

THE  
AMAZING  
TECHNICOLOUR  
PYJAMA  
THERAPY



THE  
AMAZING  
TECHNICOLOUR  
PYJAMA  
THERAPY

EMILY  
ACKERMAN



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*This book is dedicated to my amazing husband,  
who loves through thick and thin.*



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# FOREWORD

*‘This book is all about fighting back. It’s about reclaiming your life now you’re ill, finding new ways to live well and serve effectively. You’ll find survival strategies, encouragement, practical advice and fresh ways to view your situation.’*

With these striking words in the first chapter, Emily Ackerman accurately summarizes the purpose of her work. I could not find a better way to start this foreword because her words contain the main seeds she eventually sows in this moving book.

When our mutual friend, psychiatrist Rob Waller, asked me to write a foreword for *The Amazing Technicolour Pyjama Therapy*, I did not hesitate to respond affirmatively. I had two reasons to accept. First, although I have never met the author personally, I feel very near to Emily, as if we had known each other for years. It is that sort of mysterious closeness that she rightly calls ‘the fellowship of suffering’; it is the nearness which arises from sharing the experience of the ‘furnace of trial’ or, in the author’s own words, that ‘strange and scary place people living with illness have in common’.

The second reason to accept was my conviction that this book will offer great comfort and practical help to those who are ‘struck down but not destroyed’, or I should rather say, to those who are actively struggling not to be destroyed. To put it in her own words: *‘It took me a long time to learn that God was not out to kill me. Instead, he was offering me a new opportunity for growth and fruitfulness. He carefully provided everything I needed to survive and thrive in the face of pain and loss.’*

Emily writes with great moral authority because she has been – and she still is – in the furnace of trial. Notice her poignant words: *‘Before I was ill I worked as a doctor. Now I’m a patient.’* This unusual combination of Biblical wisdom, professional skill as a former doctor and personal experience make this work a very helpful tool for those suffering from long term illness and their relatives.

As I read *The Amazing Technicolour Pyjama Therapy* I noticed that my spirit was slowly filled with an unexpected sense of joy and peace. I

wondered why. By the end of the book, I had found out. It is a well-written book, I should say beautifully written, using a language that reflects both a tender heart and a lucid mind. It is also light reading and easy to digest, because Emily knows very well that sick people do not have a great deal of energy. These, however, were not the reasons that explained my unexpected sense of wellbeing. There is something deeper behind it: Emily invites us to join her in her own life trip through the desert of long illness. In this journey her point of reference is the abundant life Christ wants everybody to enjoy, regardless of their handicaps or severe thorns. She makes clear that our ultimate source of joy, meaning and happiness in life cannot be found apart from God. I am sure that this is the reason why, as you read this book, you are not likely to feel glad but you will indeed experience joy, the joy that comes from contemplating life with the eyes of the psalmist when he writes: 'You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence' (Psalm 16:11).

One last consideration from a more personal viewpoint. When I wrote *A Thorn in the Flesh: Finding strength and hope amid suffering* a few years ago I had one clear purpose in mind: 'to focus on the light of hope rather than on the darkness of the trial; to speak of victory rather than defeat; not to be paralysed by the thorn's venom but rather strengthened by the supernatural antidote of grace.'

This is exactly what Emily has achieved in her book. This is why I warmly recommend *The Amazing Technicolour Pyjama Therapy*. It will be like water in the desert, providing you with a refreshing perspective on illness and suffering.

DR. PABLO MARTINEZ, psychiatrist and author

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to sincerely thank all the people who have contributed to this book. Many of them are ill and exhausted, yet worked hard to offer me their wisdom. Thanks are also due to Dr Maureen Gowans, my pom-pom waving friends and my supportive and talented editor Stephanie Heald. My husband helpfully talked through much of the book content at the half-baked stage. Special thanks are due to my trusty green dressing gown, which clothed me during most of my writing sessions.

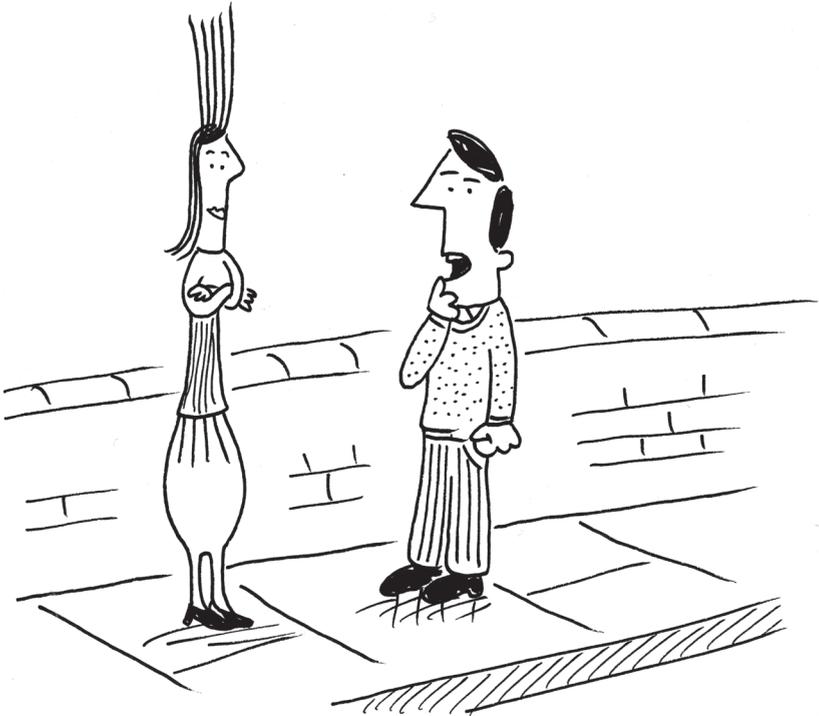


# MAKING A START

# 1

There's something about me you need to know, right at the start. My life's ambition is to be more like a spring onion.

My spring onions look small and weedy next to my neighbour's towering runner bean plants. But onions have a secret weapon. You can chop them off at the ankles and eat the shoots – and they don't die. They just shrug their wee roots and start all over again. Isn't that something?



*“There’s just something about you that makes me think of spring onions.”*

They don't despair, grumble or groan. They just crack on and grow like mad. Meanwhile, I get to eat the fresh green tops. What a useful plant.

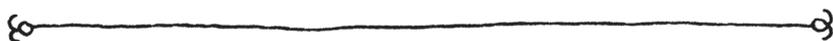
To be fair, I am quite nice to my spring onions. They grow in a sunny spot in well-watered, carefully-nourished soil. If I just ignored them, they would give up and die.

When I fell ill and stayed ill, I felt like God had chopped me off at the ankles. I wasn't as brave as my onions, let me tell you. I yelled in pain and indignation; I felt painfully abandoned, diminished and finished.

It took me a long time to learn that God was not out to kill me. Instead, he was offering me a new opportunity for growth and fruitfulness. He carefully provided everything I needed to survive and thrive in the face of pain and loss. Over time I realised that I could fill up on the good things he was offering. I began to look my illness in the eye and fight back.

This book is all about fighting back. It's about reclaiming your life now you're ill, finding new ways to live well and serve effectively. You'll find survival strategies, encouragement, practical advice and fresh ways to view your situation. God hasn't given up on you; there's plenty of good news from the Bible about living abundantly and usefully with illness.<sup>1</sup>

There's a lot to think about and try out in this book. We're all different, so some ideas will suit you better than others. I wrote the book to be read from start to finish, but it is also good for dipping in and out of according to your energy and your interests.



## THE FELLOWSHIP OF SUFFERING

The sick are exiled into a strange and scary place, leaving behind great chunks of their previous way of life. It's a lonely transition, with pressures that well friends just can't understand.

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<sup>1</sup> I'm writing from the perspective of a believing Christian. Throughout my illness, my faith has been more than a crutch, more than a stretcher. If you'd like to know more, you could check out [www.christianity.org.uk](http://www.christianity.org.uk), sign up for an Alpha course at your local church, or just start reading the Bible. Start at the Gospel of Mark and say a simple prayer – just ask God to show you more about himself as you read. If you'd like to know more about Christian faith, you could check out [www.christianity.org.uk](http://www.christianity.org.uk).

On the other hand, people living with illness have a lot in common. So, I thought, let's learn from one another. Over the years I've asked a lot of ill people a lot of questions. I've gleaned hard-won truths from folks with different illnesses, both physical and mental. Their experiences, faith and wisdom will keep us company along the way.

### Where I began

In my twenties, I happily juggled my career with a young family, hobbies, sport, friends and church life. My busy life was suddenly whipped from under my feet by a mystery illness. For many months I lay in bed in a state of shock, lost without the certainties of the past.

I cried out for God's power to relieve my suffering and allow me to fulfil my life plans. What I got was God's power changing me slowly through my struggles, so I could begin to fulfil *his* plans for my life. (Don't you hate it when God gives you what you need instead of what you want?)

Although I hadn't signed up for this particular adventure, I had, thinking back, rashly given my Lord the right to choose my path. I watched others zip ahead, choosing jobs, activities and lifestyle. I seemed to be left way behind, struggling with my situation day by day. Could this really be God's best for me?

Over a long and painful period I learned that although my path is unusual, I still have a life to live. I have choices, responsibilities and joys, like anybody else. And through my mistakes I slowly learned some nifty strategies to help me live well while I'm ill.

Before I was ill I worked as a doctor. Now I'm a patient. Ironic, eh? Although I had to leave my job, I found that being a doctor doesn't wash off. I still see things from that perspective. Through my work I met and tried to help many ill people. Now I understand a whole lot more about their point of view. So these days, I'm perched in the middle.

### Why Joseph?

I've been particularly drawn to the dramatic story of Joseph in the Bible during my long illness. Joseph's struggles seem to mirror the stages of life with illness. His strategies for handling trust, hope, pain, rejection and disempowerment are practical and useful. I'm encouraged that Joseph's destiny was not derailed by his troubles. The more I look, the

more I find. So Joseph is our Bible companion as we consider life with illness.

If you don't know the story, here's a quick overview. We'll come back to reflect on different aspects throughout this book.

*God spoke to young Joseph in two dreams, which foretold high leadership responsibilities. His jealous older brothers then sold Joseph to slave traders to get rid of him. He was taken to Egypt and sold on to become a manager in Potiphar's house. Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph but when he refused, she successfully framed him for rape.*

*Joseph was imprisoned for several years and became the prison manager. Two of Pharaoh's servants were held in the same prison. Both of them had troubling dreams which Joseph accurately interpreted. Later, Pharaoh had significant dreams of his own and Joseph interpreted these as a warning of widespread crop failure. Pharaoh was impressed by Joseph and put him in charge of a huge famine relief programme.*

*When Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to buy food from Joseph, he recognised them although they didn't realise who he was. He tested their motives before revealing the truth. The brothers then went home to get their families and returned to live securely in Egypt.*

*Joseph's God-given managerial skills and serving attitude saved millions of people from starvation, including his own family. God's calling over Joseph's life came dramatically true after many years of suffering and hardship.*

Joseph's adventures begin in Genesis 37:1. I'll give the references as we go. If you have the energy, it's a good idea to read the Bible passages alongside this book.



## DREAMS AND DESTINY

GENESIS 37:1–11

Joseph dreamed his famous dreams as a privileged teenager, living comfortably in a large family. At that time, people in the area viewed dreams and their interpretation as important business. Skilled practitioners wrote dream texts with detailed lists of symbols and meanings. Some of these fragile scrolls have survived to this day, because they were carefully preserved as treasured possessions. So it was natural for Joseph to take his dreams seriously, as a sign of his future.

Joseph's dreams didn't arrive on any random night. God had a detailed plan that stretched over many years. He knew that Joseph would need time to develop in skills and integrity. God set out Joseph's timetable perfectly so that Joseph would be ready for his big chance.

God has the same kind of loving, purposeful oversight over every human life. We weren't created to be ignored or wasted but to live out God's good plans for us. Our limited viewpoint is a huge drawback in hard times. Like Joseph, we must live through the pain without seeing the end point, trying to hang on to God's promises as we go.

**A false step**

Recognising God's call is only the beginning. Joseph reacted by boasting immaturely to his older brothers;

*Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, 'Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of corn out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.'*

*His brothers said to him, 'Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?' And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.*

GENESIS 37:5–8

Oh dear. Joseph hit trouble because he tried to use his calling to make himself look big. He still had a lot to learn.

### **Another kind of dream**

God spoke to Joseph powerfully, using Joseph's night-time dreams. There's a different kind of dream that also fuels human ambition and purpose. Life dreams, our long-held, treasured plans, are vital to preserving vision and hope.

Life dreams have had a hard time lately, hijacked and devalued by Western culture. Consumer goods like cars and long-haul holidays have been promoted as life dreams. Something you can buy is no replacement for a passionate personal vision to build a better world. A genuine life dream is a true gift from God.

When my illness hit, I felt as if my precious life dreams were ripped away. I longed to support broken people and express my creativity but I couldn't even get out of bed. I watched sadly as others lived their lives to the full. Over time, my hope and confidence quietly wilted and died.

It eased my sorrow when I grasped the difference between gifts and life dreams. Gifts are the permanent package of strengths and passions that God gives each person before birth. Life dreams spring from underlying gifts and are shaped by culture, family, education and experience. As we go through life we discover our gifts and many of us find a life dream, or dreams, which tend to be more specific.

So young Joseph had the gifts of administration and leadership from birth, which made him a very effective farm worker. His life dream of great leadership was sparked by his God-given sleeping dreams. Others find their life dreams through prayer, quiet reflection or the encouragement of a wise observer. If you find yourself consistently drawn to something good, angered by an injustice or can't ignore the needs of a particular group, this may be the area of your life dream.

### **A bigger dream**

Our life dreams are based on what we know and imagine now. Even if we've grasped God's call, our reactions to that call are often a bit naïve or self-centred. Like Joseph, I've been guilty of trying to use my calling to give me significance. God meanwhile waits patiently for me to get the point. His love is there to build me up, while his calling over my life is a gift of love from him to others.

*'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'*

JEREMIAH 29:11

This beautiful promise was given to the people of Israel at a very low point in their history. It shows that in spite of the messy bits, God's perspective on our small lives is eternal, wise and wonderful. When our human hopes and dreams fall away, they leave space for something new. God has powerful plans for us that are far beyond anything we can imagine. Our gifts are still safely in place.

If this idea seems way out of reach right now, maybe it's not time yet. After diagnosis, the first priority is to survive day by day, to grasp a new reality and start to let go of the past. That's a big step for anyone to master. As the grief and shock wear off, we'll come round to look at this again.



### *For reflection*

- 1** Think of somebody you know who's sick or suffering. Have you learned anything useful from them?
- 2** What were your childhood dreams? Are they still the same today? Could you ask God to show you if all these dreams are from him?
- 3** Which barriers stand in the way of your dreams? Imagine the barriers as big rocks blocking your path. Now picture the Holy Spirit flowing like a river. See how the water always finds a way around, under or past the rocks, or washes them away over time. Ask God to make a path for you so your journey can continue, despite what's in your way.



*Affliction is able to drown out every earthly voice . . . but the voice of eternity within a man it cannot drown*

SOREN KIERKEGAARD, *Christian Discourses*

THE AMAZING TECHNICOLOUR  
PYJAMA THERAPY

*God be in my head and in my understanding;  
God be in my eyes and in my looking;  
God be in my mouth and in my speaking;  
God be in my heart and in my thinking;  
God be at my end and in my departing.*

OLD SARUM PRAYER, FIRST RECORDED 1514

*I'm sick of following my dreams. I'm just going to ask them  
where they're going, and hook up with them later.*

MITCH HEDBERG

