





CHANGED 4 LIFE

Real Lives in
a Real World

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WAS DEAD, BUT NOW I LIVE

SERGIO ROMERO

WHEN SHE WENT TO ANSWER THE KNOCK at the door, Mom could never have imagined in a thousand years what she was about to hear and how her life was about to dramatically change. “Mrs. Romero,” said the well-dressed military man standing there, “I’m here to share some very bad news regarding your son, Sergio.”

Mom tuned out the rest of what he said; it all seemed unnecessary after a few seconds. She slowly walked to the sofa where she threw herself down and looked at the piece of paper the Interpol agent had given her. There was a black-and-white picture of her son’s half-burned, lifeless body.

What had happened? Why in the world was Mom given that report on that April morning?

THE BEGINNING OF MY TRIP

I had accepted the truths of the Seventh-day Adventist Church four years earlier. I loved the newfound doctrines and devoured them. It was absolute truth for my life. I made my profession of faith and was baptized into the church. Just four months after my baptism, I was already working at the seminary. The idea was to work hard and pay some of my tuition for the following year. The months flew by, and sooner than seemed possible, I was registered and ready to start my first year in the seminary. My new desire to become a pastor was off to a good start.

I had made a decision early on: I was going to be the best student ever. I hit the books accordingly! Soon my grades reflected my effort. Every time a teacher asked a question, I was always the first to answer; my classmates loved me—not! Later, I discovered I had earned a pretty cool nickname: Astro Boy! Call me naïve, but I'd loved *Astro Boy* since I was a little kid!

It didn't take me long to realize my newly acquired nickname was no fun at all. It was meant to hurt me. My classmates thought I was trying to show off. They thought I was trying to impress the teacher and be the star of the class. That was a tough cookie to swallow. It hurt a lot, but it didn't change my attitude toward school. Nickname and all, I kept on going.

Two years went by without things getting any better. I felt terribly lonely and profoundly hurt. I rolled around with a fake smile as a defense mechanism just to get by. To live a lonely life is pretty sad, but to feel lonely in a crowd of peers is really tragic.

The end of the fourth semester came, and it was time for me to go make some tuition money during the summer. I didn't have many options. It was either selling books as a colporteur—or not. I hated selling books. I felt very fortunate when I met a student who made his living selling Christian music at our school. After talking to him, he gave me all his connections, and, without any hesitation, I traveled all the way to Brazil to purchase some music. I set out to sell enough music to pay for my tuition the following year.

I decided to sell my merchandise in Bolivia and later in Peru. I had a very simple plan. I would hit every church I could. People loved music; I was sure they would want to help a theology major. I would sell everything I had, go back to seminary with all the money, and possibly buy some affection from my classmates. That was the plan!

The first part of my trip was great. I traveled to new places, met new people, and made some good sales. But trouble was waiting. As I tried to clear my merchandise through the Peruvian customs, the officials threatened

to keep all my music unless I paid a crazy amount of fees, which I ended up doing.

After that bump in the road, I set out to continue my adventure. I traveled all over Peru—the sierras, the coast, and the jungle. It seemed like every church I visited was waiting to give me their money, which I gladly took. I had no trouble filling my pockets; the trouble was that my heart continued to be empty and needy, and I was getting very tired of it.

About two months into my adventure, I headed for Cuzco, my last stop before going back to Argentina. My plan was to visit the churches in Cuzco and the magnificent Machu Picchu ruins before going back to school.

One night, after preaching and selling my music at a local church, something really strange happened on my way to my hotel room.

My hotel room was the only place where I could let go and be me and no one else. A place where I could let loose my emotions and pain without anyone knowing. Terrifying thoughts kept tormenting me. *Why can't I be happy? I've given my life to Jesus already. I've been baptized. I can recite all of the doctrines. I can give a Bible study with nothing but the Bible in my hands. Why can't I feel happiness and peace in my heart?* I was doing everything by the book, literally! But everything was about to change that night.

I walked aimlessly through the back alleys of the city of Cuzco. There were European tourists everywhere, looking for what the lower part of this mystical city offered. I was crossing one of the infamous streets, Procuradores, when all of a sudden someone among the multitude of people walking in the opposite direction placed something in my hands. I closed my fist instinctively. And knowing better than to ask or stop, I kept on walking. Minutes later, I was in my hotel room.

Once in the solitude of my room, I threw myself on the bed. I was tired, and I couldn't go on any longer with what seemed like hypocrisy to me. It wasn't that I was physically tired, but I was emotionally and spiritually exhausted. Following Jesus shouldn't be so hard! I felt I was renouncing everything I had held sacred.

A few seconds later, I realized that my fist was still tightly closed, and I remembered the strange encounter. Looking at my hand, I saw that my knuckles were white from so much pressure. When I finally opened my fingers, I was shocked to see I was holding a joint of weed! I quit breathing, and it felt like time had just stopped. I started to shake uncontrollably.

I must have looked at that white, thin-papered, carefully crafted joint for a long time before holding it close to my nose to inhale its strong, sweet aroma. I lit it more out of curiosity than anything else, but minutes

later I had smoked the whole thing.

The next day I woke up to a new reality. I was still dressed and very hungry. I opened the door and asked a German in the room next door what time it was. He replied that it was almost 6:00 P.M. I looked at him, thinking he was kidding. But he reassured me that it was indeed about 6:00 P.M.

I went back into my room and closed the door. A really strange feeling brought chills to my body. I was confused, but yet everything seemed so clear. I felt light and happy, but at the same time very guilty. It was all something bigger than words could describe.

I went to take a cold shower. The water was so cold it would have jolted a bear out of hibernation! I could barely make it back into bed to try to warm up.

A few minutes later, I quickly got up, dressed, and looked under my mattress where I had hidden all my savings. I took some money—just enough to eat plus a little extra.

I don't even remember what I ate—or devoured, actually—that evening because there was something else on my mind. I paid for my meal and left to wander in the already dark streets of Cuzco. I knew exactly where to go. The same street I had been crossing somewhat apprehensively the night before now seemed so inviting.

What I was looking for had to be there, and I didn't have to look too long. When I saw him, he was already looking at me as if he were waiting for me. I could see a smile under that heavy mustache and beard as I reached down into my pocket and gave him the money.

In return, I got a little plastic bag. "This is the best of the best," he said. "It comes from Urubamba." I nodded my head as I held the little bag like a new friend.

That was the beginning of many trips to this part of the city. My music, my education, my family, and my God were soon forgotten, or so I thought. The days went by quickly. Sin is that way; one thing leads to another. The next thing I knew, I was completely immersed in a world I had never known before.

I became a regular to the drug trade and famous among the tourists. Somehow, I've always been able to make people laugh. Combining that talent with drugs took away all my inhibitions, and well, I became famous.

The way I looked was an attraction in its own right. I wore a poncho and a very interesting black hat, accompanied by a long, untrimmed beard and very long hair. By the way, I have a picture to prove it! I had people from Lima, Bolivia, and even Madrid looking me up because someone had told them about me in their hometowns.

Soon, my room became *the* hangout. There were plenty of drugs for everybody at any given time. I wasn't selling it, I was sharing it with just about anybody; it was my way of socializing and making new friends.

I hated to be alone. One time, I had about twenty people sleeping in my room—roommates and people who were just staying over to save some money. During this time, I was so twisted, I was even evangelizing my “friends,” giving them Bible studies! I like to see it now as my own small congregation. I taught them about Creation, the Flood, and the Ten Commandments, but afterward the “entertainment” would escalate to cocaine, hashish, and a variety of other drugs.

My world had become upside down, literally. During the night, I was out and about, while I slept in the daytime. I moved along in a subworld of drugs, bohemian nights, and people as emotionally needy as I was. My biggest issue, however, kept on getting bigger—I felt completely alone. *How could a God of love allow me to suffer so much?*

**EITHER DO IT OR I'LL TAKE MATTERS
INTO MY OWN HANDS**

I was leaving a bar one night. That dirty bar was almost my second home. I kept going back because I

was someone of importance there. That particular night seemed colder than other nights. As I wandered along, my shoulder somehow collided with the shoulder of a drunken policeman walking in the opposite direction.

Immediately, the cop started shouting insults at me. He drew his weapon, yelling at me to get on the ground. I obeyed without hesitation. Then he put his foot on my neck, holding my head against the old cobblestone sidewalk.

His drunken voice was thick and sounded distant, muffled by the whispers of those who began to gather around. Emboldened by the alcohol in his blood and the group of spectators, the policeman pointed his gun at my head and screamed, “You will die tonight!”

My whole life passed in front of me in an instant—my father’s death, my mother who was alone back home, my decision to follow Jesus, and the way I had been living my life the last few months. Everything seemed so unreal—until the shot rang out!

I could hear people screaming. More police arrived on the scene, and everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. I felt the warm moisture of blood on my face, and I wondered, *Am I dying? Or am I already dead?* Someone helped me up while the police dealt with my attacker. People took me to my hotel.

Once in my room, I quickly went to the bathroom to look at my face in the mirror. I expected the worst. There was no bullet hole, only a scratch on my left temple. The drunken policeman had missed his target. Lying in bed, alone in my room for the first time in weeks, I started to shake. A few minutes later, my situation finally hit me, and tears began to roll down my face like an endless waterfall. I realized I could have been killed that night.

Actually, I wanted to be dead. I was tired of all this religion stuff, that stuff about “Come to Me all of you who are troubled and heavy laden.” It wasn’t working for me! *Why hadn’t anything gone right ever since I decided to follow Jesus?* I decided that the only thing that made sense, the only thing keeping me alive, were the drugs. I had easy access to lots of drugs, and boy, I hit them hard after that incident!

After a while, I woke up. I didn’t know where I was or what day it was. I got up and went to the only place that could put an end to all my problems. I knocked on the door and waited for a few minutes that seemed like an eternity. When the door finally opened, my dealer asked me what I was looking for. “A gun,” I answered without hesitation. He didn’t seem surprised. A few minutes later, I was packing a .38 caliber revolver. Back at my room again, I closed the door behind me. I

didn't want any interruptions. I pulled the gun from under my poncho and stared at it for a while. I could tell it had been used many times before. I took the bullets out of my pocket; there were six of them.

I loaded the gun with no emotions, almost in a ceremonial way. I looked at the barrel, imagining the bullet going through. I wished the policeman had killed me; it would have been easier. Now, it was my turn to finish what he had failed to do. At first, I put the gun in my mouth, but as I thought about it, I decided to put it to my temple for more accuracy. My hands weren't really shaking, but my heart was beating fast. I wasn't happy; Jesus had proved to be a failure. Why continue living?

I put my finger on the trigger and pulled it. Nothing happened. I pulled harder, but still there was nothing. Then something began happening that I couldn't explain. It was like my hand was being forced away from my temple. I fought with all my strength, but an invisible hand was determined that my life was not going to end that night.

I tried again, this time without trying to force the trigger, but my hand was not responding. I fought for over an hour, and nothing happened. Eventually, I threw the gun into a corner and began to cry as I had never cried before.

I wasn't happy. I felt cheated. I couldn't even kill myself! What did God want from me? I stifled my tears on the pillow until the tears gave way to sobs. Finally, with dry eyes and a dried-out heart, I fell asleep.

THE LAST TRIP

I woke up at noon the next day with a huge headache. My throat was dry, and my arm was hurting. When I finally got up, I saw the gun in the corner—a testimony of my failure. I took a quick shower and threw on a pair of pants and a shirt. I grabbed a bag for the gun, took my money from under the mattress, and left, closing the door behind me.

I walked to the bus terminal where I bought a ticket for Urubamba and got on the bus. My plan had changed. I knew my dealer wouldn't mind receiving me in his house and that there I would find anything and everything I needed. The trip wasn't very long. I got off the bus and walked for about twenty-five minutes before reaching the heavy gate that guarded his house.

Once inside, I was amazed at the amount of marijuana and the variety of other drugs there were in the house. If the gun wouldn't work, the drugs would do it for sure. I had seen people die from drug overdoses in recent months; I had a pretty good idea of what I was getting myself into.

I've chosen not to be very descriptive about all the drugs I used and the amounts, but once I was overloaded, I was placed in the room assigned me. I lay on the floor with a nearly empty bottle of rum. The light was off. I could hear the sound of my own heartbeat. I could see the light from my joint of weed. I could still feel the burning sensation in my arm where I had injected some of the drugs. I really wanted out, and this time I was going to make sure it worked.

It is very difficult for me to try to describe what happened. I remember how my body and mind started to give in to the drugs. The best way to describe it is as if all the lights in a big house started to turn off one by one. But before the last light went out, something amazing happened that changed my life forever.

A bright light filled the room, and a brilliant figure like nothing I had ever seen before appeared standing before me. His hand was stretched out, holding my hand, and with an echoing voice both strong and gentle He said, "You have strayed for too long; it's time to go home." That hand pulled me up, and, in an instant, I was standing.

The effects of the drugs disappeared instantly. I could feel strength coming back to my body, and I was strangely aware of my surroundings. My mind was clear. Then, all of a sudden, the vision disappeared right

before my eyes. I fell on my knees, and tears started flowing down my face. Right there and then, I prayed the most sincere prayer I've ever prayed in my whole life.

I accepted Jesus as my personal Savior in that dark room. I knew all the doctrines and a lot about the Bible, but I had never experienced true conversion. Now on the threshold of my death, Jesus became real, and I was able to see Him for the first time.

After a long time of prayer, laughter, and mourning, I stood up, grabbed my bag, and started to walk out of the house. I walked and walked; I talked with Jesus and started to sing.

My trip from hell was over. I left Cuzco; I left Lima. I went to Santiago, and from there I called my mother. At the time, I didn't understand why she was screaming and was so excited. I explained that I would be coming home the next day. For her, it was like Jesus' story of the prodigal son. "For your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found" (Luke 15:32, NKJV).

The document my mother had received from Interpol said a terrorist group had killed and burned me. For months, she had mourned a dead son. When I showed up, my mother screamed and cried from happiness. She was still holding the picture of the remains of her son.

She kept repeating, “It was just a nightmare. He is alive.” But in reality, I *had* indeed died. But I had also been resurrected by Jesus.

I went back to the seminary. I kept on studying hard because I wanted to be the best for Jesus. At some point, even the nickname was dropped, and I made some of the best friends I still keep in touch with.

Many years have gone by, but every time I look at a young man who screams loudly, “There is no hope for me!” I think of myself and smile. If there was hope for me, certainly there is hope for anybody. When I’m able to approach such a person, my message is always the same: “There is Someone who loves you above all things. Jesus is real, and He can give you true happiness.”

I can tell you today that knowing Scripture and the doctrines is important, but the one thing that remains vital is to know Jesus. He really cares about you. He’s truly concerned about your happiness, more than anyone in this world. Will you give Him a chance to show you? I really hope to meet you some day and tell you more about my Friend, Jesus. Because of Him, I have been changed for life.