

# THE Encourager

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DAVE DRAVECKY'S OUTREACH OF HOPE



## Who Am I Now?

by Dave Dravecky

*The surgeon's work completed, my arm and what it was capable of doing was gone forever. All of a sudden I found myself in no-man's land. I didn't know who I was. I didn't know who I was supposed to be.*

DAVE DRAVECKY  
THE WORTH OF A MAN

**B**attling cancer is hard enough, but for many survivors, and I am one, cancer leaves us with an even tougher battle to fight. That battle has to do with our identity. When the storm of cancer sweeps into our lives, the landscape can change dramatically. Everything familiar may be wiped away or changed beyond recognition. So some of us come out of cancer as very different people. We may have lost the relationships, skills, and resources that have been an essential part of who we are and have given us a sense of joy and purpose in living.

When I lost my arm, I lost my career, my position, and my sense of identity. All I had ever done was play baseball. Who was I if I was not a pro baseball player? It was a long, painful, and difficult journey to identify the real Dave Dravecky.

For me, that journey did not begin right away. Part of the reason is because I

didn't grieve the loss of my arm. It would have been the natural, healthy thing to do. Instead, I had a cavalier attitude about it. Before surgery I jokingly waved the arm in the air, pretending that it was saying goodbye. Even after the amputation, the reality of what I was missing didn't sink in. I was afraid to face how I really felt.

Nonetheless, I was a changed person. The questions of who I was, why I was here, and what I was supposed to do could not be held at bay. I was surprised to discover that so much of my identity was wrapped up in that arm and what it had been capable of doing. It had brought me joy. It had brought me money. It had brought me status, nice homes, and nice cars. On the outside, I continued to adjust to my new "normal" life. But inside it was a different story. Until I came face to face with the personal losses that came with the physical loss of my arm, I was

awash in a storm of denial, depression, and confusion.

So in this issue of *The Encourager*, we are going to share the experiences of people who have, in one way or another, faced a loss of identity. Not all of these people are cancer survivors. Individuals and caregivers who deal with long-term illness or disability (as well as people who go through a change of location, social status, or family circumstances) may experience similar life-changing losses. No matter how our loss of identity occurs, we can't just "go on" with life as if everything is fine. If I have learned anything through my struggles, it is that ignoring the loss is a recipe for disaster. The recipe for going on with life successfully begins when we honestly recognize and grieve our losses. Only then are we ready to redefine and rebuild our identity. (But we'll save that for the next issue).

# Who Am I Now?

## Assessing the Damage After the Storm

*My days have passed, my plans are shattered,  
and so are the desires of my heart.*

JOB 17:11

At what she calls “the naive age of 20,” Sally quit school to marry her college sweetheart, Wayne DeRue. Wayne was a natural leader who rose through the ranks to become a U.S. Air Force Colonel. As is true for many military wives, Sally’s life revolved around that of her husband. During his 29-year military career, the family moved 17 times, including a stint overseas. Between the frequent moves, the demands of raising a family, and the expectations of her as an officer’s wife, Sally never had the time or opportunity to develop an identity of her own.

Although Sally accepted her role as “Colonel DeRue’s wife” with little complaint, she always looked forward to their life after the military. She was eager to live in the same house for more than two years. She hoped to finish college or pursue some of her own dreams. She anticipated a change, but she had no idea of the storm that headed her way with gale force intensity.

A mere two weeks before his retirement ceremony, Wayne was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive form of abdominal cancer. Sally remembers the next ten months as a complete blur. Overnight, she changed from being “Colonel DeRue’s wife” to being “Wayne’s caregiver.” Instead of enjoying their much-anticipated retirement, Wayne and Sally embarked on a four-year battle. “We went from diagnosis to surgery to treatment to survival.” During that time, Sally cared for Wayne, comforted him, and this past summer, she buried her husband of 33 years.

Sally views the past four years as “living in survival mode.” The daily struggle of living with cancer—the doctor’s appointments, insurance claims, pharmacy runs, physical therapy, keeping track of medications and dosages, updating friends and family on new developments—in addition to the daily chores of running a home and family leaves precious little time to process what is happening. Because her loss and grief is so fresh, Sally admits that she hasn’t gotten to the point of facing all the losses. When you’re going through it, “You don’t have time to think about what you’ve lost, to think about the future, to think about the loss of your dreams.” That comes later.

The process of redefining who she is now that she’s not an officer’s wife or a caregiver is still ahead for Sally. She knows it won’t be easy. Being an officer’s wife and mother makes it difficult to establish strong personal goals. Like many others who live through a period of adversity and loss, Sally is just beginning to become acquainted with personal issues that have been long forgotten or placed on the back burner.

Yet Sally is determined to move forward. “I don’t know who I am now or where I’m going,” she admits, “but I’m just going to get through today, and tomorrow, and then God will show me the way.” Admitting her loss, she believes, is the first step in allowing God to fashion a new identity for her.

*When you’re  
going through it,  
you don’t have time  
to think about what  
you’ve lost.*



## What Am I Worth?

*Our worth stems not from what we have or what we do or what we control or whom we know, but from what God has done for us and in us. This was great news to me, because I always felt that my worth stemmed from my performance—if I performed well, I was worth a lot; if I messed up, I wasn’t worth much. But when I finally started to discover that my worth wasn’t tied even a little to my abilities or my performance, but rather depended entirely and forever on what God had already done in me and for me, my world suddenly opened up. I was free!*

DAVE DRAVECKY  
THE ENCOURAGEMENT BIBLE

# Who Am I Now That I Can't Be Who I Need to Be?

*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us,  
that we should be called children of God!  
And that is what we are!*

1 JOHN 3:1

As a psychologist and hospital chaplain, Dr. Ari Shreffler was well aware of the challenges of battling advanced colon cancer. No academic training or clinical experience, however, could prepare her for the impact cancer would have on her personal life. First she dealt with the radical surgery that left her with a permanent ileostomy. For months, aggressive chemotherapy and radiation rendered her completely exhausted and bedridden. Then a long and difficult recovery robbed her of what little energy she had, leaving her with nothing to give to her husband and sons.

As she reflects back on the losses of her battle with cancer, Dr. Shreffler views the loss of time with her family—especially the irreplaceable time lost with her 13- and 15-year-old sons—as a far greater loss than the physical loss of her colon. Losing one's colon is indeed a difficult, life-changing event, but being unable to function as a mother was absolutely devastating.

Many people, especially those who are still raising children, have a similar experience. As one mother said, “You simply aren't available for all of their needs, events, questions, celebrations, and growing pains. You know that those precious moments are gone forever, but there is no way to make up the time that is lost.” The inability to function in these very important areas of life is a crushing blow.

Whenever we lose the ability to function and carry out our daily duties and responsibilities or to participate in the

activities that give us a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment, our self worth takes a beating. We live in a world where our worth is often measured by what we do, so our failure to produce or perform—regardless of the reason—is synonymous with failure. And often that failure translates into a crippling feeling of worthlessness.

But God has a completely different point of view. He doesn't measure our worth in terms of our productivity. Instead, He bases our worth on something that cannot change—our heritage as His offspring.



*The truth of our worth  
doesn't always  
filter down to our  
sense of worth.*

Just as parents love and value their children regardless of the child's physical, emotional, or spiritual state, God's love and perception of our worth never changes. It doesn't matter whether we are whole or broken, functioning or floundering. We are still God's children, made in His glorious image. Our value to God

cannot be diminished. This truth is an anchor that holds secure no matter how fiercely the storms of adversity swirl around us.

Dr. Shreffler learned, however, that the *truth of our worth* doesn't always filter down to our *sense of worth*. At any given time there may be a vast difference between our God-given worth and our feelings of worth. Part of the reason is because God designed us to work and be productive. In Genesis 2:15, God put Adam in the Garden of Eden to work it, to take care of it. When we are unable to work, to take care

of the things God has given us to do, it is understandable that we feel a sense of loss. What's difficult for us to remember is that we have experienced a loss of *work* not of *worth*. Although we may view our worth in terms of our work, God doesn't. He always views our worth in terms of our position as His children, and that never changes.

Because of our perspective rather than God's perspective, it's quite natural to struggle with our sense of self worth after we suffer a loss of our ability to work. Dr. Shreffler did. Dave Dravecky did. But what a liberating discovery it is as Dave says, “to learn that our true worth is found in who we are, not in what we do.”

As Dr. Shreffler grew to trust the God who loved and valued her unconditionally, a whole new world opened up for her. She still had overwhelming losses to grieve. She still had a long list of things she could not do, but she discovered that she could always chose to focus on the God who promises to one day redeem all of our losses. By changing her focus, she discovered something else:

If we allow God to take what we have and use it for His glory, even with all of the losses and all of the pain, He will do amazing things—things we could never imagine! It's really not about us; it's about Him. I've needed to learn to come out of myself and allow myself to be a lowly servant of God. If God can use the raven, a quail, and a donkey, God can use a handicapped woman from New York. God can use anyone if we let Him!

# Who Am I When Life Spins Out of Control?

Few of us like the out-of-control feeling that comes with change, but life is rarely as predictable or controllable as we would like. Our health fails, a loved one dies, a relationship is broken, a job ends. One moment we feel safe, secure, and in control. We know who we are and how we fit into life. The next moment everything changes. We're unable to manage our time, activities, relationships, emotions, and decisions. We lose our sense of identity and purpose. We feel helpless, confused, and scared.

Changes that limit our ability to “call the shots” in daily life often have a dramatic impact. After discovering her husband’s secret drug addiction, one nurse said, “I went from making critical, life-saving decisions on a daily basis to not being able to decide which shoes to wear. I felt completely incapacitated.” The inability to make daily decisions and the uncertainty of not being able to function “normally” can threaten our well-being and sense of identity.

Jan Dravecky remembers fighting to hang onto control—to hang onto her life and identity as she had known it—while her life spiraled out of control. “Each time I’d get knocked down,” she writes in *A Joy I’d Never Known*, “I’d say, ‘Okay, I’m going to be strong.’” Like a weary prizefighter, “I would pull myself up by my own power, by my own strength. But I couldn’t stand up under the unceasing blows: Dave’s cancer, his retirement, his recurrent illness, my parents’ deaths, Paul’s (a close friend) suicide, our unrelenting schedule. Finally I told God, ‘I can’t do it anymore. I can’t do this.’”

Most of us, like Jan, don’t surrender control until we have no other option, until we’re at the end of our rope.

Although surrendering control is never easy, the benefits are more than worth it. When we finally surrender, when we admit to God that we aren’t in control, that we no longer know who we are, and that we need His help, something amazing happens. Peggy, a recovering cardiac bypass patient, describes it as an immediate feeling of relief. “As soon as you give up the situation, a complete peace washes over you,” she says. “You realize that God is in control, He is good, and He will take care of you. You can relax and rest in His protection, knowing that He is in total control.”

Jan agrees. The more she surrendered control to God and let Him work out the problems and show her who He created her to be, the more she saw that God could do a better job with her life than she could. “I’m so glad that my life didn’t follow my plan, that it followed God’s,” she writes. “Things turned out so much better than I would have planned them.”

Even so, surrendering control isn’t a one-time event. “The peace that comes from giving your situation to God can come and go,” Peggy explains. “It’s like scrambled eggs. You have to work to keep them from running all over the frying pan! It takes a conscious effort to keep your anxious thoughts and worries corralled and surrendered to God.”

It not only takes work to surrender control to God, it takes courage, especially if you’re a “recovering control freak” like Jan. She knows that God wants us to trust Him outside of the plan we have for our lives, but that’s a scary step. Life becomes an adventure when you give up control, Jan says, “because you don’t know what God is going to do next.” Yet she can say with confidence that “everywhere He has led us has ultimately been what is best for us and for His kingdom.”

Despite the feelings of uncertainty, giving up control enables us to receive untold blessing. We benefit from God’s companionship because giving up control requires ongoing communication with Him. We receive God’s peace because we let Him carry our burdens. We find God’s rest because we can trust Him to work out the master plan for our lives. Plus we learn to walk confidently in our true identity as God’s children, an identity that is unchanged by the winds of adversity.



***“Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD. . . . But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”***

JEREMIAH 17:5, 7,8



***Oswald Chambers once wrote, “Beware of harking back to what you once were when God wants you to be something you’ve never been.” If we allow God to work through our losses, He will always teach us something that will bring us closer to Him and make us more like Him. And that is anything but loss.***

## Who Am I When It Seems God Has Forgotten Me?

For more than a decade he was Tom the fireman. Then his wife got a new job that required their family to move more than a thousand miles away. Tom had no doubts that it was God's plan for his wife to take the new job, so he trusted God to work out the details of his job.

But firemen don't transfer, so it wasn't easy to get a new job. Openings were few and far between. Even experienced applicants had to test for every job. Weeks, months, then years passed. Tom the fireman became Tom the waiting man, then Tom the mechanic, then Tom the construction man, then Tom the depressed man.

Tom knew God had a plan for his life, fireman or not. But not seeing that plan work out as he welded steel in the snow day after day took its toll. Although he knew better, Tom felt as if God had forgotten him.

Urged on by his wife and close friends, Tom began to explore his troubling feelings. He knew intellectually that he was God's child, but he felt abandoned and lost. As he honestly expressed painful feelings to his wife and friends, their loving and supportive response reminded Tom that God hadn't forgotten him. He began to see that the love of his wife and friends was an expression of God's love for him. He realized that although he had lost God in the fog of depression, God hadn't lost him. He was and always would be God's child.



## Who Am I Now? When a Friend Suffers a Loss of Identity

*Comfort, comfort my people,  
says your God.*

ISAIAH 40:1



When we face a loss of identity, we don't need someone to give us a list of "right things to do." Instead, we need a friend with a gracious and understanding heart who can say, "I care for you and accept you where you are today. I'm not here to 'fix' you, but I do want to comfort and encourage you as you journey through this place of sadness." The principles below remind us of the heart attitudes that can help comfort a hurting friend.

**Minimize Minimizing.** One of the most frustrating experiences is to be with a person who downplays loss, minimizes pain, or ignores it altogether. Peggy Skattebo, who faced her own grief and loss of identity during her husband's cancer battle, expressed the feelings of many when she said, "There were times I just wanted to scream out, 'Can't anybody see how difficult this is for me?'"

**Listen, Just Listen.** After his amputation, Dave Dravecky says he "gravitated toward people who were good listeners." For someone who faces a serious loss, such as a loss of identity, it means so much when "somebody just sits there and listens without trying to give an answer or fixing how you feel. There is so much comfort when they just accept what you have to say and let you lay it out there on the table." Be careful not to judge your friend's feelings or expression of emotion. It is a privilege that your friend trusts you enough to be emotionally vulnerable and honest with you.

**Tons of Time.** Passersby on a city street corner were recently asked how long it takes to grieve the loss of a loved one. Their answer? Two weeks! No wonder those who face grief and loss feel alone. Our society doesn't understand the pain of working through the death of a loved one, much less the pain of dealing with other significant losses in life. So give your friend time to work through the losses of a changing identity. If your friend gets stuck in a particular aspect of the loss, it may be appropriate to suggest counseling, but resist the urge to become impatient with the grieving process.

**Be a Prepared Participant.** The journey through loss takes many twists and turns, so it's helpful to understand what the process may look like. After the initial shock, most people experience emotional numbness, confusion, anger, and physical problems such as headaches or abdominal ailments. They may also experience depression, apathy, decreased memory and cognitive function, and feelings of despair. To make matters more interesting, your friend may exhibit all of these symptoms in the span of an hour! It can be helpful to talk with others who are farther down the road in dealing with a similar loss so that you can better understand what your friend may be facing.

**Forget Fixing.** Resist the urge to offer solutions. Trying to "fix" the pain of another person's loss is really trying to meet our own need for closure or relief. There is no magic solution to wipe away the pain of loss. Pain dissipates as it is felt, as tears are shed, as adjustments are made, as we allow God to heal us. It is a tremendous blessing to have a comforting friend through this process. It is helpful to remember that Isaiah 40:1 doesn't say, "Fix, fix my people." It says, "Comfort, comfort my people."

For suggestions on helping a friend who is hurting, we recommend *Stand by Me*, by Dave and Jan Dravecky. To order, see the order envelope in this issue, order online [www.OutreachOfHope.org](http://www.OutreachOfHope.org), or call 719 481-3528.

# Facing the Pain of Our Losses

*The only way to heal from the pain of losses suffered is to go through the pain. There's no way around it. We can stuff it. We can dodge it. But eventually we will have to face it.*

JAN DRAVECKY

From our earliest days of life, we humans avoid pain. We pull our inquisitive fingers away from the hot stove. We avoid fights with the schoolyard bully. We wear seatbelts, kneepads, and helmets. We don't run with scissors. We quickly learn that some pain is avoidable, and we conveniently conclude that all pain is (or should be) avoidable.

Unfortunately, our conclusion is false. When the winds of adversity wreak havoc on our lives, loss and pain *will* result. What do we do when the pain and loss mounts up? Being the pain-avoiders that we are, we sometimes refuse to deal with it; we try to run away. Some of our favorite strategies are to get busy, get around it, or get numb. Consider for a moment how these strategies play out in the aftermath of suffering.

## Get Busy

After her mother's death, Jan Dravecky quickly shifted into high gear. She arranged the service, cared for the family, and tried to help her father adjust to widowhood. Three weeks after the service, Jan broke down and cried, but her sorrow was short-lived. Her father quickly reminded her that her mother always wanted her to be happy. "I knew he was right," Jan admits. "Mother always managed to steer me around any sadness, so I stuffed the pain back down. I did what a lot of people do: I got busy."

Following the amputation of his arm, Dave Dravecky "got busy" too. Instead of focusing on his own loss, he spent five days walking from room to room in the cancer ward encouraging other patients. On the surface he was serving others, but

"deep down inside of me there were issues I simply didn't want to face." It wasn't a conscious deception, but Dave now realizes that when he was involved in others people's lives, it was easier to set aside his own struggles.

## Get Around It

Denial is a common coping mechanism by which we behave, think, or feel as if some reality about us simply isn't true. Denial takes an eraser to our loss so we can avoid its impact on our lives. Denial can serve a positive purpose in the early days of a devastating loss because it enables us to begin facing our loss in bite-size chunks rather than as an overwhelming whole. The problem is, it's tempting to stay in denial.

Cancer survivor and psychologist Dr. Ari Shreffler knew the truth about denial from a professional perspective, but when the application turned personal, she struggled just like anyone else. Dr. Shreffler was married to a phenomenal, compassionate, Christian psychologist. Unfortunately, the husband of one of his patients became enraged when the doctor encouraged his patient to leave the couple's drug-addicted lifestyle. Without warning, the deranged man barged into the Shreffler home. He shot and killed Ari's husband and their two sons. Then he shot Ari seven times and left her for dead. As a mental health professional, Dr. Shreffler knew she needed to face the devastating loss of her family, yet it took eight and a half years to deal with the loss. "Even with all the counseling experience I had and all the degrees on my wall, I buried my pain."



## Get Numb

Dr. Shreffler had help burying her pain. The deadly assault on her family left her without a bladder and without the use of her legs. The unrelenting pain of her wounds required "mega doses of morphine" for the first eight years after the shooting. The medication masked her physical pain, but it also masked her emotional pain.

Masking pain is one way we avoid dealing with our losses. While it may work initially, masking our pain creates more problems in the long run. Many people get trapped in various types of addiction disease because we "self-medicate," meaning we consume as much of our chosen numbing agent (drugs, alcohol, food, work, etc.) as we need to numb ourselves to the presence of our pain. That is one reason alcoholism and drug dependence are such widespread health problems.

Our instinctive tendency to avoid pain has serious long-term consequences if we choose to continue avoiding it rather than dealing with its source. Psychologist John Townsend, in his book *Hiding from Love*, cautions that when we run from our pain, "what needs attention or repair in our hearts goes neglected. And what is broken gets more broken over time." When we run, when we bury our pain, we begin a downward spiral—from initial pain to woundedness, to retreat, isolation, depression, spiritual apathy, and much greater pain.

Gerald Sittser, who lost his mother, wife, and daughter in a tragic car accident, was so overcome by anguish and emptiness that he wanted to run and keep running. But in his book, *A Grace Disguised*, he describes how he was compelled to face his losses: “Since I knew that the darkness was inevitable and unavoidable, I decided . . . to walk into the darkness rather than try to outrun it, to let my experience of loss take me on a journey wherever it would lead, and to allow myself to be transformed by my suffering rather than to think I could somehow avoid it.”

That is a truth recent widow Sally DeRue is discovering day by day. “Some days the loss is totally overwhelming. I have to just go with it. If I feel like crying, I cry. If I feel like going to sleep, I sleep. From my own knowledge and from reading books on grief and loss, I know that the worst thing a person can do is to deny those feelings. They don’t feel good, but the sooner you acknowledge the pain, the sooner you get over it. When you acknowledge it, the pain doesn’t last as long. When you stuff it, it lasts longer.”

Facing the pain of loss is never easy. If it were easy, we wouldn’t run. The loving support of family, friends, and often pastors and counselors can help us face overwhelming pain. But more important, we need a guide, an escort, who will never leave us alone in the darkness of our loss. That guide is Jesus. Described in Scripture as “a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering,” He has walked through darkness in human form. He promises to never leave us no matter how deep the darkness, no matter how overwhelming our pain. Gerald Sittser, like many others who seek Him as they journey into the darkness, discovered that He is true to His promise. “Darkness,” he writes, “had invaded my soul. But then again, so had light.”



***When you  
acknowledge it, the pain  
doesn’t last as long.  
When you stuff it,  
it lasts longer.***

SALLY DEREU



*by Kim Jones*

***He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows,  
and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up  
our infirmities and carried our sorrows.***

ISAIAH 53:3-4

In our most desperate moments, when our losses feel overwhelming and inconsolable, there is nothing more precious than being with someone with whom we can identify. I can still envision the close companionship my aunt and brother-in-law shared at a family gathering. They had met only once, years before, so I didn’t expect them to become such fast friends. But they were the only people in that room who were battling cancer, and they shared a bond that the rest of us could only imagine. They walked the same valley, understood each other’s pain. No one else could hold a candle to the encouragement they gave and received from one another.

We, too, have Someone who has walked the same valley we have. God is intimately acquainted with the landscape of our suffering. He needs no explanation of our hurt, desperation, or fear. He has felt the dust of earth’s deep valleys on his feet. He has felt in His heart the pain of great loss and suffering.

- ❖ He understands the loss of dignity. He left Heaven’s glory for a small-town stable.
- ❖ He understands the loss of position. He left Heaven’s throne to become one of His own creation.
- ❖ He understands the loss of credibility. His own family didn’t believe His claims.
- ❖ He understands the loss of honor and respect. The religious leaders who claimed to follow God despised Him and even plotted to destroy Him.
- ❖ He understands the loss of vitality and strength. Weakened by the most brutal torture, someone else had to carry His cross to Golgotha.
- ❖ He understands the loss of relationships. In His most desperate hour, all of His friends on earth abandoned Him.

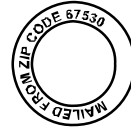
God completely understands the losses of our suffering. He understands them perfectly not only because He is all knowing but because He has experienced them personally. No one can ever understand us better.

We do not always have the freedom to choose the roles we must play in life, but we can choose how we are going to play the roles we have been given. . . . It is this power to choose that adds dignity to our humanity and gives us the ability to transcend our circumstances, thus releasing us from living as mere victims. The choices are *never easy*.

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A GRACE DISGUISED



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