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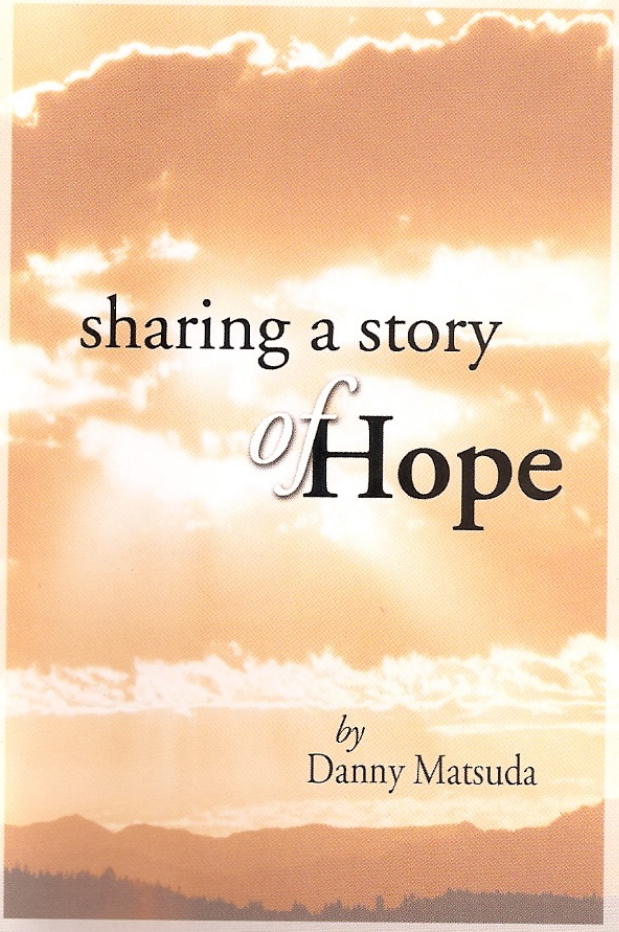

sharing a story of Hope

by
Danny Matsuda

THE DAY. I remember it like it was yesterday. My wife falsely accused me of child abuse. Without any regard for them, my two boys, Drew and Nolan, were torn from me. That day, I was like a walking dead man. It felt as though my guts had been ripped out of me—it took all my strength just to breathe.

Then came the divorce...in spite of praying, wishing and hoping for reconciliation.

And every week for six years, I would come home after dropping my sons off at their mom's house and shed tears of hurt and pain because I missed Drew and Nolan so much. I wasn't lonely from being alone. I just wanted my boys and me to be together all the time. So many evenings, I couldn't even eat. I just fell asleep clutching my pillow, crying myself to sleep.

My life had been crumbling for a while, but that's how the life I had proudly built finally came crashing down. The old Danny Matsuda died that day, the Danny that believed he could make it completely on his own—that he was both lucky and invincible. That was me.

In 1959, my mother became very ill. She was diagnosed with Lupus Erythematosus but little was known about the disease at that time. She was sick for eight years. Much of her last years were spent in and out of UCLA Medical Center. Because I knew Mom could die at any time, I remember asking Dad repeatedly, "What's life good for if all we do is come into existence only to die?" I desperately wanted my dad to have an answer, but he never could give me an explanation that quenched my yearning. I could not understand why such a good person had to suffer and die, especially that way. I had attended church until I was seventeen and participated

with youth groups at other churches. I even remember trying to read the Bible, but I never came close to understanding what it really meant to be a Christian. I had a lot of unanswered questions. My mom died at the early age of forty-two and dad was left a single-parent of five young children. I was the eldest. I had two brothers and two sisters who I helped take care of. I have fond memories of taking the three younger ones on dates with my first girlfriend. But at this same time in my life, roots of anger and resentment began to grow deep in my heart. I became convinced that this life is all there is and life is only what you make it. And, I became determined to make it and make it big!

I became self-reliant and self-sufficient. After earning my Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Art Center College of Design, I jumped onto the materialistic bandwagon and bought into the world's view of success. I worked for two corporations before starting my own design business

in 1980. Also while working at the second corporate job, I was a partner in a joint partnership which designed and manufactured novelty gifts. With drive and an entrepreneurial spirit, my dream was to retire as a millionaire before I was thirty. As time passed, the fulfillment of my dream was extended to age thirty-five—then forty. I began doing pretty well in business, but eventually woke up to the fact that I wasn't going to be one of those self-made millionaires. However, for thirty-eight years, I lived what I thought was a successful life—prospering in business, plenty of friends, driving the car of my dreams, dating beautiful women. What more could a guy ask for? Maybe relationships that really meant something. But you can't have everything, right?

Up until that point, I believed I lived a charmed life. In 1973, during the early morning hours, I was driving my VW bug at 70 mph along the San Diego Freeway. All of a sudden,

I felt the car jolt. A tire passed me in the lane to my left—it was my tire! It had come off the axle and was racing me down the freeway. The next day, the mechanic at the garage where I had the car fixed told me how "lucky" I was. He told me most VW's catapult in accidents like these because the axle acts much like a vaulter's pole—it gets stuck in the pavement and flips the car over.

A year later, I was in a worse accident. I was driving on the Santa Monica Freeway in my first brand new car—a Mazda RX4. I wasn't wearing my seat belt. It was about eleven in the evening and I fell asleep at the wheel. I woke up with enough time to utter a few choice words and realize my car, angled at 45 degrees to the center divider, was ripping out the fence that separated me from the on-coming traffic. Witnesses said my car rolled over two times before coming to rest upside down. It lay there laterally across the middle two lanes. I awoke to find

myself bleeding and crawling over glass. The roof pillars had collapsed, breaking the passenger door window. I pulled myself out through that window and half-dazed, wandered down the freeway. Both the tow truck driver and a CHP officer told me I was "lucky" to be alive. They said what saved my life was not wearing my seat belt. If I had, my head and neck would have been crushed.

In 1989, I was on a family vacation trip to Mammoth. We were driving up Highway 395 in the middle of the night. It was very dark. We were in my ex brother-in-law's Suburban and he fell asleep at the wheel. My father, who was leading in the car ahead, said our headlights "just disappeared off the face of the earth." I was jarred awake as we bounced and banged through sagebrush, cactus and boulders. I tried desperately to grab my then-wife in the back seat, steer the vehicle, and press down on the brake pedal all at the same time. The Suburban came to a stop.

We were "lucky" we hadn't gone over a cliff, smashed head-on into a mountainside or been thrown from the truck.

These three brushes with death convinced me that I was indestructible. No harm was going to come to me. And, although I had the thought that "someone" was watching over me, I mostly came to believe I was like a cat with nine lives. I thought, "Who needs God!"

When I "finally" got married at the ripe "old age" of thirty-nine, I thought my life was set. My wife and I loved each other. We had a decent house, good cars, plenty of income, and my own business. And then everything started to unravel.

Our marriage was not stable from the start. We didn't know how to communicate or resolve conflict. It took only a few months for us to separate for the first time. My design business also began to spiral down. Prior to getting married, I had savings, an IRA, and life insurance. One

by one, these had to be cashed in to keep the business afloat, pay our mortgage payments, and meet our everyday living expenses. Along the way, our two sons were born. Joy amid incredible tension. My life was out of control. I was not invincible. I felt anything but lucky. I could not handle things on my own. I needed help.

Fortunately, during that separation, I did cry out to God. I was at the end of myself. Being a Type-A, planner/controller type I came to realize that I didn't have control over my life and I couldn't fix everything. I was so tired of trying to control the outcome of my life, my relationships, and, now, my marriage. Alone in my living room, I fell to my knees and lifted my arms in surrender and gasped, "God, I'm so tired, I'm yours." That's how my relationship with Jesus Christ began—so simply. That's how hope dawned in my utter darkness. That's how the new Danny was born.

My brother Lonny was the first person I

called to share this news. He cried as he listened. He told me that my sister Pauline, my other brother Ricky and he had been praying for over twenty years for me to trust Jesus with my life. And, later, I found out that there were many others from the church I grew up in who had been praying for me all those years as well. I "guess" prayer works.

But, Jesus wasn't an instant solution to a troubled marriage. We ended up getting divorced anyway. On the day my ex-wife left with Drew and Nolan, Jesus showed himself in the pastor of the church I had recently started to attend. On that day, Pastor David was vacationing hundreds of miles away in another state, but he was willing to patiently be with me over the phone. I felt I couldn't breathe and he helped bring air back into my lungs. And for many months afterwards, he met with me, week after week, to listen to my hurt and help wipe away volumes of tears. David taught me who Jesus

is and where he is—in the midst of my pain. God used Pastor David to help me begin understanding what life is all about, what it's for, and that, in spite of everything, God has a plan for my life—a reason for me to live, with hope.

During my early recovery, two couples at church, Stan and Janie, and Pete and Sue, came alongside to comfort, guide and pray with and for me. On a moment's notice, they would give up being in the worship service to sit with me and pray. And on Sunday afternoons they invited me over to their homes to hang out and eat. They helped fill the huge void I felt on those lonely weekend days without my boys.

Stan is the founder and president of a ministry called Iwa that publishes materials which introduce Jesus Christ to Japanese- and other Asian Americans. He initially asked me to design a donor's poster, and eventually I began to work part-time for Iwa, helping them with graphic design and redesigning their website. Iwa was

and continues to be a haven for me. Many times I have stepped through the office doors carrying a heavy burden, but, in a short time, I have felt God lift the load from my shoulders. God's Spirit is in that office and those who are there. Stan, Cyril and Ellen love God more than anything else and go beyond being my boss or coworkers—they are shepherds and I am a sheep in their flock.

In recent years, "Brother Rol" has been my "main man." In times of distress or trial, no matter how small, he has been there—to listen, to counsel, to pray—many times driving out late in the evenings to meet with me. Whatever I have shared, I have never felt an ounce of judgment from him—just love and acceptance. I have met the character of God, face-to-face, through Roland. And, I appreciate his honesty. He has not only spoken words of encouragement and affirmation, but he lets me know when he believes God is trying to show me what I might change

in my life. Roland's advice is forceful, but is motivated by such a clean, pure heart that I know it comes from God—not just Roland.

There are so many others I would like to name, but can't here and now—so many who have been Jesus to me during the most difficult years of my life. Because Jesus was in these faithful friends, I have been able to vent, to grieve, to forgive and even to heal.

Dealing with divorce, no matter how amicable the process, is heart-wrenching. I honestly believe there is no such thing as a "friendly" divorce. I wouldn't wish divorce upon my worst enemy. My healing has occurred over time and continues to this day. It has been a process of learning God's character and how he wants me to live. Divorce always has two sides, two victims (not to mention the kids who are the biggest victims). No one is ever the right person and there is always judgment, resentment and bitterness. As I admitted my wrong, forgave my

wife, and had compassion for her suffering, I have been able to begin changing those things in me that led to our divorce. On a daily basis, I have to release all my resentment and bitterness to God, so he can replace all that destructive waste with his sensitivity and love. I have a long way to go, but I have miraculously experienced positive change.

One of the most difficult things I'm learning is how to surrender Drew and Nolan to God, trusting that he will take care of them in any and all circumstances. I was in constant despair over having them being raised in two different households, each having a different set of values. I worried over how my sons would be affected by competing value systems, who they would become. As I studied the Bible, I learned that God has a unique plan for each person's life and that he has the power to make sure his plan is fulfilled—and that goes for my sons too. I wrestled with whether I could entrust my boys

to this intangible Person who supposedly loves them even more than I do.

The first story that made God tangible to me is in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. In this story, God tests the faith of a father named Abraham by telling him to take his son up a mountainside and sacrifice him on a stone altar. Abraham did as he was told, but, at the last moment, God told him to sacrifice an animal instead. Through this story, I believed that God was actually speaking to me. He was telling me to do the same—to give Drew and Nolan totally, 100%, the whole kit and kaboodle to him. That meant I needn't worry, spend so much energy trying to control circumstances, or constantly badger them to be "perfect" according to my standards and values. God assured me that he would and could protect and take care of Drew and Nolan if I would entrust them to him.

For someone as self-reliant as I had the habit of being, this was no easy task. It was hard enough

to surrender myself to God, let alone my sons. But, here's the paradox. By not being so controlling, by allowing God to control the outcome of their lives, I have become a better father. Instead of being so "up-tight," I'm a lot less intense. I realized that I simply needed to allow God to transform me into the father he wants me to be, this being one of the most important things I could ever do for Drew and Nolan. This is a lesson I have had to learn over and over again. I have to put my sons on that altar everyday. At first, it was so hard. I had to be so deliberate about giving my boys up to God. Now, it's easier, but I still have to do it every day. It has become for me, a daily ongoing prayer process.

The battle to keep my business going has continued to this day. At times, I was completely out of business. Once in a while, there seemed to be light at the end of the tunnel. But then, that light would flicker out. Many silently questioned, "Why doesn't Danny just go out and

get a job?" That's an easy question to ask without understanding all that was involved. I felt God wanted me to be at home with Drew and Nolan on our days together. To keep that schedule, I had to trust God to provide. That was not easy. It would have been easier to go out and get a job, but I was convinced it was God's will I stay home. A number of times, I didn't have any money to meet my obligations. I didn't know what to do. Time and again, God provided what I needed through gifts from unexpected people. One time, I couldn't even buy a pair of much needed shoes for one my boys when I received a monetary gift. The check was so generous I literally fell to my knees in disbelief. I had to read it three times to make sure I was seeing clearly.

Having been so doggedly self-reliant, my pride took some heavy blows during the first years of my divorce, and they were crucial years for the development of my boys. They have been precious years for us. Of course we played a lot

of sports together, but my time alone with them is what was priceless. Most of the time we played made-up games, and, every once in awhile, a golden opportunity would present itself to talk about God, his love for them, and what he wanted each of us to learn. I believe to this day that it was God's loving will for me to be there for them—for stability, continuity, and their need for me as their dad, and his intention that I learn some hard lessons about needing and depending on both God and others. God proved through the selfless generosity of others that he both loves me and provides for me. These days, I am a lot more humble and sensitive than I used to be thanks to some tough lessons I had to learn.

My boys are turning out fine. Drew and Nolan are my greatest joy and I am so proud of them. Through the pain that they experience I see the greatest evidence that God is real and that he loves us. Drew and Nolan both love Jesus. He is in their lives and I am proud to have wit-

nessed them both come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Now I see that my brushes with death weren't luck. Someone was watching over me. That someone is a living God who extended grace to me so I would live until I found him and come to truly know him—to have a life filled with his love and discover the answers I had been seeking as to what life is for and all about.

A health issue also plagued me during these years of struggle. In 1995, my migraines began. I never had any health problems before. Now, for periods of months, I would have an episode once or twice a week. Often, the pain would completely debilitate me. All I would want is to die. The agonizing pain would lead to horrific vomiting, down to my guts. I would vomit bile for hours—sometimes for a full day. At times like these, I found the most comfortable place to be was lying on the cool tiled-floor in the bathroom, clutching my head. A number of times, God used Drew and Nolan to wrap his

arms around me when times were roughest. I'm grateful that they were not at home during most of my episodes with migraines, but they didn't miss them all. On those occasions when they were at home, I will never forget how I was showered by God's love through them. Not only did these two small boys fend for themselves by helping to cook, clean up, and bathe themselves, but they would gently come to my bed, ask me how I was, tell me they loved me, and sometimes make and draw get-well cards for me.

Four years ago, ill-health struck our family in a different way. My father, who is seventy-six, has always been a rock. He worked thirty-five years as a probation officer for Los Angeles County. He retired in 1977 and had been in good health until 1998. But then, two major strokes and a heart attack requiring a quadruple bypass changed all that. Dad is unable to be the strong, self-sufficient person he had always been. In the midst of this tragedy, however, a blessing emerged.

Dad received Jesus into his heart as his Lord and Savior.

Since then his mind and body have diminished considerably. It has been quite a roller-coaster ride for my siblings and me, dealing with the numerous caretaking responsibilities. Recently, in a depressed state, Dad told me that it was hard to keep going—to continue fighting to stay alive. He felt he was such a burden. Being self-reliant for so long, it was extremely difficult for him to express these feelings. Maybe it was even harder for me to hear. But, God is so good. That evening, and in a couple of instances since, God gave me the opportunity to minister to Dad by praying with him—that God would ease his aching heart and mind. This is significant because, after I prayed, my father thanked me for being so understanding and supportive. Me! I could only laugh amid my tears, and inwardly rejoice. It was wonderful to be able to tell Dad that I was only able to respond to him and his

situation that way because of having Jesus in my life. Before becoming a Christian, I was so self-centered and critical, I wouldn't have considered his condition. Instead, I would have callously told him what he should do and how he should feel. Amazingly, God has begun to mold a new character in me that is infinitely more loving, caring and compassionate than before. I am discovering that I can be a person who uses his ears and heart to listen and respond in a loving way—God's way.

Who would have ever guessed that I would be doing what I'm doing today. In addition to working part-time for Iwa, God has guided me to a ministry at church, leading couples to build and strengthen their marriages based on his plan. The past two years I've had the opportunity to lead workshops at JEMS Mt. Hermon Conference. The 2002 workshop was on divorce and amazingly, the workshop participants who were mostly shame-oriented Asian Americans, were willingly

open to share their hurts and burdens. Special prayer times were arranged so they could be prayed for specifically. It was exciting to see how God worked to open minds and hearts to healing. This year's topic was about encouraging couples to create and maintain a daily habit of praying together. Once again the response was astounding and truly reflected God's desire for marriages. I also have a vision to start a family ministry at my home church, San Fernando Valley Holiness. And not long ago, I was invited to speak at our men's retreat. The title of my message was, "I DO; Divorce is not an Option." As I was speaking, I became keenly aware of how far God had brought me over the past seven years. I stopped for a moment to reflect and thank him for his faithfulness, and for the opportunity to bring hope to many broken male hearts. Another blessing had a huge impact upon me that day. During my talk, Drew came into the room and as we made eye contact, I received a

look from him that said, "I'm proud of you Dad!" You see, a couple of years before I promised him and Nolan that I would do anything in my power, through God's grace, to help save other kids from having to endure what they have had to suffer.

Miraculously, God is turning something horrible into something wonderful. He has lifted me from the pit of despair to a place where hope is alive.

Yes, Jesus makes the impossible possible!