



The Bellowing of Cain

by

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Sample Chapter

Note: This chapter comes from Section 1, “Throwing It All Away: Perspectives on Self-Destruction,” which examines common sources of self-destruction, such as self-deception, obsession, sexualized relationships, fear, and depression.

Chapter 1: Self-Deception

A traveler happened upon a remote village in the mountains. The people were friendly and bade him come to a great feast of welcome. Upon arriving at the table, he was revolted to find all the meat rancid and all the vegetables rotten. Unfazed by the fetid food, the villagers consumed the meal with gusto.

Staring sullenly at his plate, the traveler mumbled, “Ugh, how can they possibly eat this?”

“Just keep chewing,” replied the man next to him. “Keep telling yourself you like it. You’ll eventually convince yourself.”

To this day when I’m out in public and hear someone’s iPhone give off that YOO-HOO! incoming-text whistle, I get PTSD-like tremors. I’ve dropped glasses of water in restaurants, frozen immovable in grocery store aisles, lost my power of speech mid-conversation. That sound was my summons. I could be called out of bed at 2:00 a.m. by that sound.

And I came willingly.

I’d never texted before. My contacts app had no names in it. This was all new to me. I didn’t even own a cell phone, only my iPad. But I was being shepherded into this technology by an expert with hundreds of contacts, a master of multiple concurrent text-versations, an emoji shaman.

But as the whistles grew more frequent, I knew their meaning was changing. My wife, Denise, knew it too. At first the texts were always work related, but as things devolved, I was summoned to offer comfort, perspective, advice, or even just company.

It began in December with, YOO-HOO! *You said you thought there might be some help for my*

house. And so began an eleven-month campaign of pursuing housing advocacy agencies and raising local funding to keep the mortgage from defaulting.

In February, the text read, YOO-HOO! *I can't come to work today because I can't afford daycare.* So began a nine-month stint of Denise watching the tyke along with our own newborn during work hours.

In April, YOO-HOO! *I have some legal trouble with the welfare office. Can you help?* This was the start of a seven-month effort of hunting up pro bono legal representation, contacting state representatives, and learning about policing overreach.

Then on a May evening, YOO-HOO! *I'm so lonely. I wish you were here tonight.*

And by then, I wished I were too.

Where's the Line?

While reading the preceding section, at what point did you think, *Whoa! Stop. Red flag.* You probably saw it pretty quickly. Well, I didn't. It never occurred to me that this situation was bigger than I could handle. But it should have. It was obvious. Not a single one of Lorelai's needs was I competent to deal with. I have no social work training. No law degree. I never held a public office. Never even had so much as an introductory counseling course. It wasn't even in my job description—I was a teaching pastor. I was supposed to be writing sermons.

What I was blind to, others saw clearly. My wife saw it. Colleagues in the office saw it. What kept me from seeing it? What keeps any of us from seeing our own impending trouble?

Proximity.

I was too close.

Because I knew all the complex motives behind my actions, it was actually harder for me to see which ones were really driving me. My spouse, friends, and colleagues couldn't see all those internal motivations; they saw only the actions themselves. While it's counterintuitive, when you have fewer facts, you can often make a better guess—one that's closer to the truth. Stated differently, others will jump immediately to the most probable and obvious motive for the action ... and they are often right.

They were right in my case—I was in over my head.

But I believed my own rhetoric. I wanted to help. I was a pastor. It was my job to help. That publicly stated motive was true, but it wasn't the whole truth. I was getting other things out of this as well. People who need you are pleasant to be around. They stroke the ego. They let you be their savior with all the accompanying good-feels. Further, if that person is attractive or vivacious or even just close, if they thank you profusely for caring when no one else does, how can you be sure which of your motives drives you at any given moment?

We have the ability to profess health and strength where corruption has already eaten the bone hollow. Not only profess, but believe.

We have the power to deceive not just others but ourselves.

The Truthful Lie

Self-deception is the capacity to say something false while believing it true, and few limits exist on how thorough self-deception can be. At the lowest point of that relationship—and you'll need

the following chapters on depression and obsession to really understand my record-breaking limbo skills—I had convinced myself that not only did I not love my wife of eighteen years but I had *never* loved her, that our whole marriage had been a fraud—especially compared to the golden warmth I was feeling in Lorelai’s presence.

This was of course demonstrably false. We’d had a remarkable and beautiful marriage. Every person who’d ever known us could have told us that, and plenty did. It’s clear in the VHS tape of our wedding. The young man on stage is obviously smitten—madly in love with that lady in white.

Yet I couldn’t acknowledge that truer history—not to her, not to myself. All my affections were against me. All the sentries of my soul were on guard lest I let slip the truth to myself and make plain the death into which I was willingly walking. The river of my feelings was damned at the source, and consequently, so was I—damned, that is.

But self-deceivers must be careful. They’ll out themselves in the most ironic ways. Even something like alcohol, with its reputation for enabling folly, can work against self-delusion.

I could count on one Simpsons’ hand the times I’ve been drunk in my life. I’m a control freak, and the feeling of not being in control is unsettling to me. That said, the drunkest I’ve ever been came on a night when my brother had just reamed me out over the phone for being an ass who was throwing his life away over a “woman of questionable morals.” I hung up in a state of inner torment, ran out of the house, drove to the local grocer, and bought a bottle of Malbec with the words *Stark Raving* on the label. I then drove home, climbed up on the roof of my minivan in my driveway, and drank the whole bottle in twenty minutes.

That quantity of alcohol plus the speed with which I put it down left me stewed like a tomato but also gratefully numb. I eventually stumbled into the house and fell down in the dining room, unable to walk. Denise helped me up, took me to the bathroom, stripped me, and shoved me into the shower.

So slaving drunk was I that I’d lost the capacity to lie. As I fell into the shower, I remember stammering out a rambling apology, telling Denise I loved her so much, I always had, and I was sorry I wouldn’t be able to tell her again in the morning. And with that she went to bed, and I sat in the shower till I was sober enough to resume my lie.

Denise and I have never spoken of that incident, but to this day I wonder if that’s why she stayed—because she knew the truth. It had come out when I’d been too drunk to maintain the lie I defended when sober.

So with the truth well damned up in my soul, I stood ready to walk out of my marriage at the first sign of openness from Lorelai. I was convinced with my whole heart that the wonderful, beautiful life Denise and I had built together with our four children was all a waste and a lie.

But it was a lie that required a lot of effort to maintain.

The Hard Work of Self-Deception

That in a nutshell is the problem with self-deception. We have to work really hard at staying self-deceived. When the church counselor showed up in my office midsummer and asked if something was going on between Lorelai and me, I told her we were just good friends—and I meant it with all my heart. I believed it.

I really wanted to believe it.

I *mostly* believed it.

But I had to work at it. As Al Gore argued once upon a time, truths are inconvenient things that can be pushed aside with only varying degrees of success. Losing a fifth of your body weight in four months is a difficult thing to ignore ... but I worked diligently at it! I eventually persuaded myself that, despite my suits hanging off my frame like the scarecrow's rags, I was back to my college weight. That's a good thing, right?

I spent more time texting Lorelai on my iPad than talking face-to-face with my own wife and kids. But that, too, was not beyond diligent spin-doctoring. *I'm a pastor. Caring for the downtrodden is my job, right?*

If you say something to yourself enough times, there's nothing you can't come to believe. I actually had myself convinced I was a good pianist because I'd memorized and could stumble through the theme to Bill Bixby's old TV show, *The Incredible Hulk*. I'd sit in the sanctuary with the lights off and play it for an hour at a time. Honestly, when you're sitting in the dark playing badly a song titled "The Lonely Man Theme" over and over and don't know why, you ... are not ... okay.

Now, this may sound like the very bottom of the well, but in truth it's only the first stage of a descent. Self-deception is but the front porch of the "Hotel California." Worse things await within.

How Shall We Then Live? Becoming Undeceived

Let's pause, however, before we go to the front desk and check in. In the previous chapter I said this book aims to help the fallen consider the nature of their fall and the unfallen (if there really are any) take warning from it.

So how does one prevent self-deception or, where it has taken root, become undeceived? How does one see truth where one has for so long been insisting on fallacy?

The key problem with self-deception is the "self" part. We are so close to ourselves that we can't recognize when we're doing it. The self-deceived person believes everything is all right, that they aren't drowning. *It's just a bump in the road; it'll pass.* The idea that they should go ask someone else to check their perceptions is out of bounds by definition. The self-deceived are

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omnipotent and omniscient. If you think you're in need of help, then you're not doing it right.

Self-deception is simply not preventable or correctable by yourself. You need another set of eyes with which to see yourself. This means the only solution is to spend time building good, close relationships with people who are willing to really look at you and tell you what they see.

One of the pastors I respect most in this world has an almost identical story to mine—encountering a person in need, getting too close, texting constantly, heading toward an affair with both feet, just a matter of time. Then one day a friend noticed he'd texted his Lorelai twice just during their conversation. "Jason, what's up with that?" said the friend.

"Nothing."

But the friend knew Jason well enough to know the difference between nothing and *nothing*. The truth was forced out before anything really bad happened. Elders got involved. He was rescued and is still a pastor today in a flourishing church community. What saved him? Another set of

eyes. A friend saw, recognized what wasn't normal, and got in his face.

That's how it's *supposed* to work. But such defenses have to be built during the good times. You must construct systems of formal and informal accountability when you don't think you really need them. It may be true that you don't need them *yet*, but you will later. Make it a discipline to set up such defenses as a matter of course, independent of what you feel you need, regardless of how strong, healthy, capable, holy, or in control you think you are.

It's not sufficient to have merely concerned bystanders or colleagues. That's what I had. Our church counselor—God bless her—did the best she could, but she wasn't in the right position for it to work. She either believed me because she didn't know me well enough or, disbelieving me, she didn't know how to push upstream against a popular teaching pastor. I wasn't her boss; we had a mutual boss, but high “approval ratings” made anything I said credible.

No, what I'm talking about is a close friend, a spiritual director, a counselor, a mentor, someone who really knows you and your particular brand of BS when they smell it. Someone who won't accept a *nothing* or an *It's fine*. That's what I lacked. In the two years I'd been at that church, I had not cultivated even one relationship for the defense of my own soul. Is it any wonder I lost it?