

INTRODUCTION

This book is designed to be a book of hope for you. My own hope is that it will prove to be a book you can turn to whenever you feel as though you've lost your way and life doesn't make much sense anymore. My prayer is that it can help you learn to tell and thus experience your own life story differently than you ever have before. I'll candidly share my story with you to show you how it's done.

But the real teachers of this book are ten amazing survivors from the darkest, most hopeless corner of the world: North Korea. As you read their stories, you'll pick up on an encouraging and gentle message, one that is powerful enough to tunnel through endless mountains of despair in your life. But it is not so powerful as to overwhelm you if the struggles of today are already more than enough.

The message is this: Don't worry. Your life story will turn out well. All you need to do is learn to let God tell it for you.

The most encouraging part of the message is that contrary to what you may have been taught or maybe just assumed, you do not have to live a successful life first and *then* tell your story once it is polished and perfect. You don't have to suddenly start making great choices and produce astonishing results in every area you touch before your story is worth hearing and telling. Instead, when you learn to tell your story the way God does, you'll discover that you really are already in the middle of something truly amazing, right in the midst of your difficulties. You are already on a hero's journey.

And the gentle part of the message is that it's okay if you're not the heroic type, because the heroics come from God. We're the recipients of His heroics, not the other way around.

I know the message in this book is reliable and true, but not because I have received a special word from the Lord for you or because I am hopelessly optimistic. Instead, I know this for three very factual reasons.

First, a close reading of the Bible reveals that God never gives anyone a victim story or a life consigned to failure. "No," says the apostle Paul, "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."¹ He who loved us is God. Human beings are created in the image of God, and God is no victim. Victim stories come from Satan, who, according to John 10:10, "comes only to steal and kill and destroy."² And nothing can steal, kill, and destroy your life as a victim story can. God,

¹ Romans 8:37, NIV.

² John 10:10, NIV.

on the other hand, only narrates redemptive stories, or what we might call hero stories. And He reserves hero status for individuals who simply trust in that truth and in His goodness, and thus let Him narrate their lives accordingly. Wouldn't you rather let God narrate your life story than Satan? As you'll see in these pages, that's all that being a hero requires.

Second, nearly two decades of work with North Koreans defectors and Christians has led me to recognize that the difference between those who are happy and those who are traumatized does not lay in their unique experiences but rather in the narrative frame they use to understand and tell their stories. This book is the product of coaching traumatized North Koreans to narrate their life stories using a different frame than the ones they learned from North or South Korea. That different frame is Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey" as analyzed in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell believed this twelve-stage backstory could be seen behind the stories of heroes in literally every culture in the world.³ With surprisingly little outside coaching (just the kind you can get from reading and working through the exercises in this book), life change became possible for these North Koreans because they changed the way they told, thought about, and lived their stories. In very much the same way, you can learn to change the way you tell *your* story, and the way you think about it. And, best of all, you can change the way you live it from now on.

³ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces (The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell)*, 3d ed. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008), 1.

The third reason I know the message in this book is reliable and true is because *my own life* has been fundamentally transformed by changing my narrative frame. Like you, perhaps, I have experienced a number of near-crippling psychological, spiritual, and physical episodes over the years, including losing my health, getting divorced, being physically abused, and suffering the painful betrayal of close friends. As each difficult episode was added to my life story, I became more and more tempted to narrate it as a sad, broken, and disappointing story.

But what I learned in the process of researching narrative forms was that the path to positive life change did not begin with me somehow starting to get everything right in my life but rather in me first getting the narrative frame itself right. In fact, until you get the narrative frame right, very little else will go right in your life. The wrong narrative frame will lead you to make unsatisfactory choices, as I did. I needed to learn to tell, hear, and live my story for God's glory, not my own. That meant embracing *His* narrative form, which is always gracious, redemptive, and Christ-centered, rather than the narrative forms of the cultures around me (American and Korean) which were either self-focused, shame based, or success oriented.⁴

In sum, learning how to hear and tell your story the way that God does is the key to coming to greater peace with yourself, others, and God even though you might be right in the midst of nearly impossible circumstances. It is these challenges that

⁴ Dan P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006).

make your story so very, very good and important, after all.

However, I should emphasize what this book is not: it is not a call to positive thinking. The fact that God does not give anyone a victim story doesn't mean that God gives us straightforward positive stories either, or that God, in any way, spares us from pain if we just stay positive about life. Even a quick glance at the Bible reveals that the hero's journey not only passes through stretches of the darkest desolation, but it can even, by all outward appearances, conclude there, well short of any obviously happy ending. Consider the following summary of the Bible's hero stories in Hebrews 11:36-39:

Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.⁵

According to the Bible, what makes these stories “hero stories” is not that the people in them practiced the power of positive thinking. It is, quite simply, God. In other words, verse 39 is incomplete without verse 40. Taken together, the two verses

⁵ Hebrews 11:36–39, NIV.

read like this:

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.⁶

The Reverend Mark Holsinger, longtime executive director of the Los Angeles Mission, used to listen patiently as homeless men would confess to him, in floods of tears, how they had abandoned their families and jobs and self-respect and sold their souls for alcohol. When they finished their stories of brokenness and despair, Rev. Holsinger would add softly, “But God.” The men would inevitably reply, “But God what?” Then Rev. Holsinger would say, brightening, “Now you’re asking the right question!”⁷

Rev. Holsinger’s enthusiastic answer points to a second truth about what this book is *not*. This book is not a guide to learning how to edit your story toward the goal of generating a polished, finished, stable identity for you to cling to for the rest of your life. Such a “testimony identity” may make us and others feel good, but it is not consistent with how God redeems and disciplines us.

As long as we’re alive, God will continue to add to our stories. Each new episode has a great likelihood of turning our

⁶ Hebrews 11:39-40, NIV.

⁷ Eric Foley, interviewed by author, Monument, CO, USA, September 14, 2013.

existing narratives upside down, often in completely unforeseen ways. You see, that phrase “But God” isn’t something we say only to console ourselves when everything is going badly; it’s also a reminder to stay humble and reliant on God when everything is going exactly as we want it to. Each day of life brings reversals and changes and revisions to our life narratives, and some days our existing narratives are pulverized into oblivion. On those days, everything we thought we knew about ourselves and life and God turns to dust. The good news is, that’s actually a common mile marker along the hero’s journey. As legendary baseball manager Sparky Anderson once said, “Every twenty-four hours the world turns over onto someone who was sitting on top of it.”⁸ Welcome to the hero’s journey.

The truth is that if we are not careful, our life stories can easily become idols to us. Once we have decided what our stories are, we often don’t want to let them grow, develop, or change, even as our external circumstances expose the pretense of those existing narratives to us (and everyone around us as well!). At that point, our life stories no longer become God’s stories told for and to us but rather our effort to obstruct God’s stories from rooting deeper into our lives.

God hates obstructions. We may value control and stability, and avoid pain and embarrassment and discomfort at all costs, but God values growing us in the image of His Son, Jesus.

As you’ll see throughout this book, that is part of what makes

⁸ “Sparky Anderson Quotations,” Memorable Quotations, March 10, 2014, accessed March 10, 2014, <http://www.memorablequotations.com/anderson3.htm>.

the hero's journey framework so powerful: each time you return to it to narrate your story, your story changes! Sometimes you'll swear you're in stage ten or twelve, but the next time you return to chart your course, you'll realize that you're actually in stage four, or maybe even still in stage one. (More on what these "stages" are in just a moment.)

And that's the value of using the hero's journey to narrate your story: more than anything, the hero's journey is a way of drawing you out of what is sometimes called "the tyranny of the urgent." This is the natural tendency of the present moment to exert outsize influence on the whole of your life story, sometimes in ways that lull you into a false sense of security, and sometimes in ways that lull you into an unnecessary (and sometimes faithless and thus sinful) sense of despair. The hero's journey narrative frame exerts a constant but gentle reminder that there are almost always reversals after seeming happy endings, and almost always happy endings after seeming reversals. Life stories are never quite as ecstatic or as despairing as they seem to us when we are stuck in the present moment and struggling to see beyond it.

It's like the old Chinese story about the rancher and his son.

One day a rancher was taking care of his horses when his son left the gate open and one old horse ran away. "Oh!" his son groaned. "That's a bad thing!"

"How do you know?" was the rancher's only response.

The next day the rancher and his son mounted an expedition to find their lost horses, and they discovered that the horses had joined up with a group of wild stallions. The rancher and his

son were able to bring all the horses back to the corral, and now they had many more horses than before. “Oh!” the son said, cheering. “That’s a good thing!”

“How do you know?” asked the father, neither rejoicing nor despairing.

The next day the son was trying to break in one of the wild stallions, and the stallion threw him high into the air. The son crashed down onto the ground, breaking several bones. “Oh!” the son said, wheezing. “That’s a bad thing!”

“How do you know?” asked the father, kneeling beside him.

The next day the army came through their village, conscripting every able-bodied young man to go fight in a foreign war from which they anticipated few would return. The son, however, was spared because of his broken bones. “Oh!” the son sighed in relief. “That’s a good thing!”

“How do you know?” his father asked.⁹

As Christians, we know something about the character of our heavenly Father that the rancher didn’t know: God loves us and is constantly willing good for us. As the apostle Paul wrote, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”¹⁰ The hero’s journey reminds us that not all events in our life are good, but in the story that our heavenly Father wants to tell for us and to us, even in the worst circumstances, God is working

⁹ “The Chinese Farmer,” Inspire21, March 10, 2014, accessed March 10, 2014, <http://www.inspire21.com/stories/lifestories/TheChineseFarmer>.

¹⁰ Romans 8:28, NIV.

for our good. So unlike the uncertain world of the rancher, all of us really can be confident that we are each on a hero's journey. And we can be confident that God's heroic work in Christ will, and does, express itself through our stories, such that we become heroes too. Or heirs (and co-heirs), as the apostle Paul put it: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."¹¹

That inseparable connection between sharing in His sufferings and sharing in His glory is a foundational truth about the hero's journey: the rancher may think that life is a circular series of inscrutable events, but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ doesn't give anyone a story consisting of such events. Instead, He takes up our sufferings as His own, and He invites us to take up His sufferings as our own, all for the purpose of manifesting His glory in and through our lives!

As someone born into a Christian home, I knew these truths; in fact, maybe I was too familiar with them. The idea that God somehow managed to use everything that happened to me in my life for good, even things that happened as a result of my failures and shortcomings and sins, lived in my head but not in my life story. Instead of saying "But God," I found myself thinking *But me*, and, as a result, the story I lived by was my own and not the Lord's. I had no confidence or expectation or even any idea that God could make a hero out of me. I didn't even think He could turn me into much of a Christian unless and until I got my

¹¹ Romans 8:17, NIV.

act together first.

Then twenty years ago, I began to meet some brothers and sisters with whom I have become quite close, and I am eager to introduce them to you. I'm speaking about North Koreans, particularly defectors now living in South Korea, who are coming to know Christ. As you read their stories, I hope you will see that a hero's journey is not only possible but the norm that God intends for every human being. These defectors adopted Christ's story for their own, giving up the only stories they had ever heard or told about themselves.

Perhaps a little background on North Korea will be helpful.

The estimated population of North Korea is nearly twenty-five million people,¹² but in many ways, North Korea can be described as the country of one story: the story of Kim Il Sung.¹³

As all North Koreans grow up, they have to memorize perfectly more than one hundred stories about Kim Il Sung's life. That includes exact dates, place names, details, everything.¹⁴ In school they have to give speeches about his life. Whenever they do something wrong, such as not studying well, they are made, by their overseers, to self-criticize. They have to remind themselves publicly that Kim Il Sung always studied well and

¹² Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook: Korea, North*, 2021, accessed October 15, 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/korea-north/>.

¹³ Hyung-chan Kim and Dong-kyu Kim, *Human Remolding in North Korea: A Social History of Education* (Lanham, MD: University Press of North America, 2005).

¹⁴ Kim Hee Rin (pseudonym), interviewed by author, Seoul, Korea, September 10, 2013.

that they have to prepare to be revolutionaries for him. Kim Il Sung is the subject of nearly every North Korean story, and that means, of course, that Kim Il Sung is the hero of nearly every North Korean story.¹⁵

But when North Koreans escape their country, they enter a world where there are millions and millions of stories. So, when they enter South Korea (where thirty-four thousand North Korean defectors have now resettled),¹⁶ they are confronted with the reality that Kim Il Sung's story is no longer useful. For you and me, telling our stories is something we are more or less used to doing quite naturally since childhood, but for North Koreans, learning to tell their own stories as anything other than a proof of loyalty to Kim Il Sung is quite challenging.¹⁷ They quickly latch on to the stories that others tell about them, and those stories are usually anything but positive. Defectors are considered traitors by North Korea, of course,¹⁸ but in South Korea there is strong prejudice against them as well.¹⁹ They are often viewed

¹⁵ Bae Hee Hyo (pseudonym), interviewed by author, Seoul, Korea, April 7, 2012.

¹⁶ Ministry of Unification, *Policy on North Korean defectors*. Policy on North Korean Defectors< Data & Statistics< South-North Relations< 통일부_영문. Retrieved September 30, 2021, from https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/.

¹⁷ Lee Sung Gi (pseudonym), interviewed by author, Seoul, Korea, November 5, 2013.

¹⁸ Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau, 2009), 234.

¹⁹ Jacques L. Fuqua, Jr. *Korean Unification: Inevitable Challenges* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2011), 80.

as lazy, stupid, dishonest, and untrustworthy.²⁰ They typically lack the skills to survive in a modern market economy.²¹ Even speaking the language is hard for them, because North Korea and South Korea have developed very different dialects over their years of separation and because of the conscious choices of their leaders.²²

In the end, many North Korean defectors internalize these negative narratives about themselves, and the results are quite literally fatal: North Korean defectors have the highest rate of death due to suicide of any group in the world: more than 16 percent.²³ That's a sobering statistic that shows just how deadly it is to adopt any narrative frame but God's for telling your life story.

That's why I became involved in listening to the life stories of North Korean defectors and coaching them to retell their stories using the hero's journey framework. It really was a matter of life and death! Virtually every defector with whom I have ever sat down with tells me his or her story as a victim story, as a story of worthlessness unbearable pain, or both. The person's

²⁰ Ibid., 79.

²¹ Mok Yong Jae, "80% of Defectors Struggle to Hold Down Positions," Daily NK, February 14, 2011, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk00100&num=7357>.

²² Ho-Min Sohn, *The Korean Language* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

²³ Special Reporting Team, "DPR Korea: Defector Among Us—What Does She Look Like," Reliefweb, October 19, 2010, accessed March 11, 2014, <http://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-peoples-republic-korea/dpr-korea-defector-among-us-what-does-she-look>.

life is filled with memories of starvation, concentration camps, brutal dictatorial rule, and worship of the very rulers that foist this upon them.

So, after I hear them tell their stories this way, I challenge and coach them in two ways.

First, I share with them the hero's journey framework. I explain that Joseph Campbell was a scholar of mythology who found that the truest story that could be told of people in every culture was a hero's story, and that such stories follow a simple culture-transcending pattern that makes it possible for everyone to rethink their life stories according to it.²⁴

Second, I share with them about God, who intends for us to triumph over our enemies by the blood of His Son, Jesus, and by the word of our testimonies.²⁵ In other words, our very survival depends on the stories we tell about ourselves. I advise my North Korean defector brothers and sisters to tell their own stories, because if they don't, they will end up living forever inside the story of Kim Il Sung, even though they have left North Korea physically.²⁶

After I coached North Korean defectors in these truths enough times, I started to realize that the same is true for the rest of us too. And as I watched them struggle to tell new God-centered hero's journey stories, I realized that healthy storytelling isn't

²⁴ Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structures for Writers*, 3d ed. (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007), xiii.

²⁵ Revelation 12:11, NIV.

²⁶ Helen-Louise Hunter, *Kim Il-song's North Korea* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999).

something that any of us know how to do reflexively. We have to learn how to tell our stories the way God tells them. If we don't practice doing this, we will inevitably come to tell stories about ourselves that lead to unhappy endings, whether through deluding ourselves pridefully or, more commonly, by reinforcing our identities as victims.²⁷

A victim story is when you tell a story that defines you and others in light of the pain and suffering you have experienced.²⁸ When you have been hurt in life, or when you have hurt others, it is very natural to want to tell a victim story because you want everyone to know how you have suffered. But what I have come to understand from spending time with North Korean defectors is that if you tell your life story as a victim story, it is not really your story. Other people (the people who hurt you) become the main characters, and it is really a story about them, not you.

There is another story about yourself that you can learn to tell: a hero's story. You may not think of yourself as a hero. No one understands that more than North Korean defectors. In North Korea there can only be one hero: Kim Il Sung. But as the defectors represented in this book learned, anyone who faces difficulties in his or her life and overcomes them by the blood of the lamb and the word of their testimony is a hero.

God designed the world so that while each of us will face great difficulties, He will also give us the strength and the tools

²⁷ James W. Pennebaker, "Telling Stories: The Health Benefits of Narrative," *Literature and Medicine* 19:1 (2000): 3-18.

²⁸ Martha Minow, "Surviving victim talk," *UCLA L. Rev.* 40 (1992): 1411.

to overcome them.²⁹ And even though each person's story is unique, it has common characteristics and follows a surprisingly similar outline to others', because God is growing each of us into the image of His Son.³⁰ It does not matter if a person comes from North Korea or South Korea or even North America or South America; each person has a "hero's journey" to take, including you. Like me and the ten North Korean defectors in this book, you will be called out of your ordinary world, face difficulties, meet allies, mentors, and enemies, enter dangerous places, receive rewards, and ultimately be called to share what you have learned with others from the ordinary world where you grew up.

Of course, you may not see yourself as a hero as you hold this book today. Right now, the painful parts of your story may be the only ones you can remember. But let me tell you about a man named Viktor Frankl, a Jew who survived life in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. He went on to become one of the most famous authors and psychiatrists in the world, and he often liked to quote the philosopher Nietzsche in saying, "He who have a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*."³¹ What Viktor Frankl meant was that no matter how much pain we go through, we can survive it if we come to understand the reason we are alive.

²⁹ John 16:33, NIV.

³⁰ 2 Corinthians 3:18, NIV.

³¹ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 1984 ed. (New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1985), 97.

And that is the amazing secret about the “hero’s journey”: it turns out that those who experience the most pain and suffering and setbacks and life-shattering tragedies are those who go on to do the greatest things and have the best lives; that is, if they learn to see, understand, and tell their own “hero’s journey” story the way God tells it.

In the pages that follow, you’ll see in my own story, and the stories of ten amazing North Korean defectors, the twelve stages of the “hero’s journey” that each person goes through in his or her life. Our lives will illustrate each stage for you, so that by the time you finish this book, you can see how it is done. (And speaking of illustrating, make sure to pay special attention to the illustration done by the hero in each chapter. I’ll explain why later in the book.) Then I will coach you through writing out your own “hero’s journey.”

And don’t worry. It won’t be hard for you to do this. You won’t have to write a book! In fact, it’s important to keep your story short. That way, you can remember it yourself and share it easily with others, and revisions will be simple. Remember, God will keep revising it as long as you’re drawing breath here on planet Earth.

But before you write anything, and even before you read our stories, let me briefly walk you through Joseph Campbell’s “hero’s journey” outline. The following are the twelve stages for you to think and pray about:

1. The ordinary world. This is simply the world you grew up in, what “normal” life was like before you entered the sec-

ond stage of your journey. This is the world of “home.”

2. The call to adventure. Somewhere, somehow, from someone or some thing or some series of events, you sense a call away from your ordinary world to somewhere new, or to some new opportunity or way of life.

3. The refusal of the call. We may initially refuse to leave our ordinary world, or, if we do leave, we decide it was a mistake and instead turn back, or feel tempted to.

4. Meeting the mentor. Someone is put in our path who gives us guidance on how to go forward in the journey.

5. Crossing the first threshold. This is the moment when we finally take the step where we know there can be no turning back. We have left the ordinary world behind, and our adventure has taken hold.

6. Tests, allies, and enemies. Along the way we will face tests that challenge us, allies who help us, and enemies who try to stop us.

7. Approach to the inmost cave. This is the point in the hero’s journey where we sense our biggest test looming directly ahead. A serious battle awaits. It looks as though we may not survive.

8. The ordeal. This is the battle that we fight inside our own minds. The inmost cave is the external battle, and the ordeal is the inner battle. We may question ourselves. We may question

everything we believe. We may lose our faith. We may lose hope. That is what the ordeal is all about.

9. The reward. When we complete the internal and external battles of the two previous steps, we receive a reward. This is not always something material or financial, such as a trophy or a prize or some money. Most of the time, it comes in the form of new insight about ourselves, the world, or our purpose or calling.

10. The road back. Having journeyed away from the ordinary world, we now turn in that direction once again, seeking to bring back the reward we have received. This stage may not have happened for you yet, but it is important to know that it is ahead on your journey, and you can begin to think about what that stage will be like when it happens.

11. The resurrection. Here we face another challenge. Usually it is a completely unexpected challenge, and one that turns out to be the hardest challenge of all. It can be so great a challenge that it nearly kills us. Sometimes North Koreans arriving in South Korea think that their challenges and suffering are over! Then when they start living their day-to-day lives in South Korea, they are surprised to come face-to-face with some kind of a greater challenge than they have ever been confronted with before, and it is totally unexpected for them. Sadly, this is why some North Koreans commit suicide in South Korea. Therefore, it is important to anticipate this challenge and also to remember that this stage is called the

resurrection, because ultimately by using the rewards you have received along your journey, you can survive. It will be almost like being resurrected from the dead.

12. Return with the elixir. An elixir is a healing medicine. In real life the elixir is not usually a literal medicine. Instead, it is something that you learned along your journey that you can take back to the ordinary world to bring healing to others. Later on I'll share with you the "elixir" I received, and how I am seeking to use it even to bring healing to *you* through this book.³²

So these are the twelve stages of the hero's journey. After you read them, you may have thought, *Yes, I have completed all twelve stages.* Wonderful! I will help you write them out so that you can easily share your story with others and recall it to give you strength whenever you face difficult times in the future. Just remember that tomorrow the Lord may introduce a new development in your story that turns the whole thing upside down.

Or, as I shared the stages, you may have thought, *I have completed some of these stages, but not all.* That is wonderful too! You have begun the journey. Your story is in progress. By understanding your "hero's journey" story and knowing the stages that are ahead, you can be well prepared for the future. You can

³² Linda George, *Fill-in-the-Blank Plotting: A Guide to Outlining a Novel Using the Hero's Journey & Three-Act Structure* (Milwaukee, WI: Crickhollow Books, 2009).

anticipate the challenges you will face and have hope and confidence knowing that every step you take brings you closer to the successful completion of your own unique “hero’s journey.”

Or, you may have thought, *I’m still not sure I’m a hero or even on a journey at all.* That may be the best place of all for you to be for now. Just be open to the possibility that some amazing discoveries and surprises may await you as you consider the stories of eleven ordinary people much like you, who thought of themselves as anything but heroes.

Beginning with me.