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Life After Why: Finding My Footing and Purpose in a Life Disrupter

by Sheri Entz Blackmon

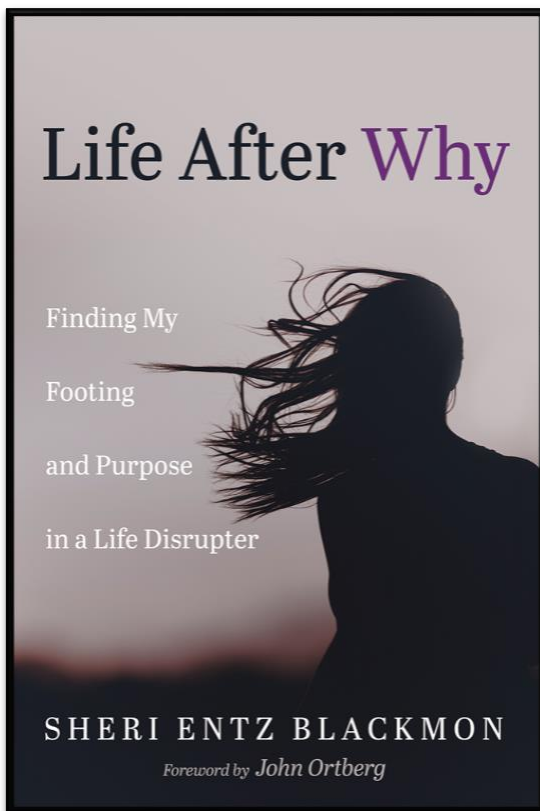
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New Title from Sheri Entz Blackmon

Life After Why: Finding My Footing and Purpose in a Life Disrupter



This book is about overcoming obstacles. When a life disrupter strikes, it's common to search for reasons and formulas to obtain control of the uncontrollable. The author is convinced that a satisfying life lies on the other side of asking why, a life at the intersection of sorrow and joy beyond the need to control outcomes. A recent cancer recurrence propelled Sheri Blackmon into surgical failures, setbacks, and a search for a way forward. Her disrupter evoked dormant childhood trauma that obscured and complicated the process of moving toward acceptance. This memoir is not only a cancer story but also a story of a girl torn between two continents as a missionary child whose mother is a Holocaust survivor. It explores universal themes of loss, abuse, control, dislocation, being an outsider, and finding one's voice. It offers an honest Christian reflection on discovering one's footing and purpose within a framework of five discernible steps toward acceptance. While presented in five steps, acceptance of what is lost is not a linear process with a beginning and an end, but a lifelong engagement of the heart.

Sheri Entz Blackmon has BAs in religious studies and English literature from Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California, and an MDiv in theology from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. She was an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and served in church ministry for fifteen years before moving to Oaks Christian School, where she served as founding department chair, Bible teacher, and chaplain, and is now an English instructor.



What is *Life After Why* about?

It's about discovering a satisfying life after a significant disrupter that leaves you asking "Why?" with no clear way to get through it. This book is about overcoming obstacles instead of being overcome by them. It's about engaging in a process from condemning to accepting, even embracing, our disrupters. It's not a linear process, but one that takes time and intention, which can go on for a while.

Why is this book important now?

Life disrupters are becoming more common. When they strike our lives, we search for reasons and formulas to obtain control of the uncontrollable. But many of us are ill-equipped to deal with disrupters. Added to this is a culture of solutions-people and overcoming strategies that conveys it is in our power to improve our circumstances. This book is for people who are tired of glib answers and platitudes. It's for people searching not for a "why" but a "how": How do I not let my pain go to waste?

What life disrupter propelled you to write this book?

This memoir evolved out of a cancer recurrence marked by surgical failures, setbacks, and searching for a way forward. My experience helped me realize that loss is a universal human experience that takes many forms. I developed a five-step process of moving from condemning to eventually accepting my loss. While I present it in five steps, acceptance of what is lost is not a linear process with a beginning and an end, but a lifelong engagement of the heart, that looks not only to what is lost but also what remains. It's about a perspective change that empowers us to relinquish control.

How is this book unique?

Life After Why is more than a memoir, but it is a springboard for diving into the universal experience of loss. As such, this memoir weaves together personal narratives with didactic content including psychological, theological, and literary insights. My training as a pastor and teacher equip me to provide substantive depth on such topics. This book is for people who seek honesty, authenticity, and inspiration.

What did you discover in your own journey that makes this book worth reading?

I discovered that letting go of my expectations is key to thriving. People who don't thrive after loss hold on to the way they want their life to be. This doesn't mean abandoning my expectations, but holding them more loosely. We all deal with the gulf between what we want and what we get in life. Examining our losses and lamenting them helps us first own and then relinquish them. Ultimately, we are able to let go when we trust that God is involved in our lives.

How does your faith in God enable you to let go?

I discovered that God's presence is real, and that it is all I ultimately need. God does not owe me explanations. He does not have a contractual obligation to me, but offers me his presence through Jesus through all of my life. Once I grasped this, I was able to receive my disrupter and find a way to let it shape me. Disrupters test our faith. They ask us to put into practice what we profess to believe. If I cannot trust God when the rug is pulled out from under me, then what good is my faith?

What were some positive experiences you had through the cancer journey?

Once I got through the treatment phase, I experienced a deep sense of appreciation for all of life. I don't want to lose that, but it's easy to do when life returns to a semblance of order. I also had a profound perspective change from seeing what is lost to seeing what remains. Keeping this perspective alive takes intentional work and effort, but I want to keep working on it diligently.

What are some things in the book that you haven't mentioned?

In my memoir I reference experiences of my mother who is a Holocaust survivor from Berlin. I also touch on triggers from childhood touched by my current loss because these things makes accepting loss more confusing and complicated. My book exposes raw and honest experiences of childhood losses, betrayal, and abuse. I offer practical suggestions on how to identify, own, and process different types of losses. My book also includes insights from my psychologist husband on the connection between loss and depression. My ultimate goal is to show you how a real person learned to overcome obstacles in her life.

Part I: The Destructive and Creative Potential of Disrupters

Chapter 1: Membership in a Club I Don't Want to Join

I've walked the familiar school halls for nineteen years since switching careers in 2000, but this time it's different: surreal, focused, insular. It's 2:27 p.m. as I head to my last class full of spirited high school sophomores and juniors. At 2:14 p.m. I answer a call from the gynecologist with the results of four needle biopsies to learn that three of them reveal hard-to-detect lobular carcinoma. I have breast cancer once again, but it's a different kind this time, a stealthier, more deadly kind. My first cancer was invasive ductal carcinoma with some lobular features. This time it's all lobular. The doctor tries to reassure me that its non-aggressive nature will probably only require excisions. (How wrong that would be!) The phone call ends ten minutes later, and I try to collect myself. What should I do, go to class or find a sub? Since there's no time to find a sub before my 2:30 class, I stand up, straighten my clothes and resolve, and head out the teacher core room into the bustling hallway. I feel detached, like being in someone else's body.

Walking down the hall as I have done thousands of times, I think this is the strangest out-of-body walk I've ever had. I appear to blend into the routine, but my life is flipped over in an instant. I wonder about students who experience similar feelings of alienation in the hallway. I push down the door handle of the classroom and the news I just heard and enter the room. A memory from 17 years ago flashes through my mind of defiantly pushing down the door handle of the Tarzana Hospital where I am about to have my first breast biopsy in 2002, feeling certain that this is a waste of the doctor's time. Those were the former days of invincibility. That biopsy and subsequent surgeries and treatments initiated me into the cancer club. Today's door opening shows less of that early certainty, but it's not completely gone. Is it the myth of being special? Why do I still believe that bad things don't happen to me? Teaching that class is a robotic blur; I'm in charge, but not really; I operate by instinct, and can't report later on what we discussed.

After school, I take a moment for reality to settle in as I tell a colleague—and friend—the news. She reflects on her own dissociation after losing her college-age son a few years ago. She tells me that her grief the first year was so ever-present and palpable that she simply went through the motions of teaching. She could not report the specifics of her teaching, only that she somehow got through that year. We bond over a shared experience of loss and detachment.

There's little time to make crucial decisions. A single or double mastectomy? What kind of reconstruction and when? The plastic surgeon advises against an implant on the affected side due to previous radiation, which significantly lowers the chances of success. An alternative is to do a microscopic tissue transplant from the abdomen to the breast called a DIEP flap surgery and an implant on the right side. Cold and rushed decision-making diverts the flood of my emotions into a neighboring tributary.

This diversion continues for a time as I decide how much information to share with the students, tie up loose ends, and prepare to leave two weeks before the end of the school year—and my teaching career as my retirement plans are already made before the diagnosis—in the midst of final oral presentations and exams. I choose to be candid with my students, spurred by Joni's Eareckson Tada's comment of not wanting to waste her breast cancer recurrence. I want them to know how my faith helps me.

The support and love—hugs, prayers, meals, gifts, cards—affirm my choice. A 16-year-old student named Ryan even leaves a gift basket with candles, a floral English teacup, and tea on my doorstep along with a hand-written note. I'm moved because it looks like he, not his mom, authored this kind act. Wanting to finish well, I push myself until 6 p.m. the day before surgery, as students patiently stand in line for hours to complete missing assignments. Why do they always wait to the end? At this point I take up my colleagues' offers to grade extra work. With dizzying speed, my career ends at the school I helped found almost 20 years ago. For now, the dizzying speed is a comfort, the comfort of agency and control.

Like many disrupters, cancer initiates you into a club you don't want to join. After my first initiation in 2002, I clicked the unsubscribe button as soon as possible. In the first few months after that experience, I still thought about cancer every day; then, slowly, the months and years of remission carved a wide stream out of the tributary into a normal life. Years of floating on the calmer waters carried me far away from the rocks and snarls of that small tributary. Normal was the new fantastic for me.

But here I am again, and this time it feels like I'm heading down the rapids toward a precipice.

It's like a bad dream of returning to a place you think you're far removed from to find the same fears and anxieties again, only more pronounced, like being back in middle school with the bullies. In your dream, you ask yourself if it's just a dream, but it doesn't seem to be because the dream continues. "How did I get here?" you ask yourself incredulously.

Praise for *Life After Why: Finding My Footing and Purpose in a Life Disrupter*

“Some books are worth reading because of the gripping drama of the author’s life. Some because of the healing wisdom they offer. Some are worth reading because they point us to God. This is the rare book that does all three.”

—John Ortberg, author of *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*

“Sheri Blackmon is a deep soul who has experienced harrowing suffering. She has developed profound insight into the role of pain in our lives, overcoming obstacles, and, ultimately, living out our dreams. In this well-written and thoughtful book, she shares wisdom about how to flourish amid the difficulties of life.”

—Bradley Wright, University of Connecticut

“Sheri is an improver. She is brave, unashamed, and honest. In her debut book, *Life After Why*, she shares the importance of disrupting the myth that joy is only found in a pain-free life. Lean in and learn from my wise, honest friend. This book will bring you hope. Hope that heals.”

—Shelene Bryan, Founder, Skip1.org

“Sheri dignifies our suffering by validating our pain. Empathizing with our losses, she elevates our struggles with magnificent writing that resonates with the soul and assures us that we are not alone. This book transcends typical platitudes and offers a transparent and authentic search for truth by supplanting the seeming unfairness of disruptors with credible hope offered by our good and mysterious God.”

—Roger Kemp, President, RK Media

