

From Rage

To Redemption



The personal testimony of Tawanda Braden

Acknowledgements

First, I thank God for the gift of salvation and His marvelous grace that He has bestowed on me

Thank you Pastors' John & Judy for taking me into your home and for the unconditional love you have shown me.

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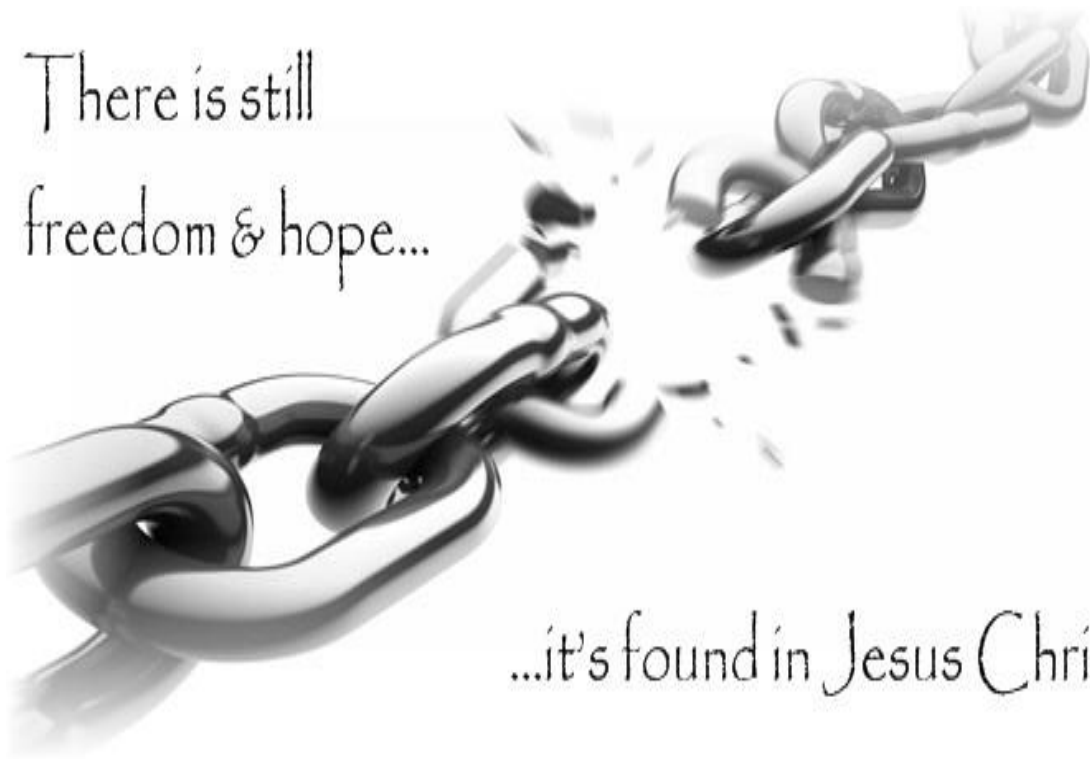
Connie for believing I could get better

My family, for putting up with me through the years

My church family, for loving and accepting me

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There is still
freedom & hope...



...it's found in Jesus Christ!

He brought them out of darkness and the
shadow of death, and broke their chains in pieces.

Psalms 107:14

First years--nightmare of instability and abuse

I grew up in Wichita, Kansas, the seventh child out of 10. Having a large family seemed to be more than my mom and dad could handle. My dad was an alcoholic, but somehow he managed to work while my mom stayed home with us kids.

The early years of my life were like a whirlwind. We moved from place to place, never settling anywhere for any length of time. When I was six, my parents joined a church in Arkansas City, Kansas, where we were living at the time. My dad continued drinking and loved the night life even though he played a role at church on Sundays. Words cannot describe the fear and horror I felt as I watched the violence and abuse my mom had to endure at the hands of my dad and, later on, other men.

My dad and the pastor's wife eventually fell in love and left their families to be with each other. In a short time the enemy came in and completely devoured the two families. We stayed with dad until his new wife gave him an ultimatum--the kids or me—and he chose her. Because my dad had kept our mom from seeing us, she was now out of the picture.

From this point on, life was one nightmare after another. Our lives were turned upside down as my dad passed us from one person to another, often leaving us with people we did not even know. During this time, I began to be physically and sexually abused, something that would continue over the years at the hands of many. Even today, I wouldn't want to share details, because it would be too humiliating. Back then you never spoke of abuse because you would be thought of as a liar or a troublemaker looking for attention. I suffered in silence as inwardly I developed an anger and hatred that would later control my life.

A godly Grandma, a good year

My parents' divorce and my dad's continual drinking eventually led to the five younger siblings becoming wards of the state. While awaiting permanent placement, three of us younger girls were temporarily placed in the home of a devout Christian woman. By now, I was an extremely angry and disturbed child. But Grandma, as we called her, was a praying woman! Every night she would sit me on the floor beside her and pray over me until I fell asleep. This seemed to be the only thing that would calm me. I later found out that she never gave up praying for me. I believe that is why I am able to share this testimony today. That year spent with "Grandma" would prove to be the only happy year of my childhood.



The nightmare resumes

When I was nine, a distant relative of my dad's agreed to take the five of us. The state agreed, and we were given permanent placement with them. Life in this new home was far from trouble-free. Over the next six years I would suffer through more abuse than I wish to talk about. The family owned a construction business, and I did not lack clothes, things or food. But none of this made up for the loss of my parents.

In this home, we suddenly went from very little discipline to very strict discipline. We were children that were to be seen and not heard. There was no family talk at dinner; we were required to eat and sit there silently until we were excused from the table. We soon began to feel that we were only wanted for the work we could produce.

My foster dad hated to waste anything. He saved old bricks from buildings he tore down, wood, nails and anything else that could possibly be used in his business. It was our job to clean the bricks, pull and straighten nails, and oil the foundation forms he used in his business. Other times he kept us busy cleaning and painting his rentals. In the summer, we worked every day from morning until night. During the school year we came home, went straight to work, and worked until dark. If the required work wasn't completed, there were severe consequences.

All of this began to take its toll on me. My grades went down because I could no longer concentrate or function in school. I would sit night after night at the dining room table trying to do my schoolwork, getting my ears yanked or my hair pulled because I couldn't get it right. Life and everything about it was out of my control and under someone else's. I had no voice. What I thought or felt did not matter. As a result, my anger grew and grew until I erupted in violence. When I acted out at school I was taken to a back room where my teacher would sexually abuse me. Who would believe me if I told? I was just a troublemaker and a brat.

When I was 10 I began hitting myself which led to me continually cutting and burning my arms and legs. As strange as it sounds, it brought a temporary release from some of the pain and rage I felt within.

But I determined that if I had to suffer, others were going to suffer with me regardless of the consequences. I became very cruel to younger children. I fought anyone who dared to take me on, and I bullied those who thought they were better than me. I destroyed property. I was so full of hatred and anger that I would kill every neighborhood animal I could get my hands on. All I really wanted was to feel loved and heard. I wanted a place where I could belong, but my anger was so out of control that it just got me into more and more trouble. Other kids were afraid of me, and the adults didn't know what to do with me.

If I just could find Mom

After I went through counselling and psychological testing, the experts determined I was just angry about my parent's divorce. But I knew better. I began to run away in hopes that I would find my mom, only to be picked up and brought back to my misery. On one of those occasions I did somehow manage to find her and spent about two weeks at her house. Finding my mom was not the dream I had hoped it would be. The man she was with was very mean and ended up choking me until I passed out. She thought I was just a troublemaker, but in reality I was just an angry 14-year-old who wanted her mom. I longed for her love. I longed to be nurtured and held by her. But unfortunately, my mom did not respond as I had hoped. It was no doubt the abuse in her own life that prevented her from giving me the love I needed.



Unfortunately, I was not able to handle this transition. I had buried so many emotions for so long that I no longer understood my own feelings. I turned on my mom and ended up severely beating her. I was so enraged that it took seven officers to subdue me. This time I didn't go to jail; I went to the state hospital.

The state hospital—nightmare, part 3

This began a long road in and out of the state hospital. Over the next 25 years, I spent six months of every year confined to the psych ward.

The courts deemed me a threat to myself and society and I was placed under court control. I was diagnosed with schizophrenia, manic depression/bi-polar disorder, multiple personality disorder, disassociation disorder and post-traumatic stress syndrome. I was put on every psych drug available. The only way they could control my behavior was to give me heavy doses of tranquilizers. No one knew what to do with me, and nothing seemed to help. Life in the state hospital was horrendous. I lost total control over my life. I was completely controlled by the courts, hospital, doctors, therapist and drugs. I had no will or mind of my own. I was told what pill to take and when. Every move I made was under the direction of someone else.



And the abuse continued in the hospital. On several occasions I was sexually assaulted by an orderly. Sometimes he would take me through an underground tunnel from the state psychiatric hospital to another facility. I became terrified of that trip through the tunnel, as I was often assaulted in a very degrading manner. I was just a frightened 15-year-old when it began, and I soon realized there was no one to help me. When I complained about the things done to me, no one believed me because I was "crazy." I felt desperately alone, scared and helpless. There was no way to make it stop.

The rage within me grew deeper, and my behavior became more violent. I ripped sinks off the walls, broke tables in half and even managed to break through unbreakable glass. I would tear into other patients for no reason.

Every outburst resulted in solitary confinement; we called it "the hole." This was a very small room that had a window in the door and a slot through which you received food. They would put me in a strait jacket and give me a mat to lie on. Sometimes I was stripped of all my clothing and left to lie on a cold mat. A guard kept watch through the window at all times.

I could not bear the humiliation of being watched like that without any clothes. Also, I was often so drugged that I would hallucinate and see things crawling all over me or on the floor. When they would try letting me out, I would be so angry I would fight them and end up going back in "the hole." It was nothing for me to spend weeks at a time in solitary confinement. There was one nurse who seemed to genuinely care about me. She would plead with me to calm down so I could get out. When I responded well to her kindness, she would get me out. However, my freedom never lasted long because of my inability to control my rage.



Diagnosis: Hopeless

The hospital eventually brought in doctors and psychiatrists to try to figure me out. They would place me in a room with glass windows around it. I was on one side of the glass, and they were on the other. I would be kept there for hours at a time while they observed me and took notes on my behavior. I felt like the freak show in a circus or like some caged animal at the zoo, but I could do nothing about it. They finally came to the conclusion that there was no hope for me and I would never get better.

Hopeless inside and out

Life outside the hospital was difficult, too. I was given a case manager and payee because I was unable to function normally. At times I stayed with family, but much of the time I was homeless, living out of a friend's car. I eventually had my own apartment and possessions, but every time I went to the hospital I lost everything and had to start over when I got out.

The pain of all the abuse was overwhelming. Most people couldn't stand to be around me so I was very lonely and unhappy. I felt worthless and full of self-hatred. I kept paper on my mirrors so I wouldn't have to look at myself. The cutting and burning now became a way to punish myself. I didn't deserve anything good. There was no point in living. I tried multiple times to end my life. On several occasions my family was called to the hospital because the doctor said I wasn't going to make it after I had overdosed on pills. It angered me that I couldn't die.



I bounced from one thing to another, seeking answers and help. I tried going to Teen Challenge, but I ran away from there. I couldn't stay still long enough for them to help me. I dabbled in the occult. I saw God as this mean guy upstairs who allows bad things to happen to people so why not sell my soul to the devil?

When I was in my twenties, I got pregnant and gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. I loved her dearly; she was mine. Her father left and refused to support her in any way. This put a great strain on me. I tried to work so that I could support her, but the stress was more than I could handle. I was in and out of the hospital, and eventually the state stepped in and took her. I was devastated and tried to overdose that night, but once again, someone found me and took me to the hospital.

I tried to get her back, but I wasn't mentally stable. I married, thinking that would help me get her back, but the marriage only lasted a month. I ended up beating up my husband and throwing him out. I finally realized that I wasn't able to give her the life she deserved. I couldn't maintain housing or employment, nor could I stay out of the hospital. I loved her, but I had no help or support. I knew if she were going to have a chance I needed to give up my rights and let someone adopt her. This was the hardest decision I've ever made. My heart ached for her over the years. Where was she? Was she being treated well? What does she look like? Will I ever see her again? Those thoughts haunted me. I wrote letters to her--some I sent, some I didn't. She may have been out of my life but she was not out of my heart.

I met another man and married again, but that marriage ended after a few months. He left after I split his head open with a frying pan. I was still so full of anger and rage that I couldn't handle being married or in any relationship.

It was nothing for me to walk up to an old woman and punch her out, just because I didn't like the way she looked. Or I would put out a cigarette in someone's eye because they looked at me funny. That's the kind of rage that was in me. Anger and violence controlled me. Consequences didn't even matter. So what? Just back to the hospital again. What's another strait jacket? I have nothing to lose; I'll keep fighting.

Eventually everyone gave up on me--the doctors, my therapist and many others. There was nothing anyone could do for me.

Amazing grace

Throughout my childhood I went to church. I knew there was a God, but could He really help me? Deep inside I wanted God, but I couldn't get past the barriers that prevented me from reaching him. I viewed God as I viewed my earthly father. Was He just another cruel authority figure? How could He be a God of love and let these things happen to me? These were questions I couldn't answer.



For several years I wandered in and out of churches. Several churches and various people tried to help me, but most gave up after a short time. Others stayed quietly on the sidelines and prayed for me. I went to the altar several times and prayed, only to walk away disappointed.

Finally, I was sent to a new therapist. She was different from the others. She believed I could get better. I did begin to improve, and my hospital stays got farther and farther apart. I was able to maintain an apartment, although I still had a case manager and payee to help me. I was on a lot of medication to help keep me calm. It helped, but nothing could take away the rage that was still in me.

I didn't want to be this way, but I couldn't fix myself. I didn't know how to get free. I desperately needed something more to help me change.

In May 2001, I was in my apartment contemplating suicide. Other people were tired of me, and I was tired of myself. I got down on my knees and began to talk to God. I prayed, "God I can't do this anymore. I'm going to give you one more chance to help me, but if you can't, I will just end my life. I'll do anything; I'll give up everything if you will just help me. God, if you can help me, please lead me to a church." I told God I would call three churches, and I would go to the one that called me back.

It was nighttime so I left a message on the answering machine of each church. Pastor John from Bethany Revival Center called me back. I had a lot of questions, and Pastor John patiently answered each one. He encouraged me to come to a service. That Wednesday, my sister and I went together, but I had no interest in going back.

During the next month, I met with Pastor John and his wife, Judy. Because of the hurt and rage I felt, I had a hard, tough exterior. I will never forget the pastor's wife looking at me and saying, "You may be tough and hard on the outside, but down inside you are a giant marshmallow." I responded by putting my hand up and saying, "Don't even go there." I hoped my tough exterior would make people think they shouldn't mess with me. Unfazed by my response, she looked at me and said, "There's a lot of good inside of you, and I want to help bring it out."

For a while I didn't go back to church, but Pastor John called and encouraged me to come. I finally went on a Sunday morning. That morning Pastor John spoke about complete surrender to God. He talked about how we often want God to fix our life, but we don't want to give Him our life. That message spoke right to my heart. I went to the altar and told Pastor John that I was ready to surrender to God. That morning, God broke the chains that were holding me captive and began to unshackle me from my past.

Growing in grace

The abuse I endured left deep scars in my emotions and my character. I was very fragile emotionally. How do you have a healthy self-esteem when, from the time you were a small child, you were called names and told you were no good? How do you feel good about yourself when the things that were done to you made you feel so dirty--like trash? How do you trust people or their intentions when so many people took advantage of you when you were helpless? How do you respect authority and submit to it when so many authority figures abused you? How do you let go of control when all your life you fought to have it? How do you love or receive love when you feel so unlovable? I didn't know how to relate to people or have relationships. I didn't know how to respond to people or situations without being angry. The effects go on and on. My chains were broken, but I had to learn a whole new way of life.

The pastors took me into their home, and Pastor Judy began mentoring me. Everything didn't change overnight; it has been a long journey.

Pastor Judy worked with me everyday, often talking and ministering to me into the wee hours of the morning. Her patience and unconditional love helped me understand God's love. If I was going to receive His help, I first needed to receive His love. As I opened my heart to God, He poured in His love. The barriers that kept me from Him were removed, and I was able to accept His help.

One of the first things God helped me with was the terrible nightmares I had, constantly reliving my past. I would fall asleep and then wake myself up thrashing and hollering out. This would go on all night. Pastor Judy and another woman from the church sat up praying with me night after night. After just a few weeks, I quit having those nightmares.

I also struggled with panic and anxiety. For a long time I couldn't go into a store without having a panic attack. To get through the experience, I often had to stay close to Pastor Judy. I often would be up late at night looking out the windows to be sure no one was lurking outside to try to hurt me.

The first year was the toughest. When I couldn't deal with something, I would run off and try to go back to what was familiar. If I didn't run off, I would isolate myself, sometimes for days at a time. None of this deterred those who were trying to help me. The prayer team at the church spent countless hours praying for me, and I don't think I would have made it without their love and prayers. Now when I don't know how to deal with something, I run to Jesus instead of away from Him.

As a spiritual father figure, Pastor John showed me kindness and gentleness that helped me overcome some of my fear of men. I now can talk freely to him when something bothers me. We can even disagree about things, and I stay calm. In fact, my relationship with him has taken me even further in my understanding of God's love. Now I know in my heart, not just in my head, how much God loves me, that I am not a piece of trash, and God sees me very differently from the way I used to see myself. I can't fully explain it, but I'm comprehending God in a completely different way than ever before. I'm overwhelmed by His love. I'm so excited and filled with a peace I've never known.

Endless hope

It has been 14 years since the day I surrendered my life to Christ, and a lot has changed. I graduated from Bible school, and I am very active in my church. Because of the transformation in my life, several of

my family members are now in church with me. I have not been back to the psych ward, and I am free from the heavy psych drugs and tranquilizers that once controlled me. I live independently without the help of case managers or therapists.

I no longer hurt or feel the pain of my past. I'm free from anger and rage. God has softened my hard heart and is teaching me how to love. I may not be all I want to be, but I can truly say I am not what I used to be.

I'm still growing and changing, and I intend, with God's help, to keep moving forward. My way had led to a hopeless end but Jesus has given me an endless hope.

All I can say is, "To God be the glory; great things He hath done."



If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

John 8:3