

CHLOE

Topics—Depression, Loneliness, False Identity, Cutting, Spiritual Bulimia

Chloe was a middle child. She had an older brother named Jake and a younger sister named Katie. For as long as she could remember, Chloe had felt like the outcast, the third best, the forgotten child. While she was great at softball and did well in school, her family never seemed to acknowledge her accomplishments as worthwhile. It was always about Jake and Katie.

When the family went on vacation, all three kids would have to sit in the backseat of the car. Of course, Chloe would get stuck in the middle of the bench seat. This meant that while Jake and Katie were sound asleep with their heads resting comfortably against the windows, Chloe was constantly snapped out of her dreams whenever her neck fell forward, left, or right. Even when they were all awake, she felt isolated from the conversation. Jake and Katie didn't usually get along with each other; but when Chloe sat between them, they seemed to have a bunch of inside jokes that they'd pass back and forth while Chloe tried to lean away from their banter.

By the time she was thirteen, Chloe had grown accustomed to these dynamics and didn't know any other way to view "family." This was the hand she'd been dealt, and she figured other people must have it worse than she did. That is, she believed that was true until one afternoon when she overheard her brother talking with one of his buddies. The two guys didn't know Chloe was standing around the corner when Jake told his friend, "I don't know what it is, but I just don't like Chloe as much as I do Katie. Chloe is kinda weird, and she isn't any fun to be around." Chloe was crushed, but she walked by the boys without letting on that she'd heard what Jake had said.

Because Chloe didn't have friendships with her brother or sister and often felt forgotten by her parents, she made it her mission to have as many friends as possible. She spent countless hours on social networking sites seeking out virtual friends. Every time she saw her "friend" count increase to a number that was bigger than her brother's, sister's, or other friends', she'd feel a rush of accomplishment and security. She wanted to be known, and she became willing to do anything to bring as much positive attention to herself as possible. But the longer Chloe lived this virtual life, the more insecure she became in her God-given identity.

Throughout junior high and into her first couple years of high school, Chloe never missed a youth group event at her family's church. She was the first to raise her hand with the "right" answer in Sunday school, and every- one came to know her as the perfect "Christian" kid. Adults complimented her parents on raising such an outgoing, smart, godly child. Chloe said all the right things, did all the right things, and had everyone fooled . . . even herself. Everything seemed to be working out perfectly—until one of her youth group leaders asked Chloe to have an honest conversation with her.

Good place to stop for the week and have conversation.

The leader's name was Debbie, and Chloe felt like Debbie often had a watchful eye on her and didn't "buy" Chloe's act. After three years of making as many friends as humanly possible, gaining the respect of all the adults at her church, and continuing to do well in school, even Chloe thought she'd found her true identity. But Debbie suspected that was far from the truth.

After youth group one night, Chloe was talking in a circle of her girl- friends, when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned and saw Debbie standing there. From the moment she looked into Debbie's eyes, something in her stomach didn't feel right. Debbie asked if they could talk for a few minutes, so they walked to a nearby bench and sat down. In her three years of "acting," Chloe had never been asked to have an honest, one-on-one conversation. So she felt very uncomfortable. Debbie asked a few simple questions, which Chloe quickly answered with her usual fake smile.

After a few moments of silence, Debbie asked, “Have you always had so many friends and been so outgoing?” All of Chloe’s painful, lonely experiences flashed through her memory in the blink of an eye. She tried to shake off her discomfort with a faint smile and shallow response, but she couldn’t pull it off. At that moment, though, Chloe saw her dad pull into the parking lot to pick her up. Without making eye contact with Debbie, she said goodbye and quickly walked to the apparent safety of her father’s car.

When Chloe got home, she walked straight to her room and began crying hysterically. She wasn’t even sure why she was crying, but she couldn’t help herself. Through her tears she started to realize that she’d become a hollow, fake shell, and no one really knew who she was. She didn’t even know who she was anymore. At this she felt more alone and depressed than ever.

The next day at school, Chloe kept smiling and remained the center of attention among her friends. But inside she was broken and hurting. Over the past year Chloe had heard some of her friends talking about “cutting.” She wasn’t sure what it meant, but for some reason she felt drawn to try it. After school she locked her bedroom door and began sobbing again at the empty reality of her life. In between the tears, she began cutting her fore-arms with a knife she’d taken from the kitchen. At first she was scared, but she soon felt a kind of relief. There was something about this physical pain that lessened the pain in her soul. It became a release from her emotional pain.

Over the course of the next few weeks, Chloe would wake up each day and go back into her world while acting as if everything was fine. She didn’t dare reveal her pain to anyone, as she feared it would ruin her perfect reputation. She felt as though her loneliness and depression was a battle she had to fight alone. This led her down a destructive path, and Chloe became addicted to cutting—her only release from all of the emotional baggage she was carrying. Her parents were more comfortable with the image she’d established over the last three years, so they didn’t ask her any questions; and since Chloe had never experienced a true friendship, she knew of no other alternatives than taking it on alone. She continued to attend every possible church function on a weekly basis, where she’d also see Debbie. But Chloe quickly avoided engaging in any conversation with her.

During the message at youth group one evening, Chloe became over-whelmed with emotion and left the room as though she needed to use the restroom. Instead, she ran out to the parking lot, sat on the curb, and started sobbing into her hands. About two minutes later, she felt a hand on her back and was startled. When Chloe looked up, she saw Debbie sitting next to her, and her eyes were full of tears as well. For the next fifteen minutes, Debbie simply held Chloe, and they both cried like never before. For some reason, this felt real to Chloe. It was as if she was experiencing her true identity for the first time, but she had no idea how to deal with it.

The next week, Chloe approached Debbie and asked if they could talk. For once Chloe didn’t want the “right” Christian answers that she’d always spouted without thinking. And Debbie didn’t give them to her. She simply told Chloe that healing was possible, but she needed to be vulnerable and could no longer hold stuff in or deal with it on her own. All Chloe heard was the terrifying word vulnerable, and she knew it would mean losing her reputation, friendships, and fake identity. This sounded really scary, and it turned Chloe off from anything else Debbie said.

Good place to stop for the week and have conversation.

A few nights later Chloe was again cutting her arms in her bedroom. But she cut too much and lost so much blood that she blacked out. Her mom called her name to let her know that dinner was ready, but there was no response. Because Chloe’s parents knew nothing of the pain she was going through, her mom wasn’t concerned; but she went to Chloe’s room to check on her anyway. She found Chloe lying on her bed, blacked out, and surrounded by blood. Chloe’s parents rushed her to the hospital, and the doctors were able to stabilize her.

About twenty-four hours later, although extremely groggy and with blurred vision, Chloe woke up. Her first conscious thought was not relief but disappointment. This experience had impacted her so much that she wished she’d just died. As she began to move her head, she saw a figure sitting next to her. Trying

hard to focus, Chloe felt a hand on her arm. The touch felt familiar. As her eyes focused enough for her to see more clearly, she saw that the figure was her youth leader, Debbie. At first Chloe felt nervous because Debbie had come to represent vulnerability and truth. But then she quickly remembered the feeling of crying in Debbie's arms and how real she felt in her soul in that moment.

Again, Debbie just held Chloe and didn't give her any answers. She simply told Chloe how much she was worth and how much she personally cared about her. Like water bursting from a pipe that had been stuffed closed for years with leaves and dirt, Chloe began pouring out her past hurt, pain, and fears to Debbie. And Debbie just listened.

After some processing, Debbie began to understand that Chloe was depressed because of her past loneliness and isolation in her family. Chloe had put on a "show" and became what Debbie called "spiritually bulimic." Chloe had "eaten" a great deal of "church stuff," but none of it had actually been digested. So Chloe had just vomited it back out in the form of "right" answers and actions and kept on going. She hadn't experienced a spirituality of wholeness; it was a counterfeit image. Chloe hadn't had the opportunity to seek out a faith of her own by asking authentic questions and having real experiences because she'd been fed the right answers and quickly reproduced them. Debbie believed that spiritual bulimics could fall victim to missing out on the powerful, transforming mystery of the Bible and our call to be part of that Story, as the bulimia caused a redundant, numb view of Scripture.

Chloe decided she wanted to kick her spiritual bulimia and seek healing from the pain that her false identity had caused her so she could enter more fully into her identity as a follower of Jesus. She wanted her faith to be her own—not her parents', her friends', or her youth leader's. Chloe also knew that cutting was no longer an option as a release from her emotional pain. Instead, she wanted to find people who'd support her in breaking this addiction. Although being vulnerable was the scariest reality for Chloe, she knew it truly is the most real.

Follow-up Questions

- What could you relate to in Chloe's story? Why?
- Have you ever felt as though you knew more than enough about the Bible or you've heard the same things so many times that they seemed boring or like they didn't relate to you? Why do you suppose that happens to those of us who've been part of a church for a long time?
- Have you ever tried to cover up issues in your life by being overly outgoing and giving all the "right" answers so no one would think something was wrong?
- Have you ever been surrounded by a ton of people or friends but still felt completely alone?
- Have you ever known anyone who's been involved with cutting? What do you think brings a person to that point? How did you respond when you found out? Do you think this person was trying to commit suicide or just looking for relief?