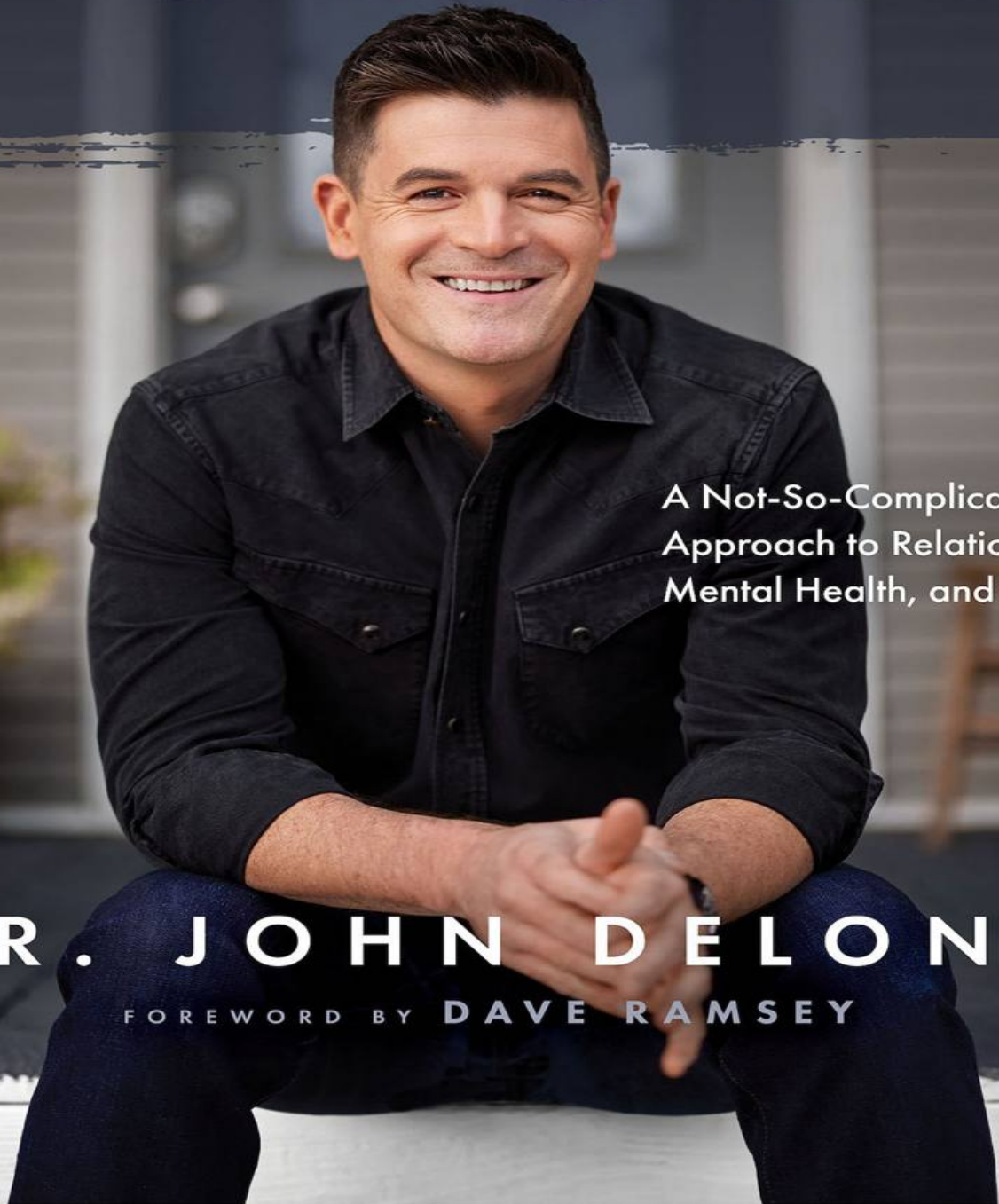


NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

OWN YOUR
PAST
CHANGE YOUR
FUTURE



A Not-So-Complicated
Approach to Relationships,
Mental Health, and Wellness

DR. JOHN DELONY

FOREWORD BY DAVE RAMSEY

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*For God gave us not a spirit of fearfulness;
but of power and love and discipline.*

—2 TIMOTHY 1:7 ASV

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To Sheila.

You hold up my arms when I am weary. You bring me true joy and you have healed my heart—I love you. Here's to many more adventures.

To Hank and Josephine.

My love for you two has no end. It is my highest honor to be in the arena, covered by dust and sweat and blood, trying to do my part to make your world a little bit better. Every day I thank God that he picked me to be your dad. May we always remember to stay a bit wild.

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FOREWORD BY DAVE RAMSEY

I am continually amazed at the human spirit. Our spirits are unbelievably tender, fragile, and can be scarred. At the same time, our spirits are unbelievably strong and resilient.

Over the last thirty years, I've walked with tens of thousands of individuals and families overcoming their financial stresses. I've found that money is just one way people experience stress. Many people are often overcoming all kinds of other life stresses all at the same time. And I'm always impressed with the power that folks can have in their lives when they *believe* they can change and *choose* to make their stresses and scars their strength.

If you're reading this book, you've experienced some sort of trauma in your life, and I'm not saying that because I'm judging you or because it's some prerequisite. It's because you're human! We've all been through something hard. We all have some sort of crazy in our family. (I like to joke that if you don't, then it just might be you!) We've all had lies told to us by well-meaning people or lies told about us by not-so-well-meaning people. And the list of hurts goes on and on. All of these things have damaged us in some way. Unfortunately, we can't change our past. But we *can* change our future.

Winston Churchill said, "Out of intense complexities, intense simplicities emerge." The hurt and hopelessness we carry from our past can be intensely complex. But from it, the intense simplicity of truth can emerge. And truth is powerful. It's intense enough to cut through the complex and simple enough to make things clear. In this book, Dr. John Delony introduces truth to the equation of our past traumas and gives us

a simple, clear path forward. Through personal stories and research, he shows us how the intense simplicity of truth can transform our hurts to healing and our hopelessness to hopefulness.

If you're not familiar with Dr. Delony, you're in for a treat. The first time I met Dr. Delony, I was immediately taken aback by his quick wit, authenticity, and unbelievable intellect. As we've worked together several years and have become friends, my respect for him has grown. His compassion and genuineness as he reaches into peoples' lives and helps them are astounding.

As you read these pages, you'll experience that same compassion, authenticity, and wit. You'll laugh. You'll cry. Your thoughts and actions will be challenged. And if you take the steps Dr. Delony outlines, you will be transformed. He will help you apply truth and hope to your life stories and write new ones—better ones.

The incredible thing about your stories is that, as long as you're breathing, your stories are being written. The question is: Who's doing the writing? Dr. Delony will give you the framework to help you pick up the pen and take the writer's seat. He'll help you put pen to paper, so to speak, and author new stories for your life that aren't warped by pain or disappointment or manipulation. You'll be able to move forward and live out new stories based on the truth of who you are and who you want to be.

So often we hear the phrase “controlling the narrative” and we immediately think of manipulative politicians or media. Don't be confused. That's not what owning your stories and writing new ones is about. It's not some public relations skill. It's about being honest with yourself and doing the emotional, physical, relational, and spiritual work that only you can do. It's about taking control of all-things you for the sake of you. It's about the legacy you want to leave. It won't be easy, but it will be worth it.

I'm excited for what will happen as you own your past and change your future!

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• PART 1 •

The Stories Are the Problem

CHAPTER 1

When Things Fall Apart

I quietly slipped out of my bedroom, careful not to wake my wife or young son. I grabbed a cheap plastic flashlight from the kitchen and silently undid the deadbolt on the back door. Wearing only my boxer briefs, I stepped outside into the backyard. It was pitch black as I waved the faint light back and forth in the rain to try and help my eyes focus.

We were coming out of the hottest Texas summer on record and clawing our way out of a devastating, statewide drought. There was a historical loss of agriculture and farming, and many of the lakes were holes of clay and dust. Everywhere I went, all anyone was talking about was the heat and how bad we needed rain.

Secretly, I was the only guy in the state praying for it to *not* rain. I know—selfish and lame. Of course I didn't want the drought to continue, but I couldn't afford to have my house collapse down around me either.

I probably should have led with this: I was certain my new house was falling down.

Shortly after my wife, infant son, and I moved into our new home, I began to notice cracks in the Sheetrock walls, spidering cracks above the doors, and tiny concrete cracks in the foundation. You had to look close to see them, but if you knew where to look, they were everywhere. I figured if it started raining, the sudden shift in soil moisture could split the foundation of my home, pour in through the cracks, and wreck me financially.

For years I'd been jolting awake in the middle of the night, never sleeping uninterrupted for more than a few hours. I was exhausted but used to it—this was just life. So on this particular night, it wasn't a surprise when my eyes popped open at 3:00 a.m., my heart pounding in my chest. But I *was* surprised to hear the water banging the roof and windows: the rain was here.

I stutter-stepped through the darkness on my toes, making my way to the side of the house. When I'd almost reached the far corner, I dropped down onto my hands and knees behind the cheap suburban boxwoods framing the flowerbeds. I shoved the flashlight in my mouth and crawled the rest of the way on all fours through the mulch, weeds, and mud.

My head near the ground, I was tracing the line where the concrete foundation met the flowerbed. Inch by inch, I crawled through the rain and dirt, looking for any sort of cracks in the slab and anywhere the water could be pouring into the house.

We had moved into this beautiful red-brick ranch home about a year before. It was the quintessential suburban track home in a new development where many of our friends lived. The country was still re-learning how to breathe following the 2009 economic collapse, and I had been nervous to buy anything. But my wife fell in love with this house, and I believed my family deserved a home. So we bought it, and I promised myself I would try and love it too.

Shortly after moving in, I began to notice the cracks.

It started when I noticed little splinter cracks around the doors and windows. I could see grout chipping away in the kitchen and paint flaking off in the living room. Then I spotted what looked like fractures in the foundation. In a few places, the concrete itself had tiny hairline cracks, and the exterior corners were beginning to crumble.

I was filled with rage. We'd just bought the house and it wasn't even ten years old yet! *Why hadn't the previous owner disclosed the issue? How had the*

inspector missed such an important problem? How had I missed it?

My wife didn't think this was a big deal. In fact, she said she didn't really see the cracks, even though I repeatedly pointed them out to her. It was maddening. So I went to the internet, where I learned dozens of explanations and theories. Maybe the cracks were from the dry, shrinking clay soil; poor craftsmanship on the foundation slab; or cheap 2x4s milled from new forests. According to a number of different websites, my house was a disaster. The internet would tell me anything I wanted to hear.

Over the course of a few months, I invited several different buddies over. I'd show them around and point out every crack. There. And there. And over here. They would always mumble something about "settling is normal, man" or "your house looks really great."

I called different contractors out. They would show up with a mustache, dip cup, and an extended-cab truck. They'd walk around, measure things, and sigh heavily. But they found nothing. They all gave the house a clean bill of health. One told me to call back in a few years.

The contractors wouldn't take my money.

They were idiots. Incompetent. Liars.

Or maybe they felt sorry for me. After all, I was a young husband and father who had been suckered into buying a broken-down house. I was an embarrassment. Maybe they just didn't have the heart to tell me.

Finally, I called Todd, one of my best friends in the world. His dad was an architect, and Todd had grown up on construction sites. I was confident he'd know what I was talking about. He loaded up his family and drove three hours in the nightmarish heat to come check out my house.

I walked him around the house and out to the driveway. He listened quietly and soaked up my rambling explanations. After a while he turned, looked at me, and spoke directly and firmly—as only a good friend can.

“Delony, your house is good. It’s strong. What you’re seeing is cosmetic. The cracks are completely normal and there’s not even that many,” he said. “Dude, this conversation is over.”

I was deflated yet resolute. I trusted my friend but I also knew that even the smartest people could be wrong sometimes. I could see the cracks in my house and no amount of disbelief from experts or friends or my wife could convince me that I wasn’t seeing what I knew I was seeing.

Problem was, I wasn’t just seeing cracks at my house. I was starting to see cracks everywhere.

Coming Unhinged

Outside of the problems with my house, my life was a chaotic blur.

I was a human hurricane, held together by a dress shirt and tie.

I was a senior student affairs administrator at a remarkable little university. One of my roles was leading the housing department, which meant I was responsible for the dorms—millions of dollars, countless employees, and thousands of college students. Every year, parents dropped off their kids on campus, and it was me and my team’s job to take care of them. We taught them how to get along with strangers, how to turn the corner into adulthood, and we worked hard to create community and a home away from home. We were good at it.

But when thousands of young adults from all over the country move away from everything and everyone they know, and all pile into giant brick residence halls together, things get messy. When they did, I was often the guy who got called.

Students got wasted and ended up in the hospital. There were drugs and fights. Sickness. Attempted suicides. Car wrecks. Failing grades. Getting kicked off the team. Rape and sexual assault. Students or their parents passing away. Massive, paralyzing amounts of debt.

These kinds of challenges don't have office hours, and neither did I. My job never ended. I lived on a merry-go-round.

When the ambulance showed up, when someone needed to call Mom and Dad to let them know their child was hurting, in jail, or in a psychiatric ward, I was often the guy to make that call.

I was the guy people wanted around when the wheels were falling off. And I liked being that guy. I liked being in the know, and I liked figuring out ways to point people to the help they needed.

I was both good at my job and pretty arrogant about how good I was. I loved speeding through town at all hours of the night. I was honored to meet with police officers for drug searches and talk with hospital staff in the wee hours of the morning. I was gifted at sitting with hurting people and walking them through their darkest moments. Then I would roll out of bed the next morning, check my phone, squeeze in a workout, and start all over again.

In my day job, I was the one bringing the chaos. It was always budgets or personnel issues or student concerns or yet another board meeting.

I felt like my head was on fire.¹

I said yes to everyone and everything.

Want to go to a leadership program at Harvard? Yes.

Can you leave your brother's wedding early to deal with a student death? On it.

Who can lead this new department? I'm your guy.

Can you teach one more graduate course? Done.

Interested in a second PhD? Absolutely.

Want to present your research at professional and academic conferences? For sure.

Texting, more texting, emails, clicking, notifications. Grade the papers. Write the papers. Pick up diapers. Keep moving. Keep fighting. Run, run, run. Do it all. And it was *a lot*.

I was married to a brilliant professor and scholar. She did her best to both live life with me and strategically avoid me. I was like living with a taser. After years of struggling with infertility, we finally had a new baby and we were trying to figure out how to be happy. We were juggling kid and careers, not sleeping, and setting up childcare—all while trying to be present for each other. And by “we” I mean “her.” Sheila did most of the juggling. I was just plowing ahead.

Around this time I was also done with my faith. I didn’t really believe in God anymore, and I was through with any sort of organized religion. But I worked at a faith-based university, so belief and organized religion were part of the job. I was trying my best to muscle through the motions in order to keep my job, my wife, and my community. Every day, I put my head down to grind it out, often struggling to believe the words that were coming out of my mouth.

I was a fake. A charlatan.

Oh yeah, and my physical body? From the outside, I was in great shape. I ran, lifted, supplemented, and tried every diet under the sun. Vegetarian. Raw vegan. Keto. Only protein shakes. Super high fat. Fasting. Atkins. You name it, I dragged my poor wife through it.² I was never consistent, always believing I just needed the one magic program or diet or combination. I’d often end up mainlining a box of cereal and a bag of gummy candies, only to declare that *tomorrow* I’d find the right new plan! I’d spend ten days on a new program, quit, and move on to the next.

And like I mentioned before, I didn’t sleep very much. More accurately, I couldn’t.

Years prior, I’d started taking sleep meds after my mixed martial arts training sessions went late into the night. I could train until 10:00 p.m., get home, take a pill, and slip out of consciousness with very little effort. But being unconscious is different than restorative sleep. Way different. So after years of pushing my body to the edge and then chemically

knocking myself out and pretending it was sleep, my body had started to eat itself.

But I kept getting promoted, and I kept getting more responsibilities. I kept getting recognized. For the most part, I was pulling off my attempt at living a frenetic, nonstop life.

Or I thought I was.

This is right around the time I started noticing the cracks in the foundation of our home. I was noticing cracks in the walls and foundations of my friends' homes. And in the buildings at work. And in my faith heritage. And in my marriage. And in the economy, higher education, politics—everywhere.

I became obsessed with cracks. They haunted me. Nobody else wanted to acknowledge them, so I felt it was up to me to figure them out. And I *needed* to figure them out.

The more I looked for cracks, the more I found them.

And this is how I ended up in the middle of the night, soaking wet, crawling around in muddy flower beds in my underwear, looking for the water seeping into the foundation of my home.

Except . . .

There was no seeping. No leaking. I was on my hands and knees and I couldn't find water rushing into the cracks. There were cracks, but they weren't what I thought they were.

My house wasn't falling apart.

I was.

I'll never forget sitting down in the mud that night and taking the flashlight out of my mouth. I blinked my eyes for a moment, trying to clear the rain that was dripping from my eyelashes.

I started to laugh. And then I started to cry. I was laughing and crying at the same time. I was so exhausted, and so tired of being tired.