

Wounds

*How hurt, heartache, and tragedy become the keys to unlocking
greatness*

By Ryan James Miller

Introduction

In April 2019, I experienced what was diagnosed as my first anxiety attack.

Sure, I'd felt anxious before. I'd had dark and lowly days. But something about that day was different. The weeks leading up to that moment weren't the best. I'd lost out on a pretty significant business opportunity that would have paid me very well over the course of the year, and I was walking through a very difficult situation with a friend regarding his marriage. Those two challenges were capped off by my most significant stressor: my business. I owned a consulting and coaching practice, and was helping a client redevelop their sales process while also coaching four of their salespeople to exceed revenue goals. This particular client was my largest, with a monthly five-figure contract. And I was on the verge of losing them.

When I woke up that day, knowing I would receive a call from my client later in the morning, I went dark. Doubt set in about my true calling, my capabilities, and even my self-worth. I tried to fight through it. I imagined retired Navy SEAL and ultramarathon runner David Goggins telling me to stop being such a little bitch, but it didn't work. It was difficult to drive the three miles to my office, but I had work to do, clients to help.

I got through one coaching call...barely. But as I got closer to talking to my client, to losing that contract, my thoughts spiraled. *How will my family pay our bills? How quickly will we be right*

back to 2013, when we lost everything? What will I tell my family? What might other people think? I cannot stomach another failure like this.

I sat in the corner of my office and curled into a ball. My body was shutting down. Physically, I felt the energy was being sucked out of me. Mentally, I had a hard time engaging the logic of what was happening. And spiritually, I cried out to God in what felt like faint whispers. I had one last option in the moment. I called my wife and begged her to pray for me. I told her what was happening and how I was feeling. She prayed on the phone with me, and she continued to pray for me throughout the day.

By God's grace, I made it through that day. My wife's prayers, along with God's Spirit, brought comfort to my soul. It also helped that when I got the call from my client later that day, it was only to discuss reconfiguring the execution of our work, not to adjust the fees or cancel the contract.

In the days and weeks to follow, through lots of prayer and discussion with others close to me, I analyzed what happened to me that day. Was my anxiety attack simply the culmination of too much bad news in a short period of time, or was there something deeper?

Because circumstances can trigger events like the one I experienced, I realized my anxiety attack was the result of a wound...well, many wounds actually. You see, my stress over the potential loss of the client wasn't the worst thing that had ever happened to me—far from it. The potential loss was simply the emotional hit that opened up a host of old wounds. The wounds I speak of are not outward, physical cuts, scrapes, or bruises to the body. They are long-held emotional injuries that, when left untreated, fester and worsen over time.

Every human being on this earth has been wounded. You picked up this book because you understand that. Wounds deep down inside of you have been bandaged over in hopes that they would just heal on their own. But bandages do nothing for deep wounds created the moment a parent walked out of your life or when a loved one was tragically killed without notice. The self-inflicted wounds from drug and alcohol addiction don't go away just because you wish they would. And the wounds that come from familiar people and places, like church, seem particularly difficult to forget no matter how hard we try.

One might think we would be expertly equipped to deal with wounds, considering the brokenness of this world and the constant afflictions we face. From the time I was a young, like many boys, I incurred visible wounds, like deep cuts and broken bones from playing sports and crashing my dirt bike. I was often told to get up, shake it off, tape 'em up, and keep going. This is the norm, especially for boys, isn't it? So, it's no wonder that when the wounds are mental and emotional, as we grow up, we attempt to use the same prescription. I was conditioned to believe I could just dust off the hurt from my parents' divorce, bury the loss when my business nearly failed shortly after its launch, and bulldoze through the death and destruction I witnessed during the Las Vegas mass shooting.

"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" becomes the war cry for most Christians who attempt to try harder and push through trauma. But that doesn't work in the same way as resetting a broken bone. Worse, most emotional wounds are more severe than a broken bone. They are more like a compound fracture of the femur that has blown right through the thigh. And our answer to that mess is to clothe our inner turmoil in a T-shirt with Philippians 4:13 written on it. But we keep bleeding right through that shirt, continuing to writhe in pain.

Many look to anything that might take the pain away, turning to self-preservation or self-medication. Some might read another book on grittiness, watch a motivational talk about mindset, or drink until the pain numbs. None of those tactics works in the long term. The wound is left untreated, and every attempt to make the wound disappear becomes a potential contributor to one's absolute destruction.

In my case, as I got older, my wounds got bigger. And the bigger my wounds got, the harder it was to shake them off. I couldn't make them go away. Past wounds came back to haunt me, leading to more wounds, which were often self-inflicted. My wounds smoldered as I became more stressed, anxious, frustrated, and angry, and I didn't know what to do about it. By the time I was twenty-eight years old, I felt lost. Though everyone saw a successful man building a life for himself and his family, I was a broken, hollow shell of a human being.

Thankfully, that brokenness led me to discover a relationship with God. That relationship did not immediately heal my wounds. In fact, I'd incur some of my deepest wounds after becoming a Christian. Instead, my relationship with God helped to reveal my wounds and give me a process to heal from them.

Though I had been a Christian for thirteen years, my anxiety attack in 2019 was the result of defaulting back to self-medication and self-preservation. Before knowing Christ, I used social norms like alcohol, drugs, gambling, and male bravado to mask all of my pain. Leading up to my anxiety attack, I had turned to working harder, ignoring the fact that I couldn't outwork or outrun what was hurting inside. Every one of those tactics only worsened the situations, the wounds, and my overall well-being.

After my anxiety attack, reflecting back on my first encounter with Jesus reminded me that I bore my wounds for a reason—two reasons actually. The first was to coax me back into the arms of Jesus, who was always there to comfort and strengthen me. God was reminding me over and over again that I couldn't flourish on my own—I needed Him. The second reason was so God could further open my mind, to show me I could go beyond simply owning my wounds. I learned to address them, grow from them, relate to others through them, and, ultimately, leverage them to discover and hone God's calling on my life so I could achieve the greatness for which He created me.

This process became what I call the Wound-Analysis Framework, a series of three steps designed to help me deal with my spiritual and emotional wounds:

1. **Acknowledge the hurt.** The first step is to identify painful experiences that wounded me.
2. **Realize the effect.** Next, I accept the emotional impact those experiences have had on me.
3. **Unlock the greatness.** Finally, I dig into those emotions to mine for lessons I can glean to strengthen myself spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically.

As I share in this book some of my life's darkest moments, I demonstrate the Wound-Analysis Framework as the tool God gave me to unlock greatness from inside each and every wound I bore.

In a decades-long journey to get where I am, I have learned so much and grown immensely.

As a performance coach, I have worked with hundreds of executives and entrepreneurs. This has allowed me to study human behavior, psychology, and how an individual's wounds often hold them back from the success they dream of.

As a pastor, I've walked through life with numerous individuals, couples, and families, observing how they experienced and dealt with wounds, as well as establishing how I could best support them during those seasons and ultimately point them to Jesus.

As a man who had to grow up too quickly, was often influenced to make poor choices, and tried every way he could think of to create a great life on his own, I left a trail of wounds that hurt those I loved and cared about the most—myself included.

My hope is that by reading this book, you will feel led to take the following actions:

First, permit yourself to tap into and share your wounds. Being vulnerable about the events that have hurt you the deepest is not a weakness but rather a strength. Leaning into that strength makes you even stronger.

Second, break out of the prison in which you are living. Emotional prison for most people looks like this: You're bound by shame tied to the ways you have hurt yourself or how others have hurt you. To feel good about yourself, you constantly seek validation from others. You struggle to maintain a good balance of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. You want to make God a priority, but you just can't seem to do that consistently.

Third, discover your purpose. The process of self-discovery was incredibly fruitful for me, but it wasn't voluntary and often came on the other side of great physical, emotional, mental, and

spiritual pain. My hope is that as you acknowledge the hurt, realize its effect, and unlock your greatness, you will enable yourself to live the life for which God created you.

It's time to unlock the greatness that's already inside of you!

1

Wounded by Violence and Death

What in the hell am I doing with my life?

Eighteen months prior to my first anxiety attack, I sat in a different office, in a different professional role, and asked myself that question. For what felt like the tenth time in my life, I was deeply hurting and in crisis, struggling to understand what to do with what I was experiencing.

As I walked into The Centennial Group office in mid-October 2017, my coworkers did their best to welcome me back to work without overwhelming me. After many hugs and a few tears, I made my way to my corner office. I closed the door behind me and took a deep breath as I sat down in my chair. I turned on my computer, and it started to boot up, making the same sound it had thousands of times before. I thought, *Will doing the things I've always done help me get back to normal? What is normal?*

I spun around in my chair and looked out the floor-to-ceiling window toward the Newport coast. I don't know what I was looking for, or hoping for—possibly soaking in the beauty of creation in an

attempt to ward off my horrific thoughts of the past two weeks. I feared the sounds of automatic gunfire and people screaming. I was sickened by visions of bloodstained walls, injured victims, and even dead bodies.

Then it hit me, seemingly out of nowhere: *What in the hell are you doing with your life?*

For most people in my position, that would have seemed a crazy question. I was more in love with my wife than ever, and our marriage was extremely healthy. My two daughters were doing very well, and our immediate family of four loved spending as much time together as we could. At thirty-nine years old, I was in the best physical shape of my life. And I was working for a pretty good company, making a healthy six-figure annual salary with great benefits and a stock package.

But the reason behind that question came from one of the deepest wounds I have ever endured—being present for the mass shooting at the Route 91 Harvest music festival in Las Vegas, Nevada, on October 1, 2017.

A Three-day Neon Sleepover

The year prior, our friends—Chad, Nicol, and Tracy—convinced me and my wife, Michelle, to join them for Route 91 Harvest, an annual three-day country music festival on the Vegas strip.

Chad, Nicol, and Tracy were what Michelle and I called our “family”—a close group of a dozen friends who grew up together, shared monumental life moments, and treated one another like family. Chad and I have known each other since shortly after birth, growing up on the same street. We rode bikes and played basketball in our hometown of Yorba Linda, California. We

toilet-papered houses and even broke a few laws. Chad's transition back into "normal life" after a few years of playing professional baseball with the New York Mets had him basically living with me and Michelle. Chad is one of my best friends—someone I love with all my heart. He has always, and will always, have my back.

In many ways, Tracy and Nicol were a pair of peas in a pod, loud and boisterous, and always ready for a great time. Tracy and I grew up on the same street, but we grew closest during the three years leading up to Route 91 Harvest 2016. Nicol was newer to the group, but her magnetic and joyful personality made her an easy friend to love quickly. While Chad, Tracy, and Nicol were technically single, Chad and Nicol had a special relationship that looked to everyone like they were dating, even if the two were unwilling to admit it.

Michelle and I loved being with all of them.

Our first year together at Route 91 Harvest was incredible. During the daytime, the pool area provided space to enjoy a few cocktails and relax. Vegas can be fast-paced, so we took advantage of the time to slow down a little and recharge. Our nights were all about singing and dancing, with a few cocktails as we went along, in an environment that always felt welcoming, caring, and supportive. Country music people, including the concertgoers and the artists, are a unique group. They perceive one another as family, and the Route 91 Harvest crowd was the typical model for that community. I love country music because it puts so much emphasis on faith in God and love for our country—both critical to living an amazing and free life.

After that awesome amazing weekend, Michelle and I were committed to going back to the festival every year thereafter. Waiting for the 2017 event was like being a kid waiting for Christmas day, every day, for damn near a year. The closer it got to the festival, the more

excited we became. We chose themed outfits for each night of the concert, and we planned our breakfast spots, pool times, and daily arrivals at the concert venue.

By the time the 2017 artist lineup was announced, we were out of our minds fired up. Morgan Wallen and Luke Combs—this was before they were big stars—were performing on the Next from Nashville stage. The main stage was to include performances by Eric Church, Sam Hunt, Brothers Osborne, and Jason Aldean. Of them all, I was most excited for Jason Aldean. I'd never seen him in concert before, and I loved his music.

On Friday, September 29, 2017, Michelle and I packed up the car and headed out from Yorba Linda for the four-hour drive. Once in Las Vegas, our first stop was Mandalay Bay, our favorite Vegas hotel. We'd stayed there a dozen or so times over the years. The property was always well taken care of, the rooms were nice, and the pool was the bomb. We had our favorite bars and even knew of a very cool speakeasy inside the hotel.

We met up with quite a few people that first night, in addition to the 2016 crew of Chad, Tracy, and Nicol. Our core group grew when more of our family, Casey and Heather, joined. We ran back and forth between stages, hit up vendors, and staked out our spot for the long run of big artists on opening night. Epic that night was an unforgettable performance by Brothers Osborne. I joined a symphony of 20,000 clapping hands to "It Ain't My Fault." We were one people, not to be divided by gender, race, or religion, celebrating the fact that together we were "guilty of a damn good time," as the song lyrics say. If I close my eyes right now, I still see the images. The second day was equally amazing, highlighted by Sam Hunt's beats finding their way to the depths of my soul.

But day three was where it was at. Normally, by the third day of any festival, most people are low on steam. Two full days of dancing and partying does a number on ya. But this year, there was too much anticipation for that to happen. The early artists were great, but Big & Rich took the whole crowd to another place, leading us in “God Bless America.” It was their moment to rise up against all the division in our country, reminding us that the United States is the most amazing country in the world, a country we are beyond blessed to live in. We lit our lighters, turned on our cell phone flashlights, and lit up that Vegas sky. It was so emotional.

The crowd was ready for Jason Aldean to take the stage, hitting our final wind to sing and dance for as long as he would lead us. The crowd went nuts as Aldean opened his show, and during the length of five songs, we were as high as life could take us.

But halfway through “Any Ol’ Barstool,” something happened. At first, it sounded like fireworks in the distance. Listening back to the cell phone video I have of that moment, I can hear people cheering, “Fireworks!”

Little did we know those were the test shots of a monster ready to unleash his hell on us.

When Hell Came to Earth

My family and I were posted on the front right side of the stage, the area of the venue closest to the Mandalay. The first round of concentrated gunfire hit the ground approximately fifty feet from us, appearing as if someone had dropped a brick of firecrackers on the ground. But it was unsettling—we had never seen firecrackers set off at a country show.

As the second round of fire riddled the scene, the situation got real. Within seconds, Jason Aldean and his band sprinted off the stage, and all the lights in the venue went dark. The crowd panicked, but nobody knew exactly what to do, so we froze. I looked around to see where the firing was coming from, also trying to gauge the crowd's reaction. I saw, on moonlit faces across the crowd, confusion and fear—a combination I knew could easily lead to erratic and dangerous behavior.

As the third round of gunfire erupted, we all hit the ground. Michelle's screams cut through the crowd noise. She was right next to me, but my back was to her. My adrenaline spiked, and a brief sickness hit my stomach. The worst came to mind. *Is she hurt? Is she hit? If she's been hit, what should I do? God, please, I pray she wasn't hit.*

Thankfully, she was hurt only because someone else went down on top of her, crushing her leg. I pushed them off, grabbed Michelle, and started to pop back up. It was a welcome moment of relief but lasted only a second or two, because just then, Michelle said, "I think Nicol is hit!"

Nicol was face down, with what looked to be a bullet entry through the lower right side of her back. As Chad turned her over, blood came through her shirt. Chad put his finger directly into the bullet hole to try and stop her bleeding, but it wasn't working. The scene was so chaotic, bullets still flying around us, people screaming and dealing with their own devastation. Yet Nicol was so calm—no screaming, no crying, just a faint voice saying, "My legs are going numb."

"What do we do?" I asked.

Chad replied, "We need to try and get her up, and move her somewhere safer."

Tracy held her hand, repeatedly telling her, "It's OK, baby girl."

We weren't sure, but it seemed as though the gunfire was coming from street level over the wall. That created a greater sense of urgency for me and Chad to get Nicol—and all of us—to safety. The fourth round of gunfire rained down, and everyone went again to the ground. I jumped on top of Michelle to shield her body, clinching tighter than I ever had. My eyes were closed, and I knew I could take a bullet at any moment. I was so scared, but the choice was clear. If someone had to die, it wouldn't be Michelle.

When the shots stopped, Chad and I attempted to move Nicol. He got under her shoulders, and I got her legs. She was limp, which made it hard to gain leverage to pick her up. Adding to the difficulty was the fact that I wouldn't take my eyes off Michelle and made sure she held onto me the entire time.

That break in gunfire was the green light for people to scramble. We assumed gunfire would resume momentarily, and nobody wanted to be a sitting duck. I've never served in the military or been to war, but instinct kicked in. I needed to protect my wife, the mother of my children, at all costs.

I grabbed Michelle to make sure she didn't get trampled. Chad and I tried one more time, but we couldn't lift Nicol. "We can't move her!" I yelled. Chad acknowledged with a nod. His face showed that he felt defeated, deflated.

The gunfire, relentless, at times flew right past us. We had to get out of there. I'd made a choice to protect Michelle *at all costs*, and I knew that meant leaving behind any chance to help pull Nicol out.

Michelle and I ran about one hundred feet toward a small row of bleachers. My intention was to get under the bleachers with Michelle, to shield us from gunfire. By the time we got there, it was packed like sardines. There was no more room underneath, so we sheltered in place in front of them. We were partially protected by railings, but no solid divider stood between us and the shots. It was frightening to know we weren't fully protected, but it was the best we could do.

Gunshots ricocheted off of the metal. People under the bleachers screamed and cried, called loved ones, and prayed for God's mercy and protection. Every time shots paused, I stood up to try and gain some sort of visual perspective on the source of the shots. But I didn't see a shooter, and I couldn't figure out exactly where he was located. More fire erupted, and I ducked.

Casey and Heather had run from where we were. We knew Tracy was somewhere under the bleachers next to us, because we heard her voice. Chad wouldn't leave Nicol's side, staying behind with her when Michelle and I ran. I looked out across the moonlit venue and saw him hunched over her. His silhouette was among only a few still out in the open to protect or mourn loved ones. I was scared for him, but at the same time, so proud my best friend was brave enough to stay out in the open and refused to leave Nicol. He loved her, he really loved her.

Michelle and I needed to move again, in case the shooter—or were there several shooters?—was coming into the venue. I didn't want to stay fenced in if that were the case. We had to move toward the back of the venue, staying as close to the bleachers as possible for protection, then get behind the vendor booths and hopefully out of the confines of the concert area.

I leaned into Michelle's face, looked her in the eyes, and said, "I love you so much, baby. I promise we are going to get out of here." I didn't know for sure whether or not we were getting out of there, but I needed her to know I was going to do whatever I could to protect her. In some dark way, I was also taking that opportunity to say goodbye to her if that was going to be the outcome.

With the next break in fire, we moved toward the back of the venue, hugging the bleachers and vendor booths that lined the west side. Fire erupted, and we ducked behind a beer booth. Discouraged, I saw that the exit we were running toward was blocked. We sure as hell weren't staying in that venue, so we had to find another way out. People seemed to be escaping through the exit directly across from us on the east side of the venue. The problem was that we would have to run the length of a football field while completely exposed to the incessant gunfire.

I grabbed Michelle's hand, and we ran.

We jumped over bodies and chairs and around barricades and booths. My adrenaline was so high that my mouth was completely dry. It had sucked every bit of saliva out of my mouth, and though I felt like I couldn't breathe, I knew we had to keep going.

With some sense of relief, Michelle and I made it to that east-side exit where police officers stood guard with guns drawn as people shuffled past them. They directed us to run north toward the Tropicana hotel, so we followed some of the crowd that was going that way. For a short period, we were out of harm's way, although thoughts ran through my head that said otherwise.

I grabbed my phone—I had to call our parents. It was later, after 11:00 p.m., but there was a chance they would hear something on the news, so I needed them to hear from us that we were safe. I called my mother-in-law first, because she was staying with our kids. "Gloria," I said, "it's Ryan. I need you to know that Michelle and I are OK, but there has been a shooting at the concert we were at in Las Vegas. I'll call you again later, but know that Michelle and I are safe. We love you." I made a similar call to my mom.

A couple of police officers and Tropicana employees directed us into the back door of the hotel. We walked down to the employee cafeteria, where it looked like a war zone. Gunshot victims from the venue had fled to the area, and blood was all over the white floors and walls from people brushing up against them. People were screaming and crying.

As Michelle and I sat down at a small table, a loud crash caused everyone to completely freak out. Two young girls next to us pulled their table down on top of themselves, trying to gain protection in case something was happening inside the hotel.

My phone rang, and it was Chad. The connection was breaking up, but I heard him say, "Nicol is dead." Though we saw what we saw, a small part of us hadn't accepted the inevitable outcome. He said it again. "Nicol is dead."

I collapsed and started bawling. Michelle knew, and she too broke down. I thought, *How in the world were we singing and dancing with Nicol twenty minutes ago and now she is dead?* I was sick and in shock. I grabbed Michelle and held her tightly. While I was devastated by Nicol's death, I was relieved that Michelle was alive and by my side.

There was still so much chaos, so much fear, that collecting thoughts was all but impossible. We remained in survival mode since we had yet to hear the all clear from anyone. With every moment that passed, I couldn't help but wonder where God was in all of this. I knew he was with me. Deuteronomy 31:6 promises, "He will not leave you or forsake you," but I needed to see Him do something, with my own eyes, if I were to feel any real comfort.

Minutes later, a few hotel employees came to tell us everything was clear. We had to vacate the cafeteria and go up through the main hotel entrance. Still, nobody knew exactly what had happened, who had been shooting, and whether or not it was actually over yet, so we got up and walked out with lots of fear and hesitation. No more than thirty seconds after we got outside to the valet area of the Tropicana came another loud crash, and someone shouted, "Shooter!"

We ran back inside the casino and hid behind a bar. Sitting on the floor, we were able to assess the damage to the casino. Apparently, when the gunman started shooting into the concert venue, people in the Tropicana freaked out and ran. Someone outside the casino heard the gunshots and ran inside to announce it to everyone inside. Blackjack tables and slot machines were flipped over, signs were broken and flung throughout, and even personal belongings like purses and shoes were left behind.

We didn't know what to do or where to go next. A few televisions in the casino showed the news reporting the incident, but the information was all over the place and saying there could be multiple shooters. Even later after the lone gunman was found dead, the news continued to report a possibility of more shooters. We didn't have a moment to rest.

At some point, the hotel staff instructed us to make our way to the bottom floor of the casino through huge hallways to a convention center-like space. One by one, we were frisked and

moved into that area. I guess they didn't want to take any chances that someone might be armed. Thoughts ran through my mind that we were under terrorist attack and, at any minute, the hotel we were in or even the whole strip might be bombed in a second wave of attack.

Peace finally came as fully dressed and armed military walked down the halls. In my opinion, there is no stronger defender than the United States military, and they were there to protect us.

Hotel staff walked the halls to let us know we were on lockdown and could be for a few hours. Staff brought us pillows and sheets so we could attempt to get comfortable. Michelle and I sat, and then lay down, on the hallway floor. I tried to close my eyes but couldn't. Every time I did, I saw people running, people bleeding, and dead bodies lying on the asphalt. It didn't help that wounded people in the halls were screaming and crying, making it feel like the war zone had followed us.

"Babe, look at my hat," Michelle said. "I think something hit it."

A small hole in Michelle's trucker hat looked a little like a burn mark, but my exhaustion combined with the desire to de-escalate caused me to shake it off. "Aw, it's probably nothing, baby. Don't worry about it."

Michelle rested her head back down on my lap, and together we restlessly waited it out.

After 4:00 a.m., the lockdown was lifted and we were given the OK to leave. We were told we could go back to our hotels as long as we weren't staying at Mandalay Bay, because the shooter had been in the Mandalay. Thankfully, Chad, Tracy, Heather, and Casey were staying at the Luxor, so Michelle and I grabbed our stuff and walked over to their hotel.

Being reunited with our friends was bittersweet. It was amazing to see the four of them, but one was missing and she would never make it back. Chad was lying on the bed when we walked in. He seemed numb but heartbroken. I climbed onto the bed, hugged him, and bawled. He hugged me back, but I could tell he had little left in him to give.

“I am so sorry, man,” I said through tears. I was devastated, because I knew how much he loved Nicol. He would never be able to tell her that again. We all cried over and over again. We had been through hell, and it was still raw.

I picked up Michelle’s hat. I wanted to see, with some clarity of mind, what had happened to it. As I turned it toward the front, I saw that a round of ammunition had not only hit the crown of that trucker hat but also had passed right through it.

“Holy shit, a round of ammunition went right through your hat,” I said to Michelle. Without even knowing it in the throes of the chaos, I came that close to losing her on the venue floor. I was sick to my stomach, but I held it in to ensure I kept her as calm as possible. *My life would have been ruined. How could I ever explain something like that to our two daughters?* I grabbed Michelle and hugged her so tight to me.

I called my dad, and thankfully he answered on my first attempt to reach him. “Dad, Michelle and I are OK, but a shooting happened at the concert we were at in Vegas.” He was in disbelief, but I could count on him to be strong and even-keeled as I explained some of what was racing through my mind, including the new discovery of nearly losing my wife.

At around 9:00 a.m., Michelle and I were able to get back into our room at Mandalay Bay. We packed our bags as fast as we could and headed down to the valet to get our car.

While Michelle and I were grateful to be on the road, we were facing a four-hour drive home and that felt like an eternity when all we wanted to do was see our girls. I drove as fast as I safely could, and we literally ran into the house to hug and kiss the girls. It was such a relief to be back in our house with our kids, far away from the recent darkness of events.

After we hugged and kissed the kids, and did the same to my mother-in-law, we had to break the news to them about what happened. I had to look my oldest, Alexis, in the eyes and let her know that, unfortunately, her Auntie Nicol had been shot and didn't make it. She broke down, crying in disbelief and pain.

Both my kids loved Nicol, and her absence would immediately leave a gaping hole in our family.

Post-traumatic Reality Check

The first few days home were difficult. A bowl dropping to the kitchen floor or a door unexpectedly slamming caused my heart to stop and my mind to reel. *What's going on? Is something wrong?* Anytime I had a moment of silence by myself, I replayed scenes of ducking underneath gunfire and running for safety. I didn't dare close my eyes during the day because the newly tattooed images behind my eyelids were war zone-esque. Falling asleep was a brutal task of the will, and just when it seemed I was finally sleeping, I would enter into a nightmare that looped every freaking moment of the traumatic event. I often woke up in a sweat, struggled to fall back to sleep, and then ended up back in the nightmare.

I tried to will away the trauma. I'd developed a strong enough will to do that before, and I could do it again. I also convinced myself that if I just kept positive and happy thoughts, if I laughed about other things when people were around, the painful wound would heal over.

On top of dealing with my hurt, and Michelle's pain, I was managing an outpouring of support we received. It might sound odd, but truthfully it was a lot to handle. We were surely blessed to have so many caring friends and family check in on us and bring meals. But we could only tell our story, explain the emotions, or accept encouraging words of "it will get better" so many times before just wanting to be alone so we could process our pain.

Michelle and I sometimes recalled moments from that night, and other times we tried to focus on anything but that. We also stayed closely connected to Chad, Tracy, Casey, and Heather. We texted and talked multiple times daily, and visited in person as often as possible. It was important for us to express how much we loved one another and our thankfulness that we made it home.

CNN, Fox, and *People*, as well as local media outlets, quickly bombarded us with inquiries. It's crazy how resourceful journalists are when it comes to getting personal information, whether a work phone, cell phone, or even home address. They all fought hard to get the best angle on the story, and I understood. Their job was to report this news of the largest loss of life in a mass shooting in US history, so the attention was massive. I tried to be gracious with anyone who reached out, but I could not afford that grace to the few who attempted to twist in a conspiracy theory. It wasn't the time or place for that shit.

Every reporter asked the same questions: "How are you dealing with things?" and "What was it like to be in the middle of the shooting?" I personally rejected a few, but I often talked to them

because, while I didn't care to answer those questions, my friends and I cared deeply about telling Nicol's story. We wanted the world to know just how amazing she was and how devastating her loss would be.

We held a candlelight vigil and eventually a celebration of life. We made every moment as much about Nicol as possible and tried to be positive, because that's what she would have wanted and definitely what she would have done. Her smile always lit up the room. Without her, we all needed to smile to make up for the void.

Though we were absent a loved one, we committed from that day forward that we would never let the monster who took Nicol's life on October 1, 2017, rob us of the life we still had to live.

An Unexpected Blessing: Developing the Wound-Analysis Framework

Some say the best way to regain sanity is to get back to a routine, and I agree. Two weeks after the Route 91 Harvest tragedy, I headed back to the office. Looking out my office window at the coast of Newport Beach, an overwhelming feeling came over me and with it, the question.

What in the hell am I doing with my life?

I would work through this question for nearly two years before it finally became the catalyst for my Wound-Analysis Framework. While I had some of the ideas and tools to process what I was going through after Route 91, the complete structure and method to analyze my wounds wasn't born until after my anxiety attack in 2019.

My past experience in working through transformational moments of life, as both a coach and pastor, led me to believe there was a much deeper question: *What is God doing through this season of my life?* I knew that answering my question would require more than what I was capable of on my own.

So, I prayed, asking God to reveal specifically what He wanted me to hear. I more diligently read His word to understand how He worked in transformational moments of my past. I also turned to others, including my wife, a few close friends, and my executive coach. Together we explored what had happened at Route 91 and, more important, why it happened.

Through these studies and conversations, I became confident that God was at work in my life through tragedy in the same way he worked through tragedy with Job. Job, a wealthy and righteous man, lost his children, possessions, and health. While Job's friends offered various explanations for his suffering, Job steadfastly maintained he had done nothing to deserve his misfortunes.

Just like my experience with the Route 91 shooting, the Book of Job does not offer a definitive answer to the problem of evil but rather invites us to trust in God's goodness and sovereignty. Even amid trials and tribulations, I am called to believe God ultimately works all things out for my good and His glory. The more I worked through what would become the Wound-Analysis Framework, the more clarity I was given to answer my "what" and "how" questions about this wound (and all of my others). *God, what are You doing through this wound? God, what do You want me to learn from this wound?*

As you review the framework that follows, and how I applied it to my wounds, I encourage you to apply it yours. Please understand that the framework is less about understanding why the wound-inducing event happened (*How come that evil monster shot at us?*) and more about identifying its existence, understanding how it impacted you, and finding ways to grow and become better because of it.

Applying the Wound-Analysis Framework

Acknowledge the hurt.

This wound related to violence and death resulted from losing a close friend in a tragic way, nearly losing my wife, and witnessing sights and sounds that are forever burned into my memory. The physical pain, and even the intensity of the emotional pain, lessens as the days go by. But the hurt remains every time we gather around the Friendsgiving table less one family member or attend another open-air concert in fear of what could happen. I admit the fear, because it there. Denying it would be to deny the emotional reality I live with every day.

Realize the effect.

My Route 91 Harvest experience caused three major harms in my life:

1. My family, the close friend group I consider family, will never be whole again on this earth because Nicol is gone.
2. My mental health has suffered. I've lost many nights of sleep because, when I close my eyes, I am brought back to that night. As described at the opening of this book, I had my

first-ever panic attack approximately eighteen months after the event and have suffered several more since.

3. I nearly lost my wife and have had many nightmares about something happening to her in the future.

Unlock the greatness.

While the aforementioned effects have crushed me at times, God used the wound of violence and death to show me once and for all that healing my emotional wounds was the key to unlocking my greatness in these three ways:

1. Within my loving family, there are always regrets, what-ifs and remember-when's. But the tragedy brought us closer. We realized how precious life is, how deeply we love one another, and how much we want to make every day together count.
2. The hit to my mental health influenced me to better prioritize my health, both in how much I strain my body as well as how I recover. I now understand the signs of anxiety and can often de-escalate the situation before it becomes an all-out attack. Having an anxiety attack also brought to light the seriousness of mental illness, leading me to speak about it more publicly. As a result, I have helped many others deal with mental illness battles.
3. While fear for my wife's safety has at times put me on edge in large public gatherings, it's helped me be better aware of my surroundings and more protective of her overall. Also, while I thought I could never love her more than I already did before the shooting started, I realized I had more love to give and, therefore, have given it.

Working through the prompts in the framework helped me lay a solid foundation for my life. I've gained clarity of my purpose, deepest passions, and non-negotiable principles. Building from that foundation leads to levels of personal and professional greatness that most people dream of but rarely achieve. While I hate what happened on October 1, 2017, I am grateful the tragedy of Route 91 became the catalyst for me to go deeper into my life and bring about the Wound-Analysis Framework.

The wound of violence and death wasn't my first wound, and it wouldn't be my last. To achieve my dreams and unlock the greatness inside of me, the greatness God created me for, I had to revisit my early life and apply the Wound-Analysis Framework to every wound I'd ever incurred, starting with my parents' divorce.