

RELEASE, *Volume 2*
Untold Stories about Inner Strength, Resilience, and Overcoming Challenges



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Introduction

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There was a time when I could have been asked, “Why do we face challenges?” and I would flat out reply, “There are no reasons”. My perception of hardship and pain was that they were pointless painful punishments that served no purpose other than to break us – to deteriorate us into nothing. But now, I guess, you could say I have come a long way.

I now know that life’s challenges make us great, make us who we are, and help us determine what we are meant to do in this world and for this world. The greatest challenges I faced has made me resilient, strong, wise, passionate, and compassionate. They also allowed me to perceive life and people differently.

“The same wind blows on us all; the winds of disaster, opportunity, and change. Therefore, it is not the blowing of the wind but the setting of the sails that will determine our direction in life.”

-Jim Rohn

Jim summed up life best... *“The same wind blows on us all... It is...the setting of the sails...”* better yet, it is our attitudes, perception of our challenges, or life’s lessons that determine our ultimate direction.

This book is a great example of both the winds and the setting of the sails. The words within these chapters remind us that we not alone and teaches us an alternate way to overcome heartbreaking situations – the ones that feel like life is coming down on us a little too hard. They teach us to not crumble but to rise in the face of opposition’s head on with beauty, strength, dignity, and grace.

Here’s to setting a better sail... May these stories release you from anything weighing you down and keeping you from going in the right direction.

With Love,

Saba Tekle

Quarter-Life Conquest

By Keenya Hofmaier

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Shortly before turning 25 years old, I began experiencing what my generation has famously coined “the quarter-life crisis.” For months, I found myself reflecting on all the joy, pain, success and failure I had experienced up until that point in my young adult life. I began questioning the purpose of all my decisions and grew anxious thinking about my future.

Since I was young, my decisions had been driven by a desire for acceptance, approval and prestige: getting good grades, going to a great university, developing a respectable career – these elements were unequivocally important. It’s funny how even after achieving these milestones, I never found the acceptance or prestige that I was seeking. Worse, I never felt fulfilled.

I was a graduate of a top university and teaching fellow in the South Bronx in New York City. I had recently been accepted to law school and had saved roughly \$30,000 for a deposit on a condo. I had achieved everything my parents wanted, and what I thought I *should* want for myself. Clearly following the “right path” was leading me in the wrong direction, but I didn’t know what other path to take.

One Sunday, while preparing lesson plans for the week, I recognized that I wasn’t happy. My “right path” was making me miserable and curbing my natural ambition and optimism. Sure, I enjoyed spending time with my friends, I was living in one of the most vibrant cities in the world, and I had a family that loved me. I was grateful for all of that, but I wasn’t “fulfilled” nor was I living up to my full potential. Without happiness or fulfilment, what was the point?

I needed to break down barriers – those imposed on me and those I imposed on myself – and do something that spoke to me; something with no end goal or motivation. I wanted to finally do something simply out of desire, whether it was on the “right path” or not.

I thought about what made me happy. The first thing that came to mind was travel. I always enjoyed travel and learning about different cultures. I often felt more at home in a foreign country than I did in my hometown. In fact, during an impromptu “superlative awards” ceremony in high school, I was named “Most Likely to be an Expat.” Little did I know my classmates were fortune-tellers.

I figured I had enough savings from my condo deposit to allow me to live anywhere in the world for one year. So, that is exactly what I planned on doing. Without much thought, I knew I

wanted to live in Paris. I studied French in high school and had always been enchanted by the country that welcomed some of America's most brilliant personalities. *I was going to be next.*

Just hours after a three-way phone call with my parents about living out my dream (and taking care of my dog as I resettled), I bought a one-way ticket to Paris and completed my long-stay visa application for France. My work resignation followed the next morning. My toxic on-again, off-again relationship ended over text message the following week.

Three months after this life-changing Sunday, I stood in my bare apartment looking at the naked walls and brown cardboard boxes that filled the living room. I did it. I left my old life behind for a new one in Paris. I didn't have a job or stellar French language skills, but I had a sense of hope, freedom and happiness – things I did not have in a very long time.

My life as an expat has been the most challenging and rewarding period of my life: I failed my first few graduate courses because they were entirely taught in French, but I pressed on and earned my degree with distinction. I experienced loneliness in a city so foreign and far away from home, but I also experienced love and belonging in the most romantic city on earth. Some weeks were spent in my cramped *chambre de bonne*, some weeks I got to travel the world. Every day is a tango between two cultures, as my habits become less American and more fused with my adopted culture. And never has anything been easy. That's what makes it fun.

At 25, I was ready to abandon what I wanted for who I thought I should become. I learned too often, women abandon their interests or personal goals for the well-being or approval of others, when all we really need is self-acceptance and self-love.

To live bravely and unapologetically is "feminine." To explore your own interests is not "selfish." You do not have to live for someone else nor for illusory expectations. You can take risks, live boldly and still succeed on the other side.

Five years later, I still live in Paris, speaking French fluently and working in a new career I am passionate about. When I arrive to work in the morning on the Champs Elysées, the view of the *Arc de Triomphe* reminds me that I didn't suffer a "quarter-life crisis," I embraced a quarter-life conquest. I am continuing to create the life I want, unapologetically, and I've realized that there are no "right" or "wrong" paths in life, simply those that are right for *you*.

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Originally from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Keenya spent three years working in New York before moving to Paris on a whim. She holds a Master's degree in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and works as a sustainability professional at a French multinational company. In her spare time she enjoys traveling, painting and learning how to code. In 2017, Keenya released her first e-book, "30-

Day Connect: A 'guide' to expanding your network and unlocking your potential by the end of the month."

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Finding Purpose From Your Pain

By Destiny Hilliard-Thomas

...

“No! He is going to be fine! You are a pastor, but you act like you don’t have faith. I’ve seen him in worse condition and he pulled through. He will make it!” said my 14-year-old self to my father, May 8, 2004.

For years that day has replayed in my mind. We were in Pennsylvania for my sister’s college graduation. The conviction and confusion was tormenting me; struggling with the decision of missing the graduation to be beside my best friend Charles, who had been battling leukemia.

I spent many days after school in the hospital with him. I felt that if we weren’t there something bad could happen. I knew Charles wouldn’t leave us while I were there. The last time I was with Charles was Wednesday, May 5th. Charles had more energy on this day; he was playing a video game and just seemed happy.

A nurse came and weighed him, and surprisingly, he had gained some weight. We were both excited and relieved. Weight gain was a good sign. This was an overall good day ... and somehow, things changed and my hope and faith were challenged.

On Friday, May 7, 2004, my family and I drove to Pennsylvania for my sister’s graduation. That night at dinner my dad received a phone call saying that Charles had gotten worse and was having seizures.

I was given the option of going back to New Jersey to be with Charles or go right after the graduation, which was the following day. I toiled with this decision. *Would Leah be upset with me for missing her graduation? Is he really that bad or is it just the doctors exaggerating? If I go now, someone else will probably miss the graduation.* These thoughts clouded my head and I didn’t know what to do.

I chose to stay. The graduation ceremony was Saturday morning and ended around noon. Once it was over, I got in the car with my dad. He said “Des, I want you to be prepared just in case.” I immediately turned around and said *“What? He WILL make it. I’ve seen him worse than this. In a coma, unresponsive. You’re a man of faith, but you think he’s gonna die?”* Unbeknownst to me, he had already received the call.

When we arrived home, I asked why we didn’t go to the hospital. No response. When we went inside he told me to come to his room. You would think it would be clear to me, but I was still holding strong to my faith. This was the first time in life I fully depended on God, and I put my all into Him to turn the situation around ... and He didn’t ... so I thought.

I went to my parents' room and saw my dad's face. I quietly said, "No he didn't." I dropped to the floor and cried until my head was pounding. The worst headache I ever had. I couldn't believe it. Charles did not make it. My faith was broken and my heart was shattered. I felt angry at God. I didn't understand why this happened.

About eight years later, my husband suggested I go to therapy to help me cope with his loss. I had never sought help to deal with the grief. I felt some blame for not being there with him and deciding to stay at the graduation. For years I believed that if I was there he would have continued holding on and fighting.

Sounds ridiculous, selfish and absurd, but it caused me emotional turmoil for years. His loss impacted almost every part of my life, especially as an adult. I carried him throughout college, graduate school, and my marriage.

I continued asking "why?" I never understood why God allowed cancer to win. I couldn't understand why these young parents had to bury their only son at 15 years old, or why my 14-year-old best friend had to bury her only sibling.

Sometimes there are no easy answers to some of life's questions. I did a lot of soul-searching and listening to God. It became clear to me that Charles actually didn't lose to cancer. His purpose here was fulfilled and what a mighty purpose it was. He brought about lifelong changes in the lives of others through his light. He united his family and was the person God used to teach us how to pray and show us how to walk by faith, not by sight. He taught us all how to fight and overcome obstacles in life. God sent him on an assignment in which he fulfilled in only 15 years. Fourteen years later, his legacy still lives on through all of us. I recognized my purpose here on earth through his loss of life.

Crazy, right? We may not understand the route we must take to find our purpose, but that doesn't change the destination we are striving to get to.

In life we are thrown curveballs, fireballs and icicles, and never understand why. Sometimes we search too hard rather than realizing what we gained from the experience. Every loss comes with a gain, whether or not we recognize it. Protagonists in stories often experience something traumatic, but ALWAYS win. You *will* win. Cherish your battle wounds. Someone's looking at yours to figure out a way to heal theirs. I hope you find the strength in your weakness and realize your "why." Make your pain your purpose and your struggles your strength. After that, **release**. Remember, great pain produces great growth and great power.

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Destiny Hilliard-Thomas received her bachelor's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies from the illustrious Hampton University ("THE REAL HU") and a Master of Science in Counseling from Johns Hopkins University.

Destiny teaches young adults from Washington, D.C., and Baltimore. She's the founder of Chuckie's Angels Inc. (ChuckiesAngels.net), a Baltimore nonprofit, and owner of a female empowerment T-shirt line, "We M.O.V.E. - Motivate, Overcome, Value, Empower" (wemove.store). She recently became the Baltimore Chapter leader for AmplifyHer, a women's empowerment network (AmplifyHerLife.com).

Destiny is a wife, sister, friend, godmother, and most importantly, a mother to Joseph Donald. For more information, please visit www.speakdestiny.com

Beauty in Pain

By Tausha M. Kelly

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When we are birthed into this world our parents don't know exactly what we will have to endure during our journey through life. If there was a looking glass that foretold our life's story, many of us would not be here today. *It's a crazy and candid thought, but one worth exploring.* This world can be such a painful place that can take you on a journey of issues that some never return from. Even though I endured so much, I am eternally grateful because I know that someone else needs to hear that "yes," through all of the pains of life, *there is beauty and hope on the other side.*

As a young girl, the tragedy of being molested impacted my life in outwardly subtle, but inwardly loud, ways. Secretly, I did not trust anyone, especially men. I never really knew how to give love properly. In my mind sex was an endorsement of love. *What a warped way to think about love, right?* It's almost as if I was viewing life and love through broken lenses, but I didn't realize that the way I was seeing everything was with distorted vision. Pain and dysfunction were my reality. Therefore, struggles of insecurities seemed normal. *Insecurity is such a travesty because it has the ability to cripple potential, dreams, talents and smother the authentic beauty that lies deep within each of us.*

One of the most tragic parts of my life story is having to give birth to a stillborn baby that I so desperately wanted. I was so grief stricken and my heart was torn apart. I never thought I would have to go through something so painful. Shortly after this time I became homeless and ended up briefly living in a shelter. Once again, life's failures were plaguing me. Less than a year later I journeyed into a relationship that I knew I should not have entertained, but I did because of loneliness. *I endured so much during this time of my life. Many life lessons were being formed within me.*

I suffered abuse not just from others, but from myself as well. In 2003, I gave birth to a beautiful son. My relationship with his father was not the best, but I stayed out of fear that he would do something crazy to me or take my son.

One night in particular my son's father got upset with me and decided to follow through on his threat to take my son far away where no one would be able to find either of them. While he was driving off I remember holding onto the steering wheel of my car and being dragged down a dark wet road until I let go. I recall standing there in the dark, bruised and bleeding, while rain soaked my bedroom slippers and night clothes. I cried as I watched my son's father continued to drive down the road with my baby. In that moment, I felt the most alone. I couldn't help but think, *surely someone could hear me crying and screaming?* But although this was normally a busy road it was completely empty on this night. So not only was this pain physical, but emotionally a part of me started to die.

His father's threat was short-lived as he returned with my car and son shortly afterward. I was so afraid, but willing to do anything to keep from losing another child.

I began to self-medicate in order to numb the pain of my reality. I would take at least 12-14 sleeping pills a day in order to black out and cut off the pain I secretly endured. It's truly a miracle I never overdosed. One instance where I believe I did "crossover" to the other side was based upon what I saw coming for me, but because of God's grace and mercy, death did not consume me completely.

I so desperately wanted to be free from the pain I faced each and every day. I never saw the beauty within myself because my heart was so filled with pain that plagued me inside. I never realized that if I could just face the pain and go through it there would be a beautiful story birthed. During my life pains there was a spiritual baby being formed within me that would later be a powerful revelation of endurance, victory, triumph and hope.

When going through the trials and different issues of life, many times pain will be inevitable, but in order to see what has been formulating inside of you it is imperative to keep pushing through the labor pains of life.

It has taken me over 20 years to realize the power within the pain I endured. Within my pain housed the beauty and strength of me. I have since rededicated my life to God and made a covenant pledge of abstinence. I started writing again and began a ministry vlog with my sister in 2011, which later evolved into the radio broadcast, *Matters of the Heart*, which helped to encourage, uplift and inspire all people to live through whatever pain in life they may be experiencing. Through my testimony of truth, my desire is to help other young girls and women to not be afraid to give a voice to their truth.

Jeremiah 29:11: "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."

How awesome is it to know that there is a plan of hope and a future for us even during the most painful parts of our lives.

I have learned and realized that healing needed to take place before I could see the beauty in my pain and how everything I endured was not just for me, but was for people that I may never know - a generation of woman that need to know that there is beauty in their pain. I encourage everyone who reads this to not give up, but to push through the pain so that you can give birth to your story of beauty.

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Tausha Michelle Kelly currently resides in the Orlando area in Florida. She is a former talk radio show host and currently a blogger. She was born in Augusta, Georgia, to two wonderful parents, the late David and Elaine Kelly.

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Changed for the Better*By Rishan Andai*

...

My parents told me I was a happy, energetic and carefree child, but for a long time I felt different and out of place. I was very shy and felt inadequate. I moved to the U.S. with my family at the age of 6. We escaped a war in Eritrea and left everything behind to seek a better life in the U.S.

In elementary school, I was teased because I was African. I was called names and laughed at. I felt hurt and vowed to never speak my native tongue. I was embarrassed of my culture and even tried to “shoosh” my dad whenever he talked Tigrinya (my first language) out in public. Feeling unaccepted by society, I quickly turned on me. This meant that I was not good enough. This feeling of not good enough would carry into my adulthood.

My first test of courage would happen in my first year of college when my roommate allowed her boyfriend to stay the night. I didn’t like this, but I didn’t have the courage to speak up. It made me feel uncomfortable when he would stay the night. This situation saddened me to the point that I spoke to a school psychologist about it. She told me I had rights, and that gave me the confidence I needed to let my roommate know that her boyfriend could no longer stay the night. I had solved the problem with my roommate, but the sadness didn’t go away.

I decided the school was the problem, so I left to live at home and ended up going to a community college. The depression went away and my self-esteem improved. I also lost my freshman 15 (pounds), the weight that you can put on in your freshman year of college. Shortly thereafter, I moved to Ohio with my family. I quickly got a job and enrolled at the local university. Everything was fine until I started experiencing sadness again. I thought living at home with my parents was the problem. I attempted to get my own place, but it didn’t work out. Finally it all made sense, I was experiencing clinical depression.

I had a breakdown and I didn’t want to do anything but sleep. My parents were worried about me because they had never seen me in such a helpless state. I would eventually seek treatment, and it made a difference, but only for a while.

It was time for another change. In 2000, I visited Eritrea. I thought that if I went to my homeland I could become a better person and the sadness would go away. It also meant I could finally meet many of my family members that I hadn’t met since leaving. I was grateful for this trip because I had not seen my country since I fled with my family.

One night I went to a bar. I got to drink alcohol for the first time, I mean really drink! Finally I got to the place I always wanted to be; a feeling of bliss. Alcohol made me feel good about myself,

but later it would turn on me. The feeling alcohol gave me was what I had been searching for all my life; a feeling of happiness.

At the time I was in Eritrea, the country had been going through a border dispute with Ethiopia. It was no longer safe to be there. It got scary. One afternoon I was in an apartment complex with two other people when suddenly the whole complex shook. I thought, "This is the end for me." Then suddenly, we heard a loud boom! It sounded like an explosion. All visitors were asked to evacuate and leave the country. My parents were worried sick and in no time I was back in the U.S.

Everything seemed fine. My dad and my uncle were running two successful businesses; a convenient store and a taxi service. So in 2004, I decided to study abroad in the Dominican Republic. I had a great time in the Dominican Republic, but my trip would be cut short. A family member called and told me that I needed to come home. They told me that my father was sick and in the hospital. They wouldn't give me any further details.

Fearing the worst, I convinced myself that he must be paralyzed. I didn't want to believe that there was a possibility that he might be dead. When I got home I learned of the tragic news. My father's carryout business had been robbed and someone came in and killed him.

My worst fear had come true. I broke into tears and ran upstairs to my bedroom. My family joined me and cried with me. My father was my best friend and hero. The main person in my life who always had my back. He would never get to see me graduate from college. This was a dream of his before coming to America, that his children could all graduate from college and live the American dream.

Until this day I don't believe I have fully grieved his loss. Devastated, I continued drinking and in 2008 my drinking escalated. I would become a selfish dishonest person and would hurt my family in the process. Drinking had allowed me to suppress my feelings and became a coping mechanism. I became depressed and at times suicidal. I became isolated from society, and at age 33 I felt I was nearing the end of my life. I eventually got sick from drinking and in 2009 I would seek treatment.

Since then my life has completely changed for the better. I found that my purpose in life was to use my voice and help others. I formed a deep connection with God, and prayer and meditation became a daily habit. I gained an appreciation for life and felt tremendous gratitude.

I learned no matter what you go through in life, you can overcome anything. I am a living testament to that.

...

Rishan is a teacher, writer and speaker. She presents empowerment workshops to youth and adults on topics such as self-esteem and personal development. She also volunteers with Unity House Inc., a transitional house for men recovering from alcohol and drug addiction. She shares her story with others in hopes that they too can overcome their challenges.

From Tears to Triumph

By Christine Compton

...

My life, to me, was like a dark, hidden secret that I kept buried inside a closet. I shed many tears from the deep emotional pain I felt inside from being violated at a young age. I experienced molestation and rejection, plus low self-esteem, even as I became older.

I never thought in a million years that the heavy emotional pain, dark repressed feelings and thinking that I was ugly, which I carried inside for so very long, would eventually lead to depression. *I was hoping that the pain inside would not make me stop smiling on the outside, and affect the way I felt about myself on the inside.*

At the age of 12, I began comparing myself to other girls in school, even those in my family. Such things like noticing that some girls seemed to dress better than me, looked prettier than me, and were more popular. Whereas, to me, I was this little short, very bony girl who wore thick-lens eyeglasses and not-as-popular clothing.

I thought I was the only one in the world with such horrific secrets, which tormented me every day of my life. A painful reminder is when I was a “cutter,” which is defined as self-mutilation. I would cut myself daily, anywhere on my body, trying to erase my pain and the shame I felt. Sadly, I never felt the pain I inflicted on myself, but instead I would feel a weird sense of relief.

My world was isolated. I would come home every day after school and just stay in my bedroom, doing my homework, and then some household chores, which included washing dishes. Later, I would steal a sharp object from the kitchen and take it to my bedroom, where I had all the little significant trinkets to make me feel like a normal teenage girl. I had my record player, wall posters of the late, famous singer Michael Jackson, fashion models, and my most important, priceless thing: my diary. I would escape by writing my fears, fantasies and worries on the lines of paper. I felt safe in my own world ... my own haven.

Feeling like so-called “damaged goods,” like some people would have considered me, I began hating myself and felt ashamed. I did not understand this feeling of being unloved, dirty and different. I knew my parents loved me in their own way, but something was still lacking ... something was dysfunctional around me because everything seemed to have to be a “hidden secret” in my family, including my secret.

At 7 years old, I began having explicit thoughts, which was abnormal for a child my age. It was strange, but later in life I found out that there were others who suffered secretly as victims of sexual abuse, self-mutilated, and had suicidal thoughts. I look back now and realize that God had a destined

and divine plan for me through my secret pain, but back then I was too blind and young to see or understand.

From 1978-1989, I covered up my physical marks by always wearing long-sleeved shirts, telling lies about the markings if someone seen them, and feeling embarrassed and ashamed afterward. Finally, I realized that I was being selfish after I became pregnant. It was truly a blessing in disguise. My two sons gave me the strength to finally make the decision to STOP this madness cycle.

The journaling about it was not enough, I needed HELP! I had to be a strong and healthy example for my sons. Just because I was a victim of growing up in unhealthy situations did not mean that my sons had to suffer because of my actions. It would be unfair to them. The self-mutilation did not subtract my pain, it only added to it.

Once I sought counseling and started to ease out of my hidden secrets slowly like a caterpillar from its cocoon, I was able to stand up to those demons that terrified me for so long. In doing so, I began to recognize that when we try to protect someone from our own pain, we often unwittingly hurt them instead. They can become indirect victims of our behavior.

My healing process took a while, but it was all worth it. My faith in God, prayer life, motivational speaking and writing has provided me the strength to help, embrace and encourage other people. I share my life lessons so that others can learn from me, and not go through the same pain I endured. I am now more confident than ever, feeling and loving me unconditionally, managing my emotions with positive surroundings and thoughts, and realizing that I can be an inspiration to others.

Painful life lessons are not designed to delay your dreams, but instead they build character, provide wisdom, and help you to learn to love yourself and to embrace your purpose in life. Believe me, you will break free in due season and be healed and restored.

My motto is this, "A greater task always brings victory and greatness, so hold on through the process because at the VERY END KNOW that you have already WON!"

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Chrissy "Bee" Compton is an author, spiritual motivational speaker, writer and the mother of two boys. She is also the CEO of Queen Pen Guru publishing. Her mission is to enlighten, encourage and educate her audience and clients on how to write, and accomplish their goals and dreams by working toward their purpose with confidence.

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“Letting Go”

By Loren West

...

I was enjoying winter break during my first year of college and keeping busy by doing fun things to take my mind off a breakup that I was struggling to move on from. Agreeing to be friends afterwards was harder than I thought it would be. I still held on to the hope that a possible second chance would somehow arise.

What could I have done differently? Could we ever get back together? These questions stayed on my mind until one day I received a call that changed my life forever...

Once I heard the phone ring, I just *knew* something was horribly wrong – call it a premonition if you will. I answered and found out that Danny, my ex-boyfriend, had taken his own life shortly after his 21st birthday. I was speechless. I could only settled in shock and disbelief. *How could this be?* I saw him the night before at church, and he appeared in good spirits. I lost him – forever. There was no opportunity for me to say “goodbye” nor see how his life would turn out. My dreams of a second chance were shattered. It would take all my strength to overcome and eventually learn to cope with my loss.

His memorial service was packed beyond what the church could hold as he was well-loved by so many.

What had I missed and not noticed? Was I the cause of his pain? How could I have not known he was contemplating this? Why didn't I say more when I last saw him? Would that have made a difference? How could God let this happen? I questioned my faith. I thought *how could I have missed any possible warning signs?* I spent years beating myself up and feeling that I was somehow a part of the cause of his death. I began feeling as if his death meant that I was not lovable and was not worth fighting for.

I carried his death with me until I was ready to let go. I realized that the pain I felt in holding on to what happened was hurting me more than it would if I let it go. I was in my mid-20s when I attended a self-improvement retreat where I had an epiphany about where I was in life. I was angry with God for my life not being what I wanted it to be. Attending the retreat allowed me the opportunity to pinpoint, acknowledge, and accept what was going on with me internally. While I wore a smile on the outside, I was crying on the inside. Sharing my experience in an open, safe space helped to start my journey of letting go.

When I was finally honest with myself, I knew I wasn't living my life the way Danny would have wanted me to – a happy life with a hopeful zeal for the future. I had chosen to harden my heart and create surface relationships that made me feel comfortable with not being attached. It was a habit I had created over the years, and in a sense, I wore my habit as a personal badge of honor. To prevent myself from ever feeling a loss so strong again, I went through life feeling as if I didn't need anyone. I was holding myself back. I had done this to myself; there was no one else to blame but me. This wasn't how God wanted me to live either – miserable, frustrated, and disconnected. How could I be of service to others and spread God's love if I'm holding back? I asked God for forgiveness, and over time, I began to let go.

Now, I am happy with my decision to finally let go. I am proud of the fact that I keep trying to improve myself after becoming innately aware of what I needed to change. My willingness to change gives me hope that my future friendships and relationships can only get better. I get to choose daily how I desire my personal relationships to be. Some days are easier than others to be vulnerable and share from my heart, but there are days when it's difficult. I am a work in progress just like anyone else.

Over the years, I've slowly chosen to rekindle my relationship with God. My dreams of the future look so differently now than they did when I was 18; I'm excited to see God's plan for my life unfold.

I've come to realize that there is no *normal* way to grieve, and everyone manifests grief in different ways. Some find comfort in talking and others in solitude and reflection. Each person's timetable for moving on can vary. Some losses tend to hit harder than others. One of the most important things to remember is to be patient with yourself and allow yourself room to breathe. And never forget to tell your loved ones you love them because you never know when your last moment with them will be.

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Living it up in Los Angeles, California, Loren West is a creative artist, avid writer, dynamic speaker, and a savvy business consultant. Her passion is inspiring others to live their best life every day.

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Blessings of a Wounded Healer*By Priyanka Sinha*

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“Dismantle your wounds so you stop living your life by them.” - Niki Rowe

Those words by Australian inspirational self-help book author echo with my inner voice of intuition that has been providing valuable guidance for navigating my challenging and transformational journey for the past three years of my adult life.

My precious grandmother, Sushila Sinha, living in Newcastle, U.K., had been unwell and her death had become imminent to most in the extended family settled in the U.K., U.S., Canada and India. In the early morning hours on Tuesday, June 30th in 2015, I had an incredibly surreal and profound experience involving a warm and blissful interaction with my grandmother’s presence while I was half asleep at home.

She had authored this book of short stories in her native language (Hindi) and had other published works to her credit. I had obtained a few copies of her literary work for my collection through my mother, who had just returned after visiting and serving my grandma in her final days in her body. This book lay beside me while I was relaxing that night. As I gently gazed at her picture on the book cover, I felt her warm embrace and strong presence around me. To my amazement, the serene visual image of her appeared to glance at me and smile, which was instantly followed by a very profound sense of well-being and love. I got up weeping, my face covered in tears. I thought perhaps that was my grandma saying goodbye. My mother called a few hours later confirming my grandmother’s passing a few hours earlier. Although I’ve had prescient dreams in the past, this experience was powerful and unshakeable. I wondered if this could have been an empathic death experience with my beloved grandmother.

I began experiencing an inner shift, a recalibration of childhood memories and unprocessed mental content moving in my subconscious, in addition to my overwhelming grief for this immense loss. This phase seemed externally chaotic yet spiritually grounded in my core. I gradually began mutually connecting and communicating with family members in the extended clan (*A clan is a group of people united by kinship or descent, which is organized around a common ancestor; it could be a part of a larger tribe.*) who knew of my grandmother and her influence. I felt a strange kind of reassurance that there were others processing the loss that made me feel less lonely and provided a sense of belonging to a supportive community. This was gradually followed by an apparent reorientation among the extended clan members in order to deal with the dysfunction present in each family system. This

dysfunction seemed to have magnified. She was the undeniable matriarch and her passing had affected the relational dynamics in the clan, causing some interpersonal upheaval and chaos.

A few elders from within our clan visited me and my parents following grandma's demise. We knew them from when we lived in India. Their showing up at our place in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, seemed like a welcome surprise. These folks wanted to engage in constructive dialogue, get our unique perspectives in order to facilitate relational negotiations and better manage the chaotic and unstable situation that had erupted since grandma's demise. I found myself stepping up at times to ensure that my grandmother's legacy is well-guarded from any negative influences, particularly in regards to maintaining discipline and having the collective interests of the extended family at heart.

I was pleased to discover through family sources that my strong presence, natural leadership, astute observation and keen discretion were being felt across the entire extended family system and my authentic voice was being heard and acknowledged as that of a modern and progressive matriarch following the footsteps of my grandmother. I was not accustomed to being recognized for my contribution in family circles. Although I felt slightly self-conscious, I appreciated the honor being bestowed on me. After several weeks of reflection and considering the feedback from a close friend, I realized that I had been embodying the spirit of the High Priestess. *The High Priestess is attuned to the experiences beyond conscious understanding.* I felt so incredibly blessed with my intuitive gifts and capabilities.

On a personal note, I unexpectedly found myself struggling with substantial baggage that surfaced from past experiences, losses and traumas in my life. I thought I had dealt with the personal loss and catastrophe I experienced and survived at a vulnerable stage in my life. Clearly, that was my mistaken notion that had likely developed to serve as a survival mechanism in bringing forward a sense of much needed relief and hope. It was from my first real heartbreak from a serious relationship that eventually left me feeling a bitter sense of loss and a perceived abandonment as an impressionable teenager of 19 years of age. I recall feeling like a wounded warrior ready to fight an uphill battle of survival against the seemingly insurmountable odds. As my memories came alive, I felt psychically and emotionally wounded to my core from the excruciating pain of feeling re-traumatized from the sudden loss of a secure bond of attachment.

Fortunately, my gracious life partner served as a refuge and blessing while I went through this Dark Night of the Soul. (*Caroline Myss describes the Dark Night of the Soul as a journey into light, a journey from your darkness into the strength and hidden resources of your soul.*) I spent the period after this in a state of radical acceptance and total surrender to my inner essence regardless of the bodily pain, slowly arriving at a fertile vibrational state of deep psychic healing and subconscious clearing. This paved the path for my abilities to reclaim an integrated personhood, embracing all my gifts and vulnerabilities.

This spiritual catharsis took great courage and inner strength; I had to retrace my difficult history and face my core wounds for the alchemical transformation to happen, giving birth to a well-spring of knowledge, faith and wisdom. I have known that I was a natural healer for well over a decade, particularly when I decided to become attuned as a Reiki, first level practitioner back in 2004 in Newcastle, U.K., and again as a Reiki, second level practitioner in 2006 in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada. This rebirth, however, seemed much deeper, integrated and whole; I am able to subconsciously resonate with the archetype of a “wounded healer” since this profound shift.

As a wounded healer, it is my fervent hope that my personal story serves to inspire and heal others.

My inner calling required me to offer my gifts of energy healing and intuitive coaching to empower those who can potentially benefit from it. I am excited now about offering my unique coaching services through my private practice known as Stepping Stones Coaching for my potential clients. There must be people out there who need to hear about stories of natural awakening like mine to feel inspired by the possibility of embarking on an empowering journey and possible movement from a state of raw woundedness toward healing, transformation and wholeness.

Energy healers and intuitive coaches serve as catalysts who can initiate and guide the healing process for a person who needs it. This is my invitation to all the wonderful and wounded souls in need of healing to reconnect and awaken the healer within. I hope that by reading about my sacred journey they feel encouraged to allow their wounds to heal by accessing their intuition with (or without) the aid of an energy healer or intuitive coach.

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Priyanka Sinha is a community recreation practitioner, Indian classical vocal artist/improviser, energy/sound healer and nondual/awareness facilitator. She is a proud recipient of the prestigious Rick Casey Courage to Cope Award for academic excellence, inner resilience, natural leadership and contributions during her term as a remarkable student and ambassador for the Recreation and Leisure Studies program at Conestoga College Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning. She received the award at the convocation ceremony in June 2014. Priyanka is on the verge of becoming a Certified Life Coach and Certified Master Spirit Life Coach and will soon be affiliated with the Certified Coaches Alliance. As an intuitive coach and energy healer, she is creating her signature coaching program, in addition to offering other valuable services through Stepping Stones Coaching for her clients worldwide.

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Opposition: It's an Inside Job

By the Rev. Phyllis Council

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I was licensed to preach on Jan. 26, 1999, at a Baptist church. After receiving my ministerial license and ordination to preach the Gospel and serve a local church, little did I know how that day would change my life forever, in ways that I couldn't imagine.

I compare being a woman, and declaring that God has called me to preach, to that of the Sadducees' and Pharisees' rejection of Jesus. The Bible refers often to the Sadducees and Pharisees, as Jesus was in constant conflict with them. Although these two were rivals, they managed to set aside their differences and plotted to kill Jesus. (John 11:48-50)

It didn't matter that the anointing was operating in my life. The pulpit stage was a forbidden area to any female, regardless of our titles or roles. *Shamefully, still today many ministries are bound by that belief.* I now understand in this stage of ministry that God was establishing the foundation on which I would build a personal relationship with Him.

As the time would come that the authenticity of my calling would be tested and challenged, I remained confident that my flaws wouldn't render me ineligible for God's service. I never doubted my calling to stand for God, even when others didn't believe me. *Many people struggle today with the myth that being called to leadership roles exempts you from facing tests and trials.*

But I was divorced for the second time and I felt like such a failure. This was by far the most painful time of my life. I didn't have a book to help me through this time of pain and rejection. My first marriage ended in divorce when I was 23 years old. Marriage No. 2 ended as a result of death. When I got married for a third time, I knew for sure it would last our lifetime, but that marriage ended in divorce No. 2.

Nevertheless, I was a two-time divorcee, single, and now a licensed female preacher. It's like oil and water, no mix, in the 21st century at a local church. As a nonbeliever being divorced, it wasn't a cross to bear for me because the world is more open to embrace people and their failures, much more so than the local church. *So, my persecution was an inside job!*

After sharing my unsuccessful attempts at marriage with my pastor, I immediately felt like I was being judge and rejected. He never asked how I got to this place of being a product of multiple marriages. Straight out the gate he starts to spew venom. I'm quoting his actual words to me, "You don't honor marriage because you've been married multiple times. I don't recognize you as a preacher in my church."

I was unfamiliar with the responsibilities of church leaders. However, I was quite familiar and recognized that he was not operating in the spirit of love. I said to him, “Even the woman at the well was offered salvation.”

Seriously, that man had no words after my statement, so I gathered myself and excused myself from his ministry. I vowed never to return.

Needless to say, that not long after I vowed not to return. But I remained very close to a young lady that after my departure needed to bury her young child. She asked that same pastor if I could speak at the child’s funeral.

At the time, she and her family were members of that ministry. Take note, her request was not for me to deliver the eulogy, but to simply speak a few words since I knew the child, and in the process, I could bring some comfort to her and the family. My words of comfort did not have to be spoken from the pulpit, it could’ve been done from the floor. Her pastor denied her request during one of the most difficult times of her life.

Imagine the anguish that mother felt having to bury her child, then being told by her spiritual leader she would have to find someone else to speak after denying her request to have me address the gathering at his church. Nevertheless, I did attend the service in support of the family.

Sadly, the child’s parents have left that ministry and have divorced, and to my knowledge, both have not found another house of worship.

Out of all of this I learned leaders must mature spiritually and realize that God calls us to labor on His behalf. Simply put, we work for Him. No man or woman called by the true and living God is considered to be self-employed. Obviously, this man was operating from a place of pain, hurting the ones that put him high regard.

The blessing in all of this is that we live in the same city, and ministering in many of the same local ministries. I chose to release him and walk in forgiveness in spite of the pain that he inflicted upon me. Honestly, I’m good. I’ve experienced him on occasion when we’re in the same room and him trying to avoid me. I walk right over to him, acknowledge his presence as if he’s never wronged me. *Vengeance belongs to God.* I’m convinced that he must answer to God for his actions. What the devil tried to accomplish through him didn’t kill me. It actually produced the fruit of this story.

It was later revealed that this very same pastor is actually someone’s husband No. 2. His wife is a divorcee with a child. It’s not karma. As a Christian saint, I turn to the Bible, Matthew 7:5.

Matthew 7:5 (KJV): Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.

It is my sincere prayer that those reading my story will never have this experience. And for those that have encountered similar opposition from church leadership or those in the pews. I encourage you to make forgiveness your choice and continue your journey. Use those life lessons to encourage and help someone else.

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The Rev. Phyllis Council is a mentor to many and received her ministerial license and ordination in 1999 as a Baptist preacher. She displays her genuine love and concern for people at Mid-Wife Women in Tampa, Florida, where she labors with women in need. She is currently working on a memoir. You can reach her at pab2263@icloud.com or on Twitter at [@Preach_Council](https://twitter.com/Preach_Council).

Darkest Hour*By Dawn Allen*

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Have you ever been so abused, mistreated, or lied to so many times that you don't even know who you are anymore? Due to the abuse I had endured over the years, in some messed up way, I felt that I deserved it. It was when the abuse started affecting my children that I knew there were no excuses for it. Not realizing the scarring the past had on me, I was unable to see the beauty God was raising up through the ashes of my life.

After years of emotional, mental, and physical abuse, I was numb. The day my eldest son, who was 9 years old at the time, called 911 on his dad for beating my head against a car was the day that not only saved my life but my children's lives as well. As I stood surrounded by police officers with blood streaming down my face, I will never forget the terrifying look in my son's eyes.

I never second-guessed my decision to divorce him that day; I knew we needed to find peace over anything else. I left the marriage with nothing except my boys, our clothes, and the will to do better. I was not sure at the time if I deserved better, but I knew my boys did.

In a short period of time, the freedom I felt for me and my boys was worth more than anything any amount of money could buy. Within months, I started to see a difference in all of us. The little giggles I began hearing from the boys that I had not heard in years were priceless. The newfound peace we had united us as a family even more. My sons' school life and social life were greatly affected by the abuse in the household before the divorce. One of my boys was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the other was retained in kindergarten. Over time, their grades, attitudes, and behavior greatly improved. Looking back on it all, I didn't realize how much our toxic environment had affected us as a family and as individuals.

One night, I was out with friends and was introduced to several people. I laughed, danced, talked, and most importantly I forgot about the negative things that weighed me down. I met a man who happened to be as broken as I was and had been hurt by those who were supposed to love him the most. Made to believe he was never good enough, he was living by other people's standards. Nevertheless, this man chose to love us and not to raise my children the way he was raised. While not having any children of his own, he has learned to love, guide, and discipline my children as if they were his own.

For years, I felt like I was completely healed. I began opening up to people and allowed my emotional walls to come down. However, I never dreamed that negativity would enter into our lives

again. My extended family who should have been supporting us and building us up happened to be the ones who were trying to destroy my marriage and my happy family.

I learned there are people who, no matter what you do or say, will always try to tear you down. But, I always had a smile on my face and always tried to remain positive. No matter how good you are doing, there is always someone who is going to put you down to make themselves feel better. I did not even realize what was happening because the abuse we were receiving didn't look like the abuse we experienced in our past; but now, I know better.

With God's help, I have been able to mend the broken pieces of my heart. I have managed to satisfy my life's desires through writing and by showing love to others by taking in foster children and offering them a life of stability – the same stability that my husband has shown to us. Seeing the smiles on their faces and helping them find peace in their brokenness helps fill the lingering void in my heart. I learned from personal experience that everyone has the strength to find their RELEASE in their darkest hour.

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Dawn D. Allen is an author and a motivational speaker. She has overcome many obstacles in her life, including physical and sexual abuse. Dawn uses her past experiences to help those who may be going through the very things she has conquered with God's help. Every obstacle she has faced she now uses as a stepping stone to rise above the things

Vision Artist

By Sibho Hlabangana

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In life we all face and go through things that we overcome, or else we wouldn't still be here. Just by virtue of being alive and reading this book it means you have overcome something or some things. I don't know what those are, but I can tell you this, what you went through will give you a story to tell and give you a way to be able to help someone else one day. This book is made up of such stories and I'm honored to be a part of it. *I'm going to tell my story a little differently though.*

I'm sure you've heard the likes of Oprah Winfrey and Lisa Nichols talk about how they made it. How they went from having nothing to having it all. *Have you ever wondered if anyone would have believed them if they'd told them what their future looked like? Would they have laughed it off or noted it somewhere to check on them every now and then?*

On that note, hello there, my name is Sibho Hlabangana, and I'm somebody whose name I believe you're going to want to write down and check on every once in a while. I'm not a well-known person. I currently live in Bulawayo, a city in Zimbabwe in Africa. I'm no celebrity or influential person. What I am though is a dreamer. I consider myself a vision artist of sorts.

I know I could tell you in detail about how I went from being unemployed to being a lawyer, motivational speaker and author. Which did happen. I could tell you about all the things I've overcome. I won't do that at this point in time because what I want you to see is what is possible. Not what is, but what can be and what will be.

When you face hardships or any situation that is far from ideal, it's easy to dwell on your present situation. It's easy to think that things will not change, or that they will not get better. Allow me to show you a different way of looking at your life.

Let me give you a glimpse into my future. I'm doing this so that when it happens you'll be able to come back and read this and say, "She was right, she did it!" My hope is that it will turn you into a believer.

March 3, 2021

I'm lying on a hammock outside our beautiful home listening to an audio book. I'm watching my children Timothy and Nomzamo play in the pool with Yossarian our dog.

When the phone rings, I reluctantly answer it and it's one of the producers of the "Ellen DeGeneres Show." She tells

me they'd like to have me as a guest on the show. I smile because that's one more thing I'll soon be crossing off my vision board. It crosses my mind that just three months ago my latest book came out, and it's already sold millions of copies.

After the call, I jump in the pool with my little ones. A lot of screaming ensues and we are so caught up playing around that it's only when I hear his voice that I realize my husband, H, is home.

Timmy, Nomzizi and Yossy run and jump on him. We're all excited to see him back home after a business trip. After he tells us about his trip, I tell him about my invitation to the Ellen show, as well as how the day before I was asked to be one of the speakers at an international women's event that will have over 20,000 attendees. He's overjoyed by the news because he knows how much this means to me. He calls it a cause for celebration.

He says he's going to take us on a trip to Costa Rica for the holiday to celebrate the good news. As my little ones excitedly jump on H, I can't help but marvel at how I'm living the life that I dreamed of. In fact, it's better than I could have ever imagined.

More than that, as I've always dreamed, my life really is a testimony of God's goodness. Although I speak through my motivational talks and writings, just by watching me, people are turned to Christ.

Where do you go in your mind when things are not going your way, or those times when you need a "release"? What images are you holding in your mind? Those are the ones that the future has in store for you.

In the book, "Key to Yourself," author Venice Bloodworth says, "Your present conditions are the result of your past thinking. You will be what you are thinking today." Instead of focusing so much on things as they are, why not look at what they could be and hold that picture in your mind. Hold it there until you see it come to pass.

To see your dreams materialize you have to believe in them. Believing in something without any evidence is called faith. So have faith and you will see what you're believing reveal itself to you. With that, know the reason for your faith. I have faith because I know my Father in heaven has got this. That knowledge assures me that everything I dream of has already happened. That's why I can put it all out there for the world to read and become believers when they see what I've been saying actually happening; when God delivers.

What I've described is one of the things I do to overcome anything that is not making me happy at the moment. Life is full of challenges. As things hit you from every direction, take some time every now and then to visualize your dreams. Let that vision remind you of what the future holds for you.

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