



The Bellowing of Cain

by

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Sample Chapter

Note: This chapter comes from Section 2, “Surviving the Explosion: Perspectives for When It All Comes Apart,” which offers thoughts on what do to in the immediate aftermath of having blown up your life.

Chapter 12: Enter the Google— When Your Public Reputation Gets Shredded

The priest of a small highland parish had lived an austere and abstemious life. He fasted twice a week and seldom ate meat. For more than four decades he had been a model of restraint to his congregation and was regarded as a man of stoic and upright character. Then one night in pursuit of an errant member of his flock, he found himself in the local pub.

“Aw, Father, have a drink with me,” slurred the prodigal.

“No, my son, you must come with me. Your wife and children are—”

“Tell you what, Father. Have one wee drink with me, and I’ll come along peaceful as a lamb.”

So against his better judgment, the priest yielded and received his pint ... and then another. Unaccustomed to such spirits, the priest concluded with the evening dancing on a table with his congregant, singing a bawdy tune.

As the two men nursed their aching heads the next morning, the rake said, “Now, Father, I hope you’re not regretting our wee bit of fun. No harm done. We need never speak of it again.”

The priest groaned. “I could live with the indiscretion, if only the town crier would shut up about it.”

You get to pick your choices. You don’t get to pick your consequences. They will be what they will be, and no amount of raging, grieving, or bartering will change them. When my story went public in the most depressing ways, I was shocked by the surreal directions of the fallout. Suddenly strangers I met on the street thought they knew more about me than I did. And the hardest part was suspecting that all the horrid things they said about me might actually be true in some

way I couldn't see.

A month later I showed up for my appointment at the barbershop where I'd been getting my hair cut for several years, except this time Judy met me at the door. "I'm sorry. I can't cut your hair."

I stood on the sidewalk with one eyebrow cocked.

"The management knows what you did, and they won't let any of the girls here cut your hair anymore."

To this day I don't know if that was the truth or if she just didn't want to cut my hair anymore and made up the story as cover. I don't blame her either way—the things the media said were as horrible as they were distorted. But that's the point. If you've made a choice that has blown up your life and public reputation, then what comes with that is a loss of control over your own story. You are no longer in a position to dictate what people think of you.

A moment's reflection will make clear this was always the case. We *never* have any real control over what people think of us. As Jacque Abbadie reminded us, it's either *some of the people* or *some of the time* but never both. No amount of suave, carefully managed PR, or selective social media splashing can defend your reputation against a single negative word from a source people trust more. And it seems nobody has any control over Google searches.

The only real change here is that your situation has become unavoidably clear to *you*. Anything that makes us more aware of our real circumstances is always in the end a friend, but what is ultimately for our good seldom *feels* good. Eating less sugar is ultimately for our good, but it's certainly less pleasurable than a dish of ice cream.

The real question is not how I rehabilitate my public image but what place will my public image have in the new person I must now become. How important will others' opinion of me be? My guess is that reputation will now have to play a much smaller role than it has heretofore. This may be one of those pieces of luggage you must leave behind. And the reason is a very simple one.

If you make restoring your public image the thing you aim at, you will cut corners to get there, and while you may fool some of the people some of the time, you won't really be the person you're trying to present. You will only be a marketed representation of a fictitious self.

If, on the other hand, you allow concern over your public image to die, you will then be in a position to look deep within and actually change tiny bits of your soul. You have the opportunity to not *appear* different but to actually *become* different. I admit this is the harder journey. It takes longer, and the outcome is much less predictable.

If you attempt it, you will discover that you're suddenly open to being changed in directions you did not anticipate and may not like. Things about yourself you didn't know were even deficient will suddenly find themselves in the crosshairs. God, family, friends—even your enemies—will become a source of information about your core person. You will no longer be able to glide over small faults in your efforts to hide your great ones.

Don't misunderstand. This new person you will become is not a repudiation of the person you were. I still like the person I was before my trouble. In some ways I liked him better. He was more conscientious, more dedicated, more visionary, and had more energy and drive. In so many ways he was a more interesting person than the one I've become. But he was also very troubled. He was consumed with his image, destiny, and legacy. He spent far too much of his energy being afraid.

How Shall We Then Live? Digging Down

A few summers back, the county tore up the main road at the end of our street. They ripped off the blacktop, and instead of just laying down new asphalt and fixing the thing that was bothering us—a cracked-up road—they dug down a dozen feet with backhoes and made a royal mess of the whole highway.

Civil engineers apparently know things we, mere drivers, do not. Just putting down new blacktop would not fix what was really wrong—the fact that storm water had no place to go. So they engaged in the messier, deeper, more time-consuming labor of digging down and replacing the old and cracked drainage tiles. This is much less attractive work than just laying new road, and no driver would ever think to demand it. But it is the more important work, and it can be done only while the road is torn up.

You and I were the same way—we couldn't reach the deep things that needed fixing till the surface concerns had been torn away—painfully. Having your image publicly shredded is horrible, and no one would choose it, but it has now presented you with an opportunity. Are you going to just lay new road over the old one, or are you going to take the opportunity, when the road is already torn up, to dig down and fix the deeper issues? You may never get another chance to dredge so deeply, and you'll never be more aware of the need than now.

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Just because your friends have disappeared, your career has dried up, and your stylist won't cut your hair, it's not the end. It's the beginning. Time for a counselor, life coach, or spiritual director. Time to do some digging. There's always another career, friend, or hair stylist but only one you. Start putting the effort where it's most needed, and those other, more visible issues will come right later.

And if you're wondering whether I was ever able to get my hair cut—yes, I was. I booked an appointment under my pen name—Gordon Greenhill—at another location of the same company and ended up with Becky, who's been cutting my hair ever since and doesn't care about my backstory. Incidentally, she's far better than Judy ever was. So keep that in mind. Maintaining a good public reputation may be hard, but finding a good reliable haircut ... well, that's nearly impossible. I suppose the lesson is this: Small blessings can grow on the back of big hairy tragedies.