

it's okay

NOT TO BE OKAY

Moving Forward
One Day at a Time

SHEILA WALSH



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This book is dedicated with love and admiration to
every weary soul who falls down and gets back up,
over and over again. It's easy to fall; it takes
courage to rise up and take the next step.

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Introduction

It's Okay Not to Be Okay

I wish I could take my twenty-one-year-old (recovering-from-teenage-acne) face in my hands and tell her, “It’s okay not to be okay, I promise.” Would she have believed me? I don’t think so. She was determined to get everything right.

It started with a photograph. I was cleaning out drawers the other day and found an old photograph under a roll of Christmas paper. I sat down on the sofa and studied the picture. I’m in a white dress and a graduation gown, twenty-one years old, graduating from seminary. My hair is short and dark. It had taken about three years to recover from my experiment with a perm that left me looking like a pack of dogs had assumed my hair was lunch. In the photograph I’m smiling, confident, ready to take on the world for Jesus.

My heart aches. There’s so much I’d like to tell her.

“Moisturize your neck! You’ll thank me later!”

If I had only ten minutes, I’d cut to the chase. I’d tell her this will not be the life she imagined. I’d tell her that she will disappoint people and they will disappoint her, but she’ll learn from it. I’d let her know that she’ll fall down over and over again, but rather than

understanding the love of God less she'll get it more. I'd let her know her heart is going to break, but she'll survive and it will change how she sees people, not as causes to be saved but as people to be loved. I'd let her know that sometimes the night will get very dark, but she will never be alone even when she's absolutely convinced she is. I'd let her know that she's loved. I'd tell her to get rid of her punishing list of things she thinks she needs to get right.

I lived so much of my life with a list of things to change, to do better—if not on paper then in my mind. I think most of us do, and the message is always the same: we can do better.

We'll not only join the gym, we'll go!

This new diet plan will work and by summer we'll be bikini ready. (Note to self: don't you dare buy a bikini. Even if you're thinner, things are not where they used to be and no one but your loving husband needs to know that.)

We'll start that read-through-the-Bible-in-a-year plan again. (Last year I got to May 7 and got distracted, and by the time I realized it, I was a whole Leviticus, fifty-three Psalms, and Romans behind.)

We'll recover from the overspending and be financially responsible.

We'll cook wholesome, nutritious meals for our family and sit down at least five nights a week together at the table.

We'll reduce our television watching and read more books.

But sometimes the messages carry much more weight.

This marriage will work.

We will get out of debt.

Our children will come back to Christ.

We'll eat better to save our lives not our waistlines.

I don't know what your internal list looks like, but if it's anything like mine it usually serves to let us know where we've failed. Lists are written when the kids are asleep or you've had a good night's sleep and a cup of coffee. The trouble is, the kids wake up and that impossible woman you work with gets louder and more obnoxious by the minute and no amount of coffee is going to help.

And what about our spiritual lives? That can be the most judgmental list of all. When we assume that God's love is based on our behavior we've set ourselves up for a devastating fall.

I'll pray more.

I'll share my faith at work.

I'll read my Bible from Genesis to the maps in the back of the book.

I'll trust God without questioning.

So, why did I title this book *It's Okay Not to Be Okay*? These words might sound a bit like a bumper sticker to you, but they don't to me. I want you to know that these words were fought for. They could sound like the waving of a white flag, six words of surrender, but they're not.

For me they are words of victory!

I've let go of beating myself up trying to live a life that Jesus never asked me to live. The life my "fresh out of seminary, determined to save the world, to love the unlovely, get nine hours of sleep every night and never let God down" self tried to live for so long.

I don't know where you're at in life as you read this, but if I could sit down with you for a while, I'd say, "Take a deep breath in and hold it for five seconds, and then let it out. Again. Again."

Then I'd tell you that it *really* is okay not to be okay. That's why Jesus came.

I gave my life to Him when I was eleven years old. As I write, I'm sixty-one. That's fifty years of falling down and getting back up. Fifty years of trying to be worth loving. Fifty years of doing the same things over and over, hoping they'd turn out differently this time. (Yes, I do know that's the definition of insanity.)

Here's the great news: It's also fifty years of the faithfulness of God and this beautiful invitation from Christ:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it.

Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly. (Matt. 11:28–30 Message)

What a lovely place to start again, side by side with Jesus, learning to live freely and lightly.

I read an old Chinese proverb that said, “The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second-best time is now.”

I like that. Those are hope-filled words. They say that we get to start again and again and again. No matter what's true in your life at this moment, I want to remind you that God loves you, right now, no matter what's going on around or inside you. These words may fall flat for you right now if you find yourself in an unfamiliar place, a difficult season.

Perhaps you're facing the end of a marriage and you either feel like a failure or that you've been betrayed and abandoned.

You may be facing an empty nest and have no idea what your life should revolve around now.

Perhaps you have lost a loved one and the very idea of moving forward not only seems impossible, it feels wrong.

You may think, *I've done this before. I've tried to start again and it didn't work.*

Or perhaps, if you're honest, you are just too tired to try. I understand that. I've been there.

I'd like to simply say, gently, you were made for more. You are worth fighting for. Christ thought you were worth dying for. Would you be willing to open your heart to the possibility of moving forward, one day at a time?

Life rarely offers quick fixes; it's a process, and God is in it with us, all the way. He doesn't look for perfection in us; He sees that in Christ. You don't need to be okay because Jesus has made you all right. He's paid the bill in full. He's covered our “not okay-ness.” Okay doesn't live here, but Jesus does. All He looks for in us is a willingness to take the next step.

Okay doesn't live here,
but Jesus does.

All He looks for in us
is a *willingness*
to take the next step.

one

Take the First Step

My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak,
but God remains the strength of my heart;
he is mine forever.

—Psalm 73:26

Forever—is composed of Nows.

—Emily Dickinson

It was 10 PM. Not too late by normal standards, but late if you've been up several times through the night for the past ten nights. I was trying to get settled in bed. Trying to relax a bit and watch the women's freestyle ice skating competition, but the TV signal had just gone out . . . again. I was about ready to throw the remote through the screen. My husband, Barry, was exhausted and snoring like he was the one in a competition and was clearly in the lead. I thought about giving him a gentle nudge, but I didn't have the heart to wake him. He'd been sleeping on the sofa downstairs for

the past ten nights, so to be back in our bed was bliss. Now, before you begin to assume anything or pray for us, we didn't have marital issues. Our twenty-one-year-old son was home from college and had just had his tonsils and adenoids removed. He was in a lot of pain.

The doctor told us this was the most painful surgery an adult can have, but it was worse than we imagined. On the day of his surgery I made the mistake of asking Christian to open his mouth so that I could have a look inside before I drove his semi-conscious self home.

Christian pulled down the visor on the passenger side and looked first. He turned his big brown eyes toward me, clearly shocked. "Oh my gosh, Mom, look at this!"

Wow! You can't un-see some things. It looked as if the surgeon took a garden trowel and dug two gaping holes in the back of his throat.

"Yeah, that's . . . well, wow . . . okay . . . hmm . . . Let's get you home," I said.

The first three days were rough, but when we hit day four, his pain went to a whole new level. He was literally shaking from the pain. He couldn't eat, and it hurt to drink. It was hard for him to swallow anything. I had to put his pain pills in Jell-O so they would slip down easier. The doctor told us to be vigilant about staying on top of the pain and make sure he took his pills on time, so I set my alarm for midnight, 4 AM, and 8 AM. Barry slept downstairs on the sofa outside of his bedroom in case he needed anything during the night. Now we were on day ten and things were finally beginning to look up.

I turned the television off, waited ten seconds, and turned it on again. Nothing. I was tired but wide awake, so I went downstairs to make a cup of tea. I checked in on Christian while the water was boiling, and he was fast asleep. It was a welcome sight. There are so many things we take for granted until they're absent, like the simple gift of your child sleeping through the night. I thought of the families who have chronically ill children. How do they cope?

I can't imagine. I paused in the kitchen and prayed for moms and dads who long for a break after ten days but instead the days turn into weeks and months.

I was beginning to feel as if I could fall asleep, so I went back upstairs and climbed into bed. It was then that I became uncomfortably aware of a damp spot beneath me. I gingerly put my hand out and discovered not a spot but a puddle and one sheepish looking dog. Belle, our Bichon Frise who sleeps on our bed, is fourteen years old, and the thoughts *I need to go to the bathroom* and *I just went to the bathroom* now seem to occur at exactly the same time. The vet told us we need to put her in diapers at night, but with everything else going on I'd forgotten. Now came the interesting part, trying to diaper a reluctant dog in the dark. I would get half of it on and she'd take off across the bed. At one point, I realized I was diapering her head. Finally, I had her pinned down and the diaper on, when the television suddenly came blaring on. Barry shot up in alarm just as I fell out of bed. I sat on the floor beside the bed and started to cry.

Have you ever had one of those days when you've just had enough? If you have to do one more load of laundry or find one more recipe for chicken or take one more kid to a sports practice you might just physically combust. What I went through in those few days was nothing compared to what many women have to face, but I felt overwhelmed and had had enough. I think of a dear friend. What she deals with on a daily basis is hard for me to imagine. She is wheelchair bound and has to rely on others for everything. She has no family where she lives, and she is dependent on local health workers to bathe her, bring her food, and every other thing that I can do by myself without thinking about it. She, like me, and like you I imagine, wants to live a life that's honoring to God, and yet she's told me sometimes it feels as if it's not enough, that *she's* not enough.

As I sat on the floor that night feeling sorry for myself, I was tired. I'd overeaten since I'd been up during the night, I'd had to

cancel my appointment at the hair salon to get my roots done and was beginning to resemble a skunk, and, once more, I was behind in my Bible study plan. I was disappointed in myself and discouraged. All I wanted to do was get Christian's post-surgery ice cream out of the freezer and consume the whole thing. I think what discouraged me the most was the feeling of being back in the same place—again.

You see, somewhere deep inside, although I'd never admit this to anyone but you, I think I can be Super Woman. I'm too old for the tights, but the rest works. I want to be the best mom in the world. I want to be the best wife in the world. I want to honor God with every thought and every action, and I just don't. Some days I'm very aware of God's presence, and prayer and thanksgiving flow easily. Other days I open my Bible and it seems dry and prayer is hard work. I have a habit of stretching myself too thin. I want to say yes to everything and be a superhero for God.

I don't think I'm alone. I've talked to lots of women who feel let down by their lives; it's a common thread. Here's my question though: Are we discouraged because of the unrealistic expectations we put on ourselves—expecting ourselves to be what God never designed us to be? Think about it for a moment. How many times do you feel like you're not enough? It makes me wonder where we got the idea of what "enough" is. Take a typical Sunday morning: You finally get everyone ready for church, into the car, dropped off at their various classes, and flop down in your seat. At first, it's hard to enter in to the worship because of a million other things going through your head, but eventually you feel the presence of God and you focus your heart and mind. The message that morning seems to be tailor-made for you. Every Scripture speaks to you, and you leave encouraged. You remember who you really are; you're not just Sam's mom or David's wife. You are a child of God and you are loved. On the drive home, you even think up one more way to cook chicken. And then Monday comes.

Monday-Morning Jesus

What happens between Sunday and Monday? Why does it feel like Monday-morning Jesus is not as clear and present sometimes as Sunday-morning Jesus? When we leave the service on Sunday, we believe certain things to be true:

I am a child of God.

God loves me just as I am.

All things work together for good to those who love God.

God is for me.

My prayers matter.

Yet, as we move into the week, it's harder to believe that God loves us just as we are because, honestly, we don't love ourselves just as we are. There are always things we want to change about ourselves. We compare ourselves to other moms in the carpool line or at work, and we don't always come off well.

I remember Christian's first morning in second grade after we'd just moved to Dallas. I went into his classroom with all the other moms and saw that several of them were in little tennis skirts with tanned and toned legs. My legs haven't been tanned or toned since . . . well . . . never mind. One mom introduced herself to me and gave me a card (I kid you not) for Dallas's best plastic surgeon. I remember muttering something like, if I'm ever in a car accident, I'll call. Crazy stuff! Most situations are not that extreme, but I think we all do it. We compare ourselves to what we see in others, and when we do we think that we'll never be enough. What we need to remember, though, is that other women are comparing themselves to others too. It's a vicious game of smoke and mirrors and no one wins.

What about believing that all things work together for good to those who love God? What happens to that when something really

hard hits your family? How can what's happening right now be good? It's hard not to ask that question in the back of your mind: Is God really listening to my prayers, because nothing seems to be changing?

Perhaps your situation is even harder than that. You don't even feel God's presence in church. Maybe you stopped going because of something someone said to you, or you look at everyone else around you who seems to be "getting it," and you, if you're honest, don't. You may have talked about something you're struggling with in a small group, and you could tell by the reactions of others that they were shocked. Now they look at you differently. That's a very lonely, isolating place to be.

I want to say something loud and clear in the first chapter: it's okay not to be okay! The bottom line is that we were never designed to be everything to everyone. Life is hard, and we all face problems. Those who say they don't have any problems are doing one of two things:

1. Hiding their problems
2. Pretending they don't have any

I'll get back to that in a moment.

I want to be clear that this is not a self-help, feel-good-about-yourself book. That might help for a moment, but when the first storm hits every word would vanish like the morning mist. What I want us to look at is this: What does God say about who we are? Does God expect us to have it all together, and why do we always feel that there's something not quite right with everything?

For that we'll have to take a look back in our history—way, way back.

Plan A

The LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. While the man slept, the LORD God took out one of the man's ribs and closed

up the opening. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib,
and he brought her to the man.

“At last!” the man exclaimed.

“This one is bone from my bone,
and flesh from my flesh!
She will be called ‘woman,’
because she was taken from ‘man.’”

This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined
to his wife, and the two are united into one.

Now the man and his wife were both naked, but they felt no shame.
(Gen. 2:21–25)

Genesis 2 describes the creation of Adam and Eve. It’s hard to
relate to, because we’ve never experienced that kind of perfect life.
They were naked but they felt no shame. This is way more than Adam
and Eve feeling good about skinny-dipping in the Garden. This is the
way things were always meant to be. There were no barriers between
them and God. They were naked in their emotions.

No shame.

No fear.

No guilt.

No questioning.

No comparing.

No sickness.

Then everything changed. When they rebelled against God’s in-
struction to eat from any tree in the garden apart from the Tree of
Knowledge of Good and Evil, life as they knew it was shattered. In
Genesis 3:7 we read, “At that moment their eyes were opened, and
they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves

together to cover themselves.” The story continues in verse 10 when God asks Adam where he is: “He replied, ‘I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked.’”

There you have it!

Shame.

Fear.

Covering up.

Hiding.

. . . and we’ve been doing it ever since.

From that day on there has never been a man or woman born who doesn’t have to contend with these emotions. They are the legacy of plan B.

I believe (and this is my belief alone) that something of the DNA of Eden runs deep in us.

We know things should be different.

We know we should be better.

We know life should be fair.

We know that death is wrong.

We know that something is wrong with everything and we try to fix it. The truth is, we can’t.

That’s why Christ, the second Adam, came. When Christ came, He didn’t come to return earth to Eden at His birth. He came to pay the price for our rebellion and sin and make it possible for you and me, through faith in Christ, to spend eternity with Him. Then everything that was lost will be restored. Here’s a sneak preview of the greatest upcoming attraction:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the

holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, “Look, God’s home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.” (Rev. 21:1–4)

That will be a day like no other. No more death or suffering. No more cancer or disease. No more broken relationships and broken hearts. All these things will be gone forever. Hallelujah!

But, we’re not there yet. We’re living in the aftermath of the fall and that is hard. It is also important to remember that’s where we are.

It’s okay not to be okay because we’re not home yet.

It’s okay not to be enough because God doesn’t ask us to be.

What He wants is to move in—to move into our hearts and our homes, our minds and our struggles. Jesus is not a hashtag to add on to your life. He wants to be your everything.

#Jesus

I lived a good part of my life adding Jesus on as a hashtag. I didn’t mean to. I didn’t know I was doing it, but I was. Whether I was dealing with loss, or depression, or financial or relational struggles, I did my best to fix things. I tried to do better and then asked Jesus to help me. It was as if prayer was an add-on and Christ was only involved once I’d given it my best shot. This is not how we are designed to live in plan B. Even the great apostle Paul struggled to grasp this.

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul talks about a miraculous experience he had with God where he was caught up into another world, which he calls paradise. That word, *paradise*, comes from a Persian word meaning “a walled-garden.” When a Persian king wanted to convey

a great honor on a man or woman he would invite them to walk in the garden with him. It's a lovely picture of a very intimate time that Paul had with God. Perhaps Paul had a glimpse into what plan A was like, or perhaps he viewed our coming glory, but it was only for a time. Then he goes on to write about returning to the reality of plan B.

He continues to write in chapter 12 about a “thorn in the flesh” that he was struggling with. Theologians over the ages have debated what Paul's thorn was. For us here, the answer to that is not important. What matters is what God told Paul.

Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.”
(2 Cor. 12:8–9)

Paul is weak. He is not enough. He's in pain and he's asking God to fix it, to take away the weakness. God says no. Then God says these two things:

My grace is all you need.

My power works best in weakness.

The word *skolops* used in this passage can be translated as “thorn” but just as likely as “stake.” The image of a stake is one of something driven straight into the heart. Whatever it was, it cost Paul dearly. So here we have a man who had been blinded by a vision of the risen Christ (Acts 9:3–4), had been used to see countless men and women saved, and had been given the gift of a vision from God so great, so above our understanding, that he was not able to talk about it. Yet here he opened his heart to us and let us know, *I'm not okay, I'm not enough*.

God's answer to Paul is His answer to us.

My grace is sufficient; it's enough for you.

My strength works best in weakness.

What is grace? We sing about it, we say it before meals, but what is the grace of God? How does it meet our *not enough-ness*? Grace is a gift unique to those in relationship with God. No other religion offers grace.

I was in Cambodia recently working to rescue girls caught in sex trafficking and took a picture that showed the profound difference between our loving God who, in Christ, became a baby—literally took on a human shoe size—and the gods of Southeast Asia. I had been working that morning in the worst slum I’ve ever been in. The people there live in broken-down shacks over a garbage dump. When the sun shines the stench is almost unbearable. I stepped outside to take a breath of air and saw that the slum was right beside a huge, ornate, recently built temple. The ornamental pieces on the roof were covered in gold. I asked my translator why some of that money wasn’t spent on those living in abject poverty. He told me that the priests believe that the poor should not be helped as it’s their fault that they are poor. If poor people take the little they have and give it to the temple priests, they might be reincarnated in a better situation next time. They call it karma. No mercy, no grace, no hope.

When I was in seminary in London, I used to visit All Soul’s Church and listen to John Stott teach. This is how he described grace: “Grace is love that cares and stoops and rescues.” Grace is the opposite of karma. We get what we don’t deserve: the love, mercy, forgiveness of God. Grace is unmerited favor. Grace is here for you right now, in the middle of what is hard or not working. The writer to the Hebrews described it this way: “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16 ESV).

God says His grace is enough for you, but the text goes on: “for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9 NKJV). It doesn’t say, “If you’re a little short of your own strength some days, Paul, I can make up the difference.” No. It makes it clear that we are never

supposed to be strong on our own. It's only when we acknowledge our weakness that God's strength shines through and it is perfect.

This brings me back to something I said earlier, which might have sounded harsh.

The bottom line is that we were never designed to be enough. Life is hard, and we all face problems. Those who say they don't have any problems are doing one of these things:

1. Hiding their problems
2. Pretending they don't have any

When we live under the pressure of feeling we have to be enough but are disappointed with where we are, I believe we actually have three choices:

1. We stay in hiding. That's a very hopeless place to rest. It leads to feelings of despair, believing that nothing will ever get better. Despair can lead to depression or anger. It makes us close off from relationships and withdraw. Have you ever been there? I know I have. Perhaps you're in a relationship right now that's not working, and you don't know what to do. You've tried to make changes and the other person doesn't respond, so you get frustrated and angry. Maybe you're in a job you don't like and you see no way out. You feel trapped.
2. We pretend we don't have a problem. I find the level of denial in the body of Christ deeply troubling. The church should be the best place on earth to show up as you really are and tell the truth, but so often it's the opposite. We smile and say we're fine as we drag our weary hearts and unbearable burdens through the church doors, and all too often we leave the same way. Why do we pretend to be okay? Perhaps it's because we are ashamed of what's true. We don't want people to think less of us. We're

afraid they'll reject us. We think we're supposed to be okay because everyone else seems to be okay. I did it for years. When you host a live Christian talk show as I did for five years but inside you're barely hanging on by a thread, what do you do? I smiled to cover up my pain even though I was dying inside. You can be well-known but desperately alone. Pretending that we're okay when we're not leads to anxiety and fear. We're afraid someone will see the real us.

I discovered a third way:

3. We have a gut-level, honest, pour-your-heart-out conversation with God.

I held it together until I couldn't anymore. I remember a night in my bedroom where I literally soaked the floor with my tears. I was bone-tired from pretending to have it all together, from trying to be okay. So, I let God have it. I told Him I was afraid and angry and tired and sad and lonely and confused and everything else I could think of. I didn't edit myself. I just let it all out.

I believe my final words were, "I can't do this anymore."

Rather than feeling rejected by my broken outburst, I felt as if God bent down and said, "I know. I've been waiting."

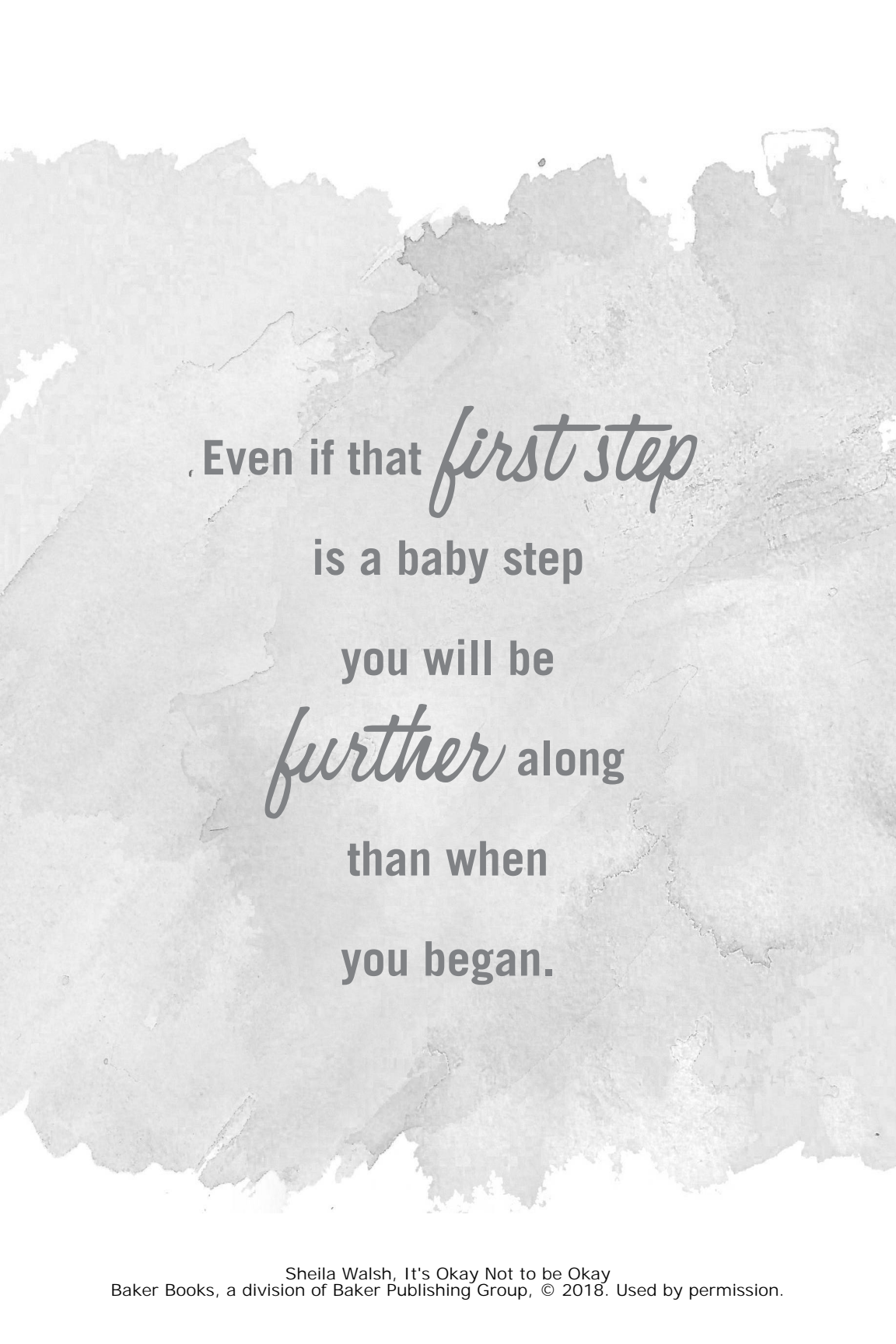
The First Step in Moving Forward

Tell God the whole truth. It doesn't matter what it is—pour it all out. It may be an affair, an addiction, an abortion. It may be that you are so disappointed, you hate where you are in life. It may be that your husband never pays attention to you or listens. Perhaps your children are a disappointment and you don't know whether to be angry with yourself or with them. Maybe you're divorced and you never signed up for the life you now have to live. Whatever it is,

God knows and invites you to take a walk with Him in the garden and tell Him the whole truth.

O my people, trust in him at all times.
Pour out your heart to him,
for God is our refuge. (Ps. 62:8)

When I began to write this book, I wanted to make it very practical, very hands-on. I've shared my own story in previous books but sometimes wonder if I left my reader with the "What now?" I want to give you more. So at the end of each chapter, I've provided tools, simple steps you might take to move forward. Choose one (or all) that makes sense to you. You may even want to write your own step that feels more authentic—but try not to rush over these. You matter! Starting anything in life is hard. The first step is the toughest. It's a choice, a commitment to change. Even if that first step is a baby step you will be further along than when you began. Ask God to help you. Invite the Holy Spirit to guide you.



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One Step at a Time

Tell God the Whole Truth

1. Have you ever thought about writing God a letter? You might be surprised by what pours out when you do. Don't edit yourself, just start. Tell God everything. There's something about the practice of writing that engages a different part of your brain. If it helps, read it out loud or read it silently yet in His presence.
2. Find a quiet place to take a walk and meditate on Psalm 61:2:

From the ends of the earth I call to you,
I call as my heart grows faint;
lead me to the rock that is higher than I. (NIV)

Even when David was exhausted, soul weary, he called out to God. I don't know where you are right now. You may have given up on God and yourself, but He has not given up on you. You may be afraid to hope again, but hope begins like a tiny drop of rain. My prayer for you is that as you keep moving forward with the tiniest of steps you will find yourself soaked to the skin.