A Positive Life

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Sample Chapter

Prologue:

More than the Sum of What We Say

The positive life is more mosaic than a measurable frame of goods and bads, joys and sorrows, laughter and tears. It is discovered through the composition of its diversity—no single color or component can adequately define a mosaic or its image, any more than one hardship or achievement can or should define life or its nature. And thus, it is these diverse colors, circumstances, victories and struggles, glimpses brought together—more than simply a snapshot of one image, success or failure—that unveil this life. We are more than the sum of what we can visualize … describe … accomplish … or, even, endure.

—Journal entry, December 6, 2006

My grandfather didn't talk much, but when he did, his words were wise and strong. People said they'd seen him cry only twice: when his mother died and when he first held his grandson. Tears were difficult for my grandfather. He preferred to look at life with logic and decorum. But sometimes, life doesn't work that way. And when it didn't, my grandfather taught me about how to live life when life becomes uncertain

I spent a lot time at my grandfather's table, week in and week out for the better part of 28 years. Mr. Earl's dining room table was about more than just a good meal; it was an

opportunity to glean wisdom from this quiet, faithful man, to catch a glimmer of what God wants us to be.

One of Grandpa's favorite phrases was "If you break it, you own it." My grandfather believed every part of life costs something—good or bad. We invest ourselves into life and, many times we do the breaking by our words, actions, or decisions. Sometimes, though, "life breaks us" and we spend the better part of our days piecing it back together.

Some folks don't believe a broken life can mean much. But I've learned that when life breaks us, we can work to own it before it owns us. In the process, we discover what authentic value and self worth mean in this world and what really matters. These moments don't come cheap, but their value is measureless.

I was six years old when I learned of my parents' divorce. Sitting on the front lawn of the house we rented, I cried at the news that my parents were separating. I had been kept in the dark about our family's problems. I never saw it coming.

If there was a bright spot in my parents' divorce, it was that my relationship with my grandfather deepened. My father was a good man, but focused on his career. When it came time for my bi-weekly visits with my dad, under the rules of the custody, I found myself staying the entire weekend with my grandparents.

Over the course of those ten years or so, my grandfather and I became very close; as a kid he was my hero, mentor, and best friend. Sunday mornings were especially important. I would wake up and race to my grandparents' bed where I'd crawl in and wait for my grandfather to fix me a "coffee-milk"—a concoction of half coffee and half milk. We watched the news together. My grandparents didn't shield me from the world as much

as my parents did. During those Sunday mornings, I confronted such issues as the Iran Hostage Crisis, the death of John Lennon and my first glimpse of Madonna. That's also where I first heard a news report about homosexuals dying of a mysterious, immune system disorder.

After coffee and the news, my grandfather cooked pancakes in a large cast iron skillet. The pancakes covered my entire plate, and I ate every bite. As soon as breakfast was finished, my grandfather and I would get in his red Chevy pickup and head out to the field. Depending upon the season, we'd pick fresh peaches from the orchard or check on the cows. Sometimes we'd just sit together and watch the morning pass. These times belonged to the two of us. Eventually, we would head home and get ready for church, but no matter what the preacher said in the sermon that morning, nothing was more spiritual or formational than those times shared outdoors.

Mostly they were quiet times, but as I grew older, I would ask advice about different situations. Although my grandfather did not expound—he hated long-winded responses to anything—he gave solid, straightforward advice, the kind I knew I could trust the moment I heard it. His favorite phrase was "we always have a choice to do the right thing." My grandfather had strong opinions, but he was not closed minded. He gifted me with room to disagree and to form my own opinions. However, Grandpa always expected that I do the right thing by others and by God. "Sport, we always have a choice," he would say. And then, as though I needed extra emphasis, he would look me in the eyes and repeat, "Always!"

I was less than a year old when doctors discovered I had hemophilia. My family realized that this would not only affect my ability to clot and heal, but my life as well. My

family loved sports and was always active in the outdoors—having a child who was a hemophiliac would certainly affect their lifestyle. My family spent a great deal of time making life as normal as possible for me, and my grandfather, in particular, went out of his way to find safe sports that we could do together. That's how we discovered golfing.

When my grandfather realized that golf offered me the ability to compete without the danger of contact and getting hurt, he bought me my first set of clubs, taught me the rules, and made a point of playing with me every chance he could. Over the years, golf, like our Sunday mornings, became sacred; when the fields and orchards became too much for Grandpa to tend, we would hold our "special Sunday meetings" on a scenic hill overlooking a local golf course.

The meetings were not usually profound, but there were the occasional aha! moments when I would see an issue a different way and change my mind because of what my grandfather said. During one particular summer, emotions between my parents became strained. My mother, along with my stepfather, was upset with my father over child support payment issues. My father was equally upset over visitation rights. Stuck in the middle, of course, was me. I understood early that whether my parents meant it or not, I was the pawn in the game. And so many times, I played the role of the emotional tennis ball shot back and forth.

Though my grandfather was naturally predisposed to favor the issues of his son, he never spoke a negative or harsh word to me about my mother or my stepfather. No, I was the primary issue for my grandfather and, so when we would talk on those Sunday mornings, it was about how I was seeing the world. If nothing else, my grandfather was the one person in my life, where I knew someone was listening to my concerns and my issues.

Several weeks after I was diagnosed with HIV, my family told my grandfather the news. He left the room immediately after being told. The news devastated him. In the late 1980s, AIDS was a death sentence. Although experts feverishly hoped for new drugs, people were dying at an alarming rate and the future did not seem hopeful.

In the weeks following the news, I struggled to get used to the diagnosis. At first, I avoided any discussion of the disease and tried to resume a normal routine. I was in the middle of my junior golf season and had qualified to play on the local university's junior golf team. But it was hard to practice, hitting golf balls over and over again, knowing that deep inside of you this virus was waiting to kill you. There wasn't much that could be done. Everyone knew that HIV (which was a fairly new way of discussing AIDS since the test was so new) was a death sentence. There were no medicines, other than a few drugs used for fighting the symptoms of the opportunistic infections. Other than that, HIV/AIDS meant dying.

I had always dealt with my hemophilia and with the injuries very well. I was strong and stoic. It was easy to talk about God's faith and to "be an example" when you knew deep down that the disease wasn't going to kill you. I remember thinking what a fraud I felt like, proclaiming this great faith of how God could handle any situation … until this one. Now, I was struggling. I couldn't pray or read my Bible, and my heart felt very distant from God. I had always been able to talk to him like he was standing next to me. Now, God felt very far away.

I remember wondering how others in my family were taking the news. My mother was strong, but I could hear her cry late at night. My father didn't talk much about it, only offering an "it's going to be okay" from time to time. My stepfather, who by that time had

become like my own father, kept the routine going and comforted my mother. They were dealing with the same feelings I felt, except they weren't the patient. But I think, now that I have children, that must have been even worse.

I do remember one night reading my Bible, which I did a great deal during that time, even more than usual, and reading through the passage about Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he begged the Father to take the cup away from him. The agony was palpable and anyone who has read the passage feels for Jesus during this scene. But as I thought about my mom, especially, I felt for the Father, too. Here was his son asking him to help, but knowing that, given the circumstances, the die was cast and there was nothing to do. I wonder what Heaven was like at that moment.

Anyway, we all traipsed around doing our normal things and trying to make sense of the situation, but there was little sense to be made. The news was devastating. I had overcome so much in my life and had kept such a positive attitude. Now, a positive diagnosis, threatened not only my body, but also how I saw the world and especially how I saw God.

But when people with personalities like mine (cholerics, type As, fires, etc.) are faced with these kinds of situations, we tried to find the center of the story and the best place to land. I tried to resume a sense of normalcy, but all too often, I woke up at night gripped by the realization of what my diagnosis meant. It was almost more than a teenage boy could endure. Just days before, I had gone to bed as the captain of the golf team, president of my class, and dating the prettiest girl in school. I had dreams of law school and a life in politics. Now, I was dying at the hands of what could only be considered as the leprosy of our time. No matter who was around, it was a very lonely time.

The first weekend I spent with my grandparents after the diagnosis was awkward. My disease was not discussed. No one wanted to be the first to mention the diagnosis. After Sunday breakfast, my grandfather asked me to take a ride with him. We drove the familiar road to the hill overlooking the golf course and sat together in silence.

It was always my grandfather's habit when we would arrive to say an "open eye" prayer. He liked to say that no one else would want him to say an open eye prayer because prayer was supposed to be with our eyes closed and our heads bowed. But sitting here or in the orchard, my grandfather would ask, "How can we pray to God and be thankful for all we have and see and be afraid to look up and actually take it all in?"

It always made sense to me when were sitting there, though I dared not try the open-eye prayer anywhere else. Looking up also meant making it about God more than about ourselves, which so many prayers seemed to be. So we would pray, looking up, around, and at each other. It was always a great moment, filled with some laughter, smiles, and the occasional loving stare from a grandfather to his grandson.

On this particular day, my grandfather finished the prayer and then took my hand. He had looked over at me several times. We knew there was more in the air than just the breeze and much more to discuss.

Finally, my grandfather broke the silence: "What are you going to do with this thing?" He never used the letters HIV or AIDS and he never talked about sickness or disease. But I knew exactly what he was talking about.

"I don't know. There's no cure," I said, looking down messing with a blade of grass or some loose rock. "There is not much of a choice."

"You always have a choice," my grandfather said, his voice steady. He was

straightforward in his words but not gruff or difficult in his tone. But he wanted me to hear and pay attention.

"What choice do I have?" I asked. There didn't seem to be many choices on my end. The doctors had not given any and most, if not everyone in my life, were walking around as though resigned to something else … to no choices available. "Sometimes," I finally added, "I feel like just running as fast as I could. I am not sure where I would go, but just to see if I could outrun this feeling of loneliness and dread in my life." My grandfather was listening.

"And then there are times, I just want to lay down and let it be over. Some days, it is hard to find the reason to feel joyful again. That scares me more than the disease."

My grandfather had looked back at the horizon. I could tell he was thinking.

"I know there is a lot to consider over the next weeks. Dr. Kent is telling me a lot about what I need to think about in terms of my treatment. So I am trying to get the right info and make good decisions. But choices?" I asked. "About life … really, about life? I don't know about that."

My grandfather and I sat there for a few moments. I was trying to be honest with him about where my heart was in this news and in this whole fight. I had faced a lot in my life, but this was different. The face of this disease was bigger than all of us put together. And the impact was not just about my life, but about so many others in my family. Lest we forget, this was all being done in secret, since most people could not at that point in the disease's timeline get their brains around the idea of what me being HIV positive would mean for them, our family, or our community.

My grandfather shifted his body language to turn more toward me. He leaned

against the ground with his left arm so that he could look me in the eye. “If anybody has a right to get in the corner and have a pity party about this, it’s you. It’s very raw deal, and I can’t tell you that I understand it or have even begun to confront my anger over it. But as bad as this seems—and I know it’s bad—you have a choice to make. You can get in that corner, and if you want me to, I will get in there with you.” My grandfather paused. I had never heard him talk about giving up or giving in to anything. But here he was with tears in his eyes, saying that he would crawl into that pity party hole with me, if that is where I went and he needed to go.

“But I know you, maybe better than anyone, and I know what is in your heart and deep in your soul, and I think you are going to make a choice other than pity, retreat, or surrender. I think you are going to live each day to the fullest with everything you have. I think you are going to take each day, no matter how many you have, and make something of them. No one can ask any more of you.”

He stopped and looked into my eyes. “And son, I think you making *that* choice will mean something someday.”

A Different Stage

Nearly twenty years after that moment with my grandfather, I was asked to share my story for a few minutes at the Saddleback Global AIDS Summit, founded by Kay and Rick Warren. By this time in my ministry, I had shared my story hundreds of times. My grandfather had been right. The story itself made a difference for people, even when it was not particularly welcome and when people did not know what to do with it. And I had developed a good reputation as a speaker who loved to move while he talked, share from

his heart, and talk about this story with a certain animation that kept people involved. After all, in my mind, the goal was for the story to prick something in their own story that caused them to see the unfailing love of God in their journey, and then move them to action. And I had given the story so many times, that it was more than just a speech but had become part of my natural movement when I talked. Thus, I rarely spoke with anything other than a few brief notes, a microphone, and two unleashed, moving hands. However, the Saddleback folks were putting a lot of info and folks into a very compressed timeframe. I was scheduled to speak in the first session in between remarks by Rick and Kay. So I wrote my remarks down word for word. I wanted this speech to be less about my delivery and more about the meaning of the story. This speech was personal.

What developed was four minutes about how HIV/AIDS had dominated my life, shaped my worldview, informed my faith, and redesigned my view of others. I was making sense of my story and the lessons it has taught me. My illness is not a part of me, but rather it is me in so many positive ways—my marriage, my family, my vocation, my faith. HIV/AIDS has taught me simple things about living, about how to love more and better, and about how to serve beyond my own interests. It has carved away my prejudices and fears and shaped my view of God and God's people—the latter, unfortunately, often in a negative light. HIV/AIDS is my common story and my moral voice—the deepest place where God worked his presence in me.

From the doctor's room where, as a sixteen-year-old kid, I learned my HIV status, to the conference room of the church that would not accept me as their pastor; and from the grieving rooms where I said goodbye to friends, to the hospital rooms where my wife buried her head in my chest and cried, HIV/AIDS has been my means of grace more than

my wound of sorrow.

I feel more familiar than angry. As much as the disease has pushed and torn at me, I know myself, the world, and God's heart better. I would prefer to be healthy and disease free, but I have become content with the struggle—maybe even, at times, not wishing to trade it away. Illness has refined my soul, and life, people, and goals, mean different things because of its presence.

As Rick finished his opening remarks, I remember my heart was about to pound out of my chest. I walked to the podium. Rick hugged me and said, "Thanks for being here. You are a blessing." But the real blessing was being anywhere, anytime at all. I couldn't help but thinking that my grandfather would like this moment. And I couldn't help but remember those who along the way had meant so much and, for one reason or another, could not be there. This had not just been my fight or my battle. I looked to my right and saw Pokey sitting in the audience. She smiled such a huge smile and I could see her wink at me. And looking forward, I saw the media, cameras and over two thousand Summit participants who had their own stories and war wounds.

Standing at that podium in front of the world, I realized that, like so many others in that room, I had met the enemy over many years, and I had been fortunate enough to prosper. Yes, the disease attacked my body, but because of the disease, I attacked life with an understanding of the brokenness through which we, like Paul, can declare God's grace to be sufficient. No, it wasn't easy. There are still times I want to take off running or lay down and give up. Did all go as planned? I am afraid not. But the story showed that we had at least made the choice for something better and had, to our best, lived it faithfully, even when we would get it horribly wrong. Regardless, the story is real, and it is mine.

Living Positive

I have lived now nearly a quarter of a century "positive." That is the lingo we attach to someone who is HIV positive, whether we say it from within the HIV community or from the sidelines. It means many things to many different people. It is a test result, a way of life, a question of morality, a lifestyle a badge, a condition, or a burden.

For me it has been all of those things at one time. However, "positive" is, more than anything, the story of my life. The lessons of my story are about the people who made—and still make—my life worth living. A common thread binds us together: the broken, forgotten, rediscovered, and redeemed present within us all. *Their story, your story, my story,* and *God's story* become *our story*. Recognizing this bond is what defines a life well-lived, regardless of the details. For some of us, the facts and figures are daunting and difficult; for others, life has been mostly comfortable and without much struggle. But the story remains and how we assimilate it, analyze it, calibrate it and share it, determines in so many ways and places how we will live it and how others will learn by it.

Over the next pages together, you will hear a lot about my story, about the things I celebrate and the things I regret. You will learn secrets from my past but also discover hopeful places where the secrets and regret did not win. You will also meet a lot of people who kept me alive because they made life so important and wonderful for me. And of course, you will see Jesus and how much I love him and how much, in spite of so much I have not gotten right, I believe he loves me. At times, this story will encourage you and at others will push you away because I want better for you and for those I love. But more than anything, it will speak honestly about life—my life, your life, and God's life. By the end, I

hope the authenticity will touch you and you will, if nothing else, know that I meant what I wrote and that it matters to me. And I believe you will see that my life is positive for more than my diagnosis or for even how I lived with the illness. No, I think you will see it is positive because when I decided to show up, I found that God was already there. Likewise, when you are meandering through your own maze, look up—God is there with you, too.

At the end of the book, I have also shared lessons born from what you read in the other pages that might be helpful as you navigate your own story. For some, these lessons will sound familiar in parts of your own journey just as they will sound quite foreign in others.

So, thank you for reading my story. I trust it will help you see your own story—and our story with God—a bit more clearly, and that you will see the positive elements in your own life and the places we should celebrate and remember. And I hope that you will see that we always have a choice to see the world differently, to see people differently, and to make a better way of it. We don't have to live, much like most of our prayers, with our eyes closed and our heads looking down, hoping that the next blow won't hurt so much. No, God wants us to look up, see the crowd, breath in the scenery, and in spite of every voice or inkling that says it can't be so, make another choice.

So, enjoy. I look forward to reading your own version—of your story, God's story, our story—one day.