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Have Barbed-Wire Discipline

Use Small Tugs

Have you ever faced something in your life that seemed so insurmountable that you thought there was no way to change it? Most of us will face an enormous problem at some point in life that seems too big to solve: college, graduate school, a dissertation, job loss, addiction, an out-of-control teenager, a failed dating life, an unfair boss, a weight problem, the list goes on and on. And when we look at the enormity of our problem, we're tempted to avoid it and watch another six hours of TV.

It's like the big ball of barbed wire that for fifteen years sat in our back woods at home. Long before we had purchased this property, someone had taken down a long section of barbed-wired fencing, rolled it up, and dumped it on our property. This enormous pile sat in our woods all gnarly and enmeshed into the ground-impossible to move. For fifteen years I looked at that tangled-up mess. It annoyed me every time I was in the backyard, but there was nothing I could do about it. Occasionally, I'd go over to the pile, study it, walk around it, and tug on it, but there was no way to move it. Sometimes I'd stand on our back deck and just stare at it from a distance.

So I thought maybe if I prayed really hard, God would remove it for me; that didn't work. Maybe my kids, whom I've spent hundreds of thousands of dollars feeding, cloth-ing, insuring, and educating, would surprise me one day and have it all cleaned up; that didn't happen. Maybe my wife, whom I love and adore, would clean it up; not in a million years. Maybe if I just ignored it and tried to block it out of my mind, it wouldn't bother me anymore. Didn't work.

So one day I stood there looking at that ugly mess, and I finally made a decision that each time I was in the woods, I would break off a piece and put it in our garbage can. I wasn't sure if the pile had more wire than I had days left on earth, but I couldn't stand it any longer. I had to do something.

So little by little I started pulling on a corner of that enormous pile. Every time I was in the woods I'd break a little section off, carry it to the garbage can, and then forget about the pile until I was back in the woods another day. Normally I just dive into

something and get it done, but this beast was so entangled and huge that to try to tackle it all in one day or one week or one month seemed overwhelming and defeating.

For several months it looked like nothing was happening; two or three months went by, and it seemed pointless. But I kept at it, bit by bit, little by little, and about five months into it, I began to notice a difference. A couple months after that, whole sections began breaking off, and I remember the day when I knew that pile was mine. It took me about fourteen months, but that pile is now completely gone. For fifteen years that pile junked up our woods and affected my mood, but now it's gone. I think the garbage man's a little upset with me, but it's gone.

I want to ask you, "What's your big ball of And where do you need to start tugging?" barbed wire? And where do you need to start tugging?"

What is it in your life that seems so overwhelming that every time you think about it you just want to crawl into a hole and forget it? Maybe when you think about it you say yourself, "I can't overcome that, I can't get rid of that, I n't do that. And you're right, you can't do it, at least not all at once. But here's the truth: no matter what your pile & you can do something. You can start pulling on a little ner of that pile, and bit by bit you can overcome whatever mblem you have. It might take five, ten, or fifteen years, but oming starts by pulling on the pile: one payment, one is, one counseling session, one AA meeting, one phone ome act of forgiveness, one dollar in savings, one pound one page written, one tug at a time.

It's Never Too Late to Start Tugging

I have a colleague who is one of the best in the country at the does. We've worked together for eight years, she is onour leadership team, and she is one of the most respected lers in our church. She's on top of every aspect of her pessional and personal life, except one. Her weight. She to work out and be in good shape. But then over a span several years a perfect storm blew into her life that threw be off her game: she and her husband were surprised by a child when their second was just fourteen months old; mturned to a sixty-plus-hour work week fresh off ma-ty leave; her best friend died at age thirty-one; and her nage was strained, to say the least. Amy was a mom to ds, a rising star at 3M, and a worn-out wife who never tofully grieve the loss of her best friend. Something had and it was her devotion to her own fitness.

Eight years later she was tired of being out of shape and to do something about it. Amy is goal oriented, so goal to enter a SK race in four months and down-waining program that would lead her to that goal in small increments. The voice on the

download became her daily companion as each morning he led her step by step. On the first morning it was a one-minute jog on the tread-mill followed by a two-minute walk. Amy said, "At about thirty seconds I thought I was going to die." A SK seemed like an impossible reach. But she kept pulling on the wire. Two mornings later she was back on the treadmill for a two-minute jog. Again, she wanted to barf and die. A week later she popped into my office with a big smile and said, "I'm up to three minutes."

Amy's also a Diet Coke-aholic-people actually give her cases for her birthday. Most mornings she cracks open the first can before 9:00 a.m. She recently admitted to me that on a typical day she would drink sixteen cans. That's 1.5 gallons each day. I can't drink 1.5 gallons of anything each day. But now I see her carrying water around, and she's down to six cans a day.

For Amy, accountability is huge, so she let me and others know of her fitness goal, which is extra motivation. I think everyone in the office knows about it, because as much as she wants this for herself, she wants to show the rest of us that she can conquer her problem.

About two months in, Amy's moment of truth came. She was going off on a weekend up north to scrapbook with a girlfriend. Keep in mind, this was February in Minnesota, and they were staying at a place with no fitness center. I tried to catch her before she left to warn her not to fall off the wagon, but I missed her. I fully expected her to return having taken two steps backward. But while her friend and the other "scrappers" slept warmly under their covers, at 6:00 a.m. Amy heaved herself out of bed in the dark and put on her jogging clothes. In her words, "I used to look at people who jogged in the dark and cold like they were crazy; now I was out there with them." When she told me about it, I couldn't have been more proud. She is up to fifteen minutes on the treadmill, has lost eight pounds, and recently finished her first 5K run. She proudly announced, "I finished in 1,473rd place out of 1,759 runners. I wasn't last!"

Now she has to make this a natural part of her daily rhythm so that it becomes a natural part of her life. According to the Human Performance Institute, 90 percent of our behavior is unconscious, which means we do things without thinking, like crack open a Diet Coke at 9:00 a.m. and keep it going until 9:00 p.m. Those who work out five times a week usually don't have more willpower; they just have better habits that have become a part of their unconscious rhythm. At some point you have to face the problem and start attacking it.

It's Never Too Big to Start Tugging

No matter who you are, you will likely face problems and barriers that will tend to paralyze and defeat you. Leaders come to our church and attend our conferences, and often the response I get from them is, "But, Bob, our problems are so huge and our resources are so limited that there's nothing we can do to fix them." And these leaders are right; there is nothing they can do to fix them, at least not all at once. But what they can do is start pulling on a corner of the pile.

All the improvements we've made to our church campuses, staff, messages, media, musicianship, and board structures started by tugging on a corner of the pile. We used to have one part-time music director who played trombone. Today we have five full-time worship leaders who lead with electric guitars and whose musicianship is concert quality. That didn't happen overnight. That took nineteen years of tugging. No matter how impossible the pile and how limited the resources, every church leader could:

- improve their messages by a little bit each year anybody can do that without cost.
add accomplished musicians to their stage one at a time.
- set some simple goals for each ministry area and start measuring them.
- deal with an attitude problem of a staff member, board member, or volunteer.
- replace the carpet, paint the walls, or fix the door.

The question is, what's your tangled-up mess? What drives you so nuts that every time you look at it or think about it you wish it were different? That's a good place to start. Cutting back from sixteen to six Diet Cokes is a good start. Jogging one minute instead of none is a good start. Reducing your caloric intake by one hundred calories a day is a good start. What's stopping you? You can't change everything all at once, but you can change something. It's not about big breakthroughs and swinging for the fences. It's about getting a little bit better every day.

Small Tugs Repeated Over Time Produce Big and Lasting Results

This is the lesson behind barbed-wire discipline, and it's true about anything in life: small tugs repeated over time produce big and lasting results. You don't lose weight all at once; you lose it in small increments over time with exercise and smaller meal portions, and you make healthy habits a daily lifestyle, even on vacation. It's true of building a business, getting through school, growing spiritually, eliminating debt, or accumulating wealth.

The wealthiest man in the ancient world, Solomon, wrote these words to his sons: "He who gathers money little by little makes it grow" (Prov. 13:11). Monetary growth doesn't come from a sudden windfall, hitting it rich, or playing the lottery. It comes from small

deposits, repeated over time, resulting in big gains.

Small Tugs in Marriage

This is also true in marriage. Great marriages are built by small deposits repeated over time. In his book *The Relationship Cure*, Dr. John Gottman calls these little deposits "bids." A great marriage is not primarily the result of mastering active listening techniques, understanding personality differences, or even having a date night once a week with your spouse. All those things can certainly help, but Gottman says that great marriages grow out of the hundreds of little interactions that couples have every day. A bid is any verbal or nonverbal expression sent from one spouse to another. It could be a comment, gesture, look, touch, hug, kiss, smile, or greeting. It could be "How are you?" or "I like your hair." Those are positive bids. Negative bids include things like a scowl, a rolling of the eyes, or a negative comment.

Gottman says that married couples give each other hundreds of bids (or tugs) every day. Most of them are just little things that don't seem to matter much, but over time they build up to either strengthen or destroy a marriage.

For years, Laurie would give me a positive bid when I came home from work. Every day she'd say, "How was your day?" But even if it was a good day, I'd send a negative bid back like "Lousy" or "I don't want to talk about it," and I did it without thinking. Sometimes I just ignored her, and without knowing it, I was telling her, "Leave me alone, don't bother me, your question is unimportant to me." Not a big deal initially, but over time my negative bids sucked the warmth and love out of our marriage. Not only was I pushing Laurie away, but I was also giving myself permission to be an idiot. I fell into what Gottman calls a "crabby state of mind." Have you ever fallen into the habit of being a grouch? Being grouchy had become a part of my unconscious behavior. But it really was a choice. I was choosing to be crabby—a basic "knob" as my friend Trent calls it. (That's short for doorknob.)

No more. These days Laurie will say, "How was your day?" and I'll usually give her a hug and say, "It was a good day. How was yours?" Her positive bid is met with a positive bid back, and that sets the mood for the entire evening. Little things like reaching over to hold her hand while watching TV, lifting my head and showing interest when she talks, responding with a nod and an uh-huh instead of silence are little positive bids or tugs that have put the spark back into our marriage. Solomon once observed, "A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones" (Prov. 15:30). How's your look? How's your smile? A smile says, "I like you, I'm happy to be around you, I'm in a good mood." These are tiny, little bids that Solomon says bring joy and health to our relationships.

Gottman found that couples headed for divorce ignore their mate's positive bids 82 percent of the time, while couples in stable marriages ignore them only 19 percent of the time. He says that healthy couples tend to "turn toward" each other. They physically turn toward and acknowledge each other's bids. Couples in dying marriages tend to turn away or ignore each other's bids.

So great marriages are not the result of huge breakthroughs, extensive therapy, or understanding deep personality differences. They are the result of hundreds of positive tugs that over time produce huge gains. Marriages that fail generally don't fail because of one major blunder. Failed marriages are usually the result of the hundreds of small put-downs and little neglects that build up over time. Nobody suddenly falls out of love; nobody suddenly chooses to have an affair; nobody suddenly decides to get divorced; nobody suddenly decides to dump their best friend. Those failures are the culmination of hundreds of little tugs that were ignored or rejected along the way. You build a marriage one bid at a time; you bury it one dig at a time.

Small Tugs in Business

Small tugs repeated over time also produce big gains in business. In the mid-1980s, Toyota determined to build a luxury vehicle that would do the impossible: beat BMW and Mercedes-Benz at their own game. But they wouldn't do it through huge breakthroughs or strokes of genius. Toyota was dead set against silver-bullet solutions or finding the one big magic pill. Instead, they achieved success through what Toyota calls continuous, incremental, evolutionary improvement by small, incremental tugs. Matthew May, who studied the secret behind Toyota's success with the Lexus and wrote a book on it, writes:

When the LS400 made its debut in 1989 it stunned the automotive world and set a new luxury standard. The facts made history: in every category rated by Car and Driver, the LS400 trumped the best of the best: BMW 735i and Mercedes 420SEL. The Lexus LS400 was five decibels quieter, 120 pounds lighter, 17 miles per hour faster, got more than four more miles to the gallon, and retailed for \$30,000 less than the BMW 735i.⁴

How did they do it? Japanese engineers dismantled the top-end BMWs and Mercedes, laid out every part, and used only the best ideas for the LS400. Ichiro Suzuki oversaw the project and demanded that the new car had to be faster, quieter, lighter, easier to handle, more comfortable, and more fuel efficient. The engineers and technicians said it wasn't possible. Greater speed needs more power, which means a heavier engine, which demands more fuel, and makes more noise. But Suzuki insisted on working the details to find a way.

Late in the process, the car was still too heavy, consumed too much fuel, and wasn't quiet enough. The solution: build an engine cast almost entirely from aluminum. Now it was light enough and fuel efficient, but it was still too noisy. Every moving part was examined in detail, and they found that it was the shaft that was making all the noise. The shaft has two parts in all rear-wheel cars. Toyota's solution: build a perfectly straight one. The noise disappeared, and the impossible happened: the LS400 became the bestselling luxury car worldwide. May writes, "Take a lesson from the Lexus story. If you want big leaps, take small steps. If you want quantum impact, sweat the details."⁵

The Pile That Made Nehemiah Cry

There once lived a man, Nehemiah, who faced an enormous "barbed-wire pile." But he understood the principle that small tugs repeated over time produce big and lasting results.

The nation of Israel was built by Kings Saul, David, and Solomon around 1000 BC but was destroyed by the Babylonians four hundred years later. It says in 2 Chronicles, "The Babylonians burned the house of God and broke down the protective walls of Jerusalem, and burned all its buildings and destroyed all its valuable articles" (2 Chron. 36:19, author paraphrase). In other words, the city was completely flattened, and the Jews who survived were scattered throughout the region and sought refuge wherever they could. This brings us to Nehemiah, who found refuge eight hundred miles away in Persia and who became employed by the Persian king.

Several years later Nehemiah's brother came to visit him with some men. Nehemiah questioned them about the surviving Jews and the condition of Jerusalem. "They said to me, 'Those who survived the exile are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down'" (Neh. 1:3). The Bible says that when Nehemiah heard this news, he sat down and wept for days. But then he got up and started tugging. Nehemiah shows us that there are four critical steps to overcoming seemingly insurmountable problems.

Step 1: Fast and Pray

Sometimes when a problem is so overwhelming, all you can do is sit down and cry. And that's what Nehemiah did. He cried and mourned, the Bible says, "for days." But after he wept, he "fasted and prayed before the God of heaven" (Neh. 1:4)-again, for several days. When Nehemiah received the devastating news that his homeland was destroyed and his people were suffering, his impulse was to fast and pray. Whenever you become so overwhelmed that all you can do is cry, that should be a signal to fast

and pray. And this is step 1 in the process of overcoming any problem.

I don't like to fast, but I've begun to fast and pray more often, especially when our family or church is facing obstacles-piles that are so impossible that if God doesn't show up we will completely fail. My wife and I fasted for the protection of our kids when they were going through high school. We fast when they face a major crossroad. But I don't like to fast.

My dislike for fasting is directly connected to my love for food and my rituals surrounding food. I have breakfast rituals. Almost every day before work, I sit down with a bowl of Raisin Bran or granola topped with a sliced banana. With my newspaper in one hand and the remote in the other, I flick between SportsCenter and The Today Show. At work I have my daily brew of morning coffee with the precise mix of cream and sugar. And that's just breakfast. I have lunch, dinner, and post-dinner rituals as well. What I eat is as important to me as when, where, and with whom I eat.

Which is why fasting is a major bummer for me. Food is so central to my life that when I deliberately set it aside for the purpose of prayer, it's a true sacrifice. But God honors it every time. During a fast, you are saying to God that your pile is so enormous that without his help you won't be able to overcome it. So instead of taking in food that day, you're going to take in more of God. Whenever food pops into your mind, or you have a hunger pain, or you forgo a food ritual, you are reminded to pray for your pile, and I'm telling you, it works. God honors it, God responds to it, and he intervenes in ways that wouldn't happen otherwise.

Nehemiah shows us that the first part in the process of moving piles is to fast and pray. By the way, Nehemiah was a man just like us. We tend to think that these biblical characters were superhuman or superspiritual-they weren't. They were normal people like you and me.

For example, the Bible says that "Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain" (James 5:17-18). When Elijah prayed for the rain to return, the Bible says that he prayed seven times. After the seventh time, a cloud formed in the distant sky, and it began to rain after three years of drought. But the key phrase is Elijah was a man just like us. He wasn't superhuman or superspiritual. He didn't have a special "in" with God. He was just like us. The biblical characters cried and mourned. They experienced pain, loss, and doubt just like us. The difference is Elijah prayed seven times. Nehemiah fasted and prayed for days. I often pray about something once and then give up.

Does that mean God doesn't respond to single, Hail Mary prayers? No. But God does

place a higher value on relationship than he does single-shot requests. Like most earthly fathers, our heavenly Father responds more to those who are in a daily, loving, trusting relationship with him than those who just want something from him. Elijah conversed with God repeatedly; Nehemiah sat and conversed with God for several days. And the God who did wonders through them is the same God who will do wonders through us.

But then Nehemiah ended his season of prayer, and he went to the king to ask for a leave of absence so he could travel to Jerusalem to see the destruction for himself. He traveled eight hundred miles to Jerusalem and spent three days examining the city to assess its condition. And this is the second step in the process of moving piles.

Step 2: Assess the Condition

Nehemiah questioned his brother about the condition of Jerusalem, and then he went to the city himself to find out everything he could. And while his men waited outside, the Bible says that Nehemiah examined the walls and gates himself. He walked around the city and studied it. He wanted to see it firsthand because he wanted to know exactly what he was dealing with. After he had fully inspected and assessed the ruins, he came back to his men and said, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire" (Neh. 2:17). A key part to overcoming any pile is to assess its condition and be honest about it. Nehemiah's assessment was that the city, people, and heritage were in big trouble.

But people fail to assess the problem all the time. A teenager is in full rebellion, but instead of assessing the problem and facing the harsh realities of what's causing the rebellion, the parents look away and figure it's just a phase. Or a marriage is in disarray, and the pile of resentment, anger, and abusive talk keeps growing higher and higher. But instead of looking into it and trying to assess what's broken, the husband and wife assume everything will eventually work out. Or a couple sees their pile of credit card debt get higher and higher. But instead of sitting down with a financial planner to assess their financial condition, they keep spending beyond their means and think it won't hurt them. Or someone burns through relationships. But instead of making an honest assessment of their relating patterns, they assume everybody else is the problem.

After you've sought God in prayer, the next part in the process of moving the pile is to be honest about it. As hard as it is to face the facts, you need to stop pretending, stop avoiding, stop ignoring, and say, "You know what, I'm in trouble. My marriage is in trouble, my health's in trouble, my kids are in trouble, my finances are in trouble, my walls are in ruin, and the gates have been burned." A key part to overcoming anything

in life is to access the condition and be honest about the facts.

When the economy collapsed during 2008 and 2009, I re-fused to look at our 401k, partly because there really wasn't anything we could do about it. But after avoiding it for six months, we knew we had to assess the condition of our financial world so we could figure out what to do next.

It was painful. Forty-three percent of our life savings was gone, vanished into thin air. It was a hard reality, especially when you've tried to do everything right. Our lifelong pattern was to save 10 percent or more of every paycheck, give 10 percent or more, and live on the remaining 80 percent. Greg, our financial guy, came over to our house with the grim news. But he was reluctant to show us the real numbers. Finally, I said, "Greg, I want to see the numbers. I want to see what we had, what we lost, and what the final figure is. Give it to me straight."

We were never rich to begin with, but when Greg showed me the numbers, I was quiet. But I had to see it, feel it, and face the reality of it, because there was something about seeing it printed on paper that made it real. Then Greg said, "I've done some calculations. If you retire at age sixty-five [I'm fifty-three], and you keep saving at your present rate, you'll run out of money by seventy-two."

I said, "That's not good is it?"

He said, "No, it's not, unless you're planning on dying before seventy-two."

Almost right away we started thinking about a new strategy, because life is full of adjustments, isn't it? You have a plan, but then something unexpected happens, so you have to adjust and create a new plan. Laurie and I had made plans to remodel our kitchen and entryway—we even had the architectural design for it. Immediately, we put that on hold. Then we decided on what I call "an aggressive form of saving." We knew we had to nearly double the amount we saved each month for the next ten years. I also made a mental adjustment to the possibility of working longer than I had originally planned.

You can't possibly know what actions to take without assessing the condition of your pile. When I'm seventy-two, I might become a greeter at Walmart, but I'd like it to be my choice. Assess the condition of your pile.

Step 3: Take Ownership

Even though the Babylonians had destroyed the Israelites' city and life, when Nehemiah learns about the condition of Jerusalem, this is what he prays: "LORD,... I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you.

We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses" (Neh. 1:6-7). Nehemiah knew that whenever the Israelites drifted from God and became disobedient, God often withdrew his protective blessing and allowed neighboring nations to exploit them.

So Nehemiah takes ownership of the problem. Sure the Babylonians are dirtballs, sure they destroyed the city and ruined their lives, but Nehemiah doesn't even mention them. He says, "I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed." Nehemiah knows that blaming somebody else for their problem will never solve it, so he says to himself, "Maybe we had a part in our own demise. We have to own it to get over it."

People who succeed in life rarely blame their teachers, bosses, co-workers, roommates, or spouses. Instead, they take ownership. People who take ownership for their financial problems roll up their sleeves and go back to school, put in long hours, work two jobs, learn new skills, become faith-ful employees, and refuse to buy on credit. People who are physically fit get off the couch, join a health club, walk dur-ing their lunch hour, and refuse to blame their upbringing, slow metabolism, work schedule, or cold winters for poor fitness. People who have solid marriages work every day at holding their tongue, managing conflict, getting help, and asking forgiveness. They refuse to blame their spouse for their problems and understand that the only person they can really change is themselves. They ask, "What's one thing I can do today that will improve my marriage?"

It's easy to think that people who are financially sound, physically fit, and relationally happy just fell into it or were just plain lucky, but that's not true. They took ownership for their lives. If your knee-jerk habit is to blame someone or something-spouse, friends, pastor, church, economy, parents, boss, roommate, traffic cop, landlord, upbringing, Republican or Democratic Party for your current pile of disappointments, you will never get anywhere. You will never make improvements to your life, because ultimately only you can improve your life. Everybody gets wronged once in a while, but if you're always getting wronged, and it's never your fault, then I hope you like your pile. At some point you have to take ownership.

Step 4: Add a Little Bit of Faith to a Little Bit of Action

In chapter 4, Nehemiah's enemies are really putting on the heat, and the builders are getting shot at. So Nehemiah makes a statement that's really a summary of how he lived his life: "Remember the LORD and fight for your broth-ers" (Neh. 4:14). I love that. "Trust in God, but fight like mad. Trust in God, but don't be a pansy. Trust in God, but

pick up your sword."

Nehemiah lived by the adage that when you add a little bit of faith to a little bit of action, miracles happen and things get done. It was the one-two punch of trusting as if it all depends on God and working as if it all depends on us that helped them overcome. It's not all God, and it's not all us. We need to work with God to attack the pile. And in chapter 6 it says, "So the wall was completed... in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this and all the surrounding na-tions saw it, our enemies lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God" (vv. 15-16). When you add a little bit of faith to a little bit of action, you can overcome impossible odds.

On September 6, 2005, the most impossible, most awful news invaded Jennifer Silvera's life. Her husband, Officer Shawn Silvera, father to one-year-old Madelynn and two-year-old Jordan, kissed his family good-bye, said "I love you," and left his home in St. Paul for his afternoon shift. A few hours later, three uniformed police officers stood on Jen-nifer's porch, visibly upset. Traveling in excess of 110 mph on a freeway not far from their home, a twenty-six-year-old felon used a stolen car as a weapon, pur-posefully aimed the car at Shawn, who had stop sticks out, and hit him. Shawn's body was thrown farther than a football field, his neck breaking instantly from hitting the windshield. A year later at the trial, the accident reconstructionist would testify that Shawn had only six-tenths of a second to get out of the way.

In her amazing book, *Believe*, Jennifer wrote about the many days and nights she spent just trying to exist: "Life has taken on a new color: Gray. At present, I don't see in color. Nothing is bright or exuberant. Nothing stands out. I feel disconnected. As the months pass, I continue to feel removed from life. Time does not heal. Life as I have known it has ended, and now I'm waiting for it to actually be over. The pain is always here; it doesn't go away."

One day Jordan approached Jennifer and said, "What's that there, Mommy?" pointing to a tear on Jen's face. "What's this one?" he asked again, pointing to another tear while wiping it away. "There's a tear on your eye, Mommy. Are you sad, Mommy?" Jordan gently prodded. Jennifer writes, "I could barely nod. Quietly he touched my face with his chubby toddler finger and placed my teardrop on his own eye." "There's a tear on my eye now, Mommy," he said. "I'm sad too." ⁷

Jennifer writes about sitting beside Shawn's dead and bleeding body in the ambulance at the accident site-his blood-soaked pant leg, black-and-blue marks on his face, the traffic backed up for miles on the freeway. "This is not my Shawn. But that's when the final detail came to me-his scent, strong and sweet. Then I knew it was him. This was my Shawn. His arm was still warm. It looked unharmed, mildly tanned by the late

summer sun. I couldn't help but touch it. I wanted to kiss him. I was afraid to. Can I kiss death? Would it be appropriate? I kissed my fingers instead and touched his mouth."⁸

Jen writes about her silent screams, her hatred for life, and her inability to find joy in things that would normally be joyful: "Each morning I put my feet out of bed wonder-ing, Is this really my life? Will I ever feel good again? Quickly followed by, I don't want to do this anymore-there isn't one day that I don't feel lonely and sad."

Midway through her book, Jennifer begins to talk about healing and hope. She found that while her pain will never go away and her life will forever be altered by Shawn's death, healing does come, and when something impossible invades your life, it's important to start moving.

She writes, "When Jordan was a little over three years old he tiptoed to my bed one morning and with his nose near my cheek asked, 'Mom, should we wait until the sun comes up to say good morning?' It was 6:02 a.m. Tugging at my arm he said, 'Wake up, Mom. Let's get into the morning.'"

"As I crawled out of bed his words stuck in my mind. Get into the morning. What did that mean to me? It meant to put effort into my day, face it, live it, learn from it, move with it: I needed to start moving. I stood in front of my bathroom mirror and told myself, 'Move, Jennifer. Just move. All you need to concentrate on is moving.'"¹⁰

Jennifer found that the activity of journaling was therapy for her, but moving can be as simple as making a cup of coffee or taking a walk. "Nearly anything is better than nothing. Healing is work. God's Spirit works healing in us when we work to heal." She met a friend who'd also been widowed. When Jen asked her how she coped, she said, "Baking. You write, I bake. I baked so many cookies after Tom died I had to start throwing them away."¹¹

Jen said:

Moving doesn't... make everything okay, but when I move I sense God moving in me, and with me. [So] that's what I did. Morning after morning. Hour after hour. Minute after minute. Even though my life connection with Shawn had died, I was still very much alive-so I kept moving. I found that when I moved, God moved. I found strength in God's promise from 2 Corinthians 12:9: "My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in your weakness." God's grace is sufficient for me. .. By simply moving and letting Christ take over, even though I felt weak I was becoming strong. This was Christ's strength in me. ¹²

Jen found that when she started moving-when she added a little bit of faith to a little

bit of action-her impossible pile of grief started to shrink. Not overnight, but bit by bit Jennifer began to live again, and trust again, and love again. Four weeks ago she met me down front after a service and introduced me to her family and to a gentle, young man named Steve. She gave me a shy smile and said quietly, "I've begun dating again."

I don't know what impossible situation you might be facing right now, but I do know that when you add a little bit of faith to a little bit of action, miracles still happen. Hope is reborn, relationships are healed, debts get eliminated, people find lifelong mates, an impossible neighbor becomes interested in faith, dying churches turn a corner, classes get passed, books get written, and life is worth living again.

So what's your tangled mess of barbed wire? And where do you need to start moving and tugging? What's the one thing you want to overcome that feels overwhelming? No matter what you are facing, you can start tugging: you can fast and pray, assess the condition, take ownership, and start moving.

It's one piece of barbed wire at a time.