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Preface

Life is good, isn't it? You're making lots of money. The trip to Rome and Paris was a blast. Your children are doing great in school. One thing's wrong...you've just been diagnosed with cancer, or your oldest child was just rushed to the hospital after a horrendous car crash, or you found out that your spouse has been cheating on you.

These are just a few *pot-holes* scattered about on life's road. We wonder, "Why me? Why now? What did I do to deserve this?" We become indignant, shaking our fist at God, or worse, apathetic.

Its times like these when a little bit of inspiration can go a long way. You might not have the internal fortitude to read an entire self-help book--heck, the first chapter might seem daunting. But a page or two of hope might be the only thing you need to bring back a smile and start the healing process.

Life's Toolbox delivers what I consider the necessities at times like this: Inspiration, Insight, and Instruction, and does it in bite-sized pieces. The stories help us remember that we're not alone in our plight and that if we trust our faith (whatever level that may be), we'll realize that we are not victims of tragedy but students being taught humility.

I present this book with a smile, knowing that only by walking down the dark corridors of life with our eyes and heart open can true fulfillment be gained. I hope through my difficult experiences and the wisdom that I've culled from them that you will find your way to the light.

Make it a blessed day!

My Sorrow

I cry. Darkness is all around me, but I know there is light.

I fight my feelings of weakness—my lack of courage. I know there is abundance, but I see no proof of it. I know I should, but I'm blind.

I ask for my sight. I know He hears me because sometimes I see so clearly. But a dark hand covers my face, smothering me, forcing me back into the darkness. My nemesis plays on my weaknesses. *It* knows I am strong that my voice has pure intention, and that threatens him. So he blinds me, deceives me, frightens me.

I turn to God. I ask for His light to shatter the dark grip *It* has. My faith isn't strong enough yet, because I know without a shadow of a doubt if it were, my blindness and fear would disappear. It takes more than I have. I must trust to the point of abandonment.

I forget that God works through others. I forget that it is our job to give before we can receive. What have I given? What vows have I broken? What offenses have I committed? What is it I need to do to make things right?

I seek refuge from the darkness for it is cold and condemning. I know the answer, but I fall short. Dear Lord, give me the strength to persevere in my faith. Let me have the patience to know that Your giving hand is always there waiting to catch me. Never let me forget that it is You that will show me the way out of the darkness—to think otherwise would be prideful.

I must take responsibility for my choices, realizing that they are part of my journey. I know Your wisdom is greater than mine, so I consult You like I would my mother or father. Even with

Your wisdom, I still make poor decisions, but that's ok because they are part of the journey. Let me know that there is nothing in this world that I cannot handle because You have given me abundance, of which faith is my greatest gift.

Faith does not adhere to physical instrumentalities. It transcends mortal boundaries because it is rooted in Your being. It is perfect because it relies only on itself, defining itself. Only love, which is Your being personified is like that.

Therefore, I say again, give me the strength to persevere in my faith. Show me what I must do to bathe in love's perfection every day of my existence. For when I do, life takes on new meaning. In that world, there is no darkness. *It* doesn't have dominion over me. Darkness is merely another meaningful trial to overcome. Fear has no place because I hold no expectation of failure. What is failure but a perceived loss, in a foolish race, that I have no business running in? There is merely the journey, and I relish every day. I welcome trials as I welcome a bounty of food when I'm hungry. I have needs, and the trials fulfill them.

Thank you, God, for all that comes my way. I fear not this existence. I realize it is my chance of becoming the spiritual being I *need* to be to live the life I've always dreamed of. That life is filled with joy, meaningful relationships, understanding, love, and tempered with humility. Now when darkness visits me, I turn a blind eye. I do not *see* problems. I see opportunities. I see ways for me to become more of everything I've always wanted to be. People acknowledge this power; they hear it in my voice and draw strength from it. They carry that inspiration on to those they love, and Your love spreads.

I'm smiling Lord. For the first time in a long time, I'm smiling. I *feel* the difference, and that is helping me *make* a difference, not only for me but also for those around me.

Life's Toolbox, helping one soul at a time
 Michael Colavito
www.colavito1.com
info@colavito1.com

Never let me forget to smile. When I wake, let me smile. When I am reviled, let me smile. When I go to bed, let me do so with happiness etched on my face.

I now understand that it isn't about *me*. The world doesn't revolve around me. I'm no longer a victim—the object of Darkness's attention. How could it be this way given such a loving creator? Thank you for my choices, both good and bad, because without them I'd be nothing more than a slave. That's what *It* would have me be, and I do not fancy that.

In short, thank you God for who I am and what I am becoming. I could not ask for more.

Testing

We put iron into a blast furnace to make it stronger not to punish it

There was a time in my life when I felt like I was a magnet for disaster that I had a sign that said, “Kick me,” tapped to my back or had a confounding piece of toilet paper that never came off my shoe. If you’ve felt this way, you’re not alone.

Once I accepted that life, in all its intricacies, had a divine purpose, then things began to change for the better. I realized that God allows these tough times to help me rather than hurt me. I began to see the tests and trials like a workout. If I wanted to get stronger, my emotions would be stretched, my will strained, and my hope challenged; it was unavoidable, but needed, to bring about the desired results.

I now think of myself as one big muscle that never stops training and my spirituality as my most ardent fan and coach. It’s always there for me, cheering me on and giving me great advice. It never lets me down as long as I listen. Understanding that dynamic changed my perspective on the *tough times*.

Therefore, when things aren’t going your way, don’t complain, don’t lament—open your heart to the messages that are coming your way, and celebrate a lesson about to be learned—the experience will enrich you. Just as the iron winces from the fire and comes out tempered steel—so shall you.

Appreciation

If you can't enjoy what you have, you won't be happier with more

In my prideful days, I used to think the statement above was ridiculous. You might be thinking what I used to think, “If I have very little of course I’ll be happier with more.”

No matter what I achieved or bought, I felt unfulfilled. I then recognized, and finally understood, that what I was getting was initial satisfaction and material jubilation—feelings that always fade and never deposit anything of true worth in my *Life Bank*. You don’t have to believe me, but I’ll offer some evidence. Surely if financial wealth were any measure of happiness, then every multi-millionaire would be society’s role model. All you need to do is read the newspaper to see the fallacy in that premise.

Once I took the time to understand and appreciate what I already had, then many of life’s frustrations and anxieties began to fade, and my *Life Bank* began to fill rather than empty. What I deem small, others see as huge. It’s all perspective that’s why I now try to appreciate everything and diminish nothing.

When you think in these terms, life naturally becomes easier, and you’re blessed with the abundance that you *need*, but not necessarily what you *want*. That’s an important difference.

And what *you* need is different than what *I* need, making comparisons futile.

Faith

One of the most profound things I learned was the difference between *Believing* and *Knowing*. It was easy for me to “Believe” in God, but challenging to “Know” for sure that He existed, and more importantly was always there to help me—never failing in that desire and duty.

Believing allows for a shadow of a doubt; knowing does not. Knowing requires trust, and for everyday life that meant I had to witness what I was trusting. If I didn’t see it with my own two eyes or touch it with my own two hands, then the truth was in question. Think about that. How could I do that with God? Practically speaking, I could do neither of those things. Therefore, how was I to “Know” that this belief in God is the truth?

Luckily for us, God is smarter and wiser than anything we can imagine. With one gift, He has given us everything we need to survive—Faith. Faith is the tool that allows us to *know* with certainty that which we cannot see or touch is in fact, truth. Some of you may have heard of the term circular reasoning. It is the premise that you cannot argue a point based on the original point. I submit that God and Faith are the only things that can endure this kind of reasoning. God stated in the Bible, “I am the beginning the middle and the end.” If you hold this as truth, then you understand my assertion in this paragraph. Faith and God don’t need any outside proof. They *are*. That is sufficient. They exist without the need of physical proof, and as such are stronger than anything in the physical world.

This led me to the next logical step, the fulfillment of knowing. Once I knew, then I was compelled to act. In this context, ‘acting’ means living every day with the love that flows from

knowing. This is challenging, because life has a way of placing obstacles in our path that appear difficult to overcome, and they seem to come at *inopportune* times. But nothing is a coincidence. Everything happens for a reason and happens *when* it must happen for that very reason.

Once I opened my heart, obstacles became a chance to learn—rather than points of fear and anxiety. I accepted them for what they were—a gift to test and affirm my faith. There is no physical reality that can break faith—only the perception of that reality. In other words, my faith could only be broken if *I* allowed it to break.

God has given us one other blessing—choice. With that gift came many burdens, many of which are self-imposed. Let me ask you a question if you were all powerful and all knowing would you give man ultimate choice? Before you answer, think about it. First, you can do anything imaginable and unimaginable. Second, you know every possible outcome, to every action that will ever take place and the intent behind all those actions. Third, as God, you are pure love. Things such as malice, treachery, deceit, ignominy, and vanity are not part of you. Now, given those factors, do you give man ultimate choice?

Personally, given my level of development, I wouldn't. And that's why I'm not God. The fact is I can't ever know what it's like to have that kind of power or be a being of perfect love. Therefore, I have faith that what He does is *just right* for my needs. It must be, and more importantly, I must *know* this to be the truth. When I did, all the doubt, anger, fear, and guilt disappeared. I *felt* fresh and revitalized. And as you can see, Faith folds back onto itself, only needing itself as justification.

Recently, I was speaking with someone about the *realities* of life. The person said something to the effect, "Mike, I know, but when you're in *that* position it is different." You can

substitute anything you want for ‘that’ in the quote above. This particular situation was about the need for money as you get older and the lack of security you feel when you don’t have it. In truth, it went even further, because the discussion revolved around just surviving (i.e., having a viable place to live, medical insurance, food, etc.). I gave some quick responses that on the surface were correct, but they weren’t the *right* things to say since they didn’t instill what I was feeling. He responded, “I don’t disagree with you Mike, but it *is* different when you have to deal with it on a personal level. You can’t know at your age what *that* is like.”

I thought long and hard. He’s right—I can’t know exactly how it feels. But fortunately, I don’t have to. God, in His beneficence and love, gave us all that we need to overcome any obstacle—it is fortunate *we all* have Him as a parent. And because He did that, we all became life support vests for one another. I believe it is our ultimate duty to help one another achieve this state of *knowing* where physical realities do not have dominion over us. You don’t have to live if you choose to die. You don’t have to eat if you choose to starve. You don’t have to love if you choose to hate. Feeling poor is a state of pride, not a state of being. You are never poor, but you can allow yourself to feel that way. That’s *your* choice, not *God’s*. He has made you wealthy; only you can make yourself poor.

Faith is not a sometime thing—it is an all the time thing. You cannot be partially faithful, just as you cannot be partially pregnant. And faith is absolutely, positively not bound by the physical laws that we follow. However, physical laws have been known to bend and break under its will. Have you ever seen a miracle? Now you know what I mean.