

Miracle on the Hudson
Survivors Share Their Stories of
Near Death and Hope for New Life



BRACE FOR IMPACT

Dorothy Firman AND Kevin Quirk

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PREFACE

WHEN I LIVED IN THE HUDSON RIVER VALLEY, I loved taking long walks along the Hudson in all four seasons. I always thought there was something different about that river. Something majestic, something old, something . . . mysterious. That's what I was thinking while I watched one of the evening news magazine shows two days after the Hudson River miracle plane crash on January 15, 2009. Like millions of people everywhere, I had seen the initial reports and needed to see more. The more I saw, the more mesmerized I became.

Then I thought about Charlotte, the planned destination of US Airways Flight 1549. I lived there for seven years while a sports reporter for *The Charlotte Observer*, back when newspapers were still vibrant and Michael Jordan was a college kid. *What must it have been like to be sitting in that plane heading to Charlotte and winding up crashing in the river, then walking away from it*, I wondered. As I learned more details about just how unfathomable this whole near-death experience had been, I felt a stirring. *What just happened here? What did it mean?*

"You have to write a book about this!" my wife, Krista, blurted out.

"I know," I said. "It's the passengers. . . . There's something here, something important."

As a counselor, personal historian, and teacher of memoir-writing classes, I have long been drawn to explore how dramatic life experience can serve as a gateway to a profound

new perspective or approach to life. But how would I even find these 150 passengers? What would I say if I *did* find them? How would I earn the trust of people whose lives had just been turned upside down by a combination of terror and jubilation, all about a half-hour apart? How would I explain why I wanted to write such a book, and why on earth they might consider joining me?

Two days later I was making initial phone calls. I tried to find the right words. “I do not mean to disturb you during this traumatic time,” I would begin. “It’s just that I feel this . . . calling.”

And so began my connection with dozens of passengers of Flight 1549. I followed a trail that led me on many twists and turns. When the task of somehow bringing together a sizable group of passengers who hardly knew one another initially appeared too daunting, I worked with one passenger. Then, as they began to bond in cyberspace and in person, I shifted course and reached out to a larger contingent of survivors and first responders.

With the scope of the project expanding, I knew I needed a partner to assist me. That was an easy choice: Dorothy Firman, a friend and colleague who had coauthored three of the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books. Thankfully, she said yes right away, and she kept saying yes through the many days and weeks when she could have found so many very good reasons to say no. I can’t imagine anyone who could have more clearly grasped what this book was about, and what it could be, nor anyone who could smoothly cocreate pivotal decisions while in the midst of a long trip to Russia, Norway,

Finland, and Sweden, presenting on her own books.

Momentum for our book began to gather, then disperse across different paths, then gradually return in a new configuration. All along we held to an idea. All along we have felt honored and deeply appreciative of the connections we have forged with these wonderfully “ordinary” people from Flight 1549.

Now they are here, willing to share who they are and what happened to them, and to try to make some sense out of this celebrated second chance at life. They’re here because one way or another they too sense that there’s more going on than an uplifting story that captured a public starved for positive news in troubled times.

None of us can know, of course, but we wonder. Not just about the details but the meaning. Could it be that the more we open ourselves to the inspiring lessons and messages this miracle may hold for us, the more our own hearts will be stirred? Could it be that somewhere in those poignant images of passengers standing so peacefully and confidently on the water-covered wings lay the seeds that can help us find the courage, strength, and faith that we as individuals and as a nation need today?

That’s what I wanted to explore from that moment two days after the miracle. That’s what I am continuing to explore. And that’s what we invite you to explore with us.

—Kevin Quirk

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The *Real* Impact

All of life is a near-death experience.

—Alan Harris

“BRACE FOR IMPACT.” We all remember those three chilling words. We tried to imagine how we would have reacted as that plane plunged toward the Hudson. Would we have prayed? Screamed? Locked arms with the stranger beside us? Reached for our cell phones to leave a final message with those we love? Stared out the windows to glimpse how the disaster would play out—or for any sign of hope?

We all know what happened next. Sully’s astounding landing. Passengers clinging to one another on those partially submerged wings. Ferries and rescue boats rushing in as if on cue from a Hollywood director. Every single person getting out alive, with nothing worse than soggy clothes and mostly minor injuries. We shook our heads, clutched our hands, praised God, or just watched in awe. How did that happen? What could it mean? We watched and read all about this stunning tale of survival against all odds.

Now it’s time for a different, perhaps more meaningful story. What happened to these 150 passengers when they went *home*? What was it like to return to their families, their

homes, their jobs—everything that was familiar but somehow not the same? How did they celebrate coming back from the brink? How did they confront the near-death trauma? How did their loved ones respond to the miracle in the house? What has been the *real* impact they braced for, not of the disaster they expected, but of the gift of a “new” life?

That’s what you’re about to discover. As we go forward you will visit with many of those passengers, along with first responders and others involved in the crash and rescue that touched us all. These ordinary people who lived an extraordinary experience will be opening their hearts, minds, and souls to share their honest accounts of the unfolding of their lives after Flight 1549 became firmly imprinted on their personal history and our cultural landscape.

Their stories of finding meaning and hope will speak to questions you may have:

- How has the miracle changed how they relate to their husbands, wives, children, and other loved ones?
- How has it impacted how they perceive God, or the world around them?
- What do they most remember when they think back to that day on the Hudson, or do they try not to think about it at all?
- How do they feel when they get on a plane today, or have they sworn off air travel forever?
- Do they ever ask “Why me?” If they do, what answer comes back?

As you read their stories, in their own words, you will learn that some passengers have already taken courageous steps toward new goals and visions, while others explore possibilities they may never have dreamed of before the Hudson.

For others, the changes may look not so dramatically different on the *outside* but feel markedly new on the *inside*. These subtle but profound differences are about love, about healing, about hope. The changes may have to do with a shift in perspective on what matters and what doesn't. It may be a yearning for a change they want to see reflected in life around them, and what they can do to make it happen. Some feel so full of compassion and gratitude they hardly know what to do with it!

Some survivors of Flight 1549 are finding that life beyond the Hudson is much more about coming home to what they already knew. But even in that reclaiming, something feels different—there's a deeper respect, understanding, or appreciation for familiar beliefs or values. They may sit down to Thanksgiving dinner at the same table with the same people, but what they see and feel may be entirely new.

Other passengers and first responders are not looking for neon light answers or bumper sticker revelations. Instead, they find themselves asking a whole lot more questions, and it's the asking that has reconfigured their lives. Isn't that the way it often works? You're hit with some unexpected crisis or challenge, and when you get through it, your head is full of questions about what happened and what to make of it. Some questions may be disturbing, at least initially, while others

are soothing or uplifting. Ultimately, all have the capacity to help you grow. And often that's just what happens. Growth, change, even transformation.

In her bestselling book *Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow*, Elizabeth Lesser suggests that what most shakes us up also carries the inherent capacity to enrich us. We can, she suggests, be the phoenix rising from the ashes. And make no mistake: contrary to any myth that all those passengers of Flight 1549 left that sinking airliner with a carefree grin, this stunning near-death moment shook almost everyone in that cabin to the core. Now they're slowly coming back to "life"—growing, changing, and rearranging how they relate to their faith, to others, to the world. They are riding the waves of one big, public, broken-open experience.

They're also learning that you don't survive a plane crash and find yourself all put neatly back together right away. That's natural. It takes time after the shake-up to discover who you are, or who you want to be. Through their stories, the passengers are sharing this second chance at life as it evolves, and we get to be right there in the middle of it with them.

You may be reading this book simply because you were touched by the event and are curious about what happened to the passengers after their worst nightmare turned into their greatest gift. Your curiosity certainly will be answered. But you will find that in reading these stories and reflections, you will gain something more: ideas, lessons, inspirations that come from that deep place inside few of us are prompted

to visit. The people you are about to get to know have been to that place. Most are still in it. Their stories of hope and faith born from the winds of a crisis and the dawn of an awakening may comfort, guide, or inspire you in your own life. You may ask yourself: how would it change my life if that happened to *me*?

Maybe you're in the midst of your own trauma or shakeup: an accident or major illness in your life or in your family; the loss of a job or fear of losing one; those anxieties about money or love or an uncertain future that can weigh us down. If you're not in a crisis or challenge today, these stories may provide insight and understanding about hardships you have encountered and survived. And even if you're not wrestling with difficult times, this book will offer timely reminders that all of us, at any time or phase of life, have access to greater purpose and meaning. What these twenty-five passengers and first responders share will stir your own ideas about the importance of family, knowing what really matters, living with more gratitude, finding our courage, respecting our fears, discovering our purpose, and recognizing how something good really can emerge out of crisis and tragedy.

Chances are, you will find commonality with many of these contributors. You will hear from Lucille, an eighty-five-year-old woman hardly able to walk, who, after the plane splashed down in the Hudson with her daughter Diane sitting next to her, was prepared to make one final, dramatic, motherly sacrifice. You will get to know Bill and Michele, two

twenty-somethings who would rather never fly again, and business executives and sales managers who must fly all the time. You will meet Maryann, who survived several near-tragedies before the crash, and Debbie, who had to confront a new and unexpected crisis weeks after the crash. You will visit with Darren and Don, two coworkers who became “brothers” after surviving Flight 1549 together, and Glenn, who has helped build a vibrant community among the 150 former strangers who share this new bond.

You will hear from parents who believed they would never see their teenagers, toddlers, or a child on the way. You will meet an ex-Marine officer, a swimming pool serviceman, a nurse, a TV executive, a CEO, and a boat pilot. You will learn about the experiences of many survivors who have publicly spoken about their experience at churches, schools, businesses, and organizations as large as the American Red Cross, as well as those who remain private. You will witness sadness and fear, but you will also notice humor, thoughtfulness, inspiration, and hope.

In some stories, you will read passionate expressions related to religion and faith. Many passengers are devout Christians, others practice different faiths, some regard themselves as spiritual people with no link to any religion, and a few hold more personal views. Because faith is indelibly linked to the experience and perspective of many passengers, each contributor was encouraged, if they chose, to freely share the spiritual dimensions of their story from their own lens to make their accounts richer, deeper, and more personal.

We usually don't get to choose who comes along with us on our "plane crash." We just hope that when trouble hits, we can somehow find the love, support, and guidance to get through it, and, ideally, come out stronger, wiser, more engaged with life. That's how it's worked for the survivors of Flight 1549. They made it, with lots and lots of help. They have reached the other side. And they have emerged with something more, something we all seek. Some spark of hope, some strong pull forward, some sense that there's more going on around us than we can even imagine.

On January 15, 2009, we were all touched by what happened on the Hudson River. We all felt the awe of a moment spiraling toward doom transformed into the gift of survival. Now, through the words and feelings of those who were there, we have an opportunity to be moved by the *meaning* behind the miracle, not just in that one moment but in the ensuing weeks and months, in all our days. In these times of uncertainty, we can stop and remember: We are all survivors. We can all be touched by grace.

What Passengers of Flight 1549 Want Others to Know About Second Chances

“Brace for impact.” Three simple words that proclaimed to all 150 passengers on board US Airways Flight 1549 on that cold, crisp New York afternoon of January 15, 2009, that their plane was about to go down in the icy Hudson River. Three simple words that churned up their fear that the next two minutes would be their final moments on earth and spurred their most heartfelt, spontaneous prayers. We all know about the stunning tale of survival against all odds that followed.

But there is a different, more meaningful, and more timely story that has yet to be fully told. What happened to these passengers when they went home to their families, their homes, their jobs, and everything else familiar but somehow not the same? What has been the real impact, not of a disastrous crash but of a gift of a “new” life? What can any of us learn from the honest and open sharing of ordinary people who came back from the brink of death?

Brace for Impact answers these questions and more by taking you inside the hearts, minds, and souls of twenty-five passengers and first responders and what life is like after near death.

DOROTHY FIRMAN is the *New York Times* bestselling coauthor of *Chicken Soup for the Mother and Daughter Soul* as well as several other books. She is professor of psychology and a psychotherapist and has been a guest on *Oprah*. Visit the author at www.dorothyfirman.com or www.synthesiscenter.org.

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Meet the passengers and read their blogs on <http://braceforimpact.hcibooks.com>.

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