no idea it was full of holes and that the more I poured in, the more ran out the other end. I was trying to plug the holes with activities, titles, with busyness, fearful of what I might find if I stopped. It was like a never-ending flow of doing. The more I did, the less I became.

Dear Reader

I encourage you to consider what holes you have in your heart or bucket and how you are trying to fill them. The more I did, the more holes I had, the more emptiness inside I felt. I was heading for a breakdown. All the warning signs were there. I had my hand in just about everything and was rushing from one thing to another, desperately trying to plug my holes. I was in the busyness of life rather than the business of L.I.F.E. While everything I was doing was good, it was killing me. I was dying without even realising. I was getting completely lost under the weight of it all.

Today, I encourage you to take stock, to consider what you are doing and where is it taking you? Are you going deep on a few things or are you cutting across too many things at a shallow level, as I was. Feeling more and more unfulfilled?

What is your one true love? I was desperately looking for wisdom and insight to help me find my true, deep and real love. I looked to self-help books, my GP, counsellors and psychologists. None of them had the answers I was looking for. This has driven me to becoming one of the first Alignment Coaches in New Zealand, for those who want to further their integrity and congruence in their lives.

Call to Adventure:

Much of my YouTube channel www.youtube.com/@inspiringperspectives is about reframing. Flipping negatives into positives. Focusing on the promise, not the problem. While I now identify as a follower of Jesus, as stated at the beginning of the book, I am NOT interested and have no time for man-made rules and regulations or the hierarchy I see in many religious organisations.

I am interested in character, in who we really are born or destined to be. In the words of Mother Teresa, "I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot; together we can do great things." This links back to knowing our lanes (see previous chapter) and working with others to achieve so much more.

Here is my five-step **E.L.A.T.E.** process of how I stopped digging and started climbing:

1. Evaluate your emotions. Emotions are warning signs, showing you whether you are pointing in the right direction or not.

I had to consider: “Am I reacting or responding?” One is in the moment and only thinking short term, often destructive. The other engages our heart and mind to connect and align, helping us to make the right choice now and for the future.

2. Listen to wisdom and your gut instinct. To those around you who have no hidden agendas, who are putting your welfare first.

In the next chapter a policeman stepped out in faith and spoke real wisdom into my heart and mind that helped me stop digging and start climbing.

3. Activate faith and belief.

Nothing changes until you change. I was expecting my husband, the counsellor, the GP etc to have the answer, to have the BAND-AID® I could put on so that the pain would go away. However, the pain was on the inside. I had to find the “knight in shining armour” within me. I love Albert Einstein’s definition of insanity, as this is exactly where I was “doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

4. Thank God for the possibilities. Every problem had a possibility attached.

I was looking at what I couldn’t do rather than what I could do. I was thinking about what everyone else would think, rather than what I really thought. I was digging a deeper hole rather than looking up at how I could climb out.

5. Engage with help.

This is the hardest thing for anyone to do. I love Dr Gabor Mate’s perspective on this. He shares that many of us are willing to help others, so few of us are willing to admit to ourselves that we are not

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perfect and need help. Yet every time we don't ask, we rob someone of the joy of being able to serve and help you with their gift.

There is nothing more rewarding than to be the one who is able to put our hand out and lift someone up in their time of need. I encourage you to seek out the right people to walk with you. I believe God places the right people around you at the right time in all seasons. I encourage you to reflect on these fabulous five for yourself, that your eyes and ears will be opened to your possibilities and His promises, should you choose to walk in them. Enjoy.

Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10, NIV)