

I WILL NOT BE BROKEN



5 Steps to Overcoming a Life Crisis

JERRY WHITE

"Jerry White brings his insight and experience to bear expertly for those facing life's unexpected challenges. He embodies the spirit of survivorship."

—Lance Armstrong, 7-time Tour de France winner, author of *Every Second Counts*

Please enjoy Chapter 3 of *I Will Not Be Broken: Choose Life* on us as a way of introducing you to this new book by author and survivor Jerry White and his new organization, [Survivor Corps](#). Feel free to share it with your friends, family, and readers. Be our guest.

About *I Will Not Be Broken*

The loss of a loved one, a painful divorce, or a serious physical injury---we must all, at one point, face tragedy---unavoidable moments that divide our lives into “before” and “after.” How do we muscle our way through tough times and emerge stronger, wiser---even grateful for our struggle? In 1984, author Jerry White lost his leg---and almost his life---in a landmine accident. He has endured the pain of loss and the challenge of rebuilding. As cofounder of Survivors Corps, White has interviewed thousands of victims of tragedy. With this book, he shares what he has learned.

White outlines a very specific five-step program to coping with disaster; to achieving strength and hope; and to turning tragedy into triumph. In their own words, his survivor friends and colleagues share their stories. It's a group that includes the well known, like Lance Armstrong, Nelson Mandela, and the late Princess Diana, and also everyday survivors. Through their stories and the author's words, the book takes readers step-by-step through the process of not only surviving tragedy and victimhood, but going on to thrive.

Step 1:**FACE FACTS**

This terrible thing has happened. It can't be changed. So, *now* what? There's little point wishing you hadn't gotten into that car, or gotten the tumor, or been fired from that job. We must face some brutal facts of the here and now. It's normal to question, but you will never get a satisfactory answer, and you'll only waste time. The past is the past, and facts are facts.

During my time recovering from my landmine injuries, there was not a lot of coddling. Ever. The Israelis were so practical it hurt. A nurse wheeled me into a new room, showed me my bed and hospital fatigues, and pointed to where to get lunch. *The dining hall? With the other inmates?* The attitude there was very *suck it up; fend for yourself*. It wasn't exactly a psych ward, but, to small-town me, it seemed like a scene from the movie *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

At first I definitely did not appreciate the "you do it" attitude. *Hello? Do you not see the bloody stump here, people?* I remember having to wheel myself down to the lunch hall. No more breakfast-in-bed hospital rooms. All of these people start introducing themselves, practicing their English in the most uncomfortable way. They're all missing

arms and legs, or eyes, or they're burned. I remember this older guy, in particular, who had been in the hospital for months going through rehab. He had a spanking new above-the-knee prosthesis, and he tells me: "Don't worry, you'll have your own fake leg one day." He then took off his shiny leg, proudly revealing a big hairy stump.

That was the first "stump" I remember meeting. I hated looking at it. I wasn't even mildly intrigued by the thought of seeing this man's robotic parts. I wasn't ready. Among the group, I felt terribly alone in this world of disfigurement. Nothing in twenty years had prepared me for this. But I stayed. And I did get used to stumps and burns and mangled bodies. And what I learned—viscerally—was that we are more than our bodies. We laughed and made jokes and snuck out of the hospital. These guys were my friends and they got me through. We got each other through.

The hospital gave me no choice but to Face Facts: I was now an amputee. I had nearly six months in rehab to face it and to get to know my own stump. This is my new body, deal with it. I came to appreciate my stump—it was conical and clean, with an eight-inch scar where my remnant leg is sewn shut. Every orthopedic surgeon who has seen it since says, "Nice one. I'd be proud to have done that." As stumps go, mine is great. Thank you, Dr. Steinbach (my surgeon).

They were six formative months. If the staff had been too sympathetic or pitying, I would probably have sunk into a funk. Instead, I was visited by other amputees long out of the hospital who basically told me, "You have a nose cold, get over it." And so, I did. Since my left leg had also been blown open, I couldn't rely on it for months. I had bone

fragments that still had to be plucked out and shrapnel that had to be removed—and then there were the skin grafts. These were the facts, and I had to face them every day.

It wasn't an easy thing. There were many setbacks—infections, a troublesome wound here and there, pressure sores. The military Israeli physical therapists kept me active. I was too proud to say I was nervous when they yanked the wheelchair from me for good. And, again, when they started whipping a heavy green medicine ball at me while I stood on one leg in front of the mirror. They worked me beyond exhaustion. They had a plan for me, and my job was to get with the program. The routine was an inflexible fact. I drew on willpower I didn't know I had.

When something bad happens, threatening our very being and way of life, we feel the need to get rid of it, to somehow dispense with the negative experience as quickly as possible. There's an urge to clean up and move on, erasing evidence of the trauma. I know rape survivors who shower repeatedly to wash away the violation. I know war-injured who drink to numb the memories. I know individuals in wheelchairs still praying to walk. This is natural. But, aging and illness and death remain the constants of the human experience. Best to look at them, acknowledge them, and find a way to live with them. As the author James Baldwin puts it, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

Emotions are facts too. But it is quite common to deny the initial experience. *This is not happening to me. I will wake up from this nightmare soon.* It is also quite common to feel the most intense range of emotions after a loss or crisis. Listen to survivors

across the world who have relayed to me in various languages the following sentiments to describe their reactions to loss:

Denial. *“This is no big deal.” “Everything is fine.” “I’ll just wake up and none of this will have really happened.”*

Revulsion. *“When I look at my body and think about what happened, I feel sick to my stomach.” “I am disgusting. No one will want to look at me again.”*

Fear and Anxiety. *“I won’t be able to support my family now.” “I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in a chair.” “What if I die?” “What if my spouse leaves me?”*

Guilt and Shame. *“Why is God punishing me?” “I must have done something to cause this.” “I feel so embarrassed I can’t tell anyone.”*

Anger and Resentment. *“Someone’s going to pay for this—it’s not my fault.” “Easy for them to say, they haven’t been through anything like this.” “What happened to me is WRONG!”*

Frustration and Helplessness. *“It takes me so long to do everything!” “Why*

don't people know how to help me?" "I cannot do anything now. I can't even dress myself anymore."

Depression and Hopelessness. *"Nothing matters anymore." "My family would be better off without me." "I don't want to do anything. I just want to sleep." "I can't stop crying."*

So, say it—whatever negative, self-pitying comments are rattling around inside your head. It is not helpful to pretend these feelings aren't real. It is best to deal with all of it neutrally, to lay them on the table as "facts." They need to be sorted through or they will reinforce each other in a spiral of despair. Denied or indulged in for too long, these emotions will plunge you into victimhood.

Everyone associated with an experience will have their own emotions and version of events. My mother, for example, says she lost a piece of her herself when I lost a limb. She kept asking to see and touch my wounds, as if to jolt her out of shock.

There is a numbness that sets in when you do not want to feel. I carried that with me to Israel. But nothing could shield me from the shock of entering your hospital room. My holding you as tight as I could. "Do you want to see my leg?" (Yes, my dear son, let me see your hurts... Ah, Jerry, the foot is not there. IT IS GONE!) I did not say that out loud... I wanted to see your other leg, and your face, and where the doctors took the skin

graft.

She had heard I'd lost a leg. But seeing the missing piece was entirely different, nothing under the sheet. Maybe she could disguise her shock, numb her pain, wish it all away somehow. It turns out that some denial or suppression of emotion can help in the immediacy of crisis as long as these short-term survival techniques aren't permitted to take hold. My mother says at first she couldn't fathom that she had given me two feet at birth, and now one was gone. It was devastating to her emotionally. So she had to give herself time to adjust, and this meant recognizing the fact of denial—the temptation to think this will all be over soon; we can make it better. One friend came to visit me in the hospital and actually said he believed my missing limb would grow back!

Self pity is another normal reaction to tragedy—a fact for us to face. *Why Me? I don't deserve this!* Self pity becomes dangerous if we don't recognize it for what it is—a natural human reaction to injury and injustice—and head it off at the pass. Emergencies trigger self-centeredness by necessity. Each of us must do what we can to survive, regardless of anyone else. But this self-involvement, when it extends well beyond the emergency phase, can turn into more destructive self-pity.

People need to nurse their wounds to some extent, and I don't blame them. I confess it took me almost two years until I could accept that my right leg was decidedly gone, that my stump and scars were permanent. I was never going to ski on two legs again. From now on I would have to hop or crawl to the bathroom at night.

For me, the key to preventing self pity was by outing it. I learned to note the moments when I started to take account of what I “deserved.” Emotions are as real as open wounds and as tough as old battle scars. I have come to see strong feelings such as self pity and anger as “things” to name and to face. Invite the emotion out in the open to gain perspective and understand its place in the scheme of things.

It’s one thing to feel sorry for ourselves. But when self pity grows, it turns into narcissism. Resentment of other’s blessings, particularly your friends and relatives—your own tribe—is a sure sign that self pity has taken hold, and that you are slipping into victimhood. It is common in *Twelve-Step* programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) for peers to allow only five minutes on the “pity pot.” If someone is carrying on at a meeting, someone normally will intervene with a rebuke. “Yeah, yeah, we’ve all been there. It’s time to move on and stop feeling so sorry for yourself. You’re time is up!” Spoken like a seasoned survivor who understands what’s at stake.

I think back to the big pains I’ve experienced: the minefield; my parents’ divorce; the suicide of a friend in rehab; the sudden death of others. I had to face the facts: “I will bleed to death if we don’t get out of here.” “My father and mother must live their own lives; it is not mine to fix.” “I was lucky to have known Phil even for the short time I did.” Wishing it all to go away is natural, but denial of facts is ultimately destructive.

My mother reflected on my accident years later.

When a tragedy happens to one you love, acceptance is not the first thing that happens in

your heart. Denial is. When it dawns on you that this situation is unfixable, the rage and the depression and despair walk hand in hand. Betrayal of “the Universe” or of “God” is the next line of defense, and then blaming. Blaming Israel for not cleaning up their minefields and of course blaming God for not caring for me, my family and, of course, Jerry. Self pity hangs around for a long time. Wanting to get pity for “all that I have suffered.” That goes on a long time. When acceptance comes, it is a great freedom, and for me it was helped by watching the recovery of you, Jerry. If your recovery had not happened and your attitude was different, it might have been different for me.

Acceptance is not just for your benefit but for your loved ones too. I think of several mothers and would-be mothers I know who have demonstrated remarkable capacity over the years to face facts. Why? There is generosity in coming to terms with personal pain so that it won't hurt others as well. Women often find resilience by committing to the welfare of others, not just themselves. Whether struggling with infertility, or stillbirth, or the death of an adult child, there are facts all around us—people who need and rely on us to be strong.

Carrie, a classmate from Michigan business school, has dreamed her whole life of having children. Now into her thirties, she is struggling with unexplained infertility. She is trying to come to grips with the “diagnosis”—not just to find her own peace, but also for the benefit of her marriage and her work life, running a family business.

I had my children's names picked out by the time I was a teenager. I even argued with my husband, prior to marrying, about the number of children we would have. I never dreamed I would have any trouble in the child-making department. After our wedding we decided to wait a few years so I could obtain my MBA without children in the mix. Today, the reality has set in. My husband and I have been trying to conceive for three years. We've been poked and prodded, questioned and analyzed, medicated and diet restricted. After years of tests we've been told we have "unexplainable infertility." Our tests are normal and we are healthy...yet something is not right. I have feelings of failure, sadness, and anger all wrapped in one.

But, I've resolved myself to accept this reality and have faith in the future. To cope with my situation I talk with friends, enmesh myself in activities and groups, pray, exercise, and consider my options. The beauty of life is that we have options and choices. We can either choose to look at the glass half empty or look at it as half full. We can live as a victim of circumstances or we can accept reality and take action to do something constructive with it. I have many gifts that I need to focus on rather than focusing on what I don't have. Maybe God has a different plan for me.

Carrie will insist that her own personal struggle doesn't rank "up there" as a trauma, per se, but it has been a big challenge for her. We all wrestle with the facts of our lives, big and small, in order to find meaning as we strive to keep hope alive. Without coming to grips with what is happening, no matter how disappointing, we can't re-think our circumstances and then make room for new possibilities. Trying to ignore the pain is

natural, even necessary at times, but avoidance can delay our ability to cope and move on.

Moving forward for the sake of the family is the unselfish goal of a mother I deeply admire. When she was six months pregnant, Elizabeth and her husband learned that their baby had a serious heart condition. Three months later the baby died in the womb, a few days before he was due to be born. At his birth, when she could finally see her first child, he was what the hospital termed “fetal wastage.”

Although the hospital staff was very supportive, putting me in a separate ward away from all the happy mothers and their new babies, it was difficult to know my child was in the morgue. I jumped at the chance the funeral parlor offered to have Joseph come to our home. I needed that time to know him and to feel like a mother. I needed to sit with him, to hold him, to show him the room we had decorated. I had to look at him, and to touch him to be able to come to terms with the fact that he was dead. Then I could accept it. I could dress him in the clothes friends had sent with so much love and say goodbye. Then I could move forward.

There is no right way to grieve. Elizabeth did what she needed to do. And it opened the way for a future with a family. Within a few years, Elizabeth had celebrated the arrivals of a healthy son and then twin daughters.

For parents, there is nothing more painful than the death of their child. On January 3, 2006, a talented young musician, Omri, was hit by an unlicensed drunk driver near his

apartment in Brooklyn. His mother Irit flew from Tel Aviv, and, immediately upon arrival at the hospital, showed her strength as a mother-survivor. She wanted all the facts. The police reports, Omri's friends' reconstruction of the accident. Exactly what had happened to her son? Who was with him? What was the expression on his face right before the car suddenly struck him?—seemingly mundane things that helped her understand exactly what had happened. I stayed with Irit at the hospital as she spent hours with her son while he was brain dead but on life support, as the doctors prepared for his organs to be donated. Each time she stroked his foot, his toes would curl or his leg would twitch. *Was he still alive?*

Again and again, Irit had to pull aside the nurse or “Organ Donor Network Coordinator” to ask whether they were sure Omri was clinically dead. How did they know? *Is this nightmare real? In the morning, will I really have to give doctors permission to take out my son's heart?* I could only hold her hand as she went through this agonizing process of brutally facing the facts. After hourly consultations with her husband Avi back in Israel, discussing the facts as they became available, Omri's parents made the decision. Their son was technically dead—being kept alive by machines. It was time to release him and honor her son's wishes that his organs live on to help others.

How do mothers do it? Is it an ingrained habit of focusing on the needs of others first? The way Irit navigated the Victims Unit at Bellevue Hospital, even with English as her second language, was remarkable. She was acutely focused on what her son required, even lying there on a respirator. She told me,

Jerry, I am a very practical person. I knew from the first phone call that Omri was dead in the brain and wouldn't recover. I'm here to do the hardest thing. I know Omri wouldn't want to live this way. This is not about me as a mother. It's about him. He's my son, and I will do the right thing for him, just like I always have since the day he was born.

One rarely sees such clear-headed analysis at the moment of shock. Usually, people dissolve in a puddle of emotion or retreat into denial or escape. We often hear of the three classic human responses to threat—fright, flight, or fight. Irit rationally avoided all three. Instead, she stared at the facts before her, leaned on her husband, family and friends, and then took responsibility for what needed to be done.

Facing facts is one way we are able to break through denial, and allow grief to do its work. We must repeat the facts to ourselves, letting them sink in. That's one of the reasons we Irish Catholics have a tradition of open-casket wakes. Though it makes the uninitiated cringe, there is nothing quite like a corpse to eliminate denial. During the funerals of my grandparents, great aunts, uncles, and later, my own father, it was important for me personally to see the corpse. It's not a tradition for everyone, mind you, just helpful for some of us who, when faced with tragic news, need to see it to believe it.

After the worst happens, the two most common psychological responses are known as *intrusion* and *avoidance*. Intrusion involves suddenly reliving a traumatic experience,

and can include nightmares and flashbacks. It's as if the experience is saying, "I am not going away until you face me." The facts intrude inconveniently, whether we want them to or not. We are forced to deal with an intrusive experience, to sort through our new reality and perceptions of the world.

Upon my return home from the hospital in Israel, I struggled to make sense of my new environment. The first time I walked across my backyard and through the woods to a neighbor's house, I started to sweat. I felt acute spikes of anxiety, and my heart raced. I didn't want to listen to the warnings in my head: *This is how it happens, Jerry. A sunny day. Blue sky. Watch your step. Life explodes.* I had to coach my brain to relax and recalculate what was a real threat and what wasn't. *This is Massachusetts, Jerry, there are no landmines here.* Even something as simple as standing at an intersection in Boston, waiting to cross the street, would trigger anxiety. *You could lose your balance, any second. Stumble. Get hit by a bus.* I'm not sure any of my friends noticed, but for months I would always stand a few feet back from the curb, letting others cross the street ahead of me.

David, who helped carry me out of the minefield, also experienced heightened stress: "For weeks my legs would shake when I walked on grass. That event left a distrust of something good and beautiful due to the association it now had with man's evil desire to hurt and kill another." Now married, a father and doctor in Corpus Christi, Texas, David describes something inside that forces him to focus, in the midst of a life-and-death crisis.

You once told me you thought I had yelled at you in the minefield. I really don't recall that, and am a little shocked, as I'm sure you were at the time. Oddly enough, a few years earlier, I do remember yelling at my father as he lay dying when he and I were alone at home and he had a heart attack. His breathing was agonal and his skin cyanotic as he lay near death. I was in high school and had had no medical or first aid training. After calling the operator to alert an ambulance (pre-911), I hovered over my father's body and told him I thought he was tougher than that and could hang on until help arrived. I swear JFK's story of PT-109 came to mind during that instant when he challenged his remaining crew to survive as they floated, waiting for rescue after their boat sank. That's a strange recollection; but today when shit hits the fan in the ER or I find myself in a critical situation with a person who is in a life or death dilemma, I often feel a surge of anger which sharpens my focus and brings my mind and body to bear totally on the situation.

Recent studies in neuroscience indicate there is a rush of adrenaline that gets triggered by an emergency with acute stress. A boost in testosterone, in both men and women, helps an individual focus better under extreme pressure. This clear focus on the facts of danger can be key to our survival.

Talking through what has happened also helps integrate the experience into a life perspective. One thing I have learned to help survivors decompress is to let them talk about it, in their own words, in their own way. Sometimes this needs to happen over and

over. Repetition is part of accepting and assimilating facts, trying to get the memory straight. The Vietnam veterans who did not suffer Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) were generally the ones who stayed very connected to family and friends and did not shy away from bearing witness to their battlefield experiences, often repeating the stories in detail. They weren't afraid to face facts.

That's why when working with war victims, I try to create opportunities for individuals to recount their experiences. I always look for the survivor narrative behind the victim story. In other words, I don't focus so much on the plotline and gory details of victimization. Instead, I ask what made it possible for this person to survive? Where did they find their strength? How on earth did they endure? Searching for the resilience factors helps bring out the inner survivor, rather than just inviting a victim's tale of woe. Avoidance—the repression of painful memories—is the other coping device we use in the face of disaster. We deploy the following tricks to help us look away from the facts:

- actively avoiding related thoughts and memories
- forgetting important aspects of what happened
- numbing ourselves, shutting down emotionally
- detaching emotionally from our environment.

Sally was 28 years old with one child and pregnant with another when she had a terrible car accident in 1978 in Australia. After her sixth surgery, she woke up heavily sedated

to bad news: she had not only lost her leg, she had miscarried. Sally credits her “stubbornness” for keeping her alive and fighting.

When I found out that my leg would have to be amputated, I felt nothing really, probably because of all the drugs. I remember feeling sorry for family and friends because they were so angry and upset. But I really felt nothing. As time went on, and operation after operation continued, I became annoyed. Annoyed that my life had changed, annoyed that part of my body had gone. I used to dream that one day soon it would grow back.

I decided from the start that I wouldn't participate in the hospital therapy, exercises, and mental help. I wanted to do it all myself, by myself—stubbornness! For about eighteen months I was stuck in a wheelchair, (apparently never to be able to walk again, on the left leg that was so badly injured) and I needed my left leg to help me get up and do most of the work for the right leg, that was still in the process of being operated on, so no artificial limb could be fitted for a while. At this stage, I couldn't even stand the pain of having the weight of a bed sheet on my ankle, so putting any weight at all on it was unthinkable.

One day at lunchtime, I was watching a TV show, where a guest was talking about positive thinking, saying that if you really wanted to do something, then set your mind on it now, and just do it. Well, I decided then and there, that I would stand on my left foot, and never let it give up, and I did!

Sally's denial and avoidance came to an end because of a moment watching a TV show.

Sometimes the moment of truth takes much longer. This was the case for my Iraqi friend, Zainab. It took years for her to put an end to her denial and disassociation. She grew up in Iraq as the daughter of Saddam Hussein's pilot. Her family lived close to the inner circle of power in the shadows of dictatorship. Zainab says she spent years suppressing the facts of her life. But the more she tried to move on from the past, the more it seemed to cling to her. When she was twenty, she left Baghdad to marry a thirty-three-year-old Iraqi living in the United States, only to suffer at the hands of an abusive husband she later divorced.

Since childhood, Zainab's mother had always told her to "erase from your memory" anything too scary. Like the kidnapping and killing of others they knew in Saddam's employ. So Zainab only faced her facts a little at a time, as the pressure of hiding her history caused her to break down and reveal things she had never admitted to herself. Only after Saddam Hussein was captured in 2003, did the dam finally break. Zainab writes in her memoir:

I wanted to make myself whole again. I wanted to come clean. I wanted to do my job without feeling like a hypocrite. But I had been afraid for so long I didn't know how to get rid of the layers of fear inside me. Because I had survived by hiding my past, even from myself, I had never really pieced together the story of my own life. Which of the things that had happened to me were causes, and which were the effects?¹

¹ Salbi, Zainab and Laurie Buckland, *Between Two Worlds – Escape from Tyranny: Growing Up in the Shadow of Saddam* (New York: Penguin 2005), 5.

Zainab worked hard to forge a successful life in America, but she couldn't fully heal until she broke her silence and stopped denying her past. Finally, she experienced a nervous breakdown, telling a female paramedic, "Nothing is wrong. Everything is going right in my life. I just don't know how to stop crying."² Zainab tells me that writing about her experiences became a complete catharsis, "It felt like the heavy, dark stone in my chest finally passed through me; it's gone now," she says, "Taking the time to piece together my personal story and my family's history has given me new energy" to face the future with optimism and strength.

Trauma is fundamentally about a loss of control and loss of connection. Life has betrayed us. Facing the loss of our life as we once knew it does not take place without some initial denial and faltering steps.

Twenty-six year old Libby was out of town for a wedding when she learned Hurricane Katrina was bearing down on her home in New Orleans. She didn't think too much of it in the moment, because there were hurricane scares nearly every year in New Orleans, and the deadliest storms tended to sweep to the east at the last minute. The hurricane hit on August 29.

I returned to New Orleans just before Halloween. I half expected to see ghosts everywhere... Driving into the city was otherworldly. I arrived at night. There were no lights on in the streets, even the interstate ramps, and the scene illuminated by my

² Salbi, Zainab and Laurie Buckland, *Between Two Worlds – Escape from Tyranny: Growing Up in the Shadow of Saddam* (New York: Penguin 2005), 231.

headlights was grim and scary. There were collapsed buildings and abandoned cars heaped all over, and piles of stuff that was indistinguishable and that you were afraid to look at for long enough to figure out what it was. Everything had a layer of sediment, like the city had been destroyed decades ago and abandoned.

Clearing out my apartment was a process of slowly amputating parts of my life that were no longer viable. My appearance, my choice of music and movies, my whole inner world became rather dark during those weeks, but not out of despair. It was more about touching the darker side of life, accepting it and then integrating it. If you are scared of the things that go bump in the night, you can either run from them, or you can become a thing that goes bump in the night yourself.

Libby felt the darkness of those days, but made a plan to leave the city she loved. She relocated to Washington, DC, and found a new job. She knew enough about herself to seek meaningful work, with a survivor mission. There was no going back, only forward. Facing the facts of our situation, letting in the pain, is never easy. But it is necessary. One of my college roommates, Adam, describes how he and his family dealt with the shock of his sixteen-year-old brother's cancer diagnosis:

I got a phone call from my parents giving me the news, and asking me to leave work immediately and come downtown. Peter was going in for surgery right away. I had to stop at the house and pick up items for him—clothes, toiletries, etc. I was in shock more than anything. I just couldn't believe it or get any kind of emotional handle on it. I

remember saying to my parents, “This can't be happening to us. This happens to other people.” It was surreal going through these very practical steps, driving downtown, picking up clothes, etc. I was fine on the surface, but in a disconnected state of mind.

My reaction was strange, in retrospect. I never became upset or cried, but I remember feeling agitated much of the time, and I had a persistent pain in my chest right beneath my breast-bone... Then about two weeks after the surgery, during an argument with my parents, I “broke” and the proverbial floodgates opened.

I remember staggering around the house from room to room, sobbing uncontrollably, writhing in absolute agony on a couch, a chair, a bed. I don't know what the hell I was doing, but it just went on and on and on. At some point it stopped, and I noticed that the pain in my chest was gone. I had finally let myself feel the enormity of my fear and grief, and I remember a kind of lightness set in afterwards... the physical pain was released.

Cancer and other life-threatening illnesses are a crisis for the entire family, not just the patient. Intense and tumultuous emotions are bound to trigger physical reactions, from stomach pain to insomnia and loss of appetite. Our bodies will set off their own alarms, as in Adam's case, letting him know he needed to vent. The mind-body connection is undeniable.

A colleague who I worked with for years, Karen, has battled cancer on and off since 1994. But she learned very early to discern the difference between facts and possibilities. She has been through the rollercoaster of testing and guesswork. With the

support of her husband, Vic, and close friends, Karen has made literally hundreds of visits to hospitals, doctors, and mind-body healing specialists.

For me, I have to say the key was and continues to be just knowing it is possible to survive. When I was first diagnosed I didn't ask what my prognosis was. I didn't want to know. I did want to know if it was possible to live. They said it was. Then I wanted to know if it was possible to live a long time. They said it was. They would try to follow that up with statistics about how likely it would be to survive, and I would generally cut them off. All I needed to know was that it was possible. It wasn't that I didn't want to face facts. To me, a prognosis is not a fact. The way I saw it, nobody knew for sure what was going to happen, and as long as it was possible that I would live, I preferred to think that would be the case. It was funny to me that they wanted to manage expectations and not give you false hope, but they weren't afraid to give you false despair! That doesn't mean I wanted them to lie and tell me it was possible if it wasn't. I just wanted to know if it was possible.

When the cancer came back, it was six months after Vic and I got married, and just shy of the three-year period when the doctor says, "I think you are going to be fine."

This time the tumor was inoperable, between my heart and my lungs. I was pretty scared because this time I didn't think it was possible to survive. I went to Johns Hopkins for a second opinion about treating the recurrence. After the consult was over and I was getting ready to leave, the doctor said, "Karen, you know you are not dying now, right?" That changed everything! He said while I could not be cured, it was

possible to live with the disease for a long time. I walked out the door with two things: I am not dying now, and it is possible I will live a long time.

To me, Karen is an example of thriving, not just surviving. Her optimism, warmth, and determination are engines for life. After a series of alternative therapies—mind-body treatments, visualization exercises, acupuncture—not to mention more radiation and surgery, Karen now appears cancer-free. She tells me, with a smile, that she rarely gets a cold.

How can we use the facts that confront us with unpleasant truth to help us survive catastrophe? Facing facts is so hard because it demands that we come to grips with our worst fears. It means admitting what we really think about disability, deformity and death—all scary stuff. Most of us would prefer to look away and carry on our merry way without thinking about these things. But without a closer look in the mirror, examining the wrinkles of our traumatized life, we can't make sound decisions, and then proceed to change and grow.

I met Nitin nearly ten years ago after he had completed his master's degree in Pittsburgh and launched his humanitarian career. It wasn't too long after his own before-and-after moment, January 18, 1997. He was settling into his new work as an aid worker in Rwanda when his team was held hostage and shot by insurgents. Three of his colleagues were killed in that attack. Nitin, the sole survivor, lost his leg, which had to

be amputated above the knee to save his life.

One of the hardest things I have had to do is to look at myself in the mirror and accept myself as being different than I used to be. I had to give up how I saw myself, be open to how others saw me, and willing to reach out for help with ordinary activities like changing a light bulb. I had to learn to be okay with who I was.

It wasn't my fault I got shot. But I had to face the fact that others wouldn't necessarily take care of me. Honestly, I'd much rather have someone else deal with the mess of insurance, co-payments, and all the paperwork and telephone calls that come with illness or disability. Unfortunately, I didn't see anybody else jumping up to deal with it, and so I had to step up to the plate. It wasn't just with insurance, it's with all facets of my life. If I don't aggressively attack my problems, they just get exacerbated until they're a mess.

Nitin moved from facing his worst fears to laughing about them:

My worst fear in life was losing a body part. Then it came true, and it wasn't so bad. Learning to walk again was my next worst fear. And then that wasn't so bad. Soon, I was dancing. In fact, I was in a bhangra troupe that did a performance at the French Embassy. Since I couldn't do all the moves the others could, we decided that two of the other guys would grab me and do this twirl, where my legs were lifted off the ground because of centrifugal force. During the dress rehearsal, as we were getting into

position, I felt my prosthesis give. It started to fall off. There I was spinning in the air, and my leg is getting looser. All of a sudden, it went flying off into the audience – just as the French Ambassador walked in. The director had a fit. The audience had a shock, and it was all I could do to prevent myself from laughing hysterically. I found when I faced my fears, I had the courage to laugh, and life wasn't so bad.

Facing fears, facing facts—the truth allows us to gain perspective. Maybe it's not as bad as we thought? Maybe we in fact can cope with this nightmare. Nitin points to a primary tenet of Buddhism and Hinduism: suffering in this life is universal and inevitable, but it is not an injustice. It is simply a lesson to help us reconfigure balance, overcome our weaknesses, and proceed to change and growth. Sometimes our “suffering results from our attachments to things and ideas, more than from the loss itself. Nitin had to let go of how he thought things would be, and examine how they really are. This is also what Libby had to do after becoming a “Katrina refugee.” She notes, “Life is not inherently less good because I no longer live in New Orleans after Katrina. My suffering comes from my attachment to the way I remember the city, and the ‘me’ I was in that life and thought I would always be.”

In my own case, I was not rendered permanently unhappy when I lost my leg. I had lived with both legs for twenty years. Initially, I couldn't fathom missing one. It didn't sink in for some time that this was the ‘new’ me—a one-legged hunk of burning love.

Before we can make the most of life after a drastic change, physical or otherwise, we must let go of the attachment to our old self-concept, and to a future we have banked on.

None of it is permanent. We must face our disappointment and then be willing to redefine these things. It's a continual process. Lama Surya Das, a popular spiritual teacher in the Tibetan Buddhist order, writes:

The first step in handling suffering is to look at our losses realistically. Put aside all illusions and delusions about what could have been or should have been. Then squarely face the grief and the pain. Acknowledge your tears and unhappiness. Know what you are experiencing. This is the opposite of denial. Feel it, examine it, and reflect upon it. Sense directly in the present moment how it affects you in your body and your mind.¹

I certainly recommend this sensory approach to facing facts. But it's damn hard to do. Self-deception is a clever tool in the service of victimhood, and it conspires to keep us from properly seeing ourselves as we are, thereby interfering with what we need to do to mend our brokenness. Never underestimate the power of self-deception. But equally powerful is the truth that will set you free.

Great teachers and prophets admonish us to get real with ourselves, no matter how humiliating the facts. We are imperfect, and no matter how hard we try, we cannot fully control our lives. None of us will get very far without first examining our circumstances, relationships, and feelings. We will need to be ruthless in our self-assessment.

And when the time comes for us to decide how to respond to our new reality, will we get

¹ Surya Das, *Letting Go of the Person You Used to Be: Lessons on Change, Loss and Spiritual Transformation* (New York: Broadway, 2003), 10-11.

busy living or get busy dying? If we don't choose death, we must choose life.

PUBLICATION DATE
May 1, 2008

Contact: John Karle
(646) 307-5546
john.karle@stmartins.com

I WILL NOT BE BROKEN

5 Steps to Overcoming a Life Crisis

JERRY WHITE

“In *I Will Not Be Broken*, Jerry White brings his insight and experience to bear expertly for those facing life's unexpected challenges. He embodies the spirit of survivorship.”

—Lance Armstrong

“[White’s] courageous personal experience is a beacon for all who are searching to recover and reclaim life.”

—Her Majesty Queen Noor of Jordan, bestselling author of *Leap of Faith*

“An excellent guide to navigating and overcoming the traumas we face in our lives.”

—Deepak Chopra, author of *Buddha: A Story of Enlightenment*

“Offers wise, practical, and inspiring steps to come back from life’s worst setbacks.”

—Daniel Goleman, author of *Social Intelligence*

From a co-recipient of the **Nobel Prize for Peace** and founder of [Survivor Corps](#) comes an astoundingly effective guide to recreating a happy and fulfilling life after catastrophe strikes—a book that Bob and Lee Woodruff call “a road map for the individual and their family to re-enter the land of the living.” In **I WILL NOT BE BROKEN**, Jerry White reframes the question “why do bad things happen to good people?” and asks, *given that bad things do happen, how do people absorb the blows and move through them?*

Tragedy happens to everyone. Whether it’s the loss of a loved one, a painful divorce, or a serious injury, we all face unavoidable moments that divide our lives into “before” and “after.” These events take a heavy toll on everyone, but there are those who have muscled their way through tough times and emerged stronger, wiser—even grateful for their struggle. Jerry White is one such example. In 1984, he lost his leg—and almost his life—in a tragic accident, and has personally endured the pain of loss and the challenge of rebuilding.

As cofounder of Survivor Corps, White has connected with thousands of victims of tragedy, and in **I WILL NOT BE BROKEN**, he shares their collective wisdom, which he distills into an effective five-step program for turning tragedy into triumph:

- **Face facts**
- **Choose life**
- **Reach out**
- **Get moving**
- **Give back**

In their own words, his fellow survivors share their stories—a group that includes the well known like Lance Armstrong, Elie Wiesel, and the late Princess Diana, but also everyday people including soldiers and veterans of the military. With compassion, White takes readers through the process of not only enduring tragedy and victimhood, but going on to thrive.

#

JERRY WHITE is a global survivor activist who has dedicated his life to helping victims of violent conflict. While camping in Northern Israel in 1984, he stepped on a landmine, and he spent nearly six months in Israeli hospitals learning to walk on an artificial leg. Since then, he has become a recognized leader of the historic International Campaign to Ban Landmines, co-recipient of the 1997 Nobel Prize for Peace; and a cofounder of Survivor Corps. He has testified before the US Congress and the United Nations and appeared in hundreds of media interviews and profiles.

TO REQUEST ADDITIONAL REVIEW COPIES AND/OR AN INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR,

PLEASE CONTACT:

John Karle, Associate Director of Publicity
(646) 307-5546/ john.karle@stmartins.com

**I WILL NOT BE BROKEN: 5 Steps to
Overcoming a Life Crisis
By Jerry White
May 1, 2008
\$22.95
0-312-36895-X**



Jerry White is a recognized leader of the historic International Campaign to Ban Landmines, co-recipient of the Nobel Prize for Peace; as well as co-founder of [Survivor Corps](#). Jerry White lives in Maryland and Malta with his wife Kelly and four kids.

For Press Inquiries:

Elizabeth Miner
eminer@landminesurvivors.org
202-250-3929
2100 M St. NW Suite 302,
Washington, DC 20037

For more information about *I Will Not Be Broken*, visit: iwillnotbebroken.smnr.us

For more information about Survivor Corps, visit: survivorcorps.smnr.us

To purchase this book click [here](#)



About Survivor Corps

Around the globe, people are inflicting harm on one another on an alarming scale with alarming ease. There were approximately 250 wars throughout the 20th century. Today, there are more than 39 conflicts raging in the world –from armed conflicts in Latin America to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to genocide in Darfur.

More than 35 million people have been displaced from these conflicts—innocent people who have been robbed of their dignity, their homes and their livelihoods. With no hope or tools to rise above their circumstances, far too many victims lash out, seeking revenge for their plight and perpetuating the cycle of violence and suffering. Something has to be done to break this downward spiral.

Survivor Corps operates under the credo that no one is better equipped to change the world than those who have been most scarred by what’s wrong with it. There is a way to break the cycle of violence, and it begins with showing survivors a new, more hopeful way forward.

What is the Survivor Corps philosophy? No one is better equipped to change the world than those most scarred by what’s wrong with it.

Whom does Survivor Corps serve? We serve people who have been injured by global conflict, primarily through training and support of the organizations that serve conflict survivors at the local level.

Where does Survivor Corps work? Wherever communities are experiencing or recovering from conflict – currently in over 50 countries.

Why should I support Survivor Corps? Survivor Corps (formerly Landmine Survivors Network) has a ten-year track record of results, improving health, creating economic opportunity, and changing laws & policies for survivors of conflict.

How does Survivor Corp work? We work across the spectrum of issues and organizations that affect the lives of survivors.

Can Survivor Corps really solve this problem? Yes. We believe that by showing survivors a new, more hopeful way forward, we can help break the cycle of violence.

Survivor Corps provides the tools and support survivors need to rise above their injuries and give back to their communities. Learn more at www.survivorcorps.org.