

Walker Hayes was an atheist reeling from a failed music career when he met Craig Cooper. Through their unlikely friendship, Craig demonstrated Christ's love and shattered Walker's misconceptions of Christianity. Discover how building relationships, sacrificing for others, and drawing near in times of need can lead to powerful transformation.

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# A DREAM

## *WALKER*

It was a Friday night way down south in Mobile, Alabama. I was shyly sitting in the corner of the Mobile Yacht Club off of Dauphin Island Parkway. Through a dirty window, I could see headlights crossing the causeway bridge against an almost black sky. I had my Taylor acoustic guitar and a Shure SM58 mic plugged into a tiny crate amplifier to the left of my bar stool. Directly in front of me was a black metal music stand that held the printed-out lyrics to “The Dock of the Bay” by Otis Redding and Steve Cropper. The place was so empty it looked closed. There were six people in the entire seating area and maybe one or two at the bar. When I finished playing the song, Trudy, the bartender and manager, noticed no one was clapping. She tucked her tray under her arm and applauded with an “I feel sorry for you” smile. A few random, slow golf claps trickled in behind hers as they noticed I was finished.

I couldn’t even consider myself mediocre. My nervous fingers messed up every chord that night. My voice was what it is, nothing special. My

banter was incredibly awkward, and my tip jar was empty, but I was hooked. The adrenaline was like nothing I'd ever experienced.

Before I even loaded my gear into my trunk that night, I called my fiancée, Laney, from the parking lot and said, "I want to be a singer." I paused. "Wanna move to Nashville?"

Without hesitation, Laney said, "Absolutely."

I think the craziest thing about the night my dream was conceived is that I really didn't even want to play the show in the first place. It was born out of one of those classic "dad bragging about his kid" moments. He was at the yacht club one night and just decided that he thought I was as good as anyone he'd ever heard singing and playing there, so he booked me a gig without even asking if I wanted one. To say I was mad at him for doing this would be a ginormous understatement. I couldn't believe he'd signed me up for that. First of all, I was a grown man. I didn't need my "daddy" to be my booking agent. Second of all, I had serious stage fright. I'm talking terrified, fingers shaking, forgetting all the words, stage fright. Third of all, I was not that talented. I was "my mom, my dad, and my girlfriend think I'm good" good, but that's it.

Nothing about me indicated that I should aim for the stars. However, my dad thought I should, so he nudged me; and I'm glad he did. I told him I would only play the show on one condition: that he had to stop bugging me to play live. I played the show, but he never stopped bugging me.

As I recall talking to Laney on the phone that night, all I can wonder is, "What in the world were we thinking?" I was twenty-three years old, off to a promising start selling real estate with my dad, and newly engaged to my high school sweetheart. We had even put a down payment on a lot we'd found about a half a mile around the corner from my office and were narrowing down house plans. My new dream and the timing of it made zero sense whatsoever. It blindsided me and everyone else. I remember telling our change of plans to family and friends and them not being able to hide the shock on their faces. Some people literally laughed

out loud because they thought I was joking. I specifically remember the question, “Do you even sing in front of people?” I said, “No, not really, but I will.” My mother was happy for us in a worried way. I remember her concerned smiles.

Laney’s parents were completely sucker-punched. They were still trying to wrap their brains around their daughter’s questionable taste in boys. I had just assured them a month or two earlier, when I asked for Laney’s hand, that we were going to live in Mobile, I would be selling real estate with my dad, and their future grandbabies would be growing up right around the corner. So, you can imagine their reaction when their soon-to-be son-in-law drops by mid-week and casually informs them that he thinks he wants to move to Nashville and become a rockstar. Nope, it wasn’t the most comfortable dinner I’ve had with them, but I am confident they handled it better than I would have in their situation. I wish I could remember exactly how I attempted to smoothly transition the conversation from casual small talk to, “So, I have this illusive dream I’d like to run by y’all . . .”

As a father of daughters, I feel bad for putting them in that situation. It’s pretty laughable looking back. What did I expect them to say? “Oh, that’s a wonderful idea! What realistic ambitions you have! According to statistics, that sounds like a lovely future for our baby girl!” Their response wasn’t entirely supportive, but it was way more merciful than I imagine I would have been. Let me put it this way: If I saw the seventeen-year-old version of me standing at the door to pick up my oldest daughter, Lela (sixteen), I’d shut it in his face and tell Lela it was just a Girl Scout selling cookies. Or, who knows, maybe I’d feel compassion knowing too well how scary it was to walk up those steps. Maybe I’d just hope he loves her as much as I love Laney.

Emotionally, I think Laney and I may have been running away from some things. Me especially. I’m no psychologist, so I truly have no idea how to properly diagnose what I was dealing with mentally at the time;

but a clean slate and mattering in the world sounded inviting to me. As a kid, I truly believed I would make it to the NBA, and that ended abruptly. Mobile, Alabama, knew me too well as the rebellious youngster I was; and Laney and I weren't really the ideal picture of forever when it came to our dating relationship.

We were on- and off-again a lot, either making up or breaking up. So much so that we were embarrassed to update our family and friends on our status. We were extremely volatile and our engagement came as a complete surprise to many. We were even a little bit tentative when telling others we were engaged because we dreaded the doubtful looks on their faces. A lot of people were most definitely thinking, "Hmm, I wonder how long this is going to last." We couldn't blame them. Then, to add to our stack of impressive life decisions, we thought I was going to be the next Kenny Chesney.

Getting away sounded like a fresh start and felt like freedom from the dream crushers. Becoming famous was the opposite of what most people would have predicted I'd become. Well, famous in a good way. I think a lot of artists can relate to this emotion. The "I'm going to show them" drive. This dream and our brokenness created the perfect storm. Laney and I hesitated less about moving to Nashville than we did about picking out

a wedding cake. I really don't remember ever asking ourselves if we were crazy or really caring if people thought we were. We were excited, naive, and loving all the firsts. (I remember getting giddy in Wal-Mart buying our first toiletries together. I had no idea how many different soaps, luffas, and shampoos a woman needs. I still don't really know what conditioner is.)

***This dream and  
our brokenness  
created the  
perfect storm.***

So, we drove our U-Haul, straight from our honeymoon, full of toiletries and hand-me-down furniture, to our one-room apartment

in downtown Nashville. We were the cheesiest, brightest-eyed, bushiest-tailed newlyweds you ever saw. Nothing could bring us down. We applied for jobs, crashed every open mic night in town, and began making connections. Within weeks, I discovered an obsessive passion for songwriting at The Bluebird Cafe. That historic venue changed my life. It was there that I first heard some of Nashville's most prolific songwriters performing massive hits they had written. I literally walked out of that place writing my first song on a napkin, and I haven't stopped since. We were going to make it. We just knew it. I wrote songs and sang them to Laney while she made chocolate chip pound cake in apartment 9. Ignorance was bliss.

Nashville. More like, "threw me in trash-ville." Fast forward ten years, a hundred heartbreaks, and five kids later. Reality had hunted us down. I couldn't get arrested. As a singer, I had been dropped by Mercury Records and Capitol Records and had been passed on at least twice by every other record label in town. As a songwriter, I had written hundreds and hundreds of songs for multiple publishing companies, but none of them made it to the radio. I'd burned bridges with two managers, wrongfully blaming them for my failures, and had run out of promising contacts. I couldn't sleep, struggling with the question, "What is best for my kids? Do I teach them to never give up, no matter what, or do I teach them there is actually a time to give up?" We proved every single person who sarcastically said "good luck" that they were right. Money was tight and so was hope.

When my dream was new, I loved it. I protected it. I appreciated how it set me apart. Even the thought of it thrilled me, no matter how far away it seemed. I thrived on every second of the chase. Even hearing "no" fueled me to work harder. But eventually, I hated my dream. I didn't want it anymore. I remember desperately wishing I could fall out of love with music, wishing it would leave me alone, wishing I could stop writing lyrics on every piece of trash in my car, only to find myself writing a song about those emotions on the side of a styrofoam cup.

I thought about going home to Mobile, but I was too proud. I would rather have lived with my family under a bridge than return to Mobile defeated. I thought about getting a desk job, but I couldn't afford the amount of Adderall I would have needed for that (I've been prescribed Adderall in the past). I didn't know what to do. My dream had made a fool out of me. I wanted to punch it in the face.

## *CRAIG*

**WHEN OUR FAMILY** made the decision to move to Nashville in 2012, like Walker, I too was chasing a dream. It was late autumn and the leaves had turned their golden hue. A cool breeze circulated in the midday air, and the sensation within our hearts was electric. My wife, Laura, and I had just finished loading all of our belongings in the back of a U-Haul truck. We buckled our four kids safely in the family van and paused to stare at the home we were within seconds of leaving behind. As I often do, I captured the moment with a quick pic on my phone. We thanked God for all the good we had experienced over the course of our seventeen years of living in east Tennessee, and we prayed for blessings on our move. It's difficult to describe the mixture of emotions we were experiencing, though Laura and I tried hard to put them into words along the drive. She steered the van, and I drove the U-Haul, so we had plenty of time to process everything over the phone as we made the trek across the state of Tennessee to the rental house we would now call home. When I wasn't talking with Laura, I was listening to Fleetwood Mac's song "Landslide" on repeat, absorbing it as an anthem for boldly embracing this changing season of my life.

I'm a feeler by nature, so I felt it all very deeply. Everything I had known in my adult life was fading quickly in the rearview mirror of a rented U-Haul. There was a strange mixture of apprehension and



exhilaration, of sadness and joy, of loss and gain, of concern and relief all experienced concurrently, kind of like the sensation you get when you taste Sour Patch Kids for the first time. Whenever you bite into something like that, you're not really sure what's hitting your taste buds at first; once it all settles down, you can then decide whether you like it or not. I happen to love Sour Patch Kids, and it wasn't long before our family decided we really liked the flavor of Nashville as well.

My dream was to help start a church to share the good news of God's immeasurable love in Jesus—to see lives transformed by that love. When we moved to Nashville, I wasn't dreaming of city lights. I wasn't dreaming of celebrity sightings or world-class concerts under the stars. I wasn't dreaming of social media influence or global impact. (I admit that at the time I didn't even realize how significant of a city Nashville is in those regards). I'm a very simple man. I spent my childhood in a small town called Ooltewah before attending college in Knoxville. I didn't have a category at all for interacting with people of widespread influence. Once our family settled into the Nashville area, I was so clueless about my surroundings that whenever I saw someone familiar, I assumed we had met before. Like the time I was putting cream in my coffee at Starbucks in downtown Franklin and I recognized the lady next to me as she was waiting for her turn with the dispenser.

"I know I know you, but I can't remember how we've met . . . are you from Knoxville, by chance?" I asked. When she kindly informed me that she was *not* from Knoxville, I kept persisting with my inquiry about where in the world we could have met.

Finally, she graciously replied, "Well, I am an actress; maybe that's how you recognize me?"

Honestly, I was a bit stunned and didn't know what to say. One of my new friends overhearing the conversation stepped in and listed off several shows and movies she had acted in, and that's how I met Kimberly Williams-Paisley (the wife of country singer Brad Paisley and the actress

who, among many roles, famously played Annie in the movie *Father of the Bride*, which happens to be one of my wife's favorite movies).

"Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

\* \* \*

My dream was sparked during my freshman year of college in 1995. Through a series of events, I began to see that I was lost spiritually—as lost in my eighteen-year-old soul as I was lost as an eight-year-old when separated from my family on the beach. (This really did happen. I searched helplessly through a sea of people on Myrtle Beach for hours before my family finally found me.)

I grew up in the South in a region often referred to as the "Bible Belt." Churches were located on nearly every corner, and our family attended church regularly. By all accounts, I would have been considered a decent kid. I graduated at the top of my class in high school, a valedictorian, senior class vice president, and a leader in our youth group at church, but it was all more out of the personal pursuit of moralism and social acceptance than a genuine relationship with God. Outwardly, I checked off a lot of "good guy" boxes, but inwardly I was just walking further and further away from God. By the time I stepped foot on a college campus, I was miserably lost. I was familiar with Jesus, but I related to Him like someone does a distant relative (happy to claim a connection but with no recent visitations and no real-time relationship). You could say I was a nominal Christian (a Christian "in name only"). I didn't have a problem with Jesus; I just didn't know Him.

One day as I was interacting with an elderly woman at work, she asked me a searching question:

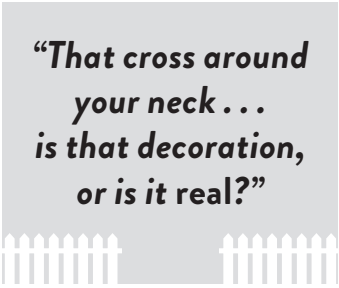
"That cross around your neck"—pausing and pointing to the wooden necklace I wore from a rope chain—"is that decoration, or is it *real*?"

"A little bit of both?" I answered hesitantly, wondering if that was even an option in her mind . . . or God's.

She left not long after our brief interaction, but the question lingered in my mind. I could not get it out of my head:

“That cross around your neck . . . is it decoration, or is it real?”

It wasn't long after this conversation that I was invited to attend an event hosted by a campus ministry, and it was there that God drew near to me in the most loving of ways. As I heard preaching from the Gospel of John, I saw myself in a man named Nicodemus. John tells us that Nicodemus was a member of the religious ruling council. He was an upstanding man, well respected in the community, yet as Jesus spoke with him about eternal life, Nicodemus couldn't even make sense of what Jesus was talking about. Jesus asked him a probing question: “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” Then Jesus went right to the heart of the matter to show Nicodemus his spiritual need. He said that unless Nicodemus was born again (given the gift of eternal life from God above), he wouldn't be able to see or enter the kingdom of God (John 3:1–21).



**“That cross around  
your neck . . .  
is that decoration,  
or is it real?”**

That night I began to realize that just because you know *of* Jesus does not mean you truly *know* Jesus (Matt. 7:21–23). I saw my need for Jesus, not just as my example (which is how I saw Him before), but as my Savior. I understood for the first time that I could go to church every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night, and still not be a Christian—not have a true relationship with God through Jesus. Though I wore a cross around my neck daily at the time, it had only been for decoration. That night, I grasped the true meaning of the cross like I never had before. I understood that Jesus had died on the cross to pay the penalty I owed for all the ways I had dishonored and strayed from God, even in the pursuit of my own “goodness.” Jesus captured my full attention and ravished my soul with

so much joy that I surrendered my entire life to Him that evening. The cross was no longer a decoration around my neck. It was a declaration of God's great love for me in sending His Son to pay the price for my salvation, and I became a genuine follower of Jesus.

When someone asked me that evening, "What's God doing in your heart?" I answered, "I just want to give my life to Jesus, and I want to do what that man just did" (pointing to the preacher who had just shared the gospel with me). I knew I wanted to tell others of the good news that Jesus is real, that He hears and answers our prayers, that His love can transform our lives, that He came to seek and save the lost, and that true life can be found in Him.

I had discovered my dream, and that's the dream I was carrying with me when our family moved to Nashville to help start a church called Redeeming Grace.

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