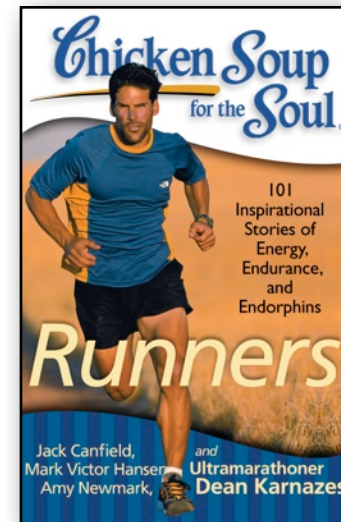
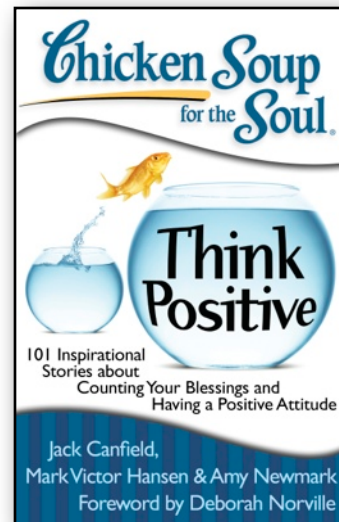
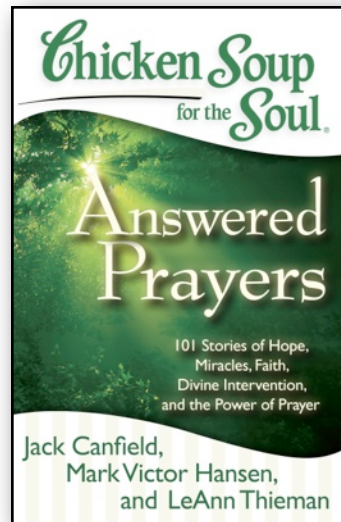
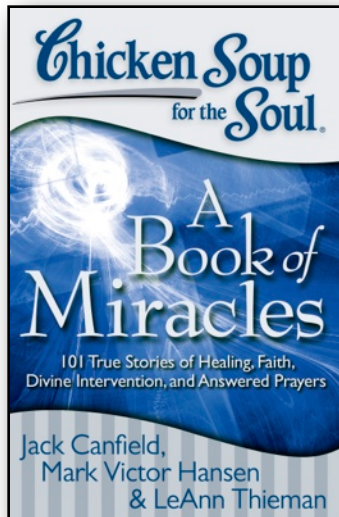
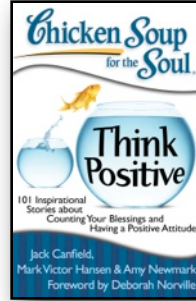


# Chicken Soup for the Soul®

Your free mini-book for the New Year!



An excerpt from



belongings into my parents' minivan and moved back home, feeling like a complete failure.

Don't get me wrong. I adore my parents, and I understood how generous it was of them to let me move back home and take some time to find my post-grad bearings. When I left for college, they probably shared the same belief I did: that I was moving out for good. But instead of being grateful, all I could focus on was how I felt like a loser. I had a fancy college degree, yet here I was, back where I had started four years before. I was sad about the breakup with my boyfriend. I missed my college friends. I felt like everyone but me was out in the world doing exhilarating, impactful things.

After a few days of wallowing, I came across a popular quote: "Make each day your masterpiece." I realized that I didn't have to be living out on my own in an exciting new city to make my days masterpieces. I could start that moment. I taped up the quote on my bathroom mirror. I typed it into my cell phone background. I added it to the signature line of my e-mails. "Make each day your masterpiece" became my own personal motto.

What did a "masterpiece day" look like? I pondered this question. For me, a day that was truly a "masterpiece" would include time with my loved ones, time spent exercising and taking care of myself, time volunteering to help others, and time devoted to my passion of writing.

I used this knowledge to organize my days.

I shifted my mindset and began to see my time at home as a gift in that I was able to spend a lot of time with my parents. My role in the household no longer felt like that of a child; rather, my parents treated me as an adult, and our relationship matured into one of mutual respect and consideration. Nearly every day I visited my grandfather, who also lived in town, and soaked up his stories. I reconnected with a few close high school friends from whom I had drifted away during the past couple of years.

In college I had often been too busy or stressed to cook healthy meals or exercise very much. Now that I was focused on making each day a masterpiece, I carved out time for nurturing my health. I began

## Each Day a Masterpiece

*Very often a change of self is needed more than a change of scene.*

~Arthur Christopher Benson

I never thought I would move back in with my parents after I graduated from college. In fact, all through my senior year, I told myself that moving from the exciting cultural metropolis of Los Angeles back into my childhood bedroom in the sleepy, small beach town where I grew up was out of the question.

So, I applied for fellowships to travel abroad. I poured hours into my applications—revising essays, collecting letters of recommendation, researching programs, practicing interviews. I made it to the final rounds for two prestigious fellowships, but ultimately was not chosen for either.

Refusing to dwell on my disappointment, I applied to graduate schools across the country. Four months later, my mailbox was filled with nothing but rejection slips.

It was now April. I had only a month left before college graduation spit me out into the Real World. I went online and searched for jobs in the Bay Area, where my long-distance boyfriend had one more year left as a student at San Francisco State. I figured I could get a job up there, live close to him, and enjoy the creative stimulus of a new city.

Then, weeks after graduation, my boyfriend and I broke up. My college friends scattered to all corners of the globe. I packed my

waking up early and running every morning at the park nearby my house. I visited local farm stands and bought more fruits and vegetables and scoured the Internet for healthy recipes. Within two weeks, I felt stronger and more energized than I had in years. My morning exercise became my treasured time to think and stay in touch with my inner self.

I volunteered in classrooms, teaching writing exercises and tutoring kids in reading. I spent time at the nursing home visiting with senior citizens. I got in touch with my hometown's volunteer center and helped out at beach clean-ups and fundraising events.

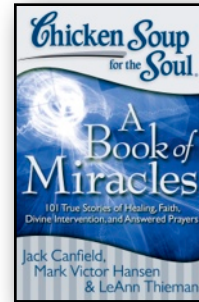
And I began to write for two hours every day. I knew I wanted to make a career as a writer, but my writing schedule in college was erratic—twenty minutes some days, none for weeks, then a whole weekend cooped up in my room with my laptop. Establishing a writing routine helped me more easily shift into the “writing groove.” Some days, the words flowed easily. Other days, I spent the better part of my two writing hours staring out the window and scribbling down disjointed notes. But my pages of writing began to add up. I wrote articles, essays, short stories. I even started a novel!

Some days weren't as balanced as others. Tasks and problems popped up unexpectedly; not every day unfurled as planned. But as I lay in bed each night, reflecting on the day, I felt a deep sense of contentment and pride in myself. I really think the cliché is true that “things happen for a reason.” Looking back, moving home after graduation was the best thing I could have done. Now, as I prepare to leave for graduate school in a few months, I feel focused, rejuvenated, and happy with who I am.

I was not a failure—I never had been. I realize now that my negative mindset is what held me back more than anything. My “success” is not dependent on what other people think or what my peers are doing or what I feel like I “should” be doing. My life is a success when I am living by my motto and making each day a masterpiece.

~Dallas Woodburn

## An excerpt from



# Miracle on the Hudson

*In hindsight,*

*I think something remarkable did happen that day.*

*~Capt. Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger III*

It was Thursday morning, January 15, 2009. I was in New York City where I traveled to work on a regular basis. It was about 10:30 a.m. and snow was coming down pretty hard. I had checked the weather forecast because I had a 7 o'clock flight home to Charlotte, North Carolina, and I didn't want to get stuck. The Weather Channel website said the snow was going to quit and it was going to be a nice day.

I went into a meeting with my boss about 11 o'clock and snow was still coming down.

“What are you still doing here?” he asked. “You're going to get stuck up here. You really ought to get home.”

So I rebooked for the 2:45 p.m. flight. Seat 16E.

When I boarded the plane, I was on my cell phone, sending texts, talking to people right up until they closed the cabin door. We taxied for about thirty minutes, as is usual at LaGuardia Airport, and we took off.

Sitting back, I felt the steep climb that pressed me against the seat. I opened the newspaper to read the remnants of *The Wall Street Journal* that I hadn't finished that morning.

There was a muffled bang that I could literally feel. The whole plane shuddered.

“What could that possibly be?” I wondered.

The plane went into a really steep bank to the left. It was all going so fast. I thought maybe the plane was out of control and it was over. But the pilot, who had identified himself earlier as Captain Chesley Sullenberger, seemed to get control back. He stabilized the plane.

There was no panic. After the initial gasp from everyone, it was very, very quiet.

I was looking around and listening when I heard somebody on the left say, “We must’ve hit something. I saw shadows.”

Then a little later, someone else said, “The left engine is on fire!”

Even at this point, I wasn’t terribly worried. I figured we had two engines, and if need be we could fly with just one.

But as time passed I realized how quiet it was on the plane. There was nothing but the whistling of the wind. It dawned on me—we had no power. We were literally gliding and we weren’t very high. That’s when I sat bolt upright and grabbed my head. I felt a cold fear like nothing I’d ever experienced.

I prayed intensely. I repeated, “Please God, help us. Please God, forgive me,” over and over again. Nothing coherent. There were just too many thoughts going through my head.

Yet I still had hope. If they could at least get one engine going... we just needed some power to get back to LaGuardia. We’d only been up for three minutes; certainly we could turn around and make a safe landing.

That hope went out the window when I realized we were getting lower and lower, following the river. When that realization set in—sheer terror—I realized the likelihood of dying on this plane. There was nowhere, no one to turn to but God.

I prayed intensely. I was there with Him. It was the closest I’d ever felt to Him. I didn’t bargain: “If you save us, I will...” Instead, I prayed for my family, my children, my wife.

Shortly thereafter, Captain Sully came over the intercom. “This is the captain. Brace for impact.”

There was nothing in those words for me but death and pain. A

cold hard reality hit me, and there was nothing I could do about it. I was strapped in my seat, completely and utterly powerless.

In the midst of that utter hopelessness, I was looking forward, as crazy as that might sound. What was death going to be like? Was it going to be just complete darkness? Or a bright light? Perfect clarity? Joy? What was it going to be like in the presence of God? I believe God gives us all hope even in dire moments. It was such a blessing to have that sense of hope and that sense of salvation.

I pulled out my BlackBerry. I wanted to get a message to my children... to give them something to carry with them through their lives, some sort of closure. I was trying to do that as I looked out the window, watching the water come faster and faster. I put the BlackBerry down, closed my eyes, and pleaded, “God, please let me see my children again.” Then, “God, this is going to hurt so bad.”

I was terrified, not necessarily of death and what comes after that, but I was really worried about the pain.

We hit the water. The BlackBerry came up and hit me right on the bridge of my nose, just about knocking me out.

And we came to a stop.

I knew immediately we were okay.

The impact was not terribly traumatic. I knew the plane was intact and not broken up. No one was going to be severely injured.

I got into the aisle, and the emergency doors were open. I saw a beautiful, clear, blue day, twenty degrees, sun light streaming in. It was the most wonderful feeling I have ever felt. Symbolic it seemed, like it was a new day, a new life. A beginning.

I filed out the doorway to step onto the wing, and turned back around to get a lifejacket. No one had announced that we were going to make a water landing and to remember our lifejackets underneath the seat cushion. Of course all the cushions by the exit row had been stripped away and I found none.

I did absolutely nothing right. I did everything wrong, but I still came out of this. If I had gotten out there on the wing, and the wing was sinking, and the ferries were not there, I would have drowned because hypothermia would have overtaken me in ten minutes.



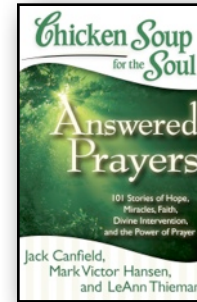
Be that as it may, I stepped out on the wing without a lifejacket. I already saw the ferry coming and it was like a dream for me. So many things went wrong. But so many other things went right. An amazing turn of events.

After that day, I got at least a dozen e-mails of the drawing of the plane with God's hands lowering it down—"What Really Happened on the Hudson River." I truly believe that.

Certainly for me, I came much closer to God that day. It was probably the only time that I've been intimately, truly wholly there and one with Him.

~Warren F. Holland

An excerpt from



## God Is Still Here

*Pray to God at the beginning of your works,  
that so thou mayest bring them to a good ending.*

~Xenophon

The old church listed badly to the left, like an arthritic senior citizen leaning on a cane. The tornado that skipped across the Texas prairie had shattered the glass and forced the wide oak floorboards upwards off the foundation that had supported them for well over a century. Until the storm struck, the Eagle Springs Baptist Church had stood as tall and straight as the men and women who built it. The tornado lifted it off its stacked rock foundation, moved it over several feet, and set it down again, gently, as though Mother Nature realized she was making a mistake. Still, serious damage was done, and many members of the congregation, already holding services in their recently completed new church, didn't think the old building could be saved. Reluctantly, they scheduled it for demolition.

The church stood beside an old cemetery just across the back fence from our farm. A wave of sadness swept over me as I surveyed the damage. This church was the last remaining structure in the vanished town of Eagle Springs, a once flourishing pioneer village. The dusty streets had been lined with stores, doctors' offices, a cotton gin, a blacksmith shop, and a one-room schoolhouse. Like many other small towns, its fate was sealed by the path of the railroad. When the tracks were routed through other towns, Eagle Springs declined.

Recently retired after three decades of teaching history to middle

school students, I discovered a small knot of rebellion forming in my chest at the thought of losing this link to our ancestors. In earlier times, my children and I had crawled under the fence to sit in the shade of the live oak trees and explore the remains of the ghost town and its primitive church. I remembered how astonished they were at the church's spartan furnishings and the uncomfortable wooden pews made by a pioneer parishioner.

They were amused to learn the church had two front doors. Women and children entered through the left door and sat on the left side of the church; men entered on the right. Legend has it that some of the men attended church with rifles balanced across their knees, in case services were interrupted by an enemy attack.

Older now and leaning a little myself, I wanted my grandchildren to see what churches were like before air conditioning and sound systems. I knew that no photograph could substitute for touching the ancient cypress boards, weathered to a soft silver, or inhaling the scent of dusty hymnbooks and frontier faith.

Before long I discovered I was not alone in my rebellion. My husband David, who grew up in the church, wanted to try to save it. Louise, my octogenarian neighbor, wiped away tears as she stood on the limestone steps where she and her husband had carved their initials as children. She looked into the battered interior. "God is still here," she said.

David and I agreed.

I wondered idly if there were others like Louise, David and me who weren't ready to give up on the old building yet. There was one way to find out. I sent an article about the history of the church to local newspapers. They printed it. Television crews came to shoot footage of the sagging relic. The public reaction took us by surprise. Although a few folks proclaimed that restoring the church would consume the fortune of a Texas oilman, many more joined with us, cheered us on, and prayed with us to save the church. Lots of small donations were made to assist with the project.

The congregation agreed to give us the old church on the condition that it was moved off their property. They were worried about liability. I thought this demand would be impossible to meet, until a landowner next to the cemetery volunteered to donate land for the relocated church.

A few people shook their heads at the damage and told us that the church would not survive the move. We called Mr. Booker, a contractor who moved buildings, and we met him at the church to hear the verdict. His weathered brown face and grizzled gray hair gave us courage—this man knew how to cope with aging. The truck he was driving seemed almost as old as the church. Mr. Booker walked thoughtfully around the building, peering through the windows and running his hands lovingly over the weathered cypress siding. Stooping, he picked up a few square nails. "This old church was built strong," he told us. "I can move it."

That was the beginning of the series of answered prayers that surrounded the moving and restoration of an old building too historically valuable to lose. Mr. Booker and his grandson pulled the slightly splayed walls back together and reattached the floor. A crowd gathered to watch as they jacked up the church and loaded it onto his ancient truck. Newspaper reporters and television crews stood among local supporters. When the truck's engine roared to life and the church began to move, you could almost see our prayers supporting its sagging walls. The antique timbers creaked and popped like old bones, but the repairs held. A cheer broke out as the truck repositioned the church in its new home in a grove of trees on the opposite side of the cemetery.

After this initial victory, the flow of answered prayers accelerated. A roofing company volunteered to fix the roof. An exterminator treated it for termites. Someone donated a piano, another an antique pump organ. Volunteers helped clear brush from around the church. More donations appeared in the church's new bank account.

Two years later, the Historic Eagle Springs Baptist Church reopened to celebrate the 150th anniversary of its founding. People came from as far away as Ohio, Alabama, and New Mexico to occupy their old pews again. The strains of hymns floated through the new windows and doors, filling the little grove with the sound of rejoicing. My grandchildren climbed under the fence and served cookies and punch. We all congratulated each other for our hard work, but we all knew who was behind this miracle.

God was still here.

~Martha Deeringer



## Taking a Leap of Faith

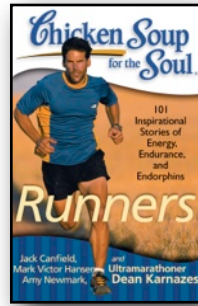
*I can believe anything, provided that it is quite incredible.*  
~Oscar Wilde

**F**our short years ago, I rejoiced after escaping one of those dreaded 2-mile gym fitness runs. I hated running with a passion; it was just something that never came easily to me. As a short-statured, and somewhat stocky girl, I'd always been a back-of-the-pack runner who struggled to finish the very labored laps. At that time, if you had told me that I would one day run a marathon, I'd have told you in all honesty that I had a better chance of winning the lottery.

The turning point came when I met Mrs. Gray. I was in awe that she was fifty years old, going through chemotherapy for her recurring cancer, and still managed to run 30 miles a week. I figured that if Mrs. Gray could run 6 miles at a time, I could run at least one or two. In February, in the cold, bitter, Michigan weather, I started to walk a 2-mile route around my neighborhood and would struggle to add in short bursts of running. I'd start huffing and puffing, desperate to complete even a half-mile segment without stopping. Two months later, I finished the whole route, running, for the first time. I felt exhausted, but I felt incredible.

Over the next several years, I continued to push each run for a few extra minutes, slowly building my endurance. Those last few minutes would often be excruciating: my quads burning, my lungs begging for air, my mind wrestling against my body, ready to be done. Despite the physical and mental battle, I loved every minute of these

An excerpt from



runs—I knew I was not only building physical endurance, but also perseverance, mental strength, and a passion for running. A runner was born, and at 4'10" and 110 pounds, she was one who did not exactly fit the tall and thin ideal. It didn't matter to me; my heart was in it completely. I didn't need to compete against other runners, for my most important competition was myself.

After building a solid mileage base of about 25-30 miles per week, I started entering some local road races. Being an endurance runner, rather than one with speed, I was drawn toward the 10K races. Although I loved improving my times, nothing competed with the feeling of going into distances of "uncharted territory." After continuing to challenge myself and finishing two half marathons, I knew it was time to step it up. I decided I would train for the Detroit Free Press/Flagstar Bank Marathon.

My summer was filled with many long 6 AM runs in an effort to beat the brutal summer heat. Despite the labored last miles, painful quads, tight IT bands, necessary ice baths and compromised sleep, I loved my training. I knew I was finally on the road to conquering my "Everest." The prospect of crossing the finish line after running 26.2 miles helped me truly comprehend my capabilities.

Race day finally came, and I was filled with infinite excitement and apprehension. It was finally time to see what I was made of. With the gorgeous weather, scenic course, supportive Detroit and Windsor spectators, and the reality of my soon feat, the experience ended up being incredible. I did struggle through the last few miles, but after my journey, there was no doubt in my mind that I'd finish. As I crossed the finish line, I experienced the strongest sense of pride and happiness I ever had in my life. I was now a marathoner.

As John Bingham once said, "The miracle isn't that I finished. The miracle is that I had the courage to start."

~Marianne Mousigian



An excerpt from



## What Did I Have to Lose?

*A man's health can be judged by which he takes two at a time—  
pills or stairs.*  
~Joan Welsh

It started with my shirts. They didn't feel right. They were too tight and the buttons kept popping open. Buying pants with a 50-inch waist was a real downer for me too. Every time I put them on a hanger it reminded me of setting up a tent. But it was applying for life insurance that caught my attention and made me think deeply about my life and health.

I was forty-six years old and more than 80 pounds overweight when my employer offered a paid \$250,000 life insurance policy for those who qualified. I got my medical records together and spent over \$40 on copying fees. Three weeks later I got a letter from the insurance provider saying, "We have decided not to offer you life insurance." What it was really saying was "REJECTED!" I admit that being 255 pounds at 5'7" is not being in shape, but I didn't think I was that overweight. Now the insurance company was saying I was too risky because of my weight. Chances were I was going to die before age sixty-five.

I needed a lifestyle change, but I didn't know where to start. At the time, I thought exercise was the answer. I knew if I had to go to a gym, I would be faithful for only a few weeks. I had to do something

that would not take too much time out of my day. I decided to start taking the stairs. Climbing stairs was a good way to exercise without going to a gym. I work in a four-story office building. Part of my job is going to other people's desks. I started my self-challenge. From then on, I would take the stairs.

The hardest thing was taking that first step. The first morning, I stepped into the stairwell and looked up. The three flights of stairs looked like Mt. Everest to me. Sir Hillary didn't conquer that mountain by staring at it. He had to take one step at a time. So I put my foot on the first step and pushed up, then a second step, then a third. Soon I was on the second floor, then the third floor. I made it to the fourth floor, wheezing and sweating and cursing myself for putting cupcakes ahead of my health.

I kept climbing stairs and soon I was up to twenty flights of stairs per day. Although my endurance increased and I started to feel more energetic, I didn't lose much weight. I then added a mile walk during my break time. That, too, helped my energy level, but I still weighed about the same.

About this time, I received a letter from my employer's insurance company stating that because my body mass index was so high, I could qualify for their weight loss management program. The insurance company would reimburse me for part of a gym membership or a weight loss program. After discussing it with my wife, I decided to enroll in a weight loss program. I studied different programs, and decided on one that was considered the most successful.

Then I received an e-mail announcing that the program I had chosen was going to meet in my office building every week. The e-mail invited everyone to an open house to see what the program was like. The next Wednesday, I went to the open house and liked what I learned. But I also learned that it would be \$135 to start. I wanted to lose weight, but was afraid of committing my money. The group members were anxious for me to sign up. They needed at least twelve people to sign up, and I was the twelfth person. My wife convinced me to fork out the money and commit myself to make this weight loss work.



Because we met in my office building, I could attend almost every week. The instructor helped me to understand where weight comes from; it comes from eating without thinking. If I didn't keep track of what I ate, I ate a lot more. So I started writing down everything that went into my mouth. I also learned how to make healthy choices and read nutrition labels. We weighed ourselves every week and that helped me to stay on track. I knew if I indulged myself, the meeting leader would know about it next week. I also found the camaraderie helpful.

I began to see that eating properly was like sticking to a budget. I only had so many calories to use each day. I decided that junk food wasn't worth the price.

I began to see results almost immediately. I lost 10 pounds in the first three weeks. I stuck to a rate of losing about two pounds a week. After nine months I had lost 85 pounds and 14 inches off my waist line. People were amazed at the change. Some said I looked younger. I didn't think I was that overweight. Now I am shocked when I look at my old pictures.

I thought I couldn't lose weight. Thankfully, I was wrong. If you learn the principles of weight loss, and live those principles, you will lose the excess pounds. It takes work and discipline, but losing weight can be done. After all, what do you have to lose?

~Douglas M. Brown

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