

The story I never wanted to tell

Why did you write Zippy? I've been asked this question a lot. And the answer has so many different layers to it. The truth is that I didn't want to. I had spent so much of my life trying to hide my scars and the emotional pain they caused. It was not my choice to create a zebra without stripes. I would not have created a zebra with pain and hardships to overcome. Nor did I want to open up the discussion about my own scars.

I wanted to write fiction that would be funny and make others feel good. I wanted a headshot only on the books, so my readers would never know I was scarred. I wanted to hide and write. So I would never have to stand before someone inquiring about my scars again.

I had a plan, but God had a

purpose.

I didn't really create Zippy. God did. Zippy is a reflection of me. It's a character who tells my story.

When I was a little girl, I struggled with my scars. I tried to hide them. I tried to hide myself. I went through my life feeling unseen, unheard, and misunderstood. I got my first lesson on the power of words when a bully hurled the ugliest, most painful words at me. I wish I could tell you they bounced off me, but they didn't. They buried themselves deep inside me. For years they replayed in my mind and became evidence against my worth.

She saw me and my scars, and it disgusted her. That's the first time in my life that anyone had openly said anything negative about my scars. It was like poison. The painful words looped in my mind. I tried to hide the hurt, but it consumed me.

Thoughts that others would be better off without me started popping into my mind frequently. I started imagining ways to end the pain. It's not that I wanted to die, but I didn't know how to live

with the pain. It all felt so incredibly overwhelming.

I was afraid and ashamed to tell anyone what I was feeling. I felt so alone.

In my darkest hours, God came to me. He showed me different perspectives. He helped me to overcome the pain. He was my hope when I felt hopeless.

God saw me.

God heard me.

God understood me.

And He loved me.

So when He gave me the gift to write, He showed me how to explain the pain and the hope that only comes from Him. Zippy is not just a story to entertain. His stories are roadmaps that point children from pain to hope.

God asked me to become the person I desperately needed when I was a little girl. He sent me back into the darkness I once lived in—not to stay there, but to carry hope to the children still walking through it.

Whether we want to admit it or not, so many kids struggle with these same thoughts and feelings. When I do school visits, I use Zippy as a tool to show them that

I see them and understand what they are going through. Then I tell them my personal story of how God helped me, how He took my pain and used it for purpose.

I had an incident recently that shook me to my core. It knocked me down and had me questioning if I wanted to continue on this journey with Zippy and school visits. In my deep hurt, I wanted to quit and walk away. I asked God to show me what to do.

As I sat on my porch one evening, God allowed me to hear the cries of those suffering in the same ways I did. That's the first time I truly understood the power of what I do. He let me feel the need and understand on a deeper level.

I go through things.

I struggle.

But God shows up in my struggle and helps me learn how to overcome.

Then I write books and blog posts to explain the pain and offer hope to those suffering.

I want to tell you that God helped me, and He can help you, too.

That's why I write.

Pastor's Pen: Plans work until they don't

Most people like a good plan in all areas of their lives. We fill calendars, write schedules, make budgets, set goals, and develop itineraries. There is nothing wrong with planning. Wisdom teaches us to prepare and to be good

stewards of what God has blessed us with. But life has a way of reminding us that our plans only work until they don't. Have you ever had a day that started exactly as you intended, only to end somewhere you never imagined? A phone call can change everything. A doctor's report can rewrite the future. A job can disappear. A relationship can crumble. A storm can roll through without warning. Suddenly, the plans we carefully laid out are no longer possible.

In James Chapter 4, the scripture says, "Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that." In this scripture, James is not telling us to not prepare, he is trying to let us know to not presume everything will go as we planned.

Sometimes, interruptions are often God's invitation. What appears to be a detour to us may actually be the road He intended all along. Some of the greatest blessings in life never appear on a calendar. Some of the most valuable lessons we can learn can come through circumstances we never would have chosen on our own.

When our plans fall apart, our faith is revealed. If our confidence was only in the schedule we have made, then disappointment will overwhelm us. But if our confidence is in the God who orders our steps, then even unexpected turns become opportunities for Him to display His faithfulness. When our plans fail, let us look for where God is directing us.

God has never been surprised by what surprised you. He never has to rewrite His plan because He already knows tomorrow. Before you ever encounter a problem, He has already made provision for the answer. That is why James reminds us to say, "If the Lord will." Those are not simply words to tack onto the end of a sentence. They are not just words without weight. They acknowledge that while we may hold the calendar, have the plans, that God holds time itself.

Maybe today your plans have unraveled. Maybe what you expected this year has not happened. Maybe doors have closed that you were certain God would open. Don't lose heart. A closed door in your plans does not mean God has abandoned His purpose. Sometimes He closes the path we chose so He can lead us down the one He prepared. Remember, when our plans don't work, His still do.

May we all learn to trust His will above our own, His timing above our schedule, and His purpose above our plans. Just because things have gone awry with your plans does not mean all hope is lost. Maybe in these moments you find who God wants you to be. Don't be soon shaken when things don't work out in the manner you had planned because God likes to work in ways in which we think not. After all, plans work until they don't. Who will you lean upon during these times?

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PASTOR STEVEN TEMPLE

It seems we spend many of our journey moments waiting. We stand in line at grocery stores, banks and theaters. We sit in waiting areas to see doctors,

dentists and tax accountants. We also wait for someone to return our call, text or email. Regardless of how much time we spend waiting, we know the waiting moment is simply a part of life.

Since we all experience moments when we must wait, the question is: "What do we do to pass the time?" I have noticed many people choose to look at their cell phones while others watch a television screen.

These are positive ways to spend your time while you wait. However, let me share what I

experienced during a waiting moment several years ago. It was so unexpected I will never forget it.

I was standing in a hospital lobby waiting for a ride home when some people in the area began laughing and talking loudly. Since the weather was warm, I decided to walk to the front door and wait outside. Suddenly, a young woman came from behind me and started walking next to me. She said, "May I ask you a question?"

I stopped and turned toward the woman. She looked weary and anxious, so I quickly said yes. When she asked if I was a Christian, I told her I was, and then her tears began to fall. She shared pieces of her journey with me—how she once felt God's presence when she prayed, but how her life had changed, leaving her feeling helpless and distant from God.

She explained that several years earlier, she had fallen in love with a man her parents would not accept, and they had disowned her. She had a child by him, and now the child was sick

in the hospital. Her parents still would not come to see her or their grandchild.

Through her tears and words, I felt her brokenness. She asked if I would pray for her. I took her hand and led her outside, and we sat on a bench not far from the hospital. She told me she didn't know what to say to God.

All the time she was sharing her story, I felt God's presence, and I mentally asked God for the words to say to her. That is when I heard in my head: "tell her to repent of her sins."

As I told her the words God gave me, she quickly humbled herself and asked God to forgive all her sins, while I asked God to touch her again with the power only He could give her. We prayed until she stood up and raised her hands to God thanking Him for touching her. By this time, we both were crying. She then hugged me and thanked me for praying for her.

Before she walked back into the hospital, I asked: "Why did you stop me and ask if I was a Christian?" She smiled and replied: "When you walked into

the lobby, I saw a light around you. I thought it was a sign that God was with you, and now I know he is."

Her words touched my soul, and I will never forget that journey moment we shared. What I thought was going to be a long wait for my ride home, became an amazing journey moment shared with a stranger.

I never saw the woman again, but I know in my spirit God changed her life that day. God also touched my soul and taught me to become more aware of people He sends on my path, especially when I am in a waiting moment.

Until next time, enjoy your journey moments.

Born in a meteorite crater city in the Appalachian Mountains and residing in East Tennessee, Elaine Lambert Bailey has authored several articles which have been published in newspapers across Appalachia. Her new series opens hearts and minds to the uniqueness of our journey moments. Elaine owns Bailey Strategic Communications and can be reached at journeymomentswithelaine@gmail.com.

Eastern Ky. showing what rural renewal looks like

For years, too much of the national conversation about rural America has focused on what has been lost. Factories closed. Coal jobs disappeared. Young people moved away.

As two leaders from different parts of rural America, one a former Democratic U.S. Senator from North Dakota, the

other a Republican and President of the Kentucky State Senate, we know these challenges are real. But after spending two days traveling through communities across Eastern Kentucky with the Brookings-AEI Commission on U.S. Rural Prosperity, we came away convinced the country is still missing the bigger story. The commission, a bipartisan body examining policy solutions to rural economic decline, visited the region as part of a national series of field hearings on what is and isn't working in rural communities.

From Manchester using its

heritage and swinging bridges to attract tourists, to downtown Hazard where artists and entrepreneurs are writing a new chapter for a town long defined by coal, Eastern Kentucky stands as an example of how rural America is not standing still.

Over two days, the commission heard from local leaders in housing, higher education, health care, and philanthropy, as well as job creators, local officials, and nonprofit organizations. Despite differing perspectives, several key themes surfaced repeatedly: retaining talent, driving targeted economic investment, and confronting the substance use crisis to save lives and help people heal are key to changing the Eastern Kentucky landscape.

While these priorities may look like separate policy buckets, the strongest consensus centered on people, and the recognition that economic renewal is fundamentally tied to taking care of the residents who power these communities.

We see this reality playing out vividly across numerous counties, including Clay, Leslie, Harlan and Breathitt, among others, where outmigration has historically

taken a toll as coal jobs vanished. For too long, a negative national narrative, the rise in substance use, and a lack of diversified employers left the region vulnerable.

Rather than accept decline, local leaders are intentionally mobilizing resources to reverse these dynamics through innovative nonprofit organizations. One example is 1 Clay County (ICC), a nonprofit whose vision is to transform downtown Manchester into a hub of commerce, tourism, and community life.

Moving a region forward requires a strategy that pairs infrastructure investment with a deep commitment to the health and safety of its people. On the economic side, this means securing millions of dollars in state funding, but the leaders at ICC will also tell you that fixing utility lines and buildings only gets you halfway there; you also have to invest in the people who will actually sustain it. In Eastern Kentucky, addressing substance use disorder is a critical pillar of workforce development. By confronting the trauma and intergenerational challenges of addiction head-on, communities

can heal families while actively restoring and retaining their workforce.

Rural communities are not failing because of a lack of effort, but because systems built in Washington, D.C. fail to fit rural realities. True renewal happens when policymakers appropriate the necessary resources but remain hands-off enough to trust local leaders to design and execute the projects that fit their unique needs.

Eastern Kentucky is proving something important to the rest of the country: renewal is possible when communities have the leadership, institutional support, and flexibility to shape their own future.

It is a lesson the Brookings-AEI Commission on U.S. Rural Prosperity intends to carry to policymakers in the nation's capital and beyond.

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